



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet

Episode Guide

Season 1, Episode 10

House of Desires: Cloaks, Daggers, and Honor

Hosts: Chase Fowler and Beth Somerville

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Episode Resources

Taylor, Scott K. *Honor and Violence in Golden Age Spain*. Yale University Press, 2009.

“The Princess Bride.” Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1987.

UCLA Diversifying the Classics, “Contextualizing the *Comedia*,”

<http://diversifyingtheclassics.humanities.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Contextualizing-the-Comedia.pdf>

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Hosts: Chase Fowler and Beth Somerville

Episode Transcript

Beth: Hey Chase Fowler.

Chase: What's up Beth Somerville?

Beth: Hey, I got a question for you.

Chase: Yeah, what's up?

Beth: Why does a Spanish golden age comedy about love, confused identity and darkness have the word honor appear 48 times?

Chase: You know what? I'm really glad you asked. And on today's episode of Writ In The Margins, we're going to talk about what kind of seat honor has at the table of Spanish golden age drama.

[Musical intro]

Beth: Hey, everyone, thanks for joining us on the podcast today. In this episode, we'll be talking about the Spanish Golden Age drama *House of Desires* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who we will refer to by her short name of Sor Juana.

Chase: Written in 1683, this farce takes place over the course of three days in Toledo, Spain, and explores love, lust, and the invisible tenth cast member, honor. Throughout, we will see characters who maintain the strictest code of honor and characters who manipulate the rhetoric of honor for their own desires.

Beth: First, let's talk a little bit about the genre and Samantha's subversion of expectations for her audience, which would have been the nobility of New Spain

Chase: Or Mexico as we now know it...

Beth: Amongst other upper class patrons. The most popular type of drama for the Spanish golden age was Commedia Nueva

Chase: Or New Drama.

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Beth: A type of theatre that consisted of three acts mixing tragedy with high and low comedy, pulling plot points from history, myth and Christian religion. It often consisted of several subgenres such as cloak-and-dagger, romance, comedy of intrigue and comedies of manners.

Chase: Those in attendance would have expected a play that covered one of those subgenres. Sor Juana, however, mashed together all three and presented a work of meta theatricality that was farcical in nature but also kept true to the traditional honor plays of the time.

Beth: Oh, that's really interesting, Chase. What's an honor play?

Chase: So here's the thing. Scott K. Taylor, a historian who was the first to really dive into the question of honor in the golden age of Spain, discusses how what we thought was a literal code of honor was actually more about rhetorical ways of dealing with reputation. The plays of the period, however, perpetuated this idea of honor being a strict code to be followed in "honor plays" written at the time. There were three characteristics of honor that were repeatedly followed: one, that a man's honor is dependent upon the women of his family. Two, that the woman's reputation was tied to sexual behavior (because of course it was). And three, any form of dishonor was to be met with violence as revenge.

Beth: And the really cool thing about honor plays was it wasn't just for men of a certain class. Men and women of all classes were expected to adhere to this dramatic code of honor, as we see apparent in nearly every character in *House of Desires*.

Chase: You mean to tell me men weren't the only people allowed to have honor?

Beth: No Chase. All right, let's talk about honor in the family, in *House of Desires*.

Chase: So Spanish *comedia* has a connection to the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, which most people would be familiar with the stock characters and the use of particular masks. The biggest instance of this is seen with Don Rodrigo, the father of Dona Leonor, and he is known as a Barba. I wasn't able to find too much information about a Barba specifically. I was actually not able to find a whole lot about Spanish stock characters in general. But he does have this connection to the Vecchi, which in *Commedia Dell'arte* are, which means the old men, specifically the Dottore and the Pantalone. The Pantalone is this character who, he's very miserly, Don Rodrigo really isn't. But his [the Pantalone's] big thing is he has a daughter. He is able to fall for one of the seven deadly sins, which still kind of stems outside of Don Rodrigo, but it's more of that general connection than anything. So he would have been this character that the audiences would have known about and kind of would have had this idea that, oh, he is going to be This old man who is all about money and all these things, but once again Sor Juana subverts her audience's expectations by having him only care about honor.

Beth: Right. It's kind of like she took this idea of stock characters, and instead of making him a recognized character that, like we would know from Commedia Dell'arte, and really leaned into one of the first characteristics of honor in the honor play, of a man's honor is dependent on the reputation of the women in his family.

Chase: Yeah.

Beth: And in in that way it becomes a stock situation rather than a stock character, because we see him showing up at Don Pedro's house knowing that his daughter has either been stolen in the night or has run away with a lover not knowing who it is because he doesn't know that it's Carlos

Chase: And that it's actually out of good faith and good love.

Beth: Right, right. Carlos and Leonor are running away because they they don't believe they'll be able to get married because their status is too different. So Rodrigo shows up at Pedro's house, and correct me if I'm wrong, thinking that perhaps it's Pedro who has taken her, and in his mind, the only way to reconcile that so his honor isn't destroyed, because Leonor's honor would be destroyed, is to have Pedro married Leonor.

Chase: The fact he cares so much about honor that he's literally literally like, yeah, so I don't know if it was love or if you kidnapped her, either way, you're going to Marry her because honor is important. And I know you care about honor because I care about honor.

Beth: Right.

Chase: Which is so funny.

Beth: Right. And in that way, its honor becomes the most important thing. Like he literally doesn't care if Leonor went with Pedro willingly or unwillingly. it's all About making sure she has not been dishonored and the way to do that is to have Pedro marry her.

Chase: It's like we were talking about this invisible character. Honor literally has to be tended to and taken care of. Honor is always, at least when it comes to Don Rodrigo, honor is always within the room, honor is of the highest priority.

Beth: Mmhmm. And for someone, it's interesting because Rodrigo mentions over and over again his status is not very high, whether through poverty or whatever his occupation is, he knows, that his status is lower than Pedro's. The only thing holding his status together is the honor of his family and his name. Exactly.

Chase: Which just makes the scene all the more interesting, and I don't want to necessarily say funny, but I'm going to use the word funny, because you have in the scene, which we will show, that Don Pedro has this little aside where

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he is very confused about this whole thing, about “he’s calling me his son in law and he knows who she actually ran away with, I’ve messed up.” But it’s not that he’s messed up in terms of honor. It’s that he just realizes he’s goofed. I also want to point out one of his lines that he does say: “today I lose my honor and my life.” And even being the character who has... is the lowest on the hierarchy of how they handle honor, he still places it before his life.

Beth: Mmhmm.

Chase: Which is an interesting observation.

Beth: Right. At this point in the play, Don Rodrigo understands that his daughter, Dona Leonor, has either run away with a man or has been kidnapped by one. The humor of the scene is that both things are true. But there are two different men involved. While Leonor willfully, ran away with her true love, Don Carlos, Don Pedro intercepted them and kidnapped Dona Leonor. Don Rodrigo assumes Don Pedro has been Dona Leonor’s lover this whole time and they have eloped together because their differing class status would not allow them to marry. Out of fear of dishonor to his name and reputation, Don Rodrigo goes to Don Pedro to insist he marry his daughter, which has been Don Pedro’s goal this whole time. Here is this scene with Chase as Don Rodrigo and myself as Don Pedro. It is important to note that Don Pedro’s text is an audience aside, and Don Rodrigo cannot hear what is being said.

Chase: You may have guessed, Don Pedro,
that what has brought me to this house is honor,
since mine is in your hands.
As you know,
honor is such a previous gem
that all noble and worthy men
must protect it all costs.
Honor is a crystal so finely polished
that though a blow to its perfection
might not break it,
breath alone will sully it.
No doubt, Don Pedro, you share this view.
Now, since you are to be my son-in-law,
it is to my advantage
to see your honor protected.
See how jealous I am of my honor,
see how I guard my good name
by jealousy protecting yours?
Now, my son, given all of this,
you are aware
that Don Carlos de Olmedo,

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as well as being of noble stock
and illustrious inheritance...

Beth: He's just named Don Carlos in my presence.
Where is this leading?
And he's not even mentioned marriage.
Doubtless he's found out that Don Carlos
is the one who fled with Leonor.
Today I lose my honor and my life.

Chase: The color has fled your cheeks,
and I am not surprised,
for you would not be noble or wise,
if you did not pale
at any threat to your honor.
But you are the perfect example
of the trials of love,
and your own guilt
makes honest another's offence;
you should not be shocked
by those that share your sins.

Beth: So in this excerpt, we heard the word honor said eight times: seven by Don Rodrigo and once by Don Pedro.

Chase: And I think it's very useful too because, as you said, we talked about this hierarchy and how Sor Juana has built this into her play. And in just this little excerpt in and of itself, we see this very traditionally honorable person and the least honorable person in the play come together

Beth: Mmhmm.

Chase: And you see that in a numerical statistic of seven to one. Um, but it's also interesting to note, too, that while Don Rodrigo is this character who talks a big game of honor, how he it is the cornerstone of who he is as a human and what his belief system is, he says honor so many times... he doesn't act on it the same way that somebody like Don Carlos does.

Beth: Right. And I think therein lies the argument for saying Don Rodrigo is not at the top of this honor hierarchy that Sor Juana has built for us.

Chase: Mmhmm.

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Beth: I think it is definitely fair to say, based on the three elements of honor, the third one being defending your honor violently if need be, therein lies Don Carlos. We see right off the bat when he and Leonor are being intercepted, when they run away, he nearly kills one of one of the guards. I think it's one of Pedro's cousins Which just complicates the plot even more.

Chase: Mmhmm. Yeah, that's exactly why he thought that it was Pedro who was kidnapping

Beth: Right.

Chase: Leonor.

Beth: Pedro's not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Chase: Very clearly.

Beth: It's it's almost like he was obviously the kidnapper the whole time.

Chase: Wow.

Beth: But you see it again and again, like even when Carlos knows he has seen Leonor in the house of Don Pedro. And there are several times that he and Leonor could very easily find each other runaway. He thinks Dona Ana is in Trouble, so he, by his honor code, must stay behind and defend her. With Violence, because that is what honor demands of him, so therefore, Carlos is absolutely at the top of this honor hierarchy that Sor Juana has built.

Chase: Don Carlos is such a sweet, precious bean. Yes, I use those words because he does something that, cough cough, Shakespeare's men could never do and that's use his brain. He sees Leonor in the house and he has a moment with Castaño where he's like, "what is she doing here? She might be in love with Pedro, Oh God." And then he stops and he's like," no, there's a logical explanation for this. And you know what? I don't really have time to think about it, because my goal is to make sure that don't Dona Ana's honor is not stained.

Beth: Right, right. Because he understands once a woman's honor is stained, it's over. Chase: And at least in the theatrical realm.

Beth: Right.

Chase: Which I also want to bring up because we mentioned earlier with Scott Taylor's research about. The actual, quote unquote, honor code being this rhetorical thing, Don Rodrigo fits the truer definition of that because he is

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talking it, it's rhetorically "this is what I'm going to do, this is how we're going to handle it." His "revenge" is a forced marriage rights.

Beth: Right? It's almost like if there was a true written code of honor, that would be Carlos. But what we actually have historically is this rhetorical code of honor, which is Don Rodrigo. I think it's interesting too, this hierarchy that Sor Juana has set up leads us into this idea of class distinction.

Chase: Mmhmm.

Beth: Like we mentioned earlier, men and women of all classes were expected to abide by this rhetorical code of honor in theater. And in the servant characters in this play, they're less servants, more confidants, and they all act, I mean, they all follow the orders of the people that they serve, but they also all act independently of that, which I think is really interesting. So you've got Celia, you've got Castaño, and you've got Hernando.

Chase: Mmhmm.

Beth: Right?

Chase: And like you said, they all have their own self-interest in mind while also serving their... what's the word we want to use here? Because I feel weird about using the word 'masters.'

Beth: Yeah. They don't really feel like masters. It feels very much like they would, like... Celia would be the lady in waiting.

Chase: It gives me Emilia and Desdemona vibes.

Beth: Yeah.

Chase: Like that relationship.

Beth: Yeah. Like Celia is very clearly a different class than Dona Ana, but she still has her own independent agency. She's not just some no name servant or messenger.

Chase: Dona Ana is literally like, yeah, you're going to help me with this. And then she literally tells all her secrets to her.

Beth: Right! Right. And then you've got Don Carlos and Castaño, who he [Carlos] really uses Castaño as a sounding board for what he is going through, like kind of like a therapist, I guess?

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Chase: [Laughs] I know!

Beth: And he really trusts Castaño to go through all of those vulnerable emotions with him like a friend, you know, rather than a servant.

Chase: And, because, you think about that and you think about. This class distinction and the fact that taking Celia, for instance, she's here, she is doing everything that Dona Ana wants her to do. But meanwhile, homegirl has literally hidden Don Juan in Dona Ana's room and was like, oh, I can't tell her that her lover that she has jilted back in her old town in Spain is here because they were practically engaged.

Beth: Right. And here's the thing, he's not just a jilted lover. He's basically her fiance based on courting ritual, they are engaged to be married at this point and then Dona Ana -

Chase: And Celia wants her to follow that because

Beth: Right.

Chase: Her honor.

Beth: Right. Celia, even though maybe some of her actions could be seen as, uh, less than cool...? [Laughs]

Chase: For lack of a better term. [Laughs]

Beth: For lack of a better term. This is an academic podcast. She acts out of maintaining Dona Ana's honor.

Chase: Mmhmm. And then you have Castaño, who he has a whole conversation with Don Carlos, and he's basically like, well, why don't you go with Dona Ana instead? Clearly, she has a thing for you. She is of the same class. Your reputation will be great because the only thing Leonora can really offer you is what? A degree? She's smart, what's that going to do for you?

Beth: Yeah. Which is hilariously, I think, a little bit of Sor Juana poking fun at her critics because she was so smart and she was self educated and definitely went through a period of her life where she wanted to be more formally educated and her family said no. So that feels like a direct joke. Yeah.

Chase: Yeah.

Beth: A not so subtle look where I am now.

Chase: I am writing plays to be performed in the court!

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Beth: One of the best playwrights of the time.

Chase: Yeah. Because there was this whole thing about the audience, something you see with early modern playwrights, and the such, is that unlike us, where we're like, "oh, look at these plays where they're older, we have no idea of their intentions or what they were like thinking about here," but the audience at the time had the ability to go and be like you wrote about this, that's so cool!

Beth: Right. Well, it's the Hamlet complex, right?

Chase: Yeah.

Beth: So today's audience, we look at Hamlet and go, "what a whiny little boy." But Hamlet is acting on a strict code of rhetorical honor that we just don't get anymore.

Chase: And the only thing that... There's modern proxies that have tried to, like, get us to understand these sort of things, because to us, an honor code is more about what we're taught in school of treat others how you want to be treated

Beth: The golden rule.

Chase: Yeah, exactly.

Beth: Do unto others.

Chase: We don't have this "you shall not blemish her reputation or you shall be slain in the street" kind of thing going on.

Beth: Right, right. A family's reputation is not dependent upon the sexual behavior of the women in the family. That's just not how we are anymore.

Chase: Exactly. But you know what I think does kind of make the audience, er not the audience, make people in a contemporary setting really understand it?

Beth: Tell me, Chase.

Chase: So, there is this wonderful little movie from 1989-

Beth: Oh, don't at me.

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[Laughter]

Chase: And I believe you're familiar with the quote?

Beth: "Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

Chase: His whole entire plot arc, at least when we first meet him, because to be honest, it has been a hot minute since I've seen the movie.

Beth: Ugh.

Chase: I know.

Beth: I can tell you word for word. Anyway...

Chase: Of course you can. His whole thing is avenging his father's deaf... death, oof, and maintaining that honor

Beth: The honor of the family.

Chase: And while we were talking about things, you brought up this really good question of why is it we look at Hamlet and say "you're just a whiny little baby," but we look at Inigo Montoya and we're like, yeah, go you!

Beth: Yeah. We vibe with him. Probably because *Hamlet*'s a tragedy and *The Princess Bride* is a comedy?

Chase: So genre probably does definitely play into it, which even goes back into Sor Juana and her expectation of, like, the audience is going to be like, "okay, we're sitting down for a nice little cloak and dagger, which usually tended to be comedies?"

Beth: Yeah.

Chase: With like swashbuckling characters.

Beth: And then surprise, we're in a comedy of intrigue with it's really complex, farcical plot points that you can... you really need like a flowchart to keep

Chase: And then surprise, we're blending into a comedy of manners.

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Beth: Yeah. And then plot twist, it's a romance.

Chase: Like it is all over the place and, I'm not going to say nonsensical

Beth: No, it all makes sense, you just really have to pay attention.

Chase: And at its core, it's this invisible character of honor which, like I said, I feel like is a very useful metaphor because it's something that is constantly being tended to, something that we are constantly reminded about. Much like Inigo Montoya is line, his catchphrase, is said repeatedly throughout. This mention of honor is that rhetoric. I also made note about how Montoya's very is kind of the Don Rodrigo. He is the more realistic "honor type;" it's all rhetorical.

Beth: Yeah. Which I guess Wesley would then be Don Carlos.

Chase: Yeah.

Beth: Yeah. And Buttercup is, I suppose, Dona Leonor since she's the kidnapped princess.

Chase: Yeah.

Beth: Mmhmm.

Chase: Yeah, that's... It's a definitely a modern adaption of the cloak and dagger. It has more to do. It weirdly fits more with *House of Desires* than it would a Shakespearean play.

Beth: It sure does. Plot twist. This is now a podcast about *The Princess Bride*. [Laughs]

Chase: Here we are.

Beth: It really does. And I mean, I think at the core of *The Princess Bride*, much like at the core of *House of Desires* this idea, an invisible character of honor, always floats above, influencing choices, and you can also see that same hierarchy of most honorable, least honorable in *The Princess Bride*. And it's this idea of like honor, if you ignore how important it is, you're going to end up-

Chase: Who was the character who with the poison and the switching and he drinks the poison and it kills him, because that is Don Pedro in the situation.

Beth: You know, it's either him [Don Pedro] or the prince because both Don Pedro and the Prince in *The Princess Bride* end up with nothing, no women for them, no wives. No honor... no honor, no marriage.

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Chase: No honor, no- Dishonor on you, dishonor on your cow.

Beth: Now we're talking about *Mulan*.

Chase: Disney, please don't sue me.

Beth: Well, I think that's the point: characters who ignore honor end up with nothing.

Chase: Whether rhetorically, whether theatrically. Nothing for you!

Beth: And that's another place where Shakespeare could never because Sor Juana said, if you are a gross man, you get nothing.

Chase: It's almost like plays written by women have a tendency to have really better happy endings...

Beth: Whaaaaat?

Chase: No shade to Shakespeare, of course, we're literally studying him right now. We're getting degrees in the Bard himself.

Beth: #ShakespeareSchool.

Chase: Now that Beth and I have successfully made this about *The Princess Bride*

Beth: And how much Prince Humperdinck sucks!

Chase: Let's wrap things back around to *House of Desires* At the beginning of this episode, we asked what place at the table does honor have when it comes to Spanish golden age drama?

Beth: I think it's pretty fair to say that honor is the matriarch that sits at the head of the table. She's always there ensuring her family is provided for and she always sends the bad seeds to bed without supper.

Chase: We're looking at you, Don Pedro.

Beth: And Prince Humperdinck.

[Musical Outro]

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