



# 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 9

#### *House of Desires: Translating Desire*

Hosts: Sam Corey and Lis Hayward

Special guests: Dr. Catherine Boyle and Dr. Kathleen Jeffs

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## Episode Resources

Out of the Wings, a contextualized resource of Spanish-language plays for English-speaking practitioners and researchers: <https://www.outofthewings.org/>

Dr. Catherine Boyle: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/hr/diversity/meettheprofessors/artshums/boyle>

Dr. Catherine Boyle's Translation: <https://www.concordtheatricals.co.uk/p/11130/house-of-desires>

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Dr. Kathleen Jeffs: <https://www.gonzaga.edu/academics/faculty-listing/detail/jeffs>

Dr. Kathleen Jeffs' book on the Spanish Golden Age (available for purchase):  
[https://books.google.com/books/about/Staging\\_the\\_Spanish\\_Golden\\_Age.html?id=7npVDwAAQBAJ](https://books.google.com/books/about/Staging_the_Spanish_Golden_Age.html?id=7npVDwAAQBAJ)

Dr. Kathleen Jeff's translation of *The Force of Habit* alongside Melissa Machit's new Spanish edition:  
<https://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/books/id/39042/>

RSC's *House of Desires* Production Info (Including Cast List):  
<https://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/hoi200407>

British Theatre Guide *House of Desires* Review by Philip Fisher:  
<https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/housedesires-rev>

### Episode Transcript

**Sam:** Hello, and welcome to another episode of Writ in the Margins: a podcast that takes a dramaturgical approach to plays from the Early Modern Period and beyond.

**Lis:** This podcast is sponsored by Mary Baldwin University's Shakespeare and Performance masters program in Staunton, Virginia. Home to the American Shakespeare Center. I'm Lis Hayward.

**Sam:** And I'm Sam Corey. If this is your first time listening to Writ in the Margins, welcome.

**Lis:** We're so excited to dive into another dramaturgical rabbit hole with you. Sam, do you want to tell the listeners which play we're focusing on?

**Sam:** Do I? Listeners. This week's play is a farcical romance filled with mistaken identities, multiple love triangles (polygons really), mischievous servants, and swashbuckling duels!

**Lis:** Yes! A play about honor and love, written in the Spanish Golden Age and first performed in 1683. Have you lovely nerds guessed it yet?

**Sam:** I bet some have! The play is *Los Empeños de Una Casa* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. In today's episode we will take a deep dive into the ever evolving text.

**Lis:** There have been a few published English translations, but we're most interested in the 2005 version

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translated by the talented Dr. Catherine Boyle, Professor of Latin American Cultural Studies at King's College London.

**Sam:** We're super excited to have Dr. Catherine Boyle on the show today, as well as dramaturg Dr. Kathleen Jeffs from Gonzaga University to talk about their experiences with *House of Desires*

**Lis:** Why this translation, Sam? Why not one of the others?

**Sam:** Well, Lis, this translation reached a much wider audience than the others, and it remains the most often produced translation of *Los Empenos de una Casa* or *House of Desires* to this day.

**Lis:** Ah, yes. I imagine it's so popular due to its attachment to the Royal Shakespeare Company?

**Sam:** Yes! It was created for the RSC during their Spanish Golden Age season in 2004 at Stratford-upon-Avon. It was initially performed with four other plays in repertory by an ensemble of actors with the English title of *House of Desires*

**Lis:** It was directed by Nancy Meckler, and the season's artistic director, Laurence Boswell, wanted to give audiences translations, not adaptations.

**Sam:** So, the RSC hired academic consultants from Belfast, Oxford, and London universities.

[QUOTE FROM KATHLEEN JEFFS: They exchanged a million emails, came together for a couple of meetings and really sifted through most of the kind of recognizable titles from Spanish Golden Age plays that you would think of and a lot of titles that are not so recognizable.]

**Sam:** That's Dr. Kathleen Jeffs, who was hired as a text consultant and dramaturg for the RSC Spanish Golden Age season. We'll hear more from her soon.

**Lis:** But let's give the listeners a background on the play itself.

**Sam:** In 1683, the playwright, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was asked to write a play to be performed at the court in Mexico City in homage to the viceregal couple.

**Lis:** Sor Juana wasn't your average Spanish Golden Age playwright. She was a woman, and it was unusual for a woman to be such a well established and respected playwright in Mexico during the 17th Century. So what allowed Sor Juana to stand out so much?

**Sam:** Well, the clue lies in her name, "Sor Juana", which translates to "Sister Juana", as in, she was a nun. Yes - she

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was a 17th century playwright that also happened to be a nun - living in a convent. This was not a coincidence, though.

**Lis:** No it was not. Convents were the only way single women could continue their work or education. Being a nun allowed Sor Juana to continue her progressive writing, commenting on the social, political, and economic landscape of Mexico in the 17th Century, without the scrutiny of being a single, unmarried woman.

**Sam:** Or having to marry! She had many suitors in her youth - she was very beautiful, but the main thing she wanted in life was to be left alone to read books and learn as much as she could. *House of Desires* is considered to be Sor Juana's masterpiece.

**Lis:** It's a comedy full of smart female protagonists, who endure the folly of ambitious men.

**Sam:** The plot involves Doña Leonor, a beautiful-and educated!-woman, and her lover Don Carlos...

**Lis:** ...But when they are separated while eloping, Doña Leonor must take refuge in Don Pedro's house...

**Sam:** ...And Don Pedro wishes to make Doña Leonor his lover.

**Lis:** Another supporter of splitting up Leonor and Carlos is Don Pedro's sister, Doña Ana, who fancies Don Carlos but she is loved by Don Juan.

**Sam:** Don't worry if that sounds confusing. It is - and it's intended to be. Throw in some scenes in the dark, the fantastically mischievous female servant Celia, and exciting crossdressing scenes from the clownish servant Castaño, and you have *House of Desires*

**Lis:** That feels like a pretty good background, yeah Sam?

**Sam:** Yeah, shall we turn it over to the experts?

**Lis:** Sure thing. We first spoke to Dr. Kathleen Jeffs, and asked her to introduce herself in her own words.

**Kathleen:** OK, so I'm Kathleen Jeffs and I serve as the university core director at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. And in 2003, through about 2005, I worked as the rehearsal dramaturg for the Royal Shakespeare Company's Spanish Golden Age season, which was kind of 03, 04, and then had some kind of afterlife after the season closed. And then after that around 2008, I worked with Jonathan Thacker and Catherine Boyle and David Johnston on the 'Out of the Wings' Project, which is a Spanish theater translation project open and available on the Web as a digital humanities project. And I was a postdoctoral researcher on that project.

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**Lis:** Welcome.

**Kathleen:** Thank you. Good to be with you.

**Sam:** We're so excited to have you and talk to you about your work. So how did you begin working with the RSC for their Spanish Golden Age season?

**Kathleen:** It's a fun story, as all these adventures are. I was in the first year of my masters at Oxford in the UK and my supervisor there was Jonathan Thacker, and he's a wonderful person and he's also a wonderful father. He has four boys and his fourth boy was just being born at the time when the Royal Shakespeare Company called him and said, you know, we'd really love you to come and work in rehearsal on this season. And he was like, Dag Nabbit, I can't, but I'll send you my graduate student. So that's kind of how it got started, is that I got to go kind of in his place and in communication with him a lot and with his colleague Jack Sage. And so I was kind of a conduit between those proper researchers and I was only in my first year as a grad student. And then it kind of grew from there because it became a longer project. And I kind of stayed in Oxford much longer than I had intended to to keep working on the project and then ended up really enjoying it. But it started like everything does with happenstance.

**Lis:** And do you know why the Royal Shakespeare Company chose *House of Desires* and did you have any role in choosing it?

**Kathleen:** They went through what they called a virtual seminar, which is that Laurence Boswell, who curated the season and was kind of the season's director, got together with some advisors and people that he trusted and that he'd worked with before on curating a season at London's Gate Theatre in the nineties. And that was Catherine Boyle and his dramaturg, Paul Sirett, there at the RSC, who had worked with him before, David Johnston, who translated with him before, and Jonathan Thacker. And they had this virtual seminar meeting that they were emailing back and forth in kind of 2003, early parts of 2003 and then through to the decision making time and it had started before that because the season at the gate was really the impetus for it and they'd worked together during that time. So yeah, they exchanged a million emails, came together for a couple of meetings and really sifted through most of the kind of recognizable titles from Spanish Golden Age plays that you would think of and a lot of titles that are not so recognizable. They also wanted to kind of dig deep and look through plays that were untranslated or unperformed or kind of dig up that, you know, mine for gold, if you will. So Laurence had five criteria for selecting the plays. He wanted great plays that speak to us now. He also wanted them to be British premieres. He was flexible in that, and obviously not all the plays that they ultimately chose were, you know, strictly premieres. But it's something he came in with, like he wanted them to feel new and fresh. He wanted them to be not readily available in English translations. So, not like, oh, how about this one that you pull off the shelf that everyone already knows? He also wanted plays with great parts for women. Obviously *House of Desires* has Leonor, and Doña Ana, which are two really great parts for women, and Celia, the servant girl who I also think is a wonderful part. And the last one was kind of a variety, a diversity of genres. And so that's how they kind of ended

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up with a biblical play, a mythological play, a comedy, a tragedy, and then kind of a farce or a parody, which is what *House of Desires* really is. So, yeah, I think that the season selection process was like really in-depth, really careful and wanted to come out with something that was diverse in genre, diverse in playwriting and kind of spanning what they would consider the things that the Spanish Golden Age has to offer.

**Sam:** Awesome. For *House of Desires* you had mentioned that they were looking for plays that maybe hadn't been translated into English yet, but *House of Desires* we found, at least in our research, that there were two other translations before Catherine's. So was there anything in that process that made them think, "Hey, these translations are not what we want? We want like our own version or an updated version?"

**Kathleen:** Yeah, that's a great question. Peter Oswald's version had been on at Battersea Art Center just in 1997. So really, within pretty recent memory of this production. It's not that there's anything wrong with that translation at all, but I think the process was really to commission new translations for the season. So even if it was perfect and beautiful, I think they would have started again because they just wanted that to be part of what they were selling was like these new versions and really offering that. And also, like, just in that span of time, linguistically things change in any language and in the English language. If you read it, everything dates really fast in translation. I mean if you pick any translation off the shelf from any language, they always need to be updated and refreshed, because if you want the plays to speak like, you know, in a heightened way, but still in a relevant way. Almost every translator wants to refresh when they remount a show.

**Lis:** When did Catherine Boyle get involved with you when she was working on her translation? And what was your level of interaction with her?

**Kathleen:** Yeah, thanks. Catherine is so they're all, they're all friends, like, they all work together. Catherine Boyle, and Jonathon Thacker, and David Johnston, Laurence Boswell sort of had worked together and known each other before. And so I'd met Catherine through Jonathan as kind of another mentor, another person. You could kind of help me along my journey as a grad student, that sort of thing. And then once I was working on the project, she was able to send me her early drafts, which was really grateful for because I was studying the process and I kind of wanted to know more about what she was doing. Later on, sort of like 2008, we ended up working together on this 'Out of the Wings' project, which principal investigator for. So she was one of the main supervisors along with Jonathan and David. So I ended up working with her again later on that project, which is really cool because she's an amazing person.

**Sam:** That is so cool. I remember Lis and I, what actually got us interested in looking into the translation of *House of Desires* in particular versus the other themes that we could have gone with for this podcast, was because when we were reading it, we're like, huh? That sounds like a really modern English phrase every once in a while. And it seemed to serve the play really well. But we're wondering how you landed on that. And, you know, did you talk to Catherine about that or was that a personal decision she had already made?

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**Kathleen:** The thing that the all the translators considered was like leaving things like expletives or like, you know, the kind of “oh, no,” those kinds of things that they say in Spanish, leaving those in Spanish so that there would be that kind of, you know, not flavor, because that sounds cheesy, but leaving some of the words in Spanish to let them speak for themselves, you know, and also to let the audiences, who have both languages kind of feel that part of it at least, is being retained. And I think that's a really interesting idea, because, as Jack Sage pointed out, hearing them go like, “my God,” a million times are, you know, just an English going “Jesus” all the time. Like, doesn't really it doesn't carry the same way, you know, as those appeals do in the original. So definitely those like, oh, my goodness, what's happening? moments are really hard to translate. And so I think Catherine put in English and she's Scottish, right? So like coming up with like a kind of giving her voice as well to it I think is what ended up working really well. So it does sound like her in parts which I love. But I think it makes it funnier when those cross-cultural things happen. You know, when a character who was in Toledo is sounding very suddenly, very English, very Scottish or, you know, very British, at least those kinds of things are part of the comedy when you're translating into another language.

**Sam:** Wonderful. Thank you so much, Kathleen, for speaking with us.

**Kathleen:** Thank you, Sam, and thanks Lis. I very much enjoyed meeting you guys. And all the best wishes for you and your dramaturgy, and dramaturgs can save the world!

**Lis:** Yes - dramaturgs can save the world! Amazing that she got the opportunity to work as a dramaturg for the RSC's Spanish Golden Age season just as a graduate student.

**Sam:** Yeah, really incredible. She was so kind, I loved speaking with her. She's currently working on translating *The Force of Habit* alongside Melissa Matchit. So, you will find that information on our show notes page. You can also find Dr. Kathleen Jeffs' book, which is called *Staging the Spanish Golden age*. That link is also on our show notes page. It's available for purchase and it details her experience working with the RSC.

**Lis:** And now that we've heard from Kathleen, let's share our conversation with Dr. Catherine Boyle. **Sam:** Let's do it!

**Sam:** Good afternoon,

**Catherine:** Good afternoon.

**Lis:** Catherine, would you like to introduce yourself in your own words?

**Catherine:** My name is Catherine Boyle. I'm a professor of Latin American cultural Studies at King's College London, and I've worked in theater translation for a long time. And I run-one of the things I run-is the 'Out of the Wings' collection, which is a collective of people dedicated to the translation, the performance and research into

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theater translation. In terms of the *House of Desires* and the Royal Shakespeare Company, that came about because the Royal Shakespeare Company got in touch with me and a couple of other academics to be part of a team of people who would construct this season of Golden age performances and what they wanted to do with the artistic director of the season Laurence Boswell was to co-create the season with people who had knowledge about the Golden age, with researchers, and for them to get really what they considered was most representative and best about the drama that we knew about in the Golden age. So that was the first connection with the Royal Shakespeare Company for this season as an academic and as somebody who had expertise in the Spanish Golden age and then particularly in the “Spanish Golden age”, in inverted commas, as it related to New Spain, to Mexico, and especially, of course, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

**Lis:** We had actually the wonderful opportunity yesterday to talk to your friend, Dr. Kathleen Jeffs.

**Catherine:** Oh, yes, yes, yes. I got an e-mail from her this morning.

**Lis:** She says hi and she sends her love.

**Catherine:** Right back at her.

**Lis:** She also told us that you actually did a literal translation before doing the performance translation.

**Catherine:** So the first one wasn't. It was a translation. I don't actually, um. I don't agree with the concept of literal translations for all sorts of different reasons, but it was a translation I'd done before that I hadn't worked on for performance and when they asked me to send it, I hadn't worked on it for something like a must have been about 10, 12 years, so, it was picking off my shelf, in a way, and working with it again. What Kathleen is getting at, is that the RSC wanted to use that as a literal for a dramatist to work from. And their first goal, their first intention was to have great dramatists, great British dramatists doing the translation of the piece, working from these original translations. And that's not how it worked out in the end, thankfully, which I think was a real bit of a coup, which was a real success actually, of the Spanish golden age season that we got beyond this undermining of what they would call literal translations, which is really just an undermining of the work of the translator. So, yeah, so I mean, what my work was, really was to go back to the translation I'd done a decade or more before and and rethink it. And the reason I did that was that the director, Nancy Meckler, had read that translation which was going to be used by someone else, liked the translation, because she thought it got her very close to Sor Juana and to Sor Juana's language, and that's how using that translation came about.

**Sam:** That's exciting. I like that you were paying attention to the difference of Sor Juana's language versus, you know, what might have been the patriarchal language of the time. Which kind of brings us to speaking about Sor Juana. How did you feel about her and her plays before you worked with the RSC and did that change at all, given the time that you had with *House of Desires*?

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**Catherine:** Um. That's a really interesting question. I mean, I think part of it is the answer that I'd done the translation of this play, you know 10, 12 years before. That the Royal Shakespeare Company came back to it in a sense, and that was actually through a colleague of mine, Jack Sage, Professor Jack Sage, who was involved in the whole thing. And it was he who actually said, "put Sor Juana forward as a possibility," which is great because I was going to as well, but in these sorts of circumstances you need allies to make sure that these forgotten female playwrights actually are given some attention. Yes, so I've loved and worked with Sor Juana for a long, long, long, long time now. And I suppose working with the RSC, did it change? Yes and no. No, in the sense that I continue to love Sor Juana and, yes, in the sense that I became even more entranced by her ability to speak to us now, and also by how performative the play was. You know, a lot of the criticism that you'll hear of the female writers in Spanish Golden Age was that they weren't writing the same sort of quality as the men. They were ventriloquists, they were plagiarizing, doing all this sort of thing. Or they weren't following the form as exquisitely or as robustly as Lope, or Cervantes or any of them that did. So what was really exciting was to see the play go through the dramaturgical process and come out and be loved by audiences. And I think, if anything, it gave me an even greater belief, actually in Sor Juana as somebody who communicates across the centuries.

**Lis:** How would you describe, sir, one man's voice compared to the male writers? What kind of difference?

**Catherine:** I think she's much more subversive. Which, you know, which is silly in a way as an incredible generalization of her work, but I think she has more fun with the form. I think there's something in Sor Juana. I always thought, and I felt this in the performances, I feel as if she doesn't really care, you know, and I love that, actually. She puts it all together and then she just pulls it all to pieces and then in the very end, she just shoves it all together again. You know, the last scene is absolutely ridiculous, you know, and quite a few of the female dramatists I've translated now are doing the same thing. And the last scene is just, well, we've got to put this together because that's what people want. But, you know, it doesn't make sense in many ways. And, you know, the fact that Pedro's left without someone and actually who Pedro is left with is Castaño. It's really interesting. And I just felt as if she'd written it and said, "okay, now I've done that, let's just do what we need to do and wrap it all up." And there's something joyful about that, actually. I think there's something just joyous about being involved in that, and I think she lets you sit on the surface of that enjoyment of the farce and of the mistaken identity and all of that and the comedy. She lets you sit on that but at the same time what's happening underneath, and in terms of what she's saying, it's actually quite hard hitting. So that's one of the things I find quite, modern is such a pointless word really, but I find it quite modern because it allows us in. You can recognize a lot.

**Sam:** Wonderful. Thank you for sharing. While you were translating both in the 90s and then again in the early 2000s with the RSC, what was the most exciting aspect for you when translating *House of Desires*?

**Catherine:** I think it's I think translating Sor Juana is both exciting and terrifying, because if you're dealing with somebody who's, uh, well, she was a genius and so command of language, the depth of her knowledge and her ability to improvise on, um, on ideas and allusion and the classics and mythologies is just really overwhelming, but that's also what makes it incredibly exciting because it makes it into a process of research and discovery of learning.

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And I felt as I was constantly untangling it, because she writes in this architectonic way, in a way, and you've got you've got lines, you know, speeches over pages and pages. You just and a lot of it is really unraveling. That's why I use the words unraveling. And as you unravel, you're making it. Making sense of it, and then your job is to ravel all up again, I don't know the word the verb to exist, but, you know, and you're putting it together again. And that's incredibly exciting because you because this is a part of the translation, which is about understanding or trying to access the modern ear and a modern ear, which is not a Spanish ear or a Spanish language ear, but one that's an Anglophone ear. And I wanted people to have access to the complexities of her thinking without losing the access to her. So those are the sorts of decisions I was making. The most important thing for me in the translation was that that you could that the actors could follow the breath of the of the speeches and and by that they would find their own rhythms where it speeds up, where it doesn't and and how to how to manage the lines. So I wasn't writing in verse and I wasn't following all of the verses that Sor Juana was using. But I was really conscious of of how she was punctuating because she never punctuated in the way that we would, but how she was punctuating through breath and through syntax. And that's what I really wanted to get to because I wanted the breath to be what was going to guide the actor so that. So, I mean, the script in the end for me is sort of punctuated to within a breadth of its life, because I really wanted that to be part of the instruction to the actors so that they could follow these different rhythms. And that I found really exciting in the rehearsal room when you find that the actors were actually following that.

**Lis:** We have *House of Desires* now exposed to us, I'm sure, because of your translation, without it, I doubt that we would even be studying it in our dramaturgical class. So thank you.

**Catherine:** Well I think that's great to know. I think that's really great to know. And I think it's really that's it's been one of the wonderful things of having done it. Yeah, I know. I'm just so delighted. I think it's so wonderful.

**Sam:** Well, Catherine, thank you so much for speaking with us.

**Catherine:** No, it's been good fun. Thank you.

**Lis:** What a great conversation, Sam. I loved Catherine's connection to Sor Juana. **Sam:** Me too, Lis! I could talk to her for hours. We almost did!

**Lis:** Thank you to Kathleen and Catherine for their time.

**Sam:** Listeners, we hope you enjoyed today's episode as much as we did and learning about the dramaturgical mysteries of translating a 17th Century Spanish Golden Age play.

**Lis:** If you're interested in more information about Catherine and Kathleen, check out our show notes for links to all their fabulous work, including their Spanish theatre translation project: 'Out of the Wings'.

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**Sam:** And if you're interested in reading or performing *House of Desires* we also included a link to Catherine's RSC translation.

**Lis:** Thanks for tuning in fellow nerds!

**Sam:** Happy dramaturging!

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