



# 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 (she/her/hers)

## Episode Guide

### Season 3, Episode 6

### *The Phantom Lady: Invisible Mistresses and Mythologizing Womanhood*

Hosts: Austen Bell and Cory Drozdowski

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## Episode Resources

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### Episode Transcript

**Austen:** Hi everyone, welcome to our episode of Writ in the Margins, on the Pedro Calderón de la Barca play *La dama duende*, or, *The Phantom Lady*. I'm Austen Bell!

**Cory:** And I'm Cory Drozdowski!

**Austen:** And today we'll be talking about "the invisible mistress" convention, Gender Swapping Cupid and Psyche, and mythologising womanhood!

**Austen:** (music)

**Cory:** In this episode, we want to put pressure on the question of gender construction. A play like *The Phantom Lady*, with its agency-filled women, supernatural themes, and sharp male/female divide, is a good opportunity to think about being responsible with gender norms and expectations.

**Austen:** More specifically, we want to ask how we, as artists, can consciously and productively approach a play that puts so much focus on how gender is perceived?

**Cory:** But first, let's briefly introduce the play! *The Phantom Lady*, original Spanish title *La dama duende*, is a Spanish Golden Age capa y espada, or cloak-and-dagger, play. It concerns a young widow, Doña Angela, who is trapped in isolation by her brothers in her house after the death of her husband in debt and disgrace.

**Austen:** Her brothers invite a handsome young man to stay with them, and Angela sees him, falls in love with him, and decides to woo him secretly through a secret passage that leads right from her room to his. Unfortunately—fortunately?—her invisible machinations make it seem like there is a supernatural creature loose in the house!

**Cory:** Exactly what kind of creature will depend on your translation. In English, they call her a ghost, or a phantom; we sometimes think of these as deceased human spirits.

**Austen:** In the original Spanish, the word is *duende*—much closer to our idea of a poltergeist or mischievous elf. This is an important distinction—in English, the main term used for Angela is simply a person who has died, but in the original Spanish, the term is something inherently non-human.

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**Cory:** This brings an important inhuman aspect to the play's use of the popular "invisible mistress" convention.

**Austen:** So, to start off, Cory—what is the "invisible mistress" convention?

**Cory:** The invisible mistress, coined by Frederick de Armas in his 1976 book *The Invisible Mistress*, is a recurrent plot convention in Spanish Golden Age drama. It involves a woman pursuing or courting a man without allowing him to see her. According to de Armas, this recurrence of similar plots across multiple Spanish Golden Age narratives was inspired by the myth of Cupid and Psyche, which was popularly adapted and reinterpreted through many subsequent and more recent works of fiction. More interestingly, though, the recurrent invisible mistress plots invert the traditional story of Cupid and Psyche.

**Austen:** If you're familiar with Cupid and Psyche—a story from Apuleius's second century Latin novel *The Golden Ass*—you'll see the inversion. In Cupid and Psyche a supernatural man—the god Cupid—keeps himself hidden from a mortal woman, his bride Psyche. In the Spanish Golden Age, however, invisible mistresses are women who hide themselves from men, and are thus ascribed supernatural characteristics.

**Cory:** A few other plays that feature the convention include *Amar sin saber a quien* AND *La viuda valenciana*, both by Lope de Vega, as well as *El conde Partinuples* by Ana Caro.

The convention largely centers on the comic *burlas* of the play's women, a term from the Italian commedia dell'arte.

**Austen:** For those of us who don't speak Italian, what's a *burla*, Cory?

**Cory:** In this context, *burla* refers to "an interpolated comic episode... usually involving a practical joke." In these plays, a woman's "*burlas* are so elaborate that supernatural powers are often attributed to her, be it as a witch, an enchantress, or a duende." (de Armas). The woman is usually concealed or in darkness when meeting the man so that he is not permitted to know/see the woman's true identity.

**Austen:** In this way, the invisible mistress mirrors the Cupid and Psyche myth. In the myth, the god Cupid is the one that conceals himself. After marrying the human Psyche, he has the invisible winds lead her around their new home during the day, and only comes to her at night, hiding himself and his true nature from her until she is tricked into trying to reveal him.

**Cory:** In this play, though, Angela—the invisible mistress who takes the supernatural hidden role—is the one who chooses to reveal herself. In a way, this means that the gender swap gives the lead female character some agency!

**Austen:** Here is the scene in *Phantom Lady*, with some minor cuts, where Angela does just that: reveals herself to Manuel. In this scene, I'll be reading for Don Manuel, and Cory will be portraying Doña Angela.

**Cory:** Angela has given Manuel complicated instructions by letter—go to a cemetery at night, get in a vehicle that's waiting there, enter a mysterious door at the end of the trip, and so on. He is now thoroughly spooked, and primed to believe that something beyond the ordinary is about to happen.

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**Austen:** Here we go! (*music*)

[*Angela's room*]

Manuel: I see the lady and await an adventure. What an enchanted house!

Angela: (*To Manuel.*) Are you unhappy to see me?

Manuel: No, madam. The longer the wait, the greater the satisfaction at daybreak. Yet it was not necessary for me to endure the dark of night to be awed by the brilliance of your beauty. You shine with such magnificence, that it is not possible for you to be eclipsed by shadow or night. The sun, singular divinity, challenges the dawn, and you, the sun. Thus I repeat that it was not necessary for me to endure the cold, dark night to revel in your shining splendor that, even at this hour, rivals the sun at mid-day.

Angela: Although I should appreciate such a pretty speech, I must complain, and not in vain, about such flattering excess. I am not light, for I lack the laughter of pure joy; I am not dawn, as you can tell by my tears of grief; I am not the sun, since I shed no light on the truth I adore. Indeed, I know not what I am. I pray you, Manuel, tell them that I am and have been a woman whom you alone drive to such extremes.

Manuel: You have offended me greatly madam.

Angela: Offended you?

Manuel: Yes, since you will not trust me with who you are.

Angela: I ask you only that you not ask me that. I cannot tell you. If you wish to come speak to me, it must on condition that you not know nor can you ask. I offer myself to you today as an enigma, for neither am I what I appear to be, nor do I appear to be what I am. While I am veiled, you may see me and I may see you. But if you come just to find out who I am, and are successful, you will no longer wish to love me even though my feelings for you will not have changed. Today you see me in this light; that is why you seek me. When you see me again in another light, perhaps you may hate me. What is important for me today is that I swear that I am not Luis's lady. I could be a noble woman with much to lose should Luis recognize me.

Manuel: Can you tell me at least how you are able to enter my room?

Angela: That, too, must wait for another time, for the same reasons.

(*Back to us*) (*music*)

**Cory:** They are then interrupted by others in the household and more chaos ensues. Above all, the convention of women behaving in this way arises from the necessity to protect their honor/reputation.

**Austen:** Well, often, there is a complicated web of other plot elements making it necessary for the woman to be cautious.

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**Cory:** In *Phantom Lady*, Angela is a widow, supposed to be confined to her room in order to safeguard her honor, yet earlier in the play she was almost caught sneaking out in disguise by her family. It was Manuel who saved her in that scene, and he is now a guest at her house. She has decided she loves him and wishes to court him, but she can't let the rest of the household know or suspect dishonorable conduct.

**Austen:** Besides protecting her honor, this kind of concealment is a sort of vetting process in the invisible mistress plays. The women, like Doña Angela, can use this opportunity to gauge the men's potential faithfulness and honor before fully committing.

**Cory:** (Plus, it can be a source of entertainment for her!)

**Austen:** But, it also functions to engender wonder and curiosity in the men, often making them desperate to find the truth and thus quite attached to the idea of the woman courting them. Note the phrase: the idea of the woman—they have no clue what this woman is really like!

**Cory:** This becomes complicated when, because they have nothing to go on, the men start going a little off the rails and ascribing supernatural characteristics to their invisible mistress.

**Austen:** What kinds of supernatural stuff do they come up with?

**Cory:** Different things depending on the play, and it's most often due to the elaborate and confusing nature of the women's actions. The men may simply ascribe supernatural abilities to these mysterious unseen women, or it may extend to conceiving the women as entirely supernatural beings. This is where the "invisible" in "invisible mistress" comes in—being invisible is a supernatural ability!

**Austen:** As suggested by the original Spanish title of *The Phantom Lady*—that is, *La dama duende*—the supernatural creature most closely associated with Angela is a *duende*.

**Cory:** Remind us what exactly a *duende* is.

**Austen:** So glad you asked. *Duendes* are poltergeist-like supernatural creatures in Spain and in Spanish-speaking cultures. We initially became interested in this distinction because we google-translated the title and instead of saying "ghost" or "phantom" it translated to "elf" or, "the elf lady."

**Cory:** Which has a very different connotation than phantom!

**Austen:** That's what we thought! But, upon further research, the word originally comes from *dueño de casa*, or "master of the house". The tradition is different in different places; usually they are house spirits like poltergeists, but sometimes they live in the woods; sometimes they are represented as helpful spirits, sometimes as goblins that eat children (e.g. your big toe). Most often—and this is significant for this play—they live inside the walls. Doña Angela, when she is operating invisibly, is considered a *duende*, specifically a *dama duende* (title drop!) or "lady duende."

**Cory:** Isn't she associated with a lot of other supernatural creatures, too?

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**Austen:** Sure—Manuel’s servant, Cosme, lists about a dozen different things she could be, from a demon to a succubus (although, again, the words are different in English). Manuel dismisses them, insisting that she must be an ordinary woman. From a feminist perspective, though, Cosme’s refusal to believe that the mysterious lady could be a human, the other men’s fascination with a woman they cannot see, and the general association of the invisible lady with the supernatural, are all symptoms of the same phenomenon: a mythologised womanhood.

**Cory:** And what, you might ask, is mythologized womanhood?

**Austen:** Well, let’s talk about that! In this case, we are using “mythologised” literally, but also to mean something closely related to “fantasised.” Angela becomes both a myth—a creature beyond ordinary personhood—and a fantasy, an ideal for the men around her.

**Cory:** Specifically, we want to give attention to the combined influences of the title *La dama duende*, the invisible mistress convention, and the Cupid and Psyche story. Angela is simultaneously being literally mythologized—put in a God’s place and being equated with duendes—and being directly abstracted and objectified.

**Austen:** As far as the literal mythology goes, besides Cupid and Psyche, Frederick de Armas describes a feminine trinomial in Spanish Golden Age plays of angel, demonio, and mujer—angel, demon, and woman.

**Cory:** Essentially, women were perceived as simultaneously angelic and demonic—that is, nonhuman, mythologised creatures, all good or all bad. This trinomial is particularly a feature of these invisible mistress plays.

**Austen:** But as far as mythology as idealisation or fantasy, we’re gonna step outside the Spanish Golden Age for a second. Twentieth-century feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir also talks about women as nonhuman and as myths in her book *The Second Sex*. She says: “Of all myths, none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine ‘mystery’...in the company of a living enigma man remains alone—alone with his dreams, his hopes, his fears, his love, his vanity. This subjective game, which can go all the way from vice to mystical ecstasy, is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relation with a human being.”

**Cory:** In other words, men are more interested in the incomprehensible idea of \_A Woman\_ than in the real, specific and imperfect human person?

**Austen:** Uh-huh. There’s something key, though, that troubles this a little bit. What makes the mythologised womanhood so interesting in this play is that Doña Angela knows about it.

**Cory:** Right! She knows that mystery is attractive! especially when the reality of her human circumstances is that she is a widow, in debt, and being hidden from men by her brothers, of whom Manuel is a guest.

**Austen:** Her knowledge here ties into her agency—another facet of the invisible mistress plays as a gender-swapped Cupid and Psyche. When Cupid, a male figure, is doing the hiding, he has the knowledge of the truth and therefore the power in the situation. When the female figure has that knowledge—in this case, not only of her identity but of her power as a mysterious figure—she has the agency! And boy does she use it.

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**Cory:** Building on Beauvoir, Judith Butler, another twentieth-century feminist philosopher, discusses her perspective that “The body becomes its gender through a series of acts.” She says, “As a corporeal field of cultural play, gender is a basically innovative affair... Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure.”

One’s gender is materially constructed through the actions one takes. In this way, gender is partially conceived of in terms of a performance. Angela’s self-fashioning can be seen as a particularly literal mobilization of this idea as she crafts the ideal womanhood for herself and utilizes the images that the men conjure, while Manuel only knows her through her constructed impression.

**Austen:** She uses her construction—her “mystery”—to get her man, knowing that being invisible and unattainable will make her more attractive to him. Psyche could only be with Cupid when she couldn’t see him, and Angela for a while can only be with Manuel when he can’t see her. In this case, rather than a character like Psyche, who reacts passively to the unknown through ignorance, the female character here—Doña Angela—turns the ignorance and supernatural power inside out by becoming the hidden manipulator.

**Cory:** Angela lives in a world where women are hidden and mythologised, and so she decides to use it. If those are the tools at my disposal, she thinks, let’s construct something using these tools!!

**Austen:** So really, she weaponises the way that men already view her.

**Cory:** Like Barbie!!

**Austen:** What do you mean, like Barbie?

**Cory:** Well, in the latter half of the *Barbie* movie, all the Barbies play up their stereotypically feminine features to distract the Kens and execute their complicated plan.

**Austen:** Oh, I see what you mean. Like, “This Barbie is a *Duende*!”

**Cory:** Sureee.... But when even Don Manuel, the skeptic, is successfully enamored and does refer to her as a divinity, as enchanted, as challenging the sun, she turns his construction upside down.

**Austen:** She tells him that she is not a divinity, nor anything non-human, but a woman. She even lets him in on her mystery a little by admitting—she’s afraid to not be a mystery to him, because she is afraid the attraction will fade if she is simply a normal person.

**Cory:** Is that really why she’s afraid? Don’t you think it’s because she doesn’t want him to know she’s a widow and in debt and a prisoner of her brothers?

**Austen:** Well, I would say it’s a little of both. Everyone’s got something, don’t they? Something that we’re afraid to let other people see or get too close to. Like de Beauvoir says, that’s why the mystery is so attractive—if you don’t know what the actual details of someone’s life are (like that they’re a widow, or in debt, or a prisoner), you can imagine whatever you want! She can be the perfect woman! Like Barbie!

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**Cory:** She's everything! He's just Manuel.

**Austen:** So, to recap! (*music*) Within the world of this play, there are a whole slew of influences on Angela's character and gender construction.

**Cory:** Between the invisible mistress convention, its mythological background, and the various other supernatural comparisons, she is being idealized, objectified, and compared to gods, demons, and *duendes*. But it's more complicated than that because she uses that construction!

**Austen:** She is both being mythologised and she is exercising agency by mythologising herself.

**Cory:** So let's bring it back to the question we asked at the beginning of the episode: how can we, as artists, consciously and productively approach a play that puts so much focus on how gender is perceived?

**Austen:** Yeah, Cory! Why do we even care about talking about gender? And why is talking about gender in a play useful?

**Cory:** Well, within the theory we have been discussing, gender is how it is constructed, and thus, it is how the culture perceives it. So, whether it is consciously or unconsciously, reinforcing a patriarchal or misogynistic perspective on gender contributes to that cultural perception or ZEITGEIST.

**Austen:** (Side note: I love that word zeitgeist for discussing this play, because it literally has geist, the German word for ghost, in it!)

**Cory:** I thought she was a *duende*...?

**Austen:** ANYWAY, gender is a big conversation in the modern era in a way it hasn't been in previous eras. Not only do women have access to more of the tools to make their perspective heard in a cultural marketplace—such as education—but people are becoming freer to express and discuss their diverse gender identities in public. And we hear backlash against both of these things!

**Cory:** So, in terms of pursuing responsibility in a production, we can think about how to be critically conscious of the ways our work will contribute to a cultural perception of gender (and even the meta-level of the construction of gender).

**Austen:** Arguably the most important thing about any production of this play is empathy, doing our best to portray these characters as real, three-dimensional people, and not gods, devils, or wall-monsters. Because there's always a danger in a heightened medium, and in a patriarchal society, to mythologise or stereotype people, just like the men in these stories have a tendency to mythologise the women into angels or demons.

**Cory:** Yeah, ideally we would find ways to harmlessly portray the authentic people of the story—men and women both—while highlighting and challenging any instances in a text that might contribute to a harmful perspective.

**Austen:** The challenge is especially important when performing a play written in a time and place with such a

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different zeitgeist. In the seventeenth century in Spain women were in the power of men; it was considered appropriate to confine the women in your family, and most women did not have an education, could not hold property, and could be married off for alliances. Plays set/written during this time reflect these views in their dramatic conventions.

**Cory:** So, for a contemporary audience of this play: if these conventions other or dehumanize women, a contemporary production needs to work to illuminate and work against these dynamics.

**Austen:** Right, how might we work to center, humanise, and empower Angela, and the play's other women, by subverting the historical, conventional constructions of gender?

**Cory:** Perhaps one potential approach, or performance choice in production would be to try to draw as much attention to the dynamics we have been discussing in a farcical way? That is, a show, and all its design elements, might literally play up the 'worshiping' of Angela (or of the idea of women generally) while Angela herself is just behaving normally and unamused?

**Austen:** Like, what if we even break the fourth wall, with the show giving her majestic entrances and introductions, and when she shows up she is just, like, brushing her teeth, or doing something normal and human? What if we almost always see her onstage when they talk about her—maybe she is listening, just like we are, and maybe it informs her choices? There are all kinds of interesting ways to play up the contrast between the supernatural dialogue about Angela and then the normal human person of Angela.

**Cory:** A production dramaturg might think about whether these production choices are particularly productive in handling the conversation about the gender divide/construction of gender.

**Austen:** Of course, there are infinite possibilities—and even more questions to be asked! What role do the other women play in this? Are they helping mythologise her? Are they being mythologised themselves? What would it do to the story to look at other potential translations of *duende*—would it be a different play if we called it *The Goblin Lady* or *Woman in the Walls*?

**Cory:** Not to mention the ending of the play, which we haven't touched on much yet. It's almost a letdown, with how everything gets resolved so quickly. The truth is revealed and the couple get engaged and then it's over — does that have something to do with the idea that once there is no mystery there is no more story? How might that be handled thoughtfully, or intentionally, in a production?

**Austen:** And most importantly of all, will we get another *Barbie* movie?

**Cory:** Whatever the production choices, it's clear that an understanding of the supernatural, familiarity with Spanish translations, and an appreciation for the Barbie movie can greatly inform a production of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La dama duende*, and can make us think more deeply about gender, gender construction, and who we're mythologizing!

**Austen:** Is it wrong of me to mythologise Margot Robbie?

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**Cory:** Yes. I'm Cory Drozdowski

**Austen:** And I'm Austen Bell

**Cory:** And thanks for listening to this episode of Writ in the Margins!

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