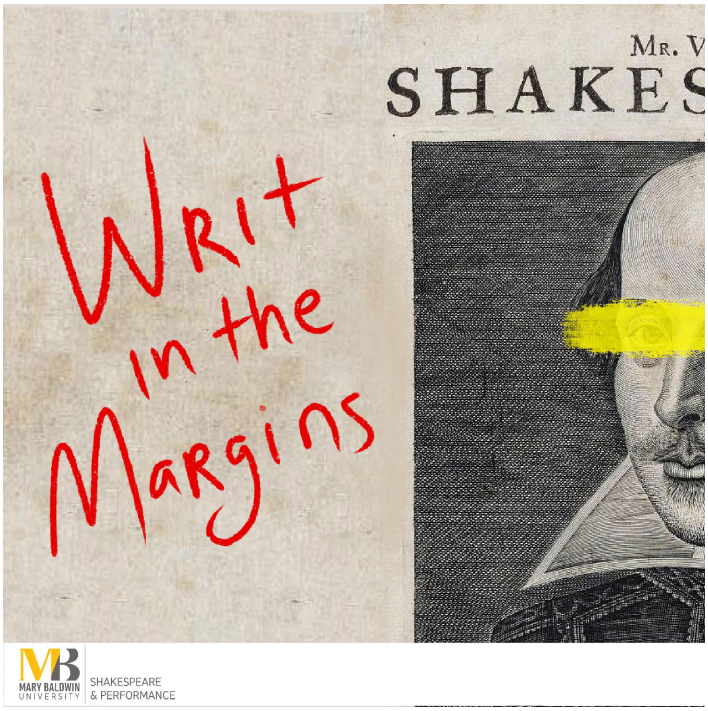

Writ in the Margins Podcast

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 4, Episode 6
Courage to Right a Woman's Wrongs: Meet the Servants

Hosts: Nora Frankovich

NOTE: This resource was created for *Writ in the Margins* by students in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University as a final project for graduate students in Prof. Molly E. Seremet's REN670: Dramaturgy class. All recordings and accompanying materials are available for use for educational and entertainment purposes. Please do not duplicate or distribute these materials without permission, however. All opinions stated in episodes are those of the hosts and special guests and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the institutions presenters represent.

Bonus Materials

Thank you to Professor Anastasia Wilson for joining us. For more information on Wilson's work, please visit https://thearts.gsu.edu/profile/anastasia-wilson/.

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Episode Transcript

NORA: Hello and welcome to today's episode of Writ in the Margins! I am your host and Mary Baldwin University MLitt candidate, Nora Frankovich.

So today we're going to talk about Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrong* but we're not going to dive into the primary characters and plot points today. What caught my attention as I was reading this play from the very first go, was the presence and involvement of the secondary characters – the servants. In a play of 14 total characters, including 3 bandits who are never heard from again after the first scene, 4 of the characters are servants. If we exclude those bandits from our count, that's 1/3 of the characters in the play.

To give a brief recap – or introduction if you've never read the play – the servant characters are Ribete, Tomillo, Flora, and Fineo. Ribete is the servant to our protagonist, Leonor, and featured heavily throughout the play. He's sharp and witty, he's educated, and he speaks the truth to her even if she doesn't want it. Next is Tomillo who is the servant and companion to Don Juan. Tomillo is also around quite a bit and has some witty comebacks and biting comments, but he's bad with money, insinuates that he's always hungry and poor, and has a side-goal of getting with Flora in his spare time. Flora, the one female-identifying servant, serves Estela – however we don't find this out until the very end of the play when she's given away to Ribete to marry. In fact, we don't hear about her until

Act 2 Scene 1 and we don't actually meet her until Act 3 Scene 2 - when she drugs and robs Tomillo. Now, lastly is Fineo, servant to Don Fernando. He is seen once in the play, speaks two lines, and basically is the cardboard cutout of a dutiful servant.

So we've met this array of characters, but who are they really? Why are some featured heavily in the play while others are in one scene? Do they tell us anything about life or society in the Spanish Golden Age? And why – with their very distinct personalities – do they make me think of commedia dell'arte characters? These are all things I was curious about and that's what we're diving into on today's show.

Now before we go any further, I've added a spin to this episode. We'll be spending some time investigating the influence of Italian commedia dell'arte on Spanish *comedia*. When we give a nod to our Italian commedia cousin, you may hear "Salute!", at which time we invite you to toast this theatrical influence. So grab a glass of the beverage of your choice, and let's dive in!

So first, a little background on Spanish *comedia*. Michael Ruggerio defines *comedia* as, "a mixture of incidents, characters, and styles traditionally found in either tragedy or comedy." Scholars seem to agree that *comedia* – when referred to as a collection of these Spanish plays – includes stories that have qualities of tragedy, tragicomedy, pastoral, and/or comedy – they're not one dimensional. Many people credit Lope de Vega with originating the form of Spanish *comedia*, but in this article, Ruggerio goes on to reveal that, "Lope de Vega (himself credited with the invention of the Spanish *comedia*) says that Lope de Rueda was the first to write this new type of play. It is equally significant – given the Italian influence on Rueda – that the Spanish theatre was profoundly influenced by the Italian theatre and Italian literature in general" (Salute!).

Spanish *comedia* followed a 3-Act structure, popularized by de Vega, including its own recurring cast of nobility, lovers, and lower-class characters. Arnold Reichenberger points out that Spanish *comedia* tends to have a limited number of conflicts, follows a pattern of "order disturbed to order restored," and includes themes around honor and faith. This all is certainly true for Caro's play, including the use of popular characters such as the gracioso – or servant characters – our topic for today. The word gracioso actually translates to "funny". So, as in Caro's play, these characters provide humor whether that be in dialogue, asides, actions, or plot. However, the two characters we see the most, Ribete and Tomillo, feel a little bit more fleshed out and there may be another reason for that.

In the courts of Philip II, Philip III, and Philip IV, court jesters abounded during the Spanish Golden Age. The court jester evolved from the "buffoon" character of the Middle Ages but became more than brash entertainers. Philip IV in particular – who was reigning when Caro wrote her play – loved being surrounded and amused by these wits going so far as to even travel with them. As revealed by López and Cadahía, "even his valet, Manuel Gomez, became one of the most influential persons in the court thanks to his buffoonery." Now, jesters did need to be careful because they were beloved as long as people were laughing, but if they insulted the wrong person or said the wrong thing, they would be beaten or even killed. But these court jesters enjoyed a freedom that none other in the court had, and that was speaking truth to power. Yes, they poked fun, told stories, sang songs, but they were the only ones who could utilize those skills to speak honestly and directly to the King and nobles about serious social and political situations. Per López and Cadahía, "the duties of the court jesters is two-fold: to amuse and to advise."

We see this behavior in Ribete and Tomillo. They speak the truth to the nobles they serve, done so in a witty and intelligent manner, but they do also get insulted and even slapped by these same people who seek their input. There seem to be parallels between our servant characters and what is known about the beloved court jesters of the Golden Age, but now we're going to dive deeper into the influence of Italian commedia dell'arte (Salute!). I had the privilege of speaking with Anastasia Wilson, Professor of Performance at Georgia State University in Atlanta, GA, to learn more about the history of this art form and the influence it had in Europe. Here's that interview:

N: So today we are speaking with Anastasia Wilson, Professor of Performance at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. Thank you for joining us today.

A: Thank you for having me.

N: Now, you studied and trained at the Accademia dell'Arte in Italy. What kind of exposure did that give you to original commedia dell'arte techniques and practices?

A: So, I had done mask work before and we actually do an extensive module in the class that is focused specifically on commedia, so we studied the acting technique itself, the mask work, how to actually build the masks, also style and physicality for performing each of the characters because each of them has a specific physicality to them, and voice. So in that module we studied that, how to build those shows, and also how build just the different components that go into the improvisation.

N: That sounds like such an incredible and unique experience.

A: It's pretty wild. It's a lot of fun. (laughter) It's a crazy world.

N: Well on today's show specifically, we're talking about Ana Caro's The Courage to Right A Woman's Wrong which is a Spanish *comedia* play, but I suspect it was influenced by *commedia dell'arte*. (Salute!) I'm wondering if you can start by giving us just a brief history of Italian *commedia dell'arte.*

A: So *commedia dell'arte* was performed in Italy - and started spreading throughout Europe and beyond - from about the mid 16th century through the mid 18th century. There is some evidence of performances in the 1540's, but we do know that definitely by the 1560s there were professional companies throughout Italy. The most identifiable characteristics of an Italian *commedia* play are going to be your improvised dialogue, half-masks that the actors wear on their faces, a cast of stock characters that are going to be dressed in their distinguishable colors, costumes, and they each have a specific style of mask as well.

N: Amazing – and we'll get into more details later, but when it comes to the stock characters, can you give us just a brief overview of what they are?

A: Sure. So in general they were grouped into 3 categories. You have your masters, your servants, and your lovers. And then within those three categories, there were more specific characters.

N: Great, and we'll circle back to that in just a minute, but first I would love to learn more about *commedia dell'arte's*

influence. How far of a reach did it have outside of Italy?

A: Oh, boy! So the map of Europe in the early modern period looks quite different compared to what we know today, but these battles for power and land actually helped *commedia dell'arte* spread throughout the European empires and beyond, really. We have records of the art form in Bavaria as early as 1568, France in 1571, Spain by 1574 (Salute!) and England by 1578. Political dignitaries who came to Italy were entertained with *commedia dell'arte* performances and they would invite acting troupes to their own countries. That, coupled with the traveling acting companies who performed outside of Italy allowed Italian *commedia dell'arte* to spread rapidly and it influenced other forms of theatre across Europe and beyond.

N: And there is definitely evidence of that influence in Caro's play as well as others in Spanish *comedia*. And in this episode, we're specifically looking at that influence when it comes to the servant characters. Can you tell me a little about the stock servant characters in Italian *commedia dell'arte?*

A: Yeah, sure! They're my favorite. So, the servants were called *zanni,* and while there might be a character with that name in the show, there were also servant companions with names such as Arlecchino, Brighella, Colombina, Pulcinella, Pedrolino, and others. All of these *zanni* possessed some level of wit, intelligence, they created comedy within the performance, and they were also known for their acrobatics, of course, but they all had slightly different traits. So for example, Arlecchino was witty and resourceful but he also had a strong sexual appetite. Brighella was Arlecchino's older and more vindictive brother who spent his time scheming to put himself ahead. Colombina started as an entr-acte dancer until women were allowed to be a part of the plot. Then the characters became a counterpart to the other *zanni* characters, intelligent, helpful to her mistress, as well as the love interest of Arelcchino. Pulcinella was a thief and opportunist who could be upper or lower class, and Pedrolino was, young, simple-minded, your "sad clown." These stock servant characters each has specific costumes, masks, and props that identified who they were to an audience. And this is why so many *commedia dell'arte* troupes found success beyond Italy, because the characters were so identifiable, audiences could follow along with the story regardless of what country or social class they were from.

N: That makes a lot of sense in terms of its ability to spread and many of these well-defined traits are identifiable in Caro's servant characters as well. Thank you very much for sharing all of this history and background and your experience with Italian *commedia dell'arte* today! I really appreciate you taking the time.

A: It is my pleasure. Thank you for having me. Grazie!

So we know that Italian *commedia dell'arte* definitely made it to Spanish shores (Salute!). In fact, Alberto Naseli, who famously went by the stage name Ganassa, was one of the biggest performers in Italy and spent 10 years - that we know of - in Spain. Shergold reveals that during a Corpus Christi festivity for the King and Queen, he got approval to play in Madrid 2 days a week, which he did for months. Ganassa was allowed to continue in the *commedia dell'arte* style but he was required to have Spanish music and song. Other Italian companies also made their way to Spain, such as that of Estefanelo Bottarga who first appeared in Valencia in 1583. He also performed in Corpus Christi festivities as a Zanni or Pantalone.

These troupes were in Spain well before Ana Caro's time, but their influence lingered. Frederick Busi discusses in

length the influence it had on Miguel de Cervante's, Don Quixote, which, published in 1605 and 1615, and was most likely read by Caro. As previously mentioned, Lope de Vega and Lope de Rueda were heavily influenced by Italian theatre and literature as well.

Bringing this history back to our servant roles, the Italian 'zanni' and the Spanish 'gracioso' serve similar purposes in their plays. If we investigate Caro's servants, Ribete has the wit and astuteness of a Arlecchino, but has no love interest in the play. That characteristic is given to Tomillo who is trying to deflower Flora – possibly a 'Colombina' character. Fineo – well, he just doesn't appear enough in the play to fall into a stock character bucket.

And it's interesting to learn about the history of these theatrical forms and inspect Caro's characters with this background, (Salute!), but what do we do with them in a modern production? Most audience members in 21st century America will not have knowledge of *comedia* or *commedia dell'arte* stock characters - nor do we want to neglect the depth they add to Caro's play. Depending on the story a production is trying to tell, we can add layers and meaning by giving these "supporting" characters the attention they deserve.

Unfortunately there is very little production history of this play. No records survive from the Golden Age and there's only recently been a resurgence in productions within the last 20 years. The GALA Hispanic Theatre in Washington DC did a production in 2006 and Repertoria Español did one in 2017 in New York – both being Spanish-language productions. This Diversifying the Classics translation from UCLA has allowed for an increase in English-language productions, even as recently as 2023 at LA City and Skidmore Colleges and in 2024 it inspired a bi-lingual production at Bowdoin College in Maine. And while a lot of the articles about these productions focus on Leonor and on the frequently-used feminist approach the production took, I was unable to find anything in print as to choices made around these servant characters.

Now as they're written in the text, 3 of the servants' characters are male presenting and one is female. If we approach them via gender studies or feminist theory, it's interesting to consider that a male – Ribete – is in service to Leonor, a female. Male writers of the Golden Age typically did not create relationships for their female characters that focused on friendship – especially not one of a different gender. As Mercedes Maroto Camino points out, quote "the idea that women (or women and men) cannot have an intimate relationship of the disembodied kind classified as friendship is partly justified by appealing to the overly and overtly prejudiced criterion that establishes women as sentimental as well as jealous and possessive in their relationship." end quote. It's important to acknowledge, though, that the majority of the time we see them together, Leonor is male-presenting as Leonardo, thus maintaining the masculine status-quo of a male servant for a male master, but Ribete is the only one who knows Leonor's true identity, making him – and the audience – the only ones aware of this mixed-gender friendship.

And that's not to say that a production couldn't cast this role with a non-male-presenting actor. Having Ribete played by a non-binary or female-presenting actor can open up an entirely different path into exploring gender dynamics and female homosocial relationships within Caro's play.

Our other servants fall in line with expected gender alliances. Tomillo and Fineo serve male noblemen and Flora, we learn, serves Estela. But breaking away from a gender-based approach, I want to touch briefly on Elizabeth

Rhodes article from 2005. She argues that, rather than a feminist lens which can fall apart when Leonor marries the man who betrayed her, she believes quote "Justice…is thus a highly appropriate lens through which to examine works by women." end quote. I bring this up specifically to tie in a point she makes about the Tomillo/Flora storyline. As we've seen, a romantic pursuit between servants was a common trope in both Spanish *comedia* and Italian *commedia dell'arte* (Salute!), but Rhodes makes the point that the lens of justiciary poetics creates an empowered parallel between Flora and Leonor, "Flora enacts particular justice, keeping her virginity and returning tit for tat by deflowering Tomillo of that which is dearest to him, his money, a victory that buttresses Leonor's larger triumph and follows its retributive trajectory. "

So whether modern theatremakers set their productions in period or contemporary settings, I hope that they do not dismiss these servant characters are mere support to the primary plot. Caro has clearly fleshed them out and created the dynamics between them to add more meaning to the composition of her story rather than making them simple stock characters. And because of that, when considering the casting and possible cross-gender casting of some of these individuals, it's important to truly understand their relationships and roles within this funny and poignant play.

I hope you've enjoyed today's episode on the servant characters of Ana Caro's *The Courage to Right a Woman's Wrong*. Be sure to check out the other podcasts on Writ in the Margins to learn even more about this wonderful – and fortunately, now better-known, Spanish *comedia* play. Thanks for listening. Salute!