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“EL CURIOSO IMPERTINENTE” Y *THE SECOND MAIDEN’S TRAGEDY*: DISCURSOS (AUTO)SUBVERSIVOS SOBRE GÉNERO Y PODER

Raquel Serrano González

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative analysis of “The Curious Impertinent”, an interpolated novel in *Don Quixote* (1605), and *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, a play attributed to Thomas Middleton premiered in 1611. Cervantes’s story about the stratagem contrived by a jealous husband who persuades his closest friend to test his wife’s fidelity and the pernicious consequences that ensue is rewritten in the subplot of Middleton’s work and adapted to the Jacobean political and ideological context. The play’s main storyline also mirrors the Cervantine-inspired episode: the female protagonist is equally tempted by a tyrant, but, as opposed to the seduced wife, she resists stoically and gives up her life to prevent an otherwise unavoidable rape. Critics of both works are divided as to whether they uphold the dominant construction of women as ‘naturally’ inferior to men, both being permeated by a blatantly misogynistic language that perpetuates the ‘weaker vessels’ ideology. The analysis developed in this paper aims to prove that, even though each text was produced in a different social context –and hence has different political motivations–, both are self-subversive, as they undermine the dominant ideology of femininity and the consequent power hierarchy, in both the private and the public spheres.

Keywords: Cervantes; Middleton; gender; Jacobean drama; performance.

RESUMEN

Este artículo proporciona un análisis comparativo de “El Curioso Impertinente”, una novela interpolada en *El Quijote* (1605), y *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*, una obra teatral atribuida a Thomas Middleton representada en 1611. Middleton reescribió en la trama secundaria de su obra la historia cervantina sobre las perniciosas consecuencias de la estratagema urdida por un celoso marido que, a través de su íntimo amigo, pone a prueba la fidelidad de su esposa, y la adaptó al contexto político e ideológico jacobino. La trama principal de la obra también reproduce este episodio de inspiración cervantina: la protagonista es tentada por un tirano, pero resiste estoicamente y da su vida para impedir una violación inevitable. La opinión crítica se encuentra dividida sobre si estas obras sostienen la construcción dominante de las mujeres como ‘esencialmente’ inferiores a los hombres, y ambas están impregnadas de un lenguaje abiertamente misógino que perpetúa la ideología de la fragilidad femenina. Este artículo pretende demostrar que, aunque cada texto se produjo en un contexto social diferente –y por tanto tiene distintas motivaciones políticas– ambos se subvierten a sí mismos, socavando la ideología dominante de feminidad y la jerarquía de poder resultante en las esferas privada y pública.

Palabras clave: Cervantes; Middleton; género; teatro jacobino; representación.

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1. Introduction

A fatal story of deception, adultery and mimetic desire, “The Curious Impertinent” became a literary phenomenon in seventeenth-century England, as attested by the numerous rewritings that followed the 1605 publication of *Don Quixote*¹. The narrative interlude recounts the tale of Anselmo and Lotario, two male youths who enjoy a long-established, close friendship. When the former marries a beautiful maiden named Camila, Lotario shortens his visits to the newly-weds’ household, as dictated by the prevailing code of honour. Bitterly disappointed with his friend’s absence, Anselmo develops an obsessive desire to test his wife’s fidelity, a task he entrusts to none other than Lotario. Despite his earnest attempts, the latter fails to dissuade his friend from embarking on such hazardous venture, and he eventually agrees to get involved in the seduction plot. Progressively, Lotario’s feigned advances turn into actual passion and Camila’s initial reluctance is eventually overcome.

The enamoured characters commence a clandestine love affair, which they succeed to hide from Anselmo with the complicity of Camila’s maid, Leonela. However, it is Lotario himself who reveals the truth to his friend in an inconvenient burst of jealousy. The regretful lover confesses his betrayal to Camila, who concocts a witty plan to persuade her husband of her innocence. Hidden behind a tapestry, Anselmo becomes the voyeur of a play where his wife histrionically rejects Lotario’s advances and even wounds herself with a dagger. The jealous husband is fully convinced of Camila’s loyalty, but the happy ending is short-lived for the adulterous couple. When Anselmo discovers Leonela’s love affair with an unnamed man, the maiden tries to appease her master’s anger promising to reveal some valuable information. Camila hastily flees the house to avoid an exposure she mistakenly anticipates, and her unsuspecting husband learns the unfortunate truth. Stricken with grief and remorse, Anselmo passes away, not before exonerating Camila and blaming his misfortune solely on his impertinent desire. Shortly afterwards, Lotario’s life is taken in battle and Camila dies in a nunnery, heartbroken, after learning of her lover’s demise.

Generally attributed to Thomas Middleton, *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (1611) is a Jacobean stage adaptation of “The Curious Impertinent”. The play’s subplot draws heavily from Cervantes; not only does it follow the storyline closely, but it also recreates much of the original’s verbal detail. In Middleton’s work, Anselmus persuades his friend Votarius to test the chastity of his young spouse, generically referred to as Wife. Like Camila, she initially resists temptation, but ends up yielding to her seducer’s amorous advances.

The idyll does not last long either. When Votarius glimpses Bellarius –his life-long enemy and Leonella’s lover– furtively wandering around the house, he breaks into a fit of jealousy and informs Anselmus of his wife’s betrayal. Middleton emulates Cervantes’s use of metatheatre by having the Wife perform a carefully hatched play that persuades her suspicious husband of her chastity. However, the events leading to the final tragedy are far more sombre than the original’s. The character of Bellarius, an unnamed figure with an accessory role in “The Curious Impertinent”, is rewritten into a revengeful villain who plots his enemy’s murder. He convinces Leonella to ignore her mistress’s command to have Votarius wear an armour

1 In the Jacobean period three stage adaptations of Cervantes’s story were published: Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Coxcomb* (1609-12), *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* (1611) and Nathan Field’s *Amends for Ladies* (printed 1618).

for their plotted encounter. The maid blithely agrees to become her lover's accomplice and so betrays her lady in a way that Cervantes's incautious –yet faithful– character never does.

The episode's ending is also more calamitous and melodramatic than the Spanish: The Wife is tricked into murdering her own unarmoured lover; Anselmus and Bellarius wound each other mortally in a fight where the Wife is killed after deliberately stepping in between their swords. Her moribund husband learns of his spouse's infidelity from his rival and, in a significant contrast to his fictional predecessor, puts all the blame for his tragic downfall on the Wife's lustful and seductive nature.

The husband's self-exonerating condemnation of his spouse has led to interpretations of Middleton's rewriting as a homiletic story on the devastating consequences of infidelity. Anne Lancashire (1978, pp. 31-32) concludes that “the dramatist's changes make the *S.M.T.* subplot an even more moral tale than Cervantes's original, and place its emphasis on the sin of (and on damnation for) adultery rather than on Anselmo's foolish curiosity”. The husband's transferring of the blame from his own folly to his wife's innate frailty led Sandra Clark (2002, p. 5) to claim that “the responsibility for the tragic outcome of this plot [...] is redirected onto the female characters; it lies in women's sensuality and their inability to resist temptation”. However, even though the suspicious husband's attribution of guilt is categorically changed, the interpretation of the Wife as the embodiment of a –fundamentally feminine– moral and physical frailty is problematic.

As highlighted by a variety of critics, the play's subplot is thematically linked to the main storyline, to which it provides a meaningful counterpoint. *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* opens with the Tyrant's deposition of Govianus, the legitimate monarch of an unnamed realm. Infatuated with his predecessor's fiancée, a character generically called the Lady, the new ruler is convinced that his power and wealth will gain him the woman's heart. However, she remains firm and loyal to the extreme: in order to avoid an imminent rape by the lustful tyrant, the Lady does not doubt to take her own life with her lover's sword. As argued by Richard Levin (1963), there are straightforward parallelisms between the main and the secondary plot. Succinctly, both present a love triangle where a married or betrothed woman is seduced by another man. Whilst the Lady becomes the epitome of moral strength and impeccable virtue, the Wife succumbs to carnal temptation.

The apparent antithesis between both female characters led to a variety of analyses articulated in terms of binary oppositions. For instance, Lancashire argued that “the Wife, as her name suggests, is the fallible counterpart of the Lady”, being the contrast between “good woman and wanton woman [...] a common one in Renaissance moral writings” (1978, p. 46). She endorses a reading of Anselmus's spouse as not only a fallible creature that yields to sexual desire, but as a lascivious temptress who takes an active part in the seduction scheme: “She not merely falls to temptation but rushes to meet it, becoming as much Votarius' seducer as he is hers” (1978, p. 46).

In the above quotation, the Wife is portrayed as the embodiment of a gender ideology which, in wide circulation during the Renaissance, constructed women as innately weak, both physically and morally². Such interpretation encourages readings of the text as upholding an

2 A variety of discourses contributed to naturalise and legitimise this construction of femininity. Especially illustrative are the humoral medical doctrine, which provided ‘scientific’ grounding for women's physical inferiority, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, which emphasised their moral frailty.

essentialist notion of femaleness that substantiates the hegemonic relations of power between the genders. For example, Karen Bamford (2000, p. 93) argues that “the exceptional chastity of one woman proves the rule of female sexual weakness. Here the commonplace adultery of the Wife is a foil for the peerless chastity of the Lady”. This claim seems to be endorsed by the two other feminine characters included in the play: Leonella and the Lady. An alter ego of the Wife, the former provides further evidence of the age’s belief in women’s innate frailty and highlights the latter’s extraordinary nature. Moreover, the Lady’s display of ‘male’ prowess in the suicide scene sets her apart from commonplace women, apparently reinforcing the strong vs. weak gender binary. As Bamford (2000, p. 96) puts it, “the Lady transcends the weakness of her sex and attains a ‘masculine’ heroism”.

The emphatically misogynistic language that imbues *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy* also reinforces this essentialist construction of womanhood. Hence, the interpretation of the play as the moralistic story of an extraordinarily virtuous lady whose ‘masculine’ fortitude sets her apart from the ‘weaker vessels’ seems justified. Such reading would provide women with a role model, while substantiating their fundamentally frail nature. However, as the upcoming analysis aims to prove, Middleton’s work contains a defiant subtext that problematises the interpretation of the play as a firm reinforcement of the dominant gender ideology. Unlike the aforementioned critics, Johnson opposes readings of Middleton’s work as upholding essentialist, normative notions of femininity, as she attributes the differences between the central female characters not to innate, fundamental traits, but to the men that exert the greatest influence on their lives:

While criticism on *The Lady’s Tragedy* habitually discusses the Lady and the Wife as morally instructive opposites, then, with one making all the right choices and the other confirming all the worst stereotypes about women, we gain an entirely different perspective by focusing on the men that drive the Lady and the Wife to their opposite ‘extremities’ (2016, p. 134).

Hopkins goes a step further in her contention that the play fails to define and constrain women, who, in her view, succeed to subvert male-constructed femininity.

we see a strongly marked tension between, on the one hand, a set of discursive and representational strategies intended to contain and define women, and, on the other, the ways in which these representations have taken on energies and valencies of their own which suggest that women cannot and will not be contained, and that their transgressiveness will indeed be in direct proportion to the energies used in attempting to curb them (2002, p. 86).

Interestingly, the extent of Camila’s success in exerting agency and ultimately subverting the hegemonic gender identities also received substantial critical attention, dividing literary critics. For instance, Mancing (2005, p. 106) encourages readings of “The Curious Impertinent” as a story “about a woman’s self-assertion” where “Camila’s movement from a silent object of desire and discussion to a narrating and controlling agent makes her the most interesting and most autonomous character” (2011, p. 18). Similarly, Diana de Armas Wilson praises the episode’s ability to “intrude into all those quixotic male fantasies about the nature of women” and its success in “exposing all those shared cultural fictions –the norma loquendi of the Renaissance man– that drive Anselmo [...] to self-destruct” (1987, p. 28). Yvonne Jehenson (1998) thoroughly analyses a variety of narrative strategies that contest and resist the hegemonic cultural codes. However, she eventually concludes that the tale’s ending “serves as sober reinforcement of Raymond Williams’s reminder that even alternative forms are tied

For an in-depth analysis see Laqueur (1990) and Fletcher (1995).

to the hegemonic, ‘that the dominant culture... at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture’ (1977: 114)” (Williams, 1977, p. 114, cited in Jehenson, 1998, p. 48). Hence, despite her attempts at resistance, Camila is given no chance but to embody an oppressing male-devised identity category –that of the prostitute. Likewise, Ashley Hope Pérez (2011, p. 100) claims that “her ambitious performance takes place inside the men’s world, and thus is always already contained by it”.

Despite their different genres and contexts of production, both “The Curious Impertinent” and the subplot of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* have been interpreted as exemplary stories on the consequences of sin. Both texts are permeated with an emphatically misogynistic language that reinforces the Renaissance dominant ideology of femininity. Interestingly, both are also self-contesting, in that they challenge the essentialist notions of gender that they seem anxiously to uphold. Finally, they have also sparked critical debate on whether the female characters’ conformity to the dominant gender ideology contains these subversive impulses –and hence ends up serving hegemonic ends. Even though this issue has divided critics of both works, they have hardly been addressed in in-depth comparative articles³. Each of the following sections provides an analysis of one of the works discussed. First, attention is paid to the essentialising discourse which, embedded in both texts, substantiates the period’s hegemonic construction of femininity and the power relations it contributes to sustain. Later, attention is paid to how effectively this construction is destabilised: Does the female characters ‘fall’ favour an interpretation of the play where subversion is contained and co-opted by the established power and the dominant gender subjectivities, naturalised? Or do the subversive impulses within the text question or undermine the hegemonic identity categories?

2. “The Curious Impertinent”: Cervantes’s exploration of gender and power

“The Curious Impertinent” is recounted by an “emphatically male” (Pérez, 2011, p. 95) omniscient narrator whose voice relays the dominant gender ideology. The tale’s opening is focused on the exemplary relationship between Anselmo and Lotario, who epitomise the early modern ideal of male friendship: “[...] there once lived two wealthy and eminent gentlemen called Anselmo and Lotario, who were so close that all their acquaintances referred to them by way of antonomasia as ‘the two friends’” (Cervantes, 2003, p. 295). The sublimity of this bond was promoted by a large number of authoritative texts which, in wide circulation during the Renaissance, celebrated and glorified male friendship. For instance, Montaigne (2004, p. 7) defines true friendship as a state where “souls are mingled and confounded in so universal a blending that they efface the seam which joins them together so that it cannot be found”. In accordance with the period’s hegemonic view, the French philosopher exalts this bond above any other –including the marital one. The ‘imperfect’ female is defined as naturally unable to partake in such a noble union, since “there is no example yet of woman attaining to it and by the common agreement of the Ancient schools of philosophy she is excluded from it” (Montaigne, 2004, p. 5).

When Anselmo resolves to marry Camila, a wealthy, highborn and beautiful maiden, he entrusts Lotario with the arrangements of what he significantly calls “negocio” (Cervantes,

3 Two published essays deal with these texts: Marina S. Brownlee’s (2015) analysis, which is focused on the concept of ‘space,’ and Sandra Clark’s (2002) study of Cervantes’s influence on the Jacobean stage.

2009, p. 328)⁴, turning the bride into the mere object of a profitable transaction. However, the irruption of a female character in the text, however obliging she may be, thwarts the apparently balanced and stable order of the two friends' world. As dictated by the prescriptive cultural codes –and endorsed by the authoritative voice of the narrator–, Lotario reduces his visits to Anselmo's household in order to protect his friend's precious honour:

Lotario began to be careful to neglect to go to see Anselmo, because it seemed to him (as it would to any person of good sense) that a man shouldn't haunt his friends' houses once they are married as he used to do in their bachelor days; for although good, true friendship must be above all suspicion, the honour of a married man is so delicate that even a brother, it seems, let alone a friend, can damage it (Cervantes, 2003, p. 295).

Anselmo is so deeply troubled that he goes so far as to regret his own marriage, arguing that “if he'd known getting married was going to erect a barrier between them he would never had taken such a step” (Cervantes, 2003, p. 295). The newly-wed husband infamously uses his spouse to redefine his relationship with his friend, depriving her of all will and agency, assuring that “Camila had no pleasure or desire other than those that he wanted her to have” (p. 296). Perturbed and tormented, Anselmo concocts a plan to regain the lost intimacy with Lotario through the reified and abused female body.

In his speech, the anxious husband brutally objectifies his wife, stressing her marketplace value through a variety of material metaphors that equate women's worth with jewels and gemstones. He intends the fidelity scheme “to reveal the purity of her virtue, as fire reveals the purity of gold” (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 297-298) and wants his spouse “to be proved and assayed in the fire of enticement and temptation” (p. 298).

Anselmo's words also reinforce females' alleged innate frailty and imperfection. His statement that “this desire that so disturbs me is the urge to find out whether my wife Camila is as virtuous and perfect as I think she is” (Cervantes, 2003, p. 297) is self-subversive. If Anselmo is confident of his wife's virtue, why should he be anxious about finding out the truth? Even more revealing is his acknowledgement that, should Camila overcome the test, “I shall say that the virtuous woman, of whom the wise men says ‘Who can find her?’ has fallen to my lot” (p. 298). A subsequent –blatantly contradictory– utterance also discloses the husband's actual expectations: “And if the outcome is the opposite of what I anticipate, the pleasure of seeing that I was right will enable me to bear without feeling it the pain that such a costly experiment could be expected to cause” (p. 982)⁵.

Anselmo's incongruous words expose the problematic logic of a culture where men's honour is made to depend on the chastity of the weaker vessels. While legitimising their natural subservience to men, the construction of women as physically and morally inferior engendered in husbands a deep unease about their reputation. In confiding Camila's seduction to his trusted friend, he avoids public humiliation: “and in this way I shall only be wronged in the intention, and the offence will be hidden in your virtuous silence” (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 298-299).

As a response to his friend's request, Lotario delivers an intricate speech to dissuade Anselmo from undertaking the test, where he produces emphatically essentialising definitions of gender. Appealing to the authority of a variety of sources –ranging from philosophy and

4 The term used in the original Spanish version ('business') has been chosen instead of the translated term, 'mission', in order to illustrate the economic dimension of the marriage.

5 Author's emphasis.

theology to literature and popular axioms—, Lotario's rationalised discourse constitutes a fragrant reinforcement of women's essential weak and mutable nature. Thus he generically defines 'woman' as "an imperfect animal" with "insufficient natural strength and virtue" (Cervantes, 2003, p. 301), and compares her to a "mirror of clear, shining glass" which is "cloud[ed] and dim[med]" at the touch of any breath (p. 303). He also makes females' worth dependant on the public acknowledgement of their sexual purity: "Remember that there is no jewel in the world as valuable as a chaste and honourable woman, and that women's honour lies exclusively in their good reputations" (p. 303). Women's marketplace value is once again elaborately established through a variety of metaphors that persistently objectify females, portraying them as precious –yet fragile– gemstones:

Tell me this, Anselmo: if heaven or fortune had made you the lawful owner of a superb diamond, and every expert who examined it was convinced of its quality and value [...] and you yourself were certain of this without a shadow of doubt – would it be reasonable to take it into your head to place that diamond between an anvil and a hammer and [...] test it to see if it was as hard and excellent as everybody said? (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 301-302).

As proved by the afore-quoted fragment, the detailed rhetoric of mining is meticulously deployed to measure women's *material* value in the public world. Lotario's discourse logically states that if Camila's worth is socially recognised as optimal and thus cannot be increased with the test, Anselmo's desire to tempt his spouse is unwise:

Now think of Camila, Anselmo my friend, as a superb diamond, in your opinion and in everybody else's, and think whether it's reasonable to expose her to the risk of destruction, because even if she does remain intact, she won't then be worth any more than she is now (Cervantes, 2003, p. 336).

Despite the 'masculine' logic that apparently backs up Lotario's speech, the incongruities within the hegemonic discourse that works to legitimise the patriarchal order are exposed. First, the thoroughly reasoned conclusion that it would be preposterous to test Camila's chastity reveals an underlying conviction that she may fail. Such conviction, directly acknowledged in the following quotation and reinforced by the essentialising construction of femininity articulated all throughout Lotario's speech, undermines the portrayal of his friend's wife as virtuous⁶:

So if the mine of her honour, beauty, virtue and modesty yields up to you, without even needing to be worked, all the riches that it contains and that you can desire, why do you want to dig still deeper in search of yet more veins of new and unseen treasure, risking the collapse of the whole structure, which is supported only on the feeble props of her frail nature? (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 309-310).

The contradiction posed by Camila's description as having the highest personal value and the implied expectation that she will not overcome temptation reveals the internal inconsistencies of a discourse where masculinity is contingent on the chastity of inherently weak beings.

The emphatically essentialising construction of femininity undertaken by Lotario should be understood in connection with the tale's sociocultural context. During the sixteenth century, the need to legitimise Spain's territorial expansion overseas demanded that a solid, consistent and homogeneous national identity be invented and naturalised. Therefore, as a national myth based upon the existence of an ancestral, purely Christian Spanish essence emerged, the oppositional definition of the nation's 'insiders' and 'outsiders' became an

6 Camila's virtue is confirmed by the authoritative voice of the narrator, who defines her as "a sensible and honourable woman" (Cervantes, 2003, p. 310).

imperative. Such definition was articulated through essentialised identity binaries, including Christian vs. heretical and masculine vs. feminine. As argued by Barbara Fuchs (2003, p. 3), “normative, aristocratic male subjects in Counter-Reformation Spain staked their identity on two basic tenets: *honra* (honor) and *limpieza de sangre* (blood purity)”, the former being largely dependent on the ability of men –considered to be more rational and restrained– to control and regulate female chastity. “Moreover, the two notions were interconnected: through the sustained equation of the East with effeminacy and of Semitic people with women, masculinity was erected as a crucial aspect of Spanish identity” (Fuchs, 2003, p. 3).

Lotario’s speech contributes to advance these ideological premises. In order to account for his friend’s deviation from normative masculinity, he effeminises Anselmo, comparing him to the ‘unreasonable’ Moors: “It seems to me, Anselmo, that your mind is in the same state as the mind of the Moors, who can’t be made to understand the error of their sect with the Holy Scripture or with arguments involving intellectual speculation” (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 299-300). Anselmo himself assumes this effeminate role, claiming that “I’m suffering from the disease that sometimes affects women and makes them to want to eat earth, plaster, coal and even worse things” (pp. 305-306). A sufficient cure for this temporary deviant behaviour would be, according to the character’s own speech, to obtain a feeble confirmation of Camila’s virtue, which Lotario could easily secure through a tepid seduction.

As mentioned before, a husband’s distrust of his wife’s loyalty and his subsequent anxiety about the loss of his manhood are indicative of a culture where masculinity is defined as a non-fixed asset, whose possession is dependent on men’s ability to control and regulate the chastity of their frail spouses. Despite the logic behind this anxiety, Anselmo’s effeminate perverse reaction jeopardises the hegemonic construction of men as innately rational and moderate. Lotario works out this ideological problem by labelling his friend’s condition as “madness” (Cervantes, 2003, p. 301), conveniently deploying the discourse of insanity to enclose deviance and reinforce the normative world view.

Unable to change Anselmo’s mind, Lotario starts Camila’s seduction; his initially feigned and demure attempts become bolder as his passion is kindled. Partaking in the story’s misogynistic rhetoric of mining, the narrator relates Camila’s capitulation, which occurs when Lotario flatters her ‘feminine’ vanity: “And he mined away at the fort of Camila’s integrity with such charges that even if she’d been made of bronze she’d have come toppling down” (Cervantes, 2003, pp. 312-313).

However, the secrecy of the affair is endangered when Lotario glimpses Leonela’s lover furtively wandering the house. Having internalised his culture’s verities, he assumes that the stranger must be seducing Camila, whose weak and fickle nature he considers well-proved: “all that came to his mind was that Camila had been an easy and rapid conquest for another man, just as she had been for him” (Cervantes, 2003, p. 319). In an emasculating fit of jealousy, Lotario impulsively confesses Camila’s betrayal to Anselmo, whom he persuades to witness the affront. Once he regains his ‘masculine’ reason, Lotario apologises to Camila for what he interestingly calls “madness” (p. 312) and seeks her advice to remedy the situation.

The female character wields agency and displays a wit that Lotario seems to lack at such pivotal moment. The narrator unconvincingly downplays her empowering sagacity by attributing Camila’s cunning to women’s innate malice: “as women are naturally more quick-witted, for both good and evil, than men, though not when it comes to constructing coherent arguments, Camila hit there and then upon a way in which to solve such an apparently insoluble

dilemma" (Cervantes, 2003, p. 321). However, Lotario does not hesitate to entrust Camila with the resolution of the conflict and partake in the plot she concocts, without her even revealing the slightest detail. The seduced lady firmly defends her honour and ventures to wound herself with a dagger in a scene which, infused with a markedly theatrical flair, fascinates and convinces the voyeur:

Anselmo had been watching and listening, with rapt attention, to the tragedy of the death of his honour, as it was performed by the players with such unusual and effective feeling that they seemed to have been transformed into the very characters they were acting (p. 329).

Camila's histrionics succeed to deceive her husband –a zealous watcher *and* listener of the scene– and hint at the performative nature of identity. As will be discussed in the analysis of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*, it is precisely the fluidity of gender subjectivities that Middleton's play will tackle. In this regard, it should be noted that Camila's succumbing to carnal desire seems to uphold the misogynistic construction of women as whores. However, she is forced to enact this role by a husband who will go to any length to test the chastity of a woman whose frail nature he takes for granted. What is even more, it is the fair sex's allegedly innate weakness that substantiates Anselmo's own right to exert power over his imperfect spouse.

As it has already been mentioned, while naturalising female inferiority, the construction of women as inherently frail engendered deep anxiety in their sexual guardians, whose reputation in a culture governed by a strict code of honour was in weak hands. The devastating consequences of Anselmo's pernicious obsession, which is but integral to his society, endorse a reading of the episode as questioning the dominant power structures, rather than as reinforcing female weakness. This interpretation is encouraged by the character's written exoneration of his unfaithful spouse:

A stupid and inappropriate desire has taken my life. If news of my death reaches Camila's ears, I want her to know that I forgive her, because she was under no obligation to work miracles, nor had I any need to expect her to; and since I manufactured my own dishonour there is no cause to [...] (Cervantes, 2003, p. 336).

Had Camila overcome the fidelity test and challenged the hegemonic notion of femininity, the violence underlying Spain's early modern patriarchal discourse would have gone unnoticed. Hence it could be argued that the tale exposes a gender ideology whose efforts to contain female agency and thwart women's empowerment are plainly destructive.

3. Middleton's adaptation of Cervantes's story: Gender and power in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy*

The subplot of *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* opens with a conversation between Anselmus and Votarius which bears detailed resemblance to Cervantes's original. A link is soon established with the main storyline, as Anselmus and Govianus, the overthrown monarch, are brothers. Like his Spanish predecessor, the untrusting husband persuades his closest friend to make a trial of the Wife's virtue, even though his motives are less thoroughly explored. The rationale behind Anselmus's desire to test his wife's fidelity does not seem to be a pernicious, culturally-induced obsession grounded in his society's normative –yet problematic– ideology of gender, marriage and honour. He simply acknowledges envying the serenity of mind that the Lady's staunch loyalty must bring to his brother, whose deposition he is far from pitying.

Not only does Anselmus consider that a woman's worth –and by extension her husband's dignity– lies in her chastity, but he also believes that such virtue should only be truly valuable if the woman has faced and overcome temptation:

What labour is't for woman to keep constant,
That's never tried or tempted? Where's her fight? [...]
O what a lazy virtue
Is chastity in a woman, if no sin
Should lay temptation to't! (Middleton, 1824, i.ii, pp. 11-12).

Quite cynically, however, he assumes most women would be proved ignoble if they were actually tested:

[...] we must only think
Our ladies are good people, and so live with 'em:
A fine security for them; or own thoughts
Make the best fools of us; next to them our wives (i.ii, p. 11).

Votarius partakes in this misogynistic rhetoric. In his attempt to dissuade his friend from pursuing the feigned courtship plot, he delivers an essentialising discourse which, reminiscent of Lotario's original speech, emphasises women's innate weakness and fallibility.

Must a man in needs, in having a rich diamond,
Put it between a hammer and an anvil,
And not believing the true worth and value,
Break it in pieces to find out the goodness,
And in the finding lose it? good sir! think on't,
Nor does it taste of wit to try their strengths
That are created sickly, nor of manhood.
We ought not put blocks on women's ways,
For some too often fall upon plain ground (i.ii, p. 12).

Like his Cervantine predecessor, Votarius only takes part in the plot to spare his friend the humiliation of being publicly disgraced by a stranger:

I am so jealous of your weaknesses,
That rather than you should lie prostituted
Before a stranger's triumph, I would venture
A whole hour's shaming for you (i.ii, p. 13).

His words display the character's suspicion that Anselmus's wife will succumb to temptation and emphatically effeminise the jealous husband for his preposterous, destructive intention. Not only does Votarius allude to his friend's frailty, which in his view is an inherently feminine trait, but he also chooses the term 'prostituted' to define Anselmus's condition if the news of his anticipated disgrace is unveiled. The Wife also contributes to emasculate her husband, whose desire to test her chastity has led him to become estranged from his spouse and, significantly, neglect her sexually. She confides the cause of her affliction to Votarius, who will later betray her staging the plotted seduction scene.

[...] H'as lost his kindness,
Forgot the way of wedlock, and become
A stranger to the joys and rites of love.
He's not so good as a lord ought to be (i.ii, p. 14).

The period's normative gender hierarchy dictated that men should rule over women, both socially and sexually. By those standards, a wife's adultery signified the husband's lack of sexual dominance and endangered his manhood. Thus, honourable masculinity was contingent on men's ability to control female chastity by providing their innately weak, fallible spouses with satisfactory sex. In this context, the Wife's assertion that Anselmus is "not so good as a lord ought to be" (I.ii, p. 14) becomes meaningful, as the character has literally fallen short of the masculine ideal.

Like Lotario, Votarious tries to pretend he has unsuccessfully seduced his friend's spouse without actually tempting her. Anselmus's recriminatory words provide an example of the misogynistic language that permeates the play, as he describes deceit as an inherently feminine flaw:

Where lives that mistress of thine, Votarious,
That taught thee to dissemble, I'd fain learn;
She makes good scholars (I.ii, p. 15).

Surprisingly, in his condemnation of Votarious's hoax, the jealous husband praises female friendship and even extols it above male-to-male philia:

How truly constant, charitable, and helpful
Is woman unto woman in affairs
That touch affection and the peace of spirit!
But man to man how crooked and unkind! (I.ii, p. 15).

However, Leonella's calamitous betrayal of her lady's trust will soon undermine Anselmus's remarks, which "here look less like enlightenment than like further testimony to his gullibility and self-destructive folly" (Hopkins, 2002, pp. 78-79). As proved by the reproachful words she addresses to Votarious, the Wife herself thoroughly doubts women's ability to preserve their fortitude unshaken in times of sorrow, and hence contributes to reinforce the dominant construction of femininity:

It is not honest in you to tempt woman,
When her distresses take away her strength.
How is she able to withstand her enemy? (I.ii, p. 20).

She resolves to have her "frailty" (I.i, p. 20) guarded with Leonella's assistance, whom she requests to remain always by her side; the Wife is betrayed, once again, by the person in whom she confides. Ironically, she believes that her maid –who is soon to plot her lady's downfall with her revengeful lover– is innocently oblivious to the courtship marketplace.

Is that strange to a lady's woman,
There are such things i'the world, many such buyers
And sellers of a woman's name and honour,
Though you be young in bribes, and never came
To the flesh market yet – beshrew your heart
For keeping so long for me! (I.ii, p. 21)

Interestingly, the Wife's speech is embedded with a marketplace rhetoric that conveys the use of women as mere commodities whose value lies in their good name, i.e. their chastity. In "The Curious Impertinent," it is the abuse of the reified female body undertaken

by Anselmo to reassert his masculinity that brings about the tragic ending. Middleton's Wife is also abused by both her husband and her lover, the latter of whom only acknowledges the mutual damage that Anselmus and he have caused to each other.

[...] I would not see him
Of any friend alive! it is not fit
We two should come together, we have abus'd
Each other mightily; he us'd me ill,
T'employ me thus, and I have us'd him worse (II.i, p. 32).

No mention is made whatsoever to the ill-treatment that both inflicted to the Wife. Infatuated with his friend's spouse, Votarius forsakes manly reason and, in an outburst of unrestrained emotion, rants against Anselmus. Just like his rival before him, Votarius is emasculated; jealousy, which signals a loss of 'manly' reason, is the ultimate indicator of this emasculation:

I do not like his company now, 'tis irksome,
His eye offends me; me thinks it is not kindly,
We two should live together in one house; [...]
I do not like his overboldness with her;
He's too familiar with the face I love.
I fear the sickness of affection;
I feel a grudging on't: I shall grow jealous
E'en of that pleasure which she has by law (II.i, p. 34).

The Wife is metaphorically represented as a house –and thus objectified and disempowered. It is this empty 'space' that Votarius contends with his former friend to 'own'. Underlying this representation is a gendering of sexual agency as 'male'; the female body is the mere 'vessel' to be penetrated and zealously guarded from other potential rivals. The problem comes when Votarius takes his life-long enemy for one of such contenders and resolves to alert Anselmus:

His care shall watch to keep all strange thieves out,
Whilst I familiarly go in and rob him,
Like one that knows the house (II.i, p. 36).

Once again, the Wife's body –familiar to Votarius– is metaphorically equalled to a house; invaded and robbed, she is utterly objectified and stripped of any voice. However, the suspicious lover is soon to regret his imprudent decision ["But how has rashness and jealousy us'd me!" (II.i, p. 36)]. Armed with a dagger, Anselmus attempts to obtain a confession from Leonella, who betrays her lady and discloses her affair with Votarius.

It is precisely the Wife's wit which Votarius resorts to in order to amend a situation caused by his 'unmanly' outburst. She asks her bewildered lover to break into her chamber and pursue her seduction, not without ensuring that Anselmus will witness her bold rejection hidden in a closet. The Wife appropriates one of her culture's constructions of femininity –that embodied by the Lady in the play– and sets out to play the role. Once again, the theatrical nature of identity is entrenched in Leonella's account of her mistress's plan:

[...] I must remember
Votarius to come once with a privy armour
Into her chamber, when with a *fain'd* fury,

And rapier drawn, which I must lay a-purpose
 Ready for her *dissemblance*, she will *seem*
 T'act wonders for her juggling honesty (iv.i, p. 60)⁷.

The Wife chooses to perform the period's ideal of femininity, which, even if just as an extraordinary identity category that most 'naturally imperfect' women failed to incarnate, was in currency during the Renaissance as the role model to which they should aspire. She attempts to demonstrate her self-proclaimed exceptional fortitude in a declaration of intent that substantiates the dominant notion of womanhood: "I will forget the weakness of my kind" (v.i, p. 77). Right afterwards, the Wife confronts her seducer with a sword; unadvised and unarmoured, Votarious dies.

Firmly persuaded by his spouse's impersonation of virtue, Anselmus avenges his friend's death by murdering the couple's accuser, Leonella. A fight starts between him and Bellarius where the Wife is fatally wounded and the rivals hurt each other mortally. It is in his deathbed that Anselmus learns, through Govianus, of his spouse's adultery. In stark contrast to his fictional predecessor, the enraged husband curses women's lecherous and deceitful nature, reinforcing the dominant notion of femininity and taking no responsibility whatsoever for the catastrophe. Anselmus articulates these accusations in a misogynistic discourse drawing from the Judeo-Christian myth of Creation: "O thou beguiler of man's easy trust, / The serpent's wisdom is in women's lust" (v.i, p. 81).

The Wife's manner of death is worthy of critical attention. In Bellarius's own words, "She perform'd that which never woman tried, / She ran our weapons and so died" (v.i, p. 80). As observed by Johnson (2016, p. 116), the sword is a "phallic symbol of male power and authority" which bears clear sexual connotations; thus, like the Lady's, the Wife's death exposes their culture's abusive treatment of the female body. Both women are scripted to death by a male-defined culture whose assumptions about gender and power constrain and coerce female agency.

Significantly, the male characters in the play shape their own perceptions of both women influenced by the dominant ideology; they surmise that both will embody and substantiate hegemonic femininity and do not take into account their individuality. Just like Anselmus expected his 'frail' wife to commit adultery, both the Tyrant and Govianus assume the Lady will display 'female' avarice and choose grandeur over love. While the former is relishing his anticipated triumph over the rightful king ["Thou shalt behold the heav'n that thou must lose / In her that must be mine" (i.i, p. 5)], the latter pronounces an essentialising speech where he laments the Lady's inevitable corruption and displays a total lack of confidence in his betrothed:

O she's a woman, and her eye will stand
 Upon advancement, never weary yonder,
 But she turns her head by chance, and sees
 The fortunes that are my companions,
 She'll snatch her eyes off, and repent the looking (i.i, p. 3).

The Lady's categorical answer, "I am not to be alter'd" (i.i, p. 5), aligns her with the immaterial part of the self; she is thus dramatically opposed to the 'carnal' Wife and contributes to undermine the construction of women as bodily creatures⁸. Such construction

7 Author's emphasis.

8 As argued throughout this paper, the play itself subverts this opposition.

is, however, reinforced by both the Tyrant and Govianus, who emphasise the uniqueness of the Lady's character and hence set her apart from 'ordinary' women. Whilst the usurper defines her as "the first / Of all her kind that e'er refused greatness" (I.i, p. 8), Govianus euphorically claims "If there be man / Above a king in fortunes, read my story" (I.i, p. 6). The play accounts for the Lady's moral supremacy endowing her with 'masculine' traits (Johnson, 2016, p. 111). As Rackin (1993, p. 39) argues, in the Renaissance "the body itself –male as well as female– was gendered feminine" and its superior opposite –the soul, the spirit or the mind–, masculine. When she resolves not to be altered, the Lady states "I have a mind" (I.i, p. 6), which, significantly, she genders masculine shortly afterwards: "Fortunes are but the outsides of true worth, / It is the mind that sets *his* master forth" (I.i, p. 7)⁹. This quotation displays the abovementioned material vs. immaterial binary, privileging the latter, represented as male, over the former¹⁰.

The Lady's exceptional virtue could be justified by her 'masculine' nature, but the Wife is far from being the sole character that falls short of her greatness. Neither is she the only one who chooses worldly pleasure over personal integrity, as well proven by the lustful tyrant and his panderers. Even Helvetius, the Lady's father, uses his commodified daughter to secure his own social advancement: he sanctions the use of force to make her own child comply with the tyrant's will and, given the Lady's outright opposition to marry the usurper, tries to persuade her to 'at least' yield sexually. His exhortation to "make thy best market" (II.i, p. 27) clearly displays the reification of women as goods to be traded and exchanged for profit. Significantly, in a condemning speech that brings about Helvetius's reformation, Govianus defines this exhibition of panderism as an "unmanly sin" (II.i, p. 28), and thus reinforces the association between the material –the corporeal, the sensuous– and women. However, Helvetius himself deconstructs such association when he confesses to Govianus his intention to "spend this life to do you service, / That sets my soul in *her* eternal path!" (II.i, p. 30)¹¹. Besides, as demonstrated in the upcoming analysis, the male characters in the play undermine the material vs. immaterial gendered binary, as they fail to embody prescriptive masculinity.

The most evident of such failures is the tyrant's, as he is emphatically effeminised throughout the play. Resolved to quench his sexual appetite, he orders the exhumation of the Lady's body and has her dressed and embroidered to his will. The tyrant's yielding to an unbridled, perverse desire signifies the overthrow of manly reason to intemperate, undue lust. Even his pandering soldiers condemn the usurper's breaking into the cathedral as an unmanly deed, arguing that "all his intents / Are contrary to man, in spirit or blood" (IV.ii, p. 64); as for his exhumation of the Lady's body, the tyrant is defined by one of his soldiers as "mad" (IV.iii p. 67), a term which highlights his irrational, unrestrained nature.

As discussed by Zimmerman (2002), the usurper treats the Lady's body as an idol to be venerated, which clearly transpires from the words he addresses to her corpse: "O blest object! / I never shall be weary to behold thee" (IV.iii, p. 66). More significantly, he is accused of "idolatry" (V.ii, p. 83) by one of his soldiers. The immaterial side to the Lady's existence is irrelevant for the tyrant, as shown by his revealing assertion that "The house is hers, the soul is but a tenant" (V.ii, p. 82). His obsession with the physical body is conveyed by the following words:

9 Author's emphasis.

10 For an analysis of the use of gendered language in the play see Hopkins (2002).

11 Author's emphasis.

[...] Since thy life has left me,
 I'll clasp the body for the spirit that dwelt in it,
 And love the house still for the mistress' sake.
 Thou art mine now, spite of destruction.
 And Govianus; And I will possess thee (iv.iii, p. 68).

Besides idolatrised, the Lady is metaphorically equalled to a house and violently disempowered, just like the Wife; the tyrant (ab)uses her body to beat Govianus in a contest of power, which reminds of Anselmo's reification and use of Camila to renegotiate his threatened bond with Lotario.

Given the play's context of production, the alignment of an effeminate, lustful tyrant with Catholic worship of relics and material images can be understood as an exhortation to the actual King of England, James I, to embody the ideal of manhood and kingship based on rational self-control, frugality and militarism, and to favour the Protestant cause in the Continent¹².

Conversely, Govianus, the legitimate king, has been interpreted by some critics such as Lancashire (1978) and Bamford (2000) as embodying this ideal masculinity, and his restoration to the throne, as signalling the victory of the true Church. However, he is equally, and quite emphatically, emasculated throughout the play¹³. Especially significant in this regard is Govianus's demeanour in the moments previous to the Lady's death. In order to avoid an imminent rape by the tyrant, she self-sacrificingly prompts a paralysed Govianus to kill her, partaking in a discourse that reifies women and presumes that taking action is a male duty and prerogative:

Then is your care so cold? will you be robb'd
 And have such warning of the thieves? Come on, sir!
 Fall to your business, lay your hands about you:
 Do not scorn to work; a resolute captain
 Will rather fling the treasure of his bark
 Into whales' throats, than pirates should be gorg'd with't.
 Be no less man than he; thou art master yet,
 And all's at thy disposing [...] (iii.i, pp. 46-47).

Just like Anselmus, Votarius and their Cervantine predecessors did not even consider their betrayal of Camila and the Wife, Govianus fails to acknowledge that the main victim of the tyrant's violent abuse of power is the Lady. In a procrastinating speech, he self-centredly ponders over his own ordeal:

Must *I* meet peace in thy destruction,
 Or will it ne'er come at *me*?
 'Tis a most miserable way to get it!
 I had rather be content to live without it,
 Than pay so dear for't, and yet lose it too (iii.i, p. 47).

Must *I* lose thee then? (iii.i, p. 49)¹⁴.

12 The King's conciliatory foreign policy, together with his unorthodox sexual behaviour and flamboyant life at court stimulated a nationwide ideological debate about the gendered politics of power and domination.

13 For an analysis of the portrayal of all the major male characters as unmasculine see Crawford (2003).

14 Author's emphasis.

Whatever his motivations, Govianus lacks ‘manly’ courage and strength to put an end to his lover’s life; the Lady herself condemns his cowardice and passivity in a fruitless attempt to exhort him to action:

Sir, you do nothing, there’s no valour in you!
 You’re the worst friend to a lady in affliction
 That ever love made his companion:
 For honour’s sake dispatch me! thy own thoughts
 Should stir thee to this act, more than my weakness (III.i, p. 47).

As opposed to her hesitant lover, the Lady faces the situation and resignedly gets ready for the ultimate sacrifice, paying tribute to the normative rule of female “obedience, chastity, silence and piety” (Traub, 2003, p. 130):

I have prepar’d myself for rest and silence,
 And took my leave of words; I am like one
 Removing from her house, that locks up all [...] (III.i, p. 49).

Despite her apparent compliance with her culture’s expectations of female virtue, the Lady defies normative gender identities in this scene. It is the determined woman that grabs Govianus’s ‘manly’ sword and bravely performs the deed, reversing traditional gender roles and thus subverting the patriarchal power hierarchy. An effort to contain such subversion is appreciated in the construction of femininity undertaken by Govianus; he appropriates the hegemonic polarisation of women into either idealised virgins or prostitutes, the former providing exceptional role models for the latter. Even though the play is significantly ambiguous about the chastity of the Lady, Govianus emphasises her purity, both directly and symbolically, in his acknowledgement of her heroism:

And hast thou, valiant woman, overcome
 Thy honour’s enemies with thine own white hand,
 Where virgin-victory sits, all without help?
 Eternal praise go with thee! (III.i, p. 51).

The portrayal of the Lady as the epitome of perfection threatens the essentialising discourse which, substantiated by the dominant religious and medical doctrines, positions women as physically and morally inferior to men. As it has already been mentioned, this ideological contradiction is resolved in the play by emphasising the character’s exceptional nature. The Lady’s uniqueness is conveyed by the following speech, delivered by Govianus right after her demise:

Come, thou delicious treasure of mankind,
 To him that knows what virtuous woman is,
 And can discreetly love her! The whole world
 Yields not a jewel like her [...] (III.i, pp. 53-54).

A page also intones a song about “so rare a wife” (IV.iv, p. 70), whose “unmatched worth” (IV.iv, p. 70) is willingly acknowledged by Govianus:

Never lady earn’d her fame
 In virtue’s war with greater strife;
 To preserve her constant name,
 She gave up beauty, youth and life (IV.iv, p. 70).

She is thus praised as an extraordinary example of virtue set for commonplace, 'naturally imperfect' women, represented in the play by the Wife and Leonella. However, quite ironically, the Lady's ornamented corpse is literally turned into a painted prostitute, and, as claimed by Johnson (2016), she takes great pain to rescue it from the tyrant's abuse and from the meaning it has wrongfully been assigned. Hence, as Johnson (2016) keeps on arguing, the concern that the Lady's spirit shows with her corpse undermines the dominant ideology that imagines the feminine in dichotomous terms. Finally, the Lady's resolve to prevent a male figure of authority from fashioning her body to his will also undermines the categorisation of the Wife –her alter ego– as a whore.

The blurring of boundaries between both women is evidenced in some utterances made towards the end of the play, where language is used arbitrarily to refer to these –apparently antagonistic– female characters. Hopkins provides a likely explanation for the generic names given by Middleton to both women:

it may seem that the term 'Wife' operates in some form of contradistinction to 'Lady', suggesting, perhaps, that 'wife' is a term of lesser honour and status than 'lady', particularly in view of the fact that the wife in this play behaves herself so much less well than the Lady (2002, p. 73).

It could be thus argued that the text contributes to blur the distinctions between both characters, apparently articulated in their names. Especially significant is the stage direction that refers to the Wife as "the Lady" (v.i, p. 78) in order to recount her death. Anselmus's spouse does not hesitate to assume such dignified role and talks about "poor ladies like myself" (v.i, p. 76). What is more, she pronounces a speech where a clear parallelism is established between both female characters:

I'll imitate my noble sister's fate,
Late mistress to the worthy Govianus,
And cast away my life as she did hers (v.i, p. 76).

Interestingly, just like the differences between the Wife and the Lady collapse, so do those between Govianus and the Tyrant. Warned by the ghost of the deceased Lady that her body is being abused by the lustful usurper, Govianus plots a revenge that compromises his masculinity. Instead of confronting and killing his rival, he impersonates the artist called to embellish the Lady's corpse and paints her lips with poison, becoming the voyeur of the tyrant's final kiss. The words he addresses to his fiancée's lifeless body just after her suicide, "I will kiss thee / After death's marble lip!" (III.i, p. 54), are disturbingly anticipatory of the tyrant's own eroticisation and abuse of the woman's corpse, when he sets, in the ghost's own words, "a sinful kiss upon my senseless lip" (IV.iv, p. 72).

Equally troubling is his use of the Lady's body in the final scene. The newly restored king enthrones and crowns the Lady queen, which brings problematic reminiscences of the tyrant's use of the female body, and, as claimed by Zimmerman (2002), of idolatry:

Here place her in this throne, crown her our queen,
The first and last that ever we make ours.
Her constancy strikes so much firmness in us,
That honour done, let her solemnly be borne
Unto the house of peace, from whence she came,
As queen of silence (v.ii, p. 90).

The Lady has resignedly surrendered her own body and voice to commend and support Govianus in his contest for power against the tyrant and restore social order; her selfless, apparently disempowering act of submission seems to uphold the period's construction of ideal femininity. The Wife and Leonella, on the other hand, embody the dominant notion of womanhood; as 'naturally imperfect' beings, they seem to naturalise female subordination to male authority, while admonishing the audience about the dangers of yielding to their frail and wanton nature. However, as argued throughout this paper, the text undermines such ideology of womanhood, rendering this reading problematic.

4. Conclusion

As conceived by Judith Butler (1988), gender is a construct constituted through the repetition of acts which are invariably conditioned and constrained by culturally-demarked possibilities. Middleton's female characters embody two polar expressions of femininity which are both rendered available by their culture's narratives of gender: those of the weaker vessel and the self-sacrificing virgin. Their tragic endings expose the violence deployed to create and sustain such historical fictions and, what is more, the blurring of boundaries between both characters undermines the essentialism of gender categories. Cervantes's Camila is equally coerced to embody –and again apparently uphold– the hegemonic construction of women as naturally inferior to men, both physically and morally. However, she is manipulated into such performance of femininity by a patriarchal discourse that has predefined her and constrained her agency. As claimed by Butler (1988, p. 526), “the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives”. Despite their different political and social contexts, both works succeed to expose the violence that such directives enforced on the female body.

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