

Trinity University

Digital Commons @ Trinity

Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty
Research

Modern Languages and Literatures Department

1993

Genre and Lack in the Comedia

Matthew D. Stroud

Trinity University, mstroud@trinity.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/ml_l_faculty



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Stroud, M. D. (1993). Genre and lack in the *Comedia*. In B. Mujica & S. D. Voros (Ed.), *Looking at the comedia in the year of the quinentennial: Proceedings of the 1992 symposium on golden age drama at the university of Texas, El Paso*, March 18-21 (pp. 159-67). University Press of America.

This Contribution to Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages and Literatures Department at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages and Literatures Faculty Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

Genre and Lack in the *Comedia*

Matthew D. Stroud
Trinity University

The history of genre studies is almost a textbook case of critical self-deconstruction. Beginning with Aristotle himself, we are faced with irreconcilable differences between description and prescription, literary cause and psychological effect, the written *Poetics* and the promised but lacking sequel on comedy. The temptation to compromise on a definition (or multiple definitions) of a genre has been met with startlingly rigid manifestos for limiting our use of a word such as "tragedy" only to those plays that fulfill the particular narrowly-conceived requirements of one critic or another.¹ Given Jacques Lacan's penchant for jumping into the middle of thorny problems, it is not surprising that he also dealt directly with tragedy in his study of *Antigone* in the second half of his Seminar 7, *L'Éthique de la psychanalyse*.² In his usually provocative and ingenious way, he brings to bear his own perspective on such notions as catharsis, *hamartia*, beauty, the role of the Chorus, desire, death, and the very problematic concept of the second death. While a full consideration of tragedy in light of Lacan's philosophical and psychoanalytical writings would not be complete without a serious treatment of these remarks, the focus in this brief study is on a more structural problem related to his earlier work on the nature of the split subject and the inevitable impossibility of any kind of totalization.

Comedy and tragedy are typically considered to be two halves of the same cycle of death and regeneration, darkness and light, winter and summer. It has often been assumed that comedy redeems tragedy, that "tragedy is really implicit

¹Without going into excruciating bibliographical detail, we can perhaps hint at the various notions of tragedy by mentioning Reichenberger's "Thoughts about Tragedy," in which the author states that if a play "ends with the approval of the protagonist's punishment (*castigo*) by the dramatist and his public, we have no longer tragedy" (p. 40); MacCurdy's "The 'Problem' of Golden Age Tragedy," in which tragedy is achieved only when the protagonists themselves die (pp. 8-10); and, more generally, Heilman's *Tragedy and Melodrama*, in which tragedy exists only in the presence of the protagonist's self-knowledge and awareness that those acts fit into a larger universal context (pp. 244-45). Generic criticism of the *comedia* has almost always led to the conclusion that the *comedia* is somehow incapable of tragedy. See Arnold G. Reichenberger, "Thoughts about Tragedy in the Spanish Theater of the Golden Age," *Hispanófila*, Special No. 1 (1974), pp. 37-45; Raymond R. MacCurdy, "The 'Problem' of the Spanish Golden Age Tragedy: A Review and Reconsideration," *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 38 (1973), pp. 3-15; Robert B. Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968).

²*Le Séminaire: Livre VII. L'Éthique de la psychanalyse*. Texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller. (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

or uncompleted comedy"³, that we are ultimately left in a state of satisfaction, of purification, of happiness. This basically optimistic view of life, literature, and the world as a whole presupposes a pair of positivistic assumptions: that redemption and regeneration are possible from perdition and death, and that the natural human condition is more closely associated with heat, light, happiness, and success, than with dark, cold misery. These assumptions are repeatedly refuted by Lacan in his discussions of the subject.

1

The three registers of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real are among Lacan's most useful contributions to his study of the subject and its relation to its world. The imaginary is the register of one's identifications with one's own image or with another external image in an attempt to confer upon oneself the notion of wholeness, and, as a result, of independence, of power.⁴ It is the register of the ego, of narcissistic relations, of specular relations in which one believes that one can have a direct relation with another subject, that one can possess an object, an other, that one has control over one's own being and destiny, that one is one's image. As is to be expected when one is dealing with the ego and its defenses, an important and necessary manifestation of the imaginary is rivalry with others who are also out to establish themselves as autonomous beings.⁵

In the imaginary register, the object to be possessed is, of course, only imaginary. A relationship with Casandra in *El castigo sin venganza* makes neither

³Northrup Frye. "The Argument of Comedy." *English Institute Essays: 1948*. Ed. D. A. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949), pp. 58-73. (Quote p. 65).

⁴Lacan's writings about the imaginary, as with his writings about almost everything, were never published in one place, laid out in a systematic fashion. Rather than provide an interminable list of scattered page references, I believe it to be more fruitful here to cite two works about Lacan. Lee's overview of Lacan's writings in the Twayne series is a good, short introduction. Ragland-Sullivan's magisterial *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* provides a much more thorough treatment of Lacan's earlier writings, especially Seminars I, II, and III. For discussions of the imaginary in specific, see Lee pp. 17-30 and Ragland-Sullivan, pp. 130-159; Jonathan Scott Lee, *Jacques Lacan*. (Boston: Twayne, 1990); Ellie Ragland-Sullivan. *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis*. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1987).

⁵Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 16-25, 307-308; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953-1954*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. John Forrester. (New York: Norton: 1988), pp. 170-171, 193, 199-200; *Séminaire III*, p. 51; *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 107.

the Duke nor Federico whole, nor do Don Juan's seductions satisfy him in any lasting way in *El burlador de Sevilla*. Because imaginary relations are really only specular, only narcissistic, that is, one is really having a relationship only with one's own imaginary constructs, there is in fact no possibility of any kind of intersubjective relationship with anyone else. The wholeness that the subject perceives or hopes to attain is, in both literal and figurative senses, only imaginary. Those things that attract the subject in the imaginary are merely lures that appeal to the idea of totality and power: the love of another, victory in battle, and political domination, for example.

Unfortunately for the success of happiness, imaginary identification alone is not enough. If imaginary totalization were successful, it would have consequences that would in themselves undermine happiness. A truly totalized subject would have no need for nor any access to any other person; one would perfectly alone. But one need not worry, because such totalization is not possible, and for a simple reason: regardless of its imaginary identifications, the subject is inherently not whole. Freud's discovery of the unconscious made clear that all subjects are split; there is more to the speaking subject than conscious thoughts and actions, as dreams and slips of the tongue demonstrate.⁶ The unconscious is not of one's own creation; it is structured by signification from outside, from the Other. The primal repression that creates the unconscious involves the necessary submission of the subject to Other signification and precipitates the loss of an absolute, abstract, irretrievable object, called algebraically the object *a*, whose recovery would lead back to wholeness.⁷ Although this object is forever lost, its lack and the desire created by that is at the core of the structure of the human subject. But the entry into signification is not without its compensations: language, law, civilization, culture, social institutions, and the like. All of these institutions and social constructs are part of the symbolic register.

Through symbolization, the subject is able to exit the egoistic short circuit through access to a mediating third term. A subject is finally able to make contact, however imperfect, with another subject through language and social compacts, and one is freed from the narcissism of ego demands. The symbolic structures both the individual psyche and the culture and civilization in which it

⁶Freud's discussions of *Ichspaltung* constitute the centerpiece of Lacan's conception of nature of the human subject. See *Écrits*, pp. 28, 287, 313; *Four Fundamental*, p. 22.

⁷The *objet a* is the real object that "falls out" at the moment of the original splitting of the subject. It is impossible to attain and inaccessible in any direct way in either the imaginary or the symbolic. See Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 320; see also Juliet Flower MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious*. (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 36.

resides.⁸ It promises law and order, success, salvation, and tranquillity. Unlike the imaginary other which lures the subject into illusions of autonomy, the symbolic Other promises its benefits only if the subject relinquishes its bid for autonomy. Through the act of naming, one is defined by the Other, one's identity is established by subscription to a series of symbolic signifiers (woman, Spaniard, noble, etc.). If one obeys the law, the promise is that one will live in harmony, validated by the society that defines one's identity. One's desires, if not entirely satisfied, will at least be mediated, and one will live happily ever after.

2

Golden Age secular comedies can most schematically be defined as plays that end with marriage, an institution that succinctly epitomizes the workings of the symbolic. When two lovers wed at the final curtain, we know quite well what the promises are: that all past grievances between them will be forgiven or forgotten, they will live as complementary partners in a state of mutual satisfaction, they will procreate and pass along the symbolic signifiers of the culture that defined them, they are now free of the rivalries and aggressions of single life, they take on additional identities as spouses and parents, and they will never desire anything again that cannot be found within the marriage.⁹ To achieve this happy ending, they have had to surpass imaginary demands and actions such as revenge and rivalry and submit to the Other. In *comedia* after *comedia*, this is clearly said to be the way to true happiness. Comedy, then, can be characterized as a successful incorporation of the individual in society, a kind of fictionalized transition from the imaginary to the symbolic.

Tragic actions in the *comedia*, on the other hand, reflect the perils of imaginary pursuits. Life, and the *comedia*, are full of lures that attempt to capture the subject in the imaginary.¹⁰ Again, Don Juan is an excellent example of the imaginary lure in action. What he sees in the women he seduces has nothing to do with them; his goal is not to love them but to trick them. Don Juan's conquests serve a primary function of increasing his sense of power, of

⁸The symbolic holds out the promise of a ways to span the gap and recover the lost object; it promises satisfaction in return for the sacrifice of individual ego demands, but it can never completely deliver what it offers. See MacCannell, pp. 13, 48, 56, 69, 77, 79, 83, 99, 161; Lacan, *Ecrits*, pp. 195-196, 286, 319. For a general discussion of the symbolic, see Ragland-Sullivan, pp. 130-137, 145-183.

⁹One is, of course, reminded of Reichenberger's early insight in the *comedia*'s trajectory from order disturbed to order restored ("Uniqueness," p. 307). See Arnold G. Reichenberger, "The Uniqueness of the *Comedia*." *Hispanic Review*, 27 (1959), pp. 303-316.

¹⁰See Lacan, *Four Fundamental*, pp. 93, 102-103).

worth, of fame:

Sevilla a voces me llama
 el Burlador, y el mayor
 gusto que en mí puede haber
 es burlar una mujer
 y dejalla sin honor. (1313-17; cf. 1489)¹¹

In *El castigo sin venganza*, Federico and Casandra have a specular relationship in that each one has been captured in the imaginary by the lure of possessing the other. Especially in Casandra's case, the text is quite clear that her interest in Federico is in large part motivated by her sense of revenge for personal injury done to her by her husband:

La mujer de honesto trato
 viene para ser mujer
 a su casa, que no a ser
 silla, escritorio o retrato;
 hasta ser un hombre ingrato,
 sin que sea descortés,
 y es mejor, si causa es
 de algún pensamiento extraño,
 no dar ocasión al daño
 que remediarle después. (1064-73)¹²

The Duke of Ferrara is also engaged in an imaginary rivalry with his son to see who can possess the object, a situation underscored by Casandra's ironic assertion that Federico was the very image of the Duke ("un retrato vuestro") during his absence (2656).

What characters really want, however, is never what they think they want, and in no case will it satisfy them.¹³ Don Juan ends up not in some sort of ego-paradise, but in hell. The Duke of Ferrara ends with his son and wife both dead; he has triumphed over Federico and Casandra, but at enormous cost. Don Alonso, in *El caballero de Olmedo*, ends the play dead rather than joined in

¹¹Tirso de Molina (Gabriel Téllez), *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra*. Ed. Joaquín Casaldueño, 11a ed. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1987).

¹²Lope de Vega. *El perro del hortelano. El castigo sin venganza*. Ed. A. David Kossoff. (Madrid: Castalia, 1970).

¹³Stuart Schneiderman, *Jacques Lacan: The Death of an Intellectual hero*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 113.

permanent bliss with Doña Inés. In *El médico de su honra*, Don Gutierre kills his wife rather than suffer the imaginary insult of dishonor to his ego. In large part these unhappy plot turns are the result of the inherent rivalry of imaginary relations that leads to aggressivity, a struggle to the death.

So far, this reading of the cycle of tragedy and comedy parallels earlier ones of death and regeneration, despair and renewal. Actions veer toward the tragic as the result of unmediated desires and end unhappily because of the very nature of the imaginary and its inability to achieve totalization. Comedies seem to be the successful transition from imaginary desires to symbolic mediation. We need to look again at the nature of the symbolic, however, before we can rest comfortably with this system. The very success of the symbolic, in which individuals who engage in serious disputes and rivalries relinquish their previous imaginary claims, gives rise to one of the negative aspects of the symbolic. So strong is the imperative that the subject yield to the symbolic that the individual must make extraordinary sacrifices to assure the reestablishment of the social code at the end.¹⁴ Only if you give up something can you be a fully functioning human subject. This submission to the symbolic, this inmixing of Otherness found in all speaking subjects, causes an inevitable "aphanisis," or fading of the subject.¹⁵ Rosaura, in *La vida es sueño*, for example, marries a man who broke his promise to her, accepts as her father the man who broke his promise to her mother, and, despite her heroic appearance in most of the play, effaces herself into a truly marginal figure by the final curtain. After all she has done, her only utterance in the last 277 lines of the play is "¡Qué discreto y qué prudente!" (3304).¹⁶ The same can be said for Juana in *Don Gil de las calzas verdes*, and Angela in *La dama duende*. Men may suffer less than women at the hands of the symbolic,¹⁷ but they, too, must give up their imaginary demands, their carefree

¹⁴MacCannell, pp. 13, 47, 73, 159.

¹⁵In fact, all subjects are marked by fading, *aphanisis*; as soon as the subject "appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' as disappearance." (Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 313; *Four Fundamental*, pp. 218, 221. See also: Jacques Lacan, "Of Structure as an Inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatsoever." In *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) pp. 186-200; *Feminine Sexuality*, Ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose. Trans. Jacqueline Rose. (New York: Norton, 1982); Lee, pp. 146-154; MacCannell, p. 13.

¹⁶Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *La vida es sueño*. 2a ed. Ed. Ciriaco Morón. (Madrid: Cátedra, 1977).

¹⁷That men suffer less than women is the result of the fact that the symbolic is always androcentric. See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans.

dalliances, the freedom to do as they wish: failure to do so results in the death of the subject.

The symbolic, through the workings of the law and civilization, is always accompanied by violence, not this time in the name of individual rivalry but for the good of all. Lacan equates the "choice" of the acceptance of the symbolic as similar to the demand, "Your money or your life".¹⁸ If you choose money (individuality, illusions of wholeness) you lose both; there is no way to avoid choosing life (symbolic) if one is to be a healthy, functioning human subject. The payment on account for future happiness would not seem to be too great if, in fact, the symbolic Other were able to fulfill its promises. As it turns out, however, just as the subject is marked by a lack, so too is the Other. This time, however, there is no further appeal for completion; there is no Other of the Other.¹⁹ As a result, it is impossible for the symbolic to fulfill its promises; the Duke's marriage to Casandra certainly did not solve his problems, nor did Gutierre's to Mencía. The failure of the symbolic leads to yet another source of tragedy.

3

So neither the imaginary nor the symbolic can guarantee satisfaction. We are ultimately faced with the inevitable workings of Lacan's third register, the real, the register of unanalyzable, irremediable lack, the hole left by the loss of the object *a*.²⁰ If the lack in the subject points to the symbolic Other, the lack in the Other points to the real that inhabits the subject at all levels, and because of which there is never any hope of ultimate satisfaction short of death. Neither imaginary illusions nor symbolic laws can successfully fill in the gaps; only death can resolve the split nature of the human subject.

The workings of the real are most easily seen in plays involving characters who seek death. These plots never fit comfortably in the definition of the other

Sylvana Tomaselli. (New York: Norton, 1988), p. 261. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan has referred to women's Second Castration in their submission first to symbolic signification (which they share with men) and then again to the androcentric nature of the symbolic (pp. 298-301).

¹⁸*Four Fundamental*, pp. 212-213.

¹⁹Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 311, 316.

²⁰The real is the most incompletely presented of Lacan's registers. Since the basic nature of the speaking human subject is to be split, the split itself, which is inaccessible except in the most indirect ways in psychoanalysis (such as through slips of the tongue and jokes), constitutes the subject's *real* nature (as opposed to its nature in its environment, its reality). The real is, thus, the register of the impossible and unanalyzable gap or lack at the center of the speaking subject. See Ragland-Sullivan, pp. 183-195 and Lee, pp. 133-170.

genres; although characters may die, if they choose death, and if they achieve eternal salvation through death, they can hardly be said to be tragic figures, at least in some senses of the term.²¹ While there are secular instances of such sacrifice, usually as the result of heroic circumstances, as in Cervantes's *El cerco de Numancia*, plays involving martyrdom, sometimes referred to as Christian tragedies, offer the easiest access to this genre.

In *El príncipe constante*, Fernando's search for satisfaction does not involve a search for completion through marriage, but it still entails his sacrifice for the Other. He is willing to lay down his life for his king and his God in the military action in Morocco, but we see the real workings of his desire in his humiliation in slavery. Slavery, for him, is not a bad condition. In his degradation (and his faith), he completely abandons his ego, making no demands that would provide him comfort, safety, autonomy, the opportunity for revenge, or even suitable defense against his misery:

aunque más tormentos sufra,
aunque más rigores vea,
aunque llore más angustias,
aunque más miserias pase,
aunque halle más desventuras,
aunque más hambre padezca,
aunque mis carnes no cubran
estas ropas, y aunque sea
mi esfera esta estancia sucia,
firme he de estar en mi fe.... (2450-59)²²

He revels in the lack in the Other. He embraces his unhappiness, he makes of it the object of his desire:

¡Oh si pudiera
mi voz mover a piedad
a alguno, porque siquiera
un instante más viviera
padeciendo! (2255-59)

²¹Consider Alexander Parker's dismissal of tragedy in *El príncipe constante*: "Fernando cannot be a tragic hero because he is a Christian martyr." See Alexander A. Parker, "Christian Values and Drama: 'El príncipe constante.'" In *Studia Iberica: Festschrift für Hans Flasche*. Ed. Karl-Hermann Körner and Klaus Rühl. (Berne/Munich: Francke Verlag, 1973), pp. 441-458. Quote p. 441.

²²Pedro Calderón de la Barca, *El príncipe constante*. Ed. Alberto Porqueras Mayo. (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1975).

He experiences real *jouissance*, the joy of the knowledge that, as a subject, he is lacking in a primordial way. *Jouissance* is not pleasure in a usual sense; indeed, when one experiences it, it is perceived in the conscious as misery, as instability, as pathology. But it is pleasure, pleasure in the unconscious, pleasure in the direct contact with the death drive.²³ The ecstasy that results, the ex-stasis that comes from going beyond one's imaginary and symbolic self, is at the heart of Fernando's desire and, indeed, of the desire of mystics in general.²⁴

I believe that there is always a corrosive real element undermining the alleged happiness of Golden Age comedies. It takes little imagination to speculate that the promises of happiness that conclude the plays are soon to fail. Can we really imagine that Juana and Rosaura, who have shown themselves to be strong, capable women with considerable egos, will be happy forever living with the men who lied to them and abused them? Will Martín and Astolfo really be able to give up their former ways forever? The tragedies, which, as Wardropper noted, are mostly about married people, seem quite clearly to undermine the hopes of the comedies whose goal is marriage.²⁵ Only in martyr plays do characters even come close to "getting what they want." If there is a cycle of tragedy and comedy, rather than being optimistic and regenerative, from tragedy to comedy, it is rather a trajectory from the happiness promised to single people if they marry to the tragedy that awaits them in marriage because of the failure of the symbolic to keep its promise. To use Heidegger's terminology, together comedy and tragedy point to an ultimate Being-toward-Death,²⁶ a path from comedy to tragedy, from the egoistic demands of unmarried characters to a submission to law, to the failure of the law to maintain order, and, ultimately, to death.

²³Jacques Lacan, "Kant with Sade." Trans. James B. Swenson, Jr. *October*, 51 (1989), pp. 55-104. See pp. 60, 95.

²⁴Lacan, *Feminine*, p. 147.

²⁵Bruce Wardropper. "El problema de la responsabilidad en la comedia de capa y espada de Calderón." *Actas del Segundo Congreso Internacional de Hispanistas*. Ed. Jaime Sánchez-Romeraldo y Norbert Poulussen. (Nijmegen: Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas: Instituto Español de la Universidad de Nijmegen, 1967), pp. 689-694. See page 693.

²⁶Heidegger's term *Sein-zum-Tode*, from *Being and Time*, is translated by Lacan into French as "être-pour-la-mort," which in turn is usually translated into English as "being-for-death." Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 68, 104-105.