

“The Metonymic Cross-Dresser of Guillén de Castro’s *La fuerza de la costumbre*”

In Spanish *comedias* of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, self-discovery and transformation often emerge as products of the role-play, disguise and trickery that constitute the metatheatrical elements of a given play. As early modern society adjusted to an early form of capitalism and the discovery of the New World, its static class structure began to become more fluid, opening new possibilities for changing one’s occupation and social standing. Despite these new opportunities, early modern subjects still lived in a society that placed great value on fulfilling designated social roles. As such, a tension may be noted in literature and theater of the period between a more fluid, interior exploration of selfhood and the pressure of broader, exterior social and culture forces to close off said exploration. Disguises, in this sense, serve as an agent to temporarily offset the latter while indulging the former. Cross-dressing, a popular device of the period, serves as a powerful disguise to this end, eliminating boundaries at the heart of personal and social identity (those of gender). *La fuerza de la costumbre*, by Guillén de Castro, demonstrates the social and dramatic need for this figure, ironically, through its lack, as its central characters remain trapped in roles of the opposite gender, unable to overcome “la fuerza de la costumbre” without recourse to cross-dressing’s manipulations. In this essay, I will discuss *La fuerza de la costumbre* as an example that points specifically to the theatrical cross-dressing act as a central, dynamic force that facilitates the metatheatrical breakdown and rebuilding of identity. This happens through its absence and eventual metonymic suggestion, effectively signaling the theatrical cross-dresser as an agent of category crisis with the unique power to transform identity as well as a trope that can signify in the absence of the actual cross-dressed character.

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