Casting Castaño: Sor Juana and Gender Performativity on Stage

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ABSTRACT
In December 2023, The Station Theatre in Urbana, Illinois staged a production of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa*. Directed by Christiana Molldrem Harkulich, this production utilized Catherine Boyle's English translation, titled *House of Desires*. Within the context of a *comedia* that already explores the performance of gender in the guise of Castaño's famous scene of cross-dressing in preparation for impersonating Doña Leonor, Harkulich's production highlighted the full spectrum of gender identity. Indeed, her decision to cast Heraldo Hermosillo (who brought a drag sensibility to the role of Castaño) anchored a production that deliberately "queered" the play's implicit heteronormativity. At a time when LGBTQIA+ communities find themselves increasingly under siege, this essay explores the place of Station Theatre's *House of Desires* within the larger context of gender performativity (both on stage and in the academic literature) and argues that this production represents a welcome addition to the long performance history of Sor Juana's best-known *comedia*.

KEYWORDS
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Los empeños de una casa*, Catherine Boyle, *House of Desires*, Castaño, cross-dressing, gender performativity, drag, queer theory, Station House Theatre, Christiana Molldrem Harkulich

RESUMEN
En diciembre de 2023, The Station Theatre en Urbana, Illinois montó una producción de *Los empeños de una casa* de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Dirigido por Christiana Molldrem Harkulich, este montaje utilizó la traducción al inglés de Catherine Boyle, titulada *House of Desires*. En el contexto de una comedia que ya explora la representación del género en la famosa escena de travestismo que hace Castaño al disfrazarse para personificar a Doña Leonor, el montaje de Harkulich destacó toda la gama de la identidad de género. De hecho, la decisión de Harkulich de elegir a Heraldo Hermosillo (quien aportó una sensibilidad drag al papel de Castaño) centró una producción que, mediante una perspectiva queer, deliberadamente cuestiona la heteronormatividad implícita de la obra. En un momento histórico cuando las comunidades LGBTQIA+ se encuentran cada vez

más asediadas, este ensayo explora el lugar de *House of Desires* del Station Theatre dentro del contexto más amplio de la performatividad de género (tanto en el escenario como en la literatura académica) y sostiene que este montaje representa una muy buena adición a la larga trayectoria de representaciones teatrales de esta conocida comedia de Sor Juana.

PALABRAS CLAVES
Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Los empeños de una casa*, Catherine Boyle, *House of Desires*, Castaño, el travestismo, la performatividad de género, drag, la teoría queer, Station House Theatre, Christiana Molldrem Harkulich

The past seven decades have witnessed a sea change in our understanding of gender and sexuality. These changes, which had already started taking place in the postwar years following World War II, accelerated greatly after the Stonewall uprising in 1969, when the "gay rights" movement took its place alongside second wave feminism, the Civil Rights movement, and other social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. But Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) groundbreaking work on "gender performativity" in the early 1990s revolutionized the field. Indeed, by the early 2000s, societal views on gender and sexuality had changed so much—largely due to the pioneering work of Butler and others—that Butler's (2004) book *Undoing Gender* could confidently make the following assertion: "If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity *performed*, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of *improvisation* within a *scene* of constraint" (1, emphasis mine). Given Butler's use of terms like or "improvisation within a scene" or "acting in concert" in *Undoing Gender* (2004, 1), it is not surprising that this recognition that gender is always already performative would eventually come to influence (both artistically and socially) the world of theatre praxis, such that today a professional company like the Steppenwolf Theatre (2024) in Chicago now includes a casting statement on its website that reads:

> Steppenwolf Theatre Company is committed to creating an organization that deeply values and draws strength from the various stories and storytellers that make up our society. The majority of characters currently encountered adhere to the gender binary, using he/him or she/her pronouns. Despite these limitations in descriptions, our casting aims to be as inclusive as possible. We welcome submissions from gender non-conforming, genderqueer, transgender, and non-binary actors for roles that resonate with their identities.

But beyond the world of the professional stage, such approaches to gender-blind, cross-gender, and non-binary casting have also become increasingly important in both academic and community theatre settings.[1] For instance, the University of Massachusetts Amherst's 2009 production of Tirso de Molina's *Marta the Divine* (directed by Gina Kaufmann in a translation by Harley Erdman) expanded its notion of cross-gender casting in order to explore more fully the ramifications of Butler's gender performativity. Says Kaufmann (2015) in a retrospective essay: "[A]s I thought about the upcoming auditions for *Marta*, the question of how I might emphasize both the theme of the interchangeability of people and the rigidity of gender and class roles as just that—roles—led me to explore the idea of strategic cross-gender casting" (156). Kaufmann goes on to say that she "felt that if some of the men were played by women and some of the women played by men, then it would emphasize the fact that everyone is playing an assigned role in this society, and, indeed, any society, and that gender roles themselves are social constructs" (156–57). In this regard, Kaufmann ultimately settled on three roles for her production of *Marta the Divine* that would be assigned using cross-gender casting: the role of Lucía, Marta's sister, would be assigned to a male actor; the role of Don Gómez, Marta and Lucía's father, would be assigned to a female actor; and the role of Don Sancho, the brother of Don Pancho, would be assigned to a female actor. In this way, Kaufmann created a set of three "romantic pairs" that would consist of distinct gender dynamics: Marta and Felipe (female/male), Lucía and the Ensign (male/male), and Pastrana and Inés (female/female) (Kaufmann 157).

UMass Amherst's 2009 production was both highly successful and widely celebrated. It was invited to perform at the 2010 annual Siglo de Oro Drama Festival at the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas. And Samuel Bosworth, who played the role of Lucía in the production, is even featured (in a production still) on the cover of Harley Erdman and Susan Paun de García's 2015 volume of essays titled *Remaking the Comedia: Spanish Classical Theater in Adaptation* (within which Kaufmann's [2015] essay on cross-gender casting appears). That said, while the UMass Amherst production went out of its way to draw viewers' attention to its use of non-traditional casting, not all productions need to be so overt when making important statements about gender performativity on stage. Station Theatre's 2023 staging of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *House of Desires* was just such a production, and it provides an alternative and complementary example of just how contemporary directors can "queer" the classics.

Station Theatre is a small community-based theatre located in Urbana,

[1] For studies of queer and trans performance on the English stage, see Chess (2019); Kemp (2019); and Lublin (2012).

Illinois,[2] home to the flagship campus of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Its 2023-24 season featured eight productions, including Catherine Boyle's English translation of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa* (*House of Desires*), which was directed by Christiana Molldrem Harkulich.[3] Regarding the play's basic plot, Station Theatre's website describes *House of Desires* as follows: "Don Pedro pines for Doña Leonor who is in love with Don Carlos who is desired by Doña Ana who is pursued by Don Juan. This 17th-century romantic farce is a wild tale of confusion and mistaken identities complete with wily servants and witless nobles."[4] Station Theatre's production ran for eight performances in December 2023 and was well-received by the public, with ticket sales for its roughly 65-seat house running in the 94th percentile.

Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa* has a long production history that dates back to October 4, 1683, when it was first staged in Mexico City as part of a "festejo" to celebrate the birth of the Viceroy's firstborn son, as well as to welcome the new archbishop Francisco de Aguira y Seijas. Recent stagings include an English-language production at Oklahoma City University in 1995 (directed by David Pasto using his own translation titled *The House of Trials*),[5] which was quickly invited to perform at the Chamizal National Memorial's Siglo de Oro Drama Festival in March 1996; a 2015 English-language production at Gala Hispanic Theatre in Washington, DC (directed by Hugo Medrano and using Boyle's translation); and a 2017 Spanish adaptation co-produced by Novohispunk Teatro and the Carro de Comedias at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), which was directed by Álvaro Cerviño (and also featured Juan Ruiz de Alarcón's *La verdad sospecha* under the umbrella title of *La plaza de Juan y Juana*), and which later traveled to Almagro, Spain to perform at the 2019 Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico. But perhaps the best-known of the more recent stagings is the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2004 English-language

[2] Built in 1923, its name derives from the fact that the building itself began life as a passenger rail station for the Big Four Railroad, which connected Indianapolis, Indiana to Pekin, Illinois. With the coming of the Interstate Highway system in 1956 during the Eisenhower administration, the train depot was decommissioned, and the building was eventually purchased in 1972 by Rick Orr as the home of his newly founded Celebration Company at Station Theatre.

[3] The production's scenic designer was Robert Peterson, with costume design by Vivian Krishnan, sound design by Logan Dirr, hair and makeup design by Kristin Pitlik, and lighting design by Avery R. Adomaitis. The cast included Carissa Yau as Doña Ana, Ellen Magee as Doña Leonor, Lexie Vogel as Celia, Bryce Bennyhoff as Don Carlos, Heraldo Hermosillo as Castaño, Kyglo Webb as Don Juan, Kevin Paul Wickart as Don Rodrigo, Nicolas Perez-Jandrich as Hernando, Trent Sherman as Don Pedro, and Kristin Pitlik as the production's onstage musician.

[4] See https://stationtheatre.com/season-51. More detailed plot summaries, both in English and Spanish, are easily available through a quick online search.

[5] Among the small handful of other English translations of *Los empeños de una casa* are those of Susana Hernández Araico and Michael McGaha (2007) and of Dakin Matthews (2020).

production, which was featured (under the artistic direction of Laurence Boswell) as part of the RSC's 2004-2005 "Spanish Golden Age Season." This production, which was directed by Nancy Meckler and which premiered Boyle's translation, had a major impact on the worldwide visibility of Sor Juana's play.[6] Indeed, Harkulich indicates that she saw the RSC's *House of Desires* while she was studying in London and "fell in love with it" (Quezada 2023, n.p.), which is partially why she chose Boyle's translation for her own Station Theatre production.

Visually, Station Theatre's production was quite traditional. Unlike the earlier Gala Hispanic Theatre's production, which incorporated "a sense of the vociferous and rhythmic style of the iconic western films of 1940s Mexico" (Cortez 2015, n.p.), or Novohispunk Teatro's production featuring brightly colored costumes that were a mash-up of the baroque, the postmodern, and steampunk, Harkulich and her designers created a visual aesthetic that looked appropriate to early modern Spain.[7] Part of the reason for this aesthetic, says Harkulich, is that as a work of community theatre, her production simply did not have the budget, for instance, to create elaborate costuming that might require something more than borrowing much of it from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Accordingly, Station Theatre's set was also quite traditional and somewhat sparce, featuring a three-sided colonnade and doors that evoked the dark wrought iron of early modern Spain. Station Theatre's sets and costumes thus contributed to a visual aesthetic that worked well for an intended audience whose members probably knew very little about either Sor Juana or her world, and who would not come to the theatre looking for this production to "update" the play (in ways that they might be expecting if they were coming to see *Hamlet*).

That said, this does not mean that Station Theatre's production was staid or regressive in any way. Indeed, Harkulich clearly understands the social, political, and gender dynamics that Sor Juana has put into motion in *Los empeños de una casa*, and Station Theatre's production worked to unpack a number of Sor Juana's ideas. For instance, Harkulich said that she arranged the audience's seating area within the performance space so that audiences would enter the theatre from what was effectively the back of the set and would thus be unable to leave the space without having to walk across the stage again to do so (personal conversation, 9 August 2024). Her intention, she maintained, was to make the audience feel as trapped in the house as the characters themselves. Likewise, Harkulich stated (in that conversation) that she was particularly interested in the ways in which Sor

[6] For more on the RSC's Spanish Golden Age season, see Fischer (2014); and Jeffs (2018).

[7] For images of Gala Hispanic Theatre's production, see Cortez (2015). For images of Novohispunk Teatro's production, see the company's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/Novohispunk/. And for images of Station Theatre's production, see Quezada (2023).

Juana "plays with veils." Thus, her production emphasized the stifling nature of the veils themselves, coupled with the unintended freedom that such veils allow for both anonymity and duplicity.

As a side note, one of the more enjoyable aspects of this production was Harkulich's treatment of the many—and often lengthy—asides that occur throughout the play. Here, however, rather than playing these asides "straight" (as it were), Harkulich directed her actors to emphasize deliberately what I have elsewhere called hermetically sealed bubbles of "sonic closure" by having two things happen (Burningham 2017, 100). First, any character who was speaking an aside would literally step out of the play's world by jumping forward slightly toward the audience and then would deliver their lines directly to the crowd. Second, while these speakers were delivering their hermetically sealed asides to the audience, the other actors on stage would immediately freeze and would only resume their various activities once the actor speaking the aside had "jumped back into" the world of the play—a solution that, as Susan Fischer (2014) notes, was also adopted by the RSC for its 2004 production (138).[8] A number of critics—for instance, Boyle (1999, 233-34)—have commented on the metatheatre created by Sor Juana's supposed breaking of the "fourth wall." There are, of course, clear moments of metatheatre (as when Castaño attempts to excuse what might be considered an implausible plot device by insisting that the audience should not think he has concocted it himself, since "this is all part of the play" [Boyle 2004, 87]). But I would argue that most of the play's moments of direct address are part and parcel of the still-meaningful vestiges of a medieval Iberian jongleuresque performance tradition that informed the rise of the Spanish *comedia* in the first place. Our modern (and even postmodern) notions of the "fourth wall" only really came into being with the rise of proscenium arches and box sets in the 18th and 19th centuries (Calderón de la Barca's *El gran teatro del mundo* notwithstanding). Therefore, I think we tend to read too much into such moments in *Los empeños de una casa* as indicative of some kind of existential self-awareness on the part of her characters, rather than as examples of the kind jongleuresque dialogue that has always existed between actors and spectators in performance. Thus, what made Station Theatre's production of *House of Desires* all the more enjoyable was precisely its own self-awareness *as a play being performed* in which Harkulich's almost acrobatic asides highlight the extent to which her actors are still part of a

[8] Pasto (2004) also hit upon a similar strategy for his 1995 staging: "Catherine Larson's article, 'Writing the Performance: Stage Directions and the Staging of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa*,' had alerted me to the unusually large number of asides, but until I had to direct the action on the stage, I was not fully aware of the problems raised by the vast volume of asides. . . . The solution I discovered involved having all the other characters freeze while each character spoke directly to the audience. This stop-action technique proved both effective and funny. In fact, the audience was laughing by the fourth aside, having found the obviously theatrical pattern very amusing" (n.p.).

jongleuresque performance tradition. As Trent Sherman (who played Don Pedro) mentions in an interview: "The audience is always in on the direction of the plot and the jokes of the character who addresses them, while the other characters on scene are not" (Quezada 2023, n.p.).

Recent scholarship of Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa* generally falls into one of three categories.[9] The first of these categories relates to the way in which the play inscribes what Flor María Pagán (1997) calls Sor Juana's "discurso feminista literario" and thus engages in dialogue more broadly with Sor Juana's larger project (47). For example, specifically comparing *Los empeños de una casa* to works like Sor Juana's famous "Respuesta a Sor Filotea," Emilie Bergmann (1990) cites a particular speech by Leonor in Act 1 of the play,[10] and argues that "Leonor's self-depiction as brilliant scholar could easily be applied to Sor Juana herself," given that "Leonor departs from the female norm for Spanish drama of the time by affirming her exceptional learning and describing the man she loves in a tone and in detail ordinarily reserved for men regarding women" (153). Indeed, in a 2015 *Washington Post* review of Gala Hispanic Theater's production of *House of Desires*, Celia Wren (2015) quotes Rosa Perelmuter—whom Wren had evidently interviewed for the review—as calling the character of Leonor "Sor Juana's alter ego" (n.p.), an argument also advanced by Octavio Paz (1982) when he says, "En *Los empeños de una casa* se pinta a sí misma en el relato que hace doña Leonor" (139).[11] In this way, these critics argue, Sor Juana draws our attention to what Boyle (2015) sees—both in this play as well as in Calderón's *La dama boba* and Cervantes's *El viejo celoso*—as "the duality of insight into deep structures of patriarchy" (156), and what Julie Greer Johnson (2001a) calls the problematic "reflection of gender-designated roles in a patriarchal society of the early modern period" (234).[12]

In this regard, Harkulich's 2023 production explored these elements of Sor

[9] Throughout his monumental study of Sor Juana and her life and works, Octavio Paz (1982) discusses *Los empeños de una casa* (usually looking for textual clues to Sor Juana's biography via the character of Leonor), but he eventually sums up his opinion on the play as follows: "*Los empeños de una casa* es una comedia agradable, que todavía hoy se puede ver con gusto, y nada más" (626). For other more general studies on this play, see also Boyle (2007); Brancatelli (2022); Cañas Murillo (1998); Carullo (1990); Cowling (2023b); Friedman (1991); García Valdés (2011, 2019); González (1999); Hernández Araico (2008); Kenworthy (1982); Larson (1990); López Forcén (2000); Poot Herrera (1993); Sancho Dobles (2015); and Wilkins (1991).

[10] "Inclinéme a los estudios / desde mis primeros años / con tan ardientes desvelos, / con tan ansiosos cuidados, / que reduje a tiempo breve / fatigas de mucho espacio. . . . Era de mi patria toda / el objeto venerado / de aquellas adoraciones / que forma el común aplauso" (Juana Inés de la Cruz 1989, 641).

[11] Georgina Dopico Black (2001) notes this frequent comparison of Leonor to Sor Juana herself, but argues that such a connection is (at the very least) "problematically" made (171).

[12] For other studies related to *Los empeños de una casa* and feminism or gender, see Boyle (2008); Maroto Camino (2002); McErlain (2020); Quispe-Agnoli (2004); and Weimer (1999).

Juana's literary text in two ways. In the first place, the production featured strong women in the characters of both Doña Ana (Carissa Yau) and Doña Leonor (Ellen Magee). Indeed, neither of these characters was portrayed as the kind of demur, shrinking violet that might be considered "appropriate" for young women in early modern Spain; both, in fact, "presented" (to borrow a term from the nomenclature of gender performativity) as twenty-first-century independent women who just happened to find themselves trapped in the patriarchal structures of early modern Spain, where their choices (and futures) were severely delimited by both their fathers and their place in society. (In this way, both Doña Ana and Doña Leonor—while never actually appearing in male clothing during the play—can be read as versions of the *mujer varonil* of the Spanish literary tradition.). In fact, in Act 1, Sc. 5, during a moment of clear frustration when Don Juan (Kyglo Webb) continues to press himself upon Doña Leonor, she exclaims:

> For heaven's sake, as you're a gentleman,
> leave me. I have hardly set
> my unhappy foot in this house,
> whose owner I do not even know,
> so what can I make of your words,
> if the only thing that I understand
> is the amazement they cause me?
> And if, as I suspect,
> you think I am another,
> your passion deceives you.
> Stop. Use your wits.
> I am not your lady. (Boyle 2004, 39)

Even if we merely read this passage as plainly written, the meaning of Doña Leonor's words is very clear. But in Station Theatre's production, as a method for demonstrating the sheer unreasonableness of Don Juan's advances in the age of the #MeToo movement, Magee delivered the final two lines of this speech with full stops between each word: "Stop. Use. Your. Wits. / I. Am. Not. Your. Lady"—and with the final word "lady" she also pantomimed the stereotypical two-handed "hourglass" gesture of Western sexism. Magee's was a Doña Leonor who takes neither abuse nor prisoners.

Likewise, the production's male actors engaged in a broad, almost melodramatic, acting style in order to provide a commentary on the state of toxic masculinity both during the seventeenth century and today. Indeed, one of the running gags that Harkulich inserted into the performance was a recurring Roman "fist salute" over the heart that each of the male characters performed every time someone said the word "honor." This parody of the ritual performance of

masculinity not only tracks early modern Spain's preoccupation with honor, but it also grew out of one of the twenty-first-century cultural intertexts that subtly informed Harkulich's production. Having just seen the 2023 Oscar-nominated film *Barbie*, Harkulich said she realized that the character of Don Juan is essentially Ken (personal conversation, 9 August 2024). And, indeed, the entire cast of male characters in Station Theatre's production came across as if they were a group of petulant fraternity brothers somehow transported back to Golden Age Spain.

The second major category to interest contemporary scholars involves the interrelated issues of ethnicity and hybridity as depicted in the play. Much of this analysis centers on the relationship between *Los empeños de una casa* itself and the various other texts that make up Sor Juana's complete *festejo*. Recall that the full, original performance text included an opening allegorical *loa*, a first allegorical *sainete* placed between acts one and two of the *comedia*, a second comic *sainete* placed between acts two and three, and a concluding "Sarao de cuatro naciones" whose representatives are the "españoles, negros, italianos, y mejicanos" (Juana Inés de la Cruz 1989, 700). The *festejo*'s representation of these four "national ethnicities" obviously engages our twenty-first-century concerns regarding identity and representation, but Susana Hernández Araico (1997) even finds traces of what might be called a "crypto-americanness" subtly embedded in the comedic second *sainete* (in which two spectators of a *comedia* performance in progress attempt to bring it to a halt by heckling it through loud whistles). Says Hernández Araico (1997):

> Certainly the whistling in Sor Juana's *Sainete segundo* mocks to the utmost the musical and rhetorical sophistry in all the ancillary pieces as well as in the lyrical caesura in the second act. As an ironic expression of popular disapproval, also identified with the accent of newly arrived Spaniards in Mexico (*gachupines*, vv. 134–37), the whistling shrilly sounds out Sor Juana's own awareness of the lack of folkloric vitality in such musical elegance whose proven mastery by the nun some Spaniards in Mexico City might nonetheless view condescendingly. (323)[13]

On an even larger scale, Michael Horswell (2006) finds the very existence of the *festejo* itself to be a commentary on an emerging transatlantic identity: "While the celebrated heir of the Spanish viceroyalty, José, is the American-born offspring of an European crossing between Italian and Spanish nobles, Sor Juana's fictional 'newborn' is the precursor of a people eventually to be celebrated as the 'cosmic race,' the mestizo, the Mexican" (65).

[13] On the second *sainete*, see also Burningham (2013); and Poot Herrera (1996).

And nowhere within *Los empeños de una casa* itself is this *mestizaje* better represented than in the figure of the *gracioso* Castaño, who mentions that he has come to Spain from the "Indies," where he was born: "¿Con qué traza / yo a don Rodrigo le diera / aqueste papel, sin que él / ni alguno me conociera? / ¡Quién fuera aquí Garatuza, / de quien en las Indias cuentan / que hacía muchos prodigios! / Que yo, como nací en ellas, / le he sido siempre devoto / como a santo de mi tierra" (Juana Inés de la Cruz 1989, 684). Shortly thereafter, Castaño (whose name literally translates into English as "Chestnut") also makes reference to his dark skin tone: "No hay duda que me esté bien, / porque como soy *morena* / me está del cielo lo azul" (685, emphasis mine). Carmen Rabell (1993) argues that, in this, Castaño represents a kind of "tributo al pueblo mexicano" (18):

> La identificación de esa realidad más terrena del gracioso con un pícaro mexicano identifica a México, al espacio americano, con un lugar donde las conductas se hallan en un estado de relajación, o tal vez, un lugar donde la tendencia al mestizaje y la exogamia anula en parte las raíces mismas del código del honor: la defensa de una "pureza de sangre," la conservación del título de "cristiano viejo." (18)

Castaño is, in short, a symbol of what Horswell (2006) calls the "subversive potential of hybrid, colonial, subaltern" subjectivity (73), which comes into being through what he designates "transatlantic performances of hybridity" (64).[14]

And yet, there is another performance embedded in *Los empeños de una casa* that has also captured the attention of recent critics: Castaño's famous cross-dressing scene in Act 3, which Sandra Messinger Cypess (1993) says makes Sor Juana's *gracioso* a "reflejo distorsionado de Leonor" (182). Driven by Don Carlos's demand that he deliver a letter to Don Rodrigo (one that would explain both Carlos's culpability and his honest intentions), Castaño fears that he might find himself in serious trouble should he get caught up in one of the house's many intrigues. To solve this dilemma, Castaño hits upon the idea of dressing up as the veiled Doña Leonor so that he can move about the house undetected. At this point, he delivers a long speech during which, while putting on the various pieces of Leonor's clothing that he has been carrying around in a sack, he directly addresses the women of audience in order to ask them what they think of his improvised gender performance as a woman.[15] This quasi-soliloquy is, without a

[14] For other studies of the relationship between the Americas and Sor Juana's complete *festejo*, see Cowling (2023a); Díaz Balsera (1994); González-Estévez (2021); and Hernández Araico (2017).

[15] Sor Juana's (1989) original Spanish text reads: "¿Qué les parece, *Señoras*, / este encaje de ballena?" and "Pues atención, mis *Señoras*; / que es paso de la comedia" (685, emphasis mine). In both cases, Boyle (2004) has translated these lines as the more gender-neutral "ladies and gentlemen" (86–87). John Fletcher (2004), who played Castaño in the 1995 Oklahoma City

doubt, the best-known speech of the entire play. But, as Georgina Dopico Black (2001) also argues (with a nod to Judith Butler), "the 'gender trouble' that Castaño's cross-dressing provokes is, quite clearly, central to the plot resolution; it is the turning point of the play" (181).[16]

In her own discussion of this crucial scene, Boyle (2015) argues that what we see on stage is "Sor Juana vandalizing normative understandings of gender, in a process that constructs being-according-to-accepted-codes, that mocks the veiling and unveiling of the self, that shows the use of illusion and trickery, and that reveals the primacy of codes over evidence" (163). Johnson (2001a), for her part, notes that "Cross-dressing was a commonly used technique in early modern theatre, but it usually involved a woman who dressed as a man in order to enable her to move about freely in a man's world," and that Sor Juana's innovation in this play is to reverse "the concept of the *mujer varonil* by having Castaño don Doña Leonor's dress in preparation for reentering the interior of the house which is designated as female space" (243). Indeed, as Mercedes Alcalá Galán (2001) argues: "Esta especie de striptease a la inversa supone una finísima deconstrucción de la idea de lo femenino como mera corporalidad precisamente al poner todo el énfasis en el nuevo cuerpo de mujer recién adoptado por Castaño, lo que lo convertirá inmediatamente en epítome de la seducción femenina" (90). Christopher Weimer (1992) points out that misogyny, "which was so deeply embedded in the dominant ideology of Sor Juana's culture," is the "primary target" of Sor Juana's satire here (92), while Carmen Rabell (1993) insists that "Sor Juana pone, una vez más, en boca de Castaño 'la otra visión,' la de la mujer hostigada sexualmente por el hombre. En este sentido, el personaje de Castaño cumple muy bien su función de ser el 'alter ego' del autor dramático al denunciar lo que tantas veces Sor Juana ha denunciado también en su poesía" (20).[17]

In the recent scholarship on Castaño's cross-dressing scene, one study in particular stands out: that of Sidney Donnell (2008). If this author provides his own insights into many of the issues discussed above, including what he calls Castaño's "racialized ethnicity" (182), he also offers an extremely important take on what he calls Castaño's "drag performance" (180): "I privilege Sor Juana's *Los empeños* and its transvestite subject because it is my contention that cross-dressing in both text and stage performance served as one of the principal means

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University production, indicates that the production's blocking for this scene "involved an extended foray into audience seats (and onto one person's lap)" (n.p.). But he also notes that Castaño's famous cross-dressing scene can lose "something of its shock value when presented to an audience inured to plots like *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *The Birdcage*" (n.p.).

[16] For other studies of Castaño (or *graciosos* more generally), see Ferrer Vals (2005); Hernández Araico (2011); and Johnson (2001b).

[17] For more on Castaño's cross-dressing scene, see Birkenmaier (2002); Domínguez Quintana (2010); Fernández (2004); Hernández Araico (1997); Jung (2011); Merced (1997); Pagán (1997); Pérez Magallón (2005); Valbuena Briones (1997); and Wagner (2015).

of exploring variant signs of identity and of interrogating the dominant discourse that supported the ruling elite in the Baroque" (180). By focusing on Castaño's deliberately gendered line, "No hay duda que me esté bien, / porque como soy morena / me está del cielo lo azul" (Juana Inés de la Cruz 1989, 685), such an approach as Donnell's shines a bright light on one of the more significant aspects of Station Theatre's 2023 production. Due to the largely non-gendered nature of English grammar, Boyle's translation cannot capture the original Spanish's radical subversion of gender identity in the line: "It suits me perfectly– / I'm so dark that blue looks divine on me" (Boyle 2004, 86). For Donnell, however, the gendered Spanish adjective "morena" is crucial because it shows that Castaño does not merely see himself here as a man dressed in women's clothing, but rather, through this very performance, Castaño takes on a new, alternative, female identity. Says Donnell:

> His verses are both declarative ("I am a brown woman" or "my name is Morena") as well as contemplative ("blue looks heavenly on me"), signaling an internal transformation and self-awareness of how this assumed identity goes well with his "true colors." Castaño in drag—whom I will now call Morena—plays up the advantages of "her" recently inscribed identity to a coquette extreme. She begins to refer to herself in the feminine […], indicating an entanglement of psychological and linguistic changes accompanying the change of clothes. (182)

For this reason, Harkulich was extremely fortunate to have cast Heraldo Hermosillo in the role of Castaño. Not only is Hermosillo originally from Mexico and a BFA acting student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, but he also happens to be a drag performer in his own right. Thus, he was able to bring to the role of Castaño more than just a little bit of Donnell's drag queen, "Morena."

Throughout Station Theatre's *House of Desires* Hermosillo's Castaño participated in the parody of masculinity that was so central to Harkulich's vision for the production. He often delivered his lines in the same "manly" tones as the other male characters, and therefore, other than coming from the servant class, he did not immediately stand out as being in any way different from the other men in the play. Nevertheless, from the start, when he first entered the stage and immediately tried to hide under Doña Ana's skirt, Hermosillo's Castaño was very flirtatious in ways that befit a *gracioso* as well as foreshadow what we would eventually see in Castaño's drag performance in the third act. Such flirtatiousness (often directed at the audience itself) popped into view multiple times throughout the production. For example, in Act 2, when Castaño is deliberately toying with Celia's affections, she says to him, "I have to go. But if this is not a game I'll be

back" (Boyle 2004, 52). Castaño's reply, which the script suggests should be said to Celia herself, was delivered instead to the audience because Celia had already exited the stage. Says Castaño: "Ah, but it is a game, and like all games, it can take many turns" (52). Significantly, when Hermosillo landed on the word "turns," he punctuated the moment with an ironic too-cute-by-half smile and a quick double eye blink. Later, at the very end of Act 2 (where Station Theatre's production placed its intermission), Hermosillo essentially repeated this gesture. As the first half of the performance came to a close, Castaño delivered the final lines: "It's been a long day. I think we need a break" (77). And, as with Castaño's previous comment about games potentially taking many turns, Hermosillo punctuated this announcement of intermission with a coy, sexy wink to the crowd before scampering off to the green room.

These moments of coquettishness continued to build over the course of Act 3 and then culminated, of course, in Castaño's famous cross-dressing scene. But where other actors in this role might emphasize Castaño's transvestism—Matthew Stroud (2007), for instance, notes a 1986 Castaño whose humor was derived "by essentially making himself the butt of the joke, the typical situation of a straight man in a dress" (157)—Hermosillo brought what can only be called a truly "drag sensibility" to the performance.[18] Of all the Castaños I have ever seen on stage, I have never seen one who enjoyed his own drag show as much as did Hermosillo's *gracioso*. In fact, Harkulich indicated that Hermosillo could extend this drag scene for as long as fifteen minutes, and that she had to direct him to keep the scene within the necessary time limits (personal conversation, 9 August 2024). Indeed, while Hermosillo continued to use his "manly" voice throughout this scene, he also occasionally alternated this with an exaggerated line delivery that dripped of drag "fabulousness." Likewise, when he put on Leonor's skirt, he was so excited to see himself—but even more importantly, to *feel* himself—in her clothing that he could not help but spin multiple circles in the flowing skirt and then jump for joy. And if, as per Dopico Black (2001), this cross-dressing scene does indeed represent the "turning point of the play" (181), then Castaño's discovery of the performative possibilities of Leonor's fan is the indisputable high point of Hermosillo's drag performance (and Harkulich, in our personal conversation, mentioned the importance of fans within contemporary drag culture). Coming to the end of his cross-dressing speech, Hermosillo's Castaño picked up the fan and snapped it open. This gesture made such an unexpected and

[18] Weimer (1992) distinguishes between transvestism and drag: "Transvestism, or the serious effort to impersonate the opposite sex, implicitly reinforces the prevailing sociosexual standards, while drag, which is comic in nature, mocks them" (92). Stroud (2007), for his part, defines "camp" as including "irony, incongruity, masquerade, aestheticism, theatricality, humor, exaggeration, and an inversion of the important and the trivial" (152). For an extended discussion of drag, camp, and Castaño, see Stroud (2007, 150–58).

dramatic noise that Castaño himself was pleasantly shocked by it, and we saw on his face the sheer glee of realizing all the potential that this "feminine" object might bring to his performance. Thus, he snapped it open again just for fun. And then he snapped it open again just for good measure, and then again and again and again until his ongoing performance of snapping the fan, as with his earlier moment of donning Leanor's skirt, also made him visibly giddy. It was a dramatic—and clearly drag-informed—gesture that Hermosillo's Castaño would continue to explore as he moved into the final scenes of the play.

But if Hermosillo's drag sensibility makes the most of Castaño's performance of cross-dressing, such a drag sensibility is only part and parcel of a much larger "queer" sensibility that permeated Station Theatre's staging from start to finish. Harkulich indicated that several members of her cast and crew identify as LGBTQIA+ and that this fact had an enormous impact on the development of Station Theatre's production: "What's interesting to me about this play, and how we can think about it queerly, is that it is a commentary about masculinity, a commentary about gender relationships. But the only way you see those things is if you are queering heteronormativity" (personal conversation, 9 August 2024). Thus, in Act 2, Sc. 5, Sor Juana's embedded musical number, "Which is the greatest of all love's sorrows" (Boyle 2004, 59–60),[19] was sung to a sexually ambiguous choreography (by Kristin Pitlik) that looked much more like something we might see on the television show "Dancing with the Stars" than on any early modern stage. Such a queering of heteronormativity in this production even extended to the lighting design in which Avery Adomaitis's lighting plot often made use of a saturated hot pink contrasted with royal blue accents, an aesthetic that Harkulich referred to as moments of "bisexual lighting" (personal conversation), and which was clearly a prominent feature of Castaño's cross-dressing scene. Regarding the characters themselves, Harkulich added (in that personal conversation) that the character of Don Pedro (played by Trent Sherman) was deliberately queered, made "muppety" in this particular instance by having the actor's costume, hair, and makeup match almost perfectly the Jim Henson Muppet known as Lew Zealand (who sports a ruff collar and throws a boomerang fish). Likewise, Hermosillo actually played Castaño as pansexual, while, as Harkulich also said, Lexie Vogel played Celia as a lesbian who only agrees to marry Castaño at the end the play "because he is wearing a dress."

But this brings us to the other significant element of Station Theatre's *House of Desires*. Immediately following Castaño's cross-dressing scene in Sor Juana's original text, Don Pedro enters the stage, where he mistakes Castaño for Doña Leonor, and so he begins to woo forcefully the disguised Castaño. Readers familiar with Sor Juana's play will remember that this wooing ultimately

[19] The first line in the original Spanish is "¿Cuál es la pena más grave / que en las penas de amor cabe?" (Juana Inés de la Cruz 1989, 663).

culminates with Don Pedro proposing marriage to the person he thinks is Doña Leonor, only to later discover that there are actually two Leonors in the house; after which, as happens at the end of nearly all Spanish *comedias de enredo*, the various characters eventually pair off with their proper mates in anticipation of the heterosexual marriages that will bring order to the romantic chaos. In Sor Juana's play, however, Don Pedro ultimately finds himself to be the "odd man out" when it becomes all-too apparent that he has been wooing the cross-dressed Castaño all along. Carl Good (1999) suggests that Castaño's transvestism "brings to the surface a latent tension in the work which the struggle between the two couples tends to obscure: by taking the focus off of their farcical dramatic opposition, he reorients the dramatic attention to the latent rivalry between Ana and Pedro" (37). Pasto (1997), who, again, directed the 1995 production at Oklahoma City University, speaks of the "attractiveness of androgyny" in the play: "The audience watches one man make love to another, fully aware of the irony, and the possibility of a homosexual union is raised" (26). For, as Donnell (2008) rightly points out, "Castaño appears unwilling for their relationship to end so abruptly, acknowledging his drag persona's betrothal to Pedro even after his masculine identity has been revealed" (188). And yet, as Pasto (1997) also points out, "The homosexual union never actually happens, of course, [because] the rigid Catholicism of the period would not permit it" (26). Or, as Donnell succinctly puts it: "Castaño's reiteration of his vow to wed Don Pedro could [only] be taken seriously if patriarchal conventions and law were to permit such an act between men" (188).[20]

Taking advantage of the play's own "queering heternormativity" here, Harkulich's production plays up this moment of homoeroticism: Hermosillo's Castaño, for instance, took full advantage of his fan snapping gesture, and he even seemed to get the "vapors" at one point. Fischer (2014) anticipated this idea and then followed it to its logical conclusion when she says of the RSC's 2004 production:

> Would it be too far-fetched to suggest that the potential for an *unconventional* ménage à trois Pedro-Castaño-Celia might provide a further labyrinthine twist for a latter-day director interested in pushing arbitrary gender boundaries to their logical conclusion and subjecting them to the same sort of interrogation and critique that the rigidities and absurdities of conventional codes of decorum, courtship, and honor would necessarily be subjected? (141, emphasis in original)

That said, even Station Theatre's twenty-first-century production could not allow

[20] On this marriage proposal, see also (Boyle 1999, 235).

its Castaño and Don Pedro to deviate so far from Sor Juana's original script as to show the two men romantically pairing off at the end. Nevertheless, and given the circumstances (which include the existence of legal prohibitions against the altering of Boyle's copyrighted text),[21] Harkulich's queer staging of *House of Desires* play did manage take the idea about as far as it could go.

Thus, in Station Theatre's production, when Castaño finally reveals that he is not the Leonor that Don Pedro is looking for, Pedro initially faints. But, when Don Pedro comes to, Castaño helps him to his feet by extending a friendly hand, but then immediately pulls Pedro into a romantic embrace while coyly reiterating his willingness to go through with the marriage: "Do not forsake me, my darling" (Boyle 2004, 111), he says in his most "feminine" voice. Hermosillo's Castaño then linked arms with Don Pedro, and his next few lines were delivered as the two men walked arm in arm downstage as if walking down the aisle toward the matrimonial altar. What Hermosillo himself says of the entire ethos of this production is also a wonderful summary of this particular queer moment: "Desire is a completely different concept from love, and this show represents that with wit and boldness. Lines between love and desire are crossed constantly as human beings, and it's wonderful to relate to characters that, amidst the absurdity, experience this universal confusion" (Shelby 2023, n.p.). Even so, the queer potentiality posited by this "walking down the aisle" moment soon dissipates as Doña Leonor pairs off with Don Carlos, Doña Ana pairs off with Don Juan, and Celia pairs off with Castaño, leaving Don Rodrigo (the play's symbol of early modern patriarchal honor) with nothing left to do but accept this final outcome.

Of course, contemporary audiences may find such "conventional" *comedia* endings completely unsatisfying in the early twenty-first century, hoping instead for the kind of alternative, genderqueer plot twists that Fischer (2014) suggests above. This is certainly true for a play like Guillen de Castro's *La fuerza de la costumbre*, which—quite astonishingly—explored the performativity of gender some 350 years before Judith Butler was even born, but which nonetheless resolves its various queered plot complications by acceding to the traditional binary and heteronormative marriage conventions of early modern Spain. Still, as Kaufmann (2015) says of her own experience directing *Marta the Divine*'s cross-gender cast, "Our understanding of Tirso's world can no longer be simply that women naturally behave this way and that men naturally behave this other way, or that the rich naturally behave this way and their servants naturally behave this other way, but rather that these rigid and complex behavioural constraints are culturally constructed and that other ways of behaving are possible" (159). This is

[21] While Sor Juana's original Spanish text is in the public domain, the copyright page of Boyle's English translation stipulates: "No performance may be given unless a license has been obtained, and no alterations may be made in the title or the text of play without the author's [i.e., Boyle's] prior written consent" (Boyle 2004, 10).

a point made abundantly clear by Station Theatre's 2023 production of *House of Desires*, even without the kind of overt cross-gender casting that was so central to Kaufmann's production, because in casting her own particular Castaño, Harkulich said nearly all there was to say.

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