

DECEPTION AND TRUTH:  
THE USE OF LETTERS IN THE COMEDIES OF  
IRIARTE AND MORATIN

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Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

DECEPTION AND TRUTH:  
THE USE OF LETTERS IN THE COMEDIES OF  
IRIARTE AND MORATIN

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Jane Fife,  
who instilled in me a love of reading,  
and to my husband, John Fueger,  
for his steadfast encouragement and support.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dramatic and thematic role of staged letters in the neoclassic comedies of Spain's eminent comediographers Tomás de Iriarte and Leandro Fernández de Moratín. The plays under consideration include Iriarte's *El señorito mimado* and *La señorita malcriada* and Leandro Fernández de Moratín's *El barón*, *La mojigata*, *El viejo y la niña*, and *El sí de las niñas*.

In these plays the letters are a fundamental means by which the playwrights achieve the objective of *enseñar deleitando*; through the role the letters play in plot advancement, character development, and the creation of dramatic irony, suspense, and humor, they are a source of pleasure and dramatic entertainment for the viewing public. At the same time they are instrumental in illustrating the Enlightenment ideal of rational thought and critical thinking. The letters are used in these plays as masks that disguise the identities and motives of the letter-writers and simultaneously bear within themselves the truth they seek to obscure. As vehicles of deception *and* truth, the letters demand that the onstage characters and the viewing public participate in their interpretation, and in this way, they are the principal means by which the playwrights not only entertain the audience but also achieve their dramatic and ideological objectives of interrogating the errors common to society and advocating virtue and truth.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Dramatic Letters

A letter captivates our attention. Whatever its particular form – a scroll encircled with ribbon, a sheet of parchment sealed with wax, an unopened envelope, a folded note, or a new email message in one’s inbox –it immediately provokes in the recipient both an affective and intellectual reaction and requests, or sometimes demands, a reply. Who wrote the letter? What is its message? What response will it evoke? What, if anything, will it change in the life of its recipient? It is dynamic, dialogic and open-ended; that is, it is inherently dramatic. The unread letter is like the unopened stage curtain, momentarily concealing a world of possibilities and existing in anticipation of a response. The following study seeks to “open”, read and respond to the many letters found in the neoclassic plays of Spain’s eminent comedigraphs Tomás de Iriarte and Leandro Fernández de Moratín.

Perhaps the dramatic quality of the letter – its capacity to convey information and to compel a response, its invitation to ongoing communication or action – explains, at least in part, its enduring use. In his study of the epistolary novel, Godfrey Frank Singer traces the letter’s presence and evolution *within* literary texts as well as *as* literary texts. The earliest extant letters, Singer points out, are concerned primarily with matters of state: Egyptian cuneiforms dating from the fifteenth-century BC convey news of the war in Phoenicia; King David’s letter to Joab obliges the recipient to deploy Uriah to the frontlines of battle. In the Pauline Epistles, letters serve not just to communicate official matters but offer “exhortations and exegeses” as well (3). Cicero’s letters communicate



information while simultaneously revealing the character and philosophy of their author, Pliny's encompass not only the history of the age but were intended for preservation and as such were "confessed, conscious efforts"; and Ovid's *Heroides* are comprised of fictional letters in verse (6). In the European Renaissance, official and ceremonious letters increased in importance and were enthusiastically employed by Petrarch and Erasmus. In England, the Paston Letters of 1424-1526 bore news of social life, and as Singer asserts, "In this respect, in their portrayal of manners, they point forward to the mid-eighteenth century and its usage of the letter" (11). These forms, Singer explains, all evolve eventually into the purely literary epistle, the predecessor of the eighteenth-century 'epistolary novel.' A diverse vehicle for conveying information, issuing political mandates, expressing philosophical ideas, and eventually exchanging personal correspondence, and concomitantly a form which reflected greater access to print media, increases in popular literacy, and the shifts between public and private realms, the letter became ubiquitous in both social practice and in literary production – that is, in life and in text – in eighteenth-century Europe.

Epistolary prose of Europe, especially that of England and France, has been the object of abundant scholarly attention. Early bibliographical studies enumerating the appearance of letters in prose include those such as Singer's aforementioned monograph, Frank Gees Black's *The Epistolary Novel in the late eighteenth century* (1940), and Robert Day Adams' *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (1966). Subsequent studies surpass the necessary tasks of categorization to examine the properties of epistolarity and its function within literature, a focus best exemplified by Janet Gurkin Altman's study *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), which serves as

the theoretical foundation of this study. Other key texts of this type include Elizabeth MacArthur's *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics on the Epistolary Form* (1990) and Thomas O. Beebee's *Epistolary Fiction in Europe 1500-1850* (1999). Further elaboration of these authors' observations has been characterized by the focus on the relationship between epistolary prose and its socio-political, -historical, and -cultural contexts, as exemplified by Peggy Kamuf's *Fictions of Feminine Desire* (1982), Linda S. Kauffman's *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1986) and *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (1992), and Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook's *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (1996). Publications in the first years of the twenty-first century attest to the ongoing scholarly interest in epistolarity. Among these recent studies are the essay collection *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture* (2000) edited by Gilroy and Verhoeven, Sunka Simon's *Mail Orders: The Fiction of Letters in Postmodern Culture* (2002), Joe Bray's *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (2003), and Gary Schneider's *The Culture of Epistolarity* (2005).

Many of these studies deal extensively with epistolary prose of the eighteenth century, the period in which the form enjoyed its greatest popularity. While undoubtedly thought-provoking, these studies nevertheless share a common gap – the lack of discussion regarding the literature of Spain. This may be due in part to the erroneous belief that Spain did not share in other countries' rich heritage of epistolary literature. Beebee, for instance, contends that "Epistolary novels in Spain have appeared only sporadically, a fact perhaps related to the infrequency of publication of familiar letters and memoirs. Indeed, one might argue that the absence of epistolary novels contributed

to the generally poor harvest of Spanish fiction during the eighteenth century” (90). Hazel Gold writes that in Spain there existed hostility to the novel in general and that a sense of xenophobia, specifically a fear of cultural artifacts deemed foreign or “Frenchified”, inhibited the influence of the epistolary traditions of England, France, Germany, and Italy; *machismo* was in disaccord with what was deemed the ‘feminized’ form of the novel; and the confidentiality associated with letters made the publication of private correspondence a violation of trust, “as though a priest had betrayed the secrecy of confession” (133-135). Gold notes the irony of this scarcity, since “...Spanish belles lettres possessed a thriving tradition of literary epistolarity up through the seventeenth century” (135).

The assertion that Spain was absent from this trend is first contradicted in Charles Kany’s 1937 study, *The Beginnings of the Epistolary Novel in France, Italy, and Spain*, which catalogues numerous examples of early and influential Spanish contributions to the genre, many of which display the beginnings of traits of epistolary complexity which would reach their peak in the eighteenth century. One such text is Joanot Martorell’s (completed by Martí Joan de Galba) *Tirant lo Blanch* of 1490, which enjoys the honor of being one of the three romances preserved in Don Quijote’s library. The text consists of thirty letters that contain challenges, replies, solicitations for advice, and declarations of love. Many of these letters surpass mere ornamentation and help to advance the action and share necessary information with the reader (36-37). Also written at the end of the fifteenth century are two texts of Diego de San Pedro, whose work would influence English epistolary literary culture. His 1491 *Tractado de amores de Arnalte y Lucenda* (1491) is comprised of letters between multiple correspondents and was translated into

English in 1543 and 1575 as *The Pretie and Wittie Historie of Arnalt & Lucenda*, which Day contends “might almost be called a domestic novel” (14). The *Cárcel de amor* of 1492 owes much of its development to the epistolary form and concludes with a particularly dramatic scene: the unfortunate Leriano claims “acabados son mis males” as he imbibes a potion concocted from a mixture of water and the torn letters of his lover. Like San Pedro’s preceding text, the *Cárcel de amor* was important not only in the evolution of epistolarity within Spanish literature but in that of other European countries as well. It enjoyed immense popularity both in Spain and abroad, having appeared in twenty-eight Spanish editions before 1600 and twenty editions in Italian, French, English, and German (Kany 43-44). According to Day, the story reached England in 1540 as Lord Berner’s translation *The Castell of Loue*, which exemplified an early and influential “important and organic connection of the letters with the plot” (13-14). Perhaps the most convincing argument against the absence of Spanish participation in the genre is the fact that the first epistolary novel has been attributed to Spain. Day asserts that Juan de Segura’s *Processo de cartas que entre dos amantes passaron* (1548) “...can be called a true epistolary novel since it consists of forty-four prose letters” (10). Kany writes that it is of “...great importance in the development of the genre, for it is the first modern novel made up entirely of letters (72), and Beebee, despite his assertion that Spain did not participate extensively in the genre, concurs that it is the first epistolary novel (50).

Kany includes many more examples, a few of which may illustrate Spain’s ongoing contribution to epistolary literature and especially its use of the letter with didactic purpose. In Antonio de Guevara’s 1539-42 *Epístolas familiares*, the author cautions letter-writers to be careful, since ‘their manner of writing will show their

breeding' (qtd. in Kany 56). Blasco de Garay's 1541 *Cartas en refranes* purport to inhibit carnal love; Juan de Avila's *Epistolario espiritual para todos estados* of 1578 was published for the edification of distinct social classes. Letters in sixteenth-century Spanish prose served literary aims as well: Alonso Pérez's 1564 *Segunda parte de la Diana de Jorge de Montemayor* contains twelve letters which help to advance the plot (Kany 75) and Antonio de lo Frasso's *Diez libros de fortuna de amor* (1573), which has the perhaps dubious honor of being ridiculed in *Don Quijote* (I,6), gives "free play to a long series of letters" (78). Of historical importance are the letters of Antonio Pérez in his *Cartas, Relaciones, and Memorial*, many of which are comprised of letters and serve simultaneously as "models of letter writing, for they offer a great variety of styles ranging from appeals to King Philip II to gallant notes to court ladies and letters to his wife and children" (Kany 63) as well as texts which document the curious life of their author, who in turn would later be fictionalized in José María Blanco White's 1825 novel *Vargas: Novela española*.

Seventeenth-century texts continued to incorporate letters: Tirso de Molina's *Cigarrales de Toledo* (1621) contains eleven letters; Solorzano's *La Garduña de Sevilla*, nine; Pérez de Hita's *Guerras civiles de Granada*, sixteen; Salas Barbadillo's *Don Diego de noche* (1623) contains thirty-one letters which are not connected to the plot but rather are "sententious and moral in purpose" (Kany 92). Quevedo's *Cartas del caballero de la tenaza, donde se hallan muchos y saludables consejos para guardar la mosca y gastar la prosa* (1627) contained some twenty-five letters from the miser to his lady, with one reply (107). In summary, as Kany observes, "Save for its mention in histories of Spanish

literature, Spain's claim to priority in the epistolary novel has never been sufficiently recognized" (72).

Notwithstanding Spain's centuries-long involvement with and contribution to epistolary literature, it continues to be excluded from much contemporary scholarship, even that which focuses on the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century, when in Spain, as in other European countries, the form enjoyed the greatest popular and literary success. Notable exceptions include Mark Malin's 1990 dissertation *The Nineteenth-Century Epistolary Novel* and, more recently, Ana Rueda's *Cartas sin lacrar: La novela epistolar y la España Ilustrada (1789-1840)* (2001), which recovers and analyzes over forty of Spain's epistolary novels and upon doing so, definitively dispels the assumption that letter fiction is absent from the country's eighteenth century.

Indeed, the epistolary technique was sufficiently popular in eighteenth-century Spain that it was utilized not only in the novel but in other prose forms and in drama as well. Several critics have explored the use of letters or other manifestations of inscription in Spanish *comedias*. T. Earle Hamilton, for example, categorizes of the use of letters in the works of three Golden Age playwrights and reveals the ubiquity of this form. In 314 plays of Lope, 174 contain letters; each play averages 1.91 letters. Tirso employs the letter in 33 of the 52 works studied, with an average of two letters per play. Alarcón employs letters in nine of 20 plays, with an average of 2.33 letters per play (65). Hamilton does not focus on the dramatic functions and aesthetic approach to these letters but rather concentrates on their composition (whether in prose or in verse, and in the case of the latter the verse type) and their manipulation (that is, he emphasizes the linguistic

play in which letters are physically torn, for example, thus creating two discrete and thereby semantically distinct messages.

Hamilton's survey alludes to the amatory function of most of them. These love letters are often veiled in secrecy, containing clandestine or coded messages to their intended recipient. Epistolary manipulation, whether through the letters' content or its manner of delivery, most often serves amorous ends. In those cases in which an authority is the recipient of a letter, there exists a dual recipient— the powerful or authority figure to whom the missive is purportedly intended and the true *destinatario*, or intended recipient, who receives the letter or its message directly via eventual receipt of the physical letter or indirectly by the first and unintended recipient's reporting its contents. Such examples include Alarcón's *Mudarse por mejorarse*, in which "Don García, ostensibly in love with Doña Clara, has really fallen in love with her niece Leonor, and communicates with his true love via a letter sent to her aunt" (Hamilton 68). Likewise, in *Tirso's Amar por arte mayor*, "Doña Elvira writes the King, and the declaration of love contained therein is actually destined for his counselor Don Lope who receives the message when the King hands him the note" (69). In Tirso's *Quien calla, otorga*, the Marchioness asks her secretary to dictate a letter. He then divides the verses into two hemistichs, the second of which forms a message indicating the sentiments of the secretary, who ultimately wins the Marchioness's hand.

Charles Oriel, in *Writing and Inscription in Golden Age Drama*, discusses the use of the letter in several other works. In *El galán escarmentado*, a husband, Julio, finds old love letters among his wife Ricarda's possessions and accuses her of infidelity. In Antonio Mira de Amescua's 1625 *El ejemplo mayor de la desdicha*, the conclusion of a

letter brings about the downfall of the protagonist Belisario. Oriol says of the letter in these plays that "...various papeles (in all senses of the term) serve to emphasize the ultimate ambiguity of all perception and the arbitrary quality of Fate" (17).

Further interesting studies on letters in the *comedias* are Catherine Larson's *Language and the Comedia* and Elias Rivers' "The Shame of Writing in *La estrella de Sevilla*", both of which emphasize the missives' role in the foregrounding of language itself and whose observations regarding the use of letters in these plays relate to the later plays of the Neoclassicists. Rivers has shown conflict between oral and written contracts, that is, the conflict between the authority of the oral versus the written word, concluding that "The categories of written and oral together reveal the uncertainty of language itself" (277). Likewise, in Emilie L. Bergmann's "Reading and Writing in the *Comedia*," included in Ganelin and Mancing's volume *The Golden Age Comedia*, the author examines the dynamic relationship between spoken and written discourse in plays such as *La dama boba* and *La estrella de Sevilla*. In *La estrella*, she indicates, the "single act of writing a letter" is ancillary to the marriage arrangements that her brother makes for her: her writing does not make things happen" (276). In contrast, in the plays of Iriarte and Moratín, the letters are quite responsible for "making things happen." Bergmann observes as well that letters in these plays are used both as stage props and objects that influence action and are instrumental to temporal suspense (278); such too is the case in the dramas of Iriarte and Moratín. These critics of Golden Age drama have indicated the importance of letters in the works of that epoch, and their importance continues to develop and deepen in accordance with the preoccupations of the Enlightenment, in Nicolás



Fernández de Moratín's *La petimetra* and even more so in the plays of Iriarte and the younger Moratín.

The epistolary technique was sufficiently popular in eighteenth-century Spain that it was utilized not only in the novel but also in other prose forms and in drama. In fact, two of the century's best known playwrights, Tomás de Iriarte (1750-1791) and Leandro Fernández de Moratín (1760-1828), both depend extensively on letters in their work. While their plays have been considered models of successful neoclassical dramaturgy and have consequently received a certain amount of critical attention, the functions and effects of the letters within these plays have either been entirely overlooked or mentioned only in passing. This study is an effort to respond to this gap and concomitantly to explore this unexamined manifestation of Spanish epistolarity. Following a brief look at Nicolás Fernández de Moratín's prototypical neoclassic comedy, *La petimetra* of 1762, this thesis centers its attention on two plays written by the elder Fernández de Moratín's *contertuliano* Iriarte: *El señorito mimado* (1788) and *La señorita malcriada* (1789), and four penned by Leandro Fernández de Moratín: *El viejo y la niña* (written in 1786, first performed in 1790), *La mojígata* (1791, performed 1804), *El barón* (performed 1803) and *El sí de las niñas* (performed 1806)<sup>1</sup>. Specifically this study will examine the ways in which the staged letter contributes dramatically and thematically to these plays.

For the purpose of this study, the definition of "letter" is understood to be a "written or printed message addressed to a specific recipient" (*Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary*) or a "papel escrito que se manda a una persona para darle cuenta

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<sup>1</sup> Of Moratín's five original comedies, four are included here. *La comedia nueva* (1792) is not included. Although language is a principal concern of the work, this is Moratín's only play in which letters are neither discussed or presented.

de algo” (*Pequeño Larousse Ilustrado* 1994). As these definitions intimate, the length of a letter or *carta* is of little concern; because these letters appear in plays – all of which are under obligation to the spatial and temporal limits of the Aristotelian unities, moreover – they are necessarily briefer than those that might be found in a novel. Most, in fact, are brief notes.

In the comedies of Iriarte and Moratín, the letter appears on stage in several forms. One seemingly paradoxical manifestation is that of letters which are never tangibly represented on the stage but are mentioned by the characters, many of whom exit the scene to write letters, to wait for their delivery, or to post them. Beebee contends that the “letter is not a particular form or object, but a set of functions and capabilities” (202); however, for the purpose of this study, and based on how missives are used in the plays, the letter *is* in fact understood to be a concrete object, but one whose dramatic or thematic function is not necessarily negated by its absence. That is, even when there is no letter physically present, it is possible to consider how the suggestion of its existence ‘works’ in the play, and in these instances, the “mentioned” letters do indeed participate in a real way, from dramatic action to plot advancement to character development. A second category is comprised of letters which are seen but not “heard”: their existence is certain, that is, the public sees a character manipulating a piece of paper, but their content remains a mystery throughout the play, sometimes revealed at the denouement, sometimes not. These letters are often clandestinely passed from one character to another or tucked surreptitiously into pockets. Of course, many letters are indeed read aloud on stage, either in the presence of other characters or as a soliloquy-like discourse for the benefit of the audience.

Various topics are presented in these letters: many are practical and prosaic, bearing news of business dealings or legal matters and offering personal recommendations; others are inscriptions of emotion, expressing heartfelt sentiment or deceitful manipulation. There are truthful and apocryphal letters, whose authors and recipients include friend and foe, lover and seducer. These are letters which seek to surpass the simple conveyance of information, a fact which is of principal import but unsurprising when we consider that for the eighteenth century, the letter "...does not just communicate ... but persuades, hypnotizes, caresses" (Beebee 172). Finally, regardless of their specific manifestation or purpose, all the letters in these plays demonstrate what Altman has identified as an inherent characteristic of the epistolary form, termed the "epistolary pact", or the "call for a response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world" (89). Beebee echoes this idea in his assertion that the difference between literature which employs the epistle and that which does not lies in the "...particular relationship it [seeks] to create between 'performer' and audience" (13-14). This observation, meant to refer to the letter-writer and its recipient, is especially intriguing for the study of the letter within drama since in the case of the plays, this "pact" or relationship between performer and audience is extended from the on-stage letter-writer and recipient to the stage performer and the viewing public. The letter's capacity to provoke a response suggests a reason for its ubiquity and importance in these plays given the didactic objectives of the Neoclassicists.

The notions of "epistolarity" and "epistolary technique" (or method) are challenging to describe definitively, for they are never stagnant forms but alter according to innumerable intra – and extratextual factors. This study borrows several definitions of

these concepts to most fully explore the letters' roles in the examined comedies. Furthermore, these definitions have evolved in the context of narrative rather than of drama, yet they are relevant and insightful for a discussion of the plays. Without a doubt, the spatial and temporal parameters inherent to drama impose limits on the length and number of letters that can be exchanged and examined.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Altman contends,

...not all of letter fiction's *narrative* events are *narrated* events. In the epistolary work, acts of communication (confession, silence, persuasion, and so on) constitute important events; they are enacted rather than reported in discourse. Analytic models drawn from drama theory, speech act, or other types of communication theory may come closer than narrative models to describing what is 'happening' in epistolary work. (207, original italics)

If it is the case that drama theory can illuminate epistolary narrative, perhaps the reverse is true and narrative-centered epistolary theory can help illustrate what is 'happening' in the plays. Finally, these definitions are utilized because there does not exist, to my knowledge, a definition of "epistolary technique" or "epistolarity" specific to drama.

The use of letters within narrative is referred to as "epistolary technique" or "method." Kauffman, borrowing from Alastair Fowler, prefers the term "epistolary mode" since this term "seldom implies a complete external form" as does the word "genre" (xiii). Whether termed "epistolary technique", "method" or "mode", for Day, the

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<sup>2</sup> This is the case for the neoclassic plays discussed here; however, A.R. Gurney's 1984 play *Love Letters* demonstrates the possibilities of depending exclusively on the epistolary form to compose a drama. The play is comprised entirely of letters between two characters, whose story unfolds for the audience solely based on the letters that they have written to one another and that they read on stage.

phenomenon can be defined as “the use of imaginary letters as a vehicle for conveying a connected narrative” (2). Day’s working definition of epistolary fiction, then, which he concedes to be “a rather loose characterization” is “... any prose narrative, long or short, largely or wholly imaginative, in which letters, partly or entirely fictitious, serve as the narrative medium or figure significantly in the conduct of the story” (5). He adds

That the story is in letters should be important, not incidental ... Letters should have a vital and organic connection with the conduct of the narrative – the epistolary technique should permit effects which would otherwise be difficult or impossible to achieve. The writing, receiving, suppression, and discovery of letters, as well as the fact that letters have a receiver and sender, should have more than merely mechanical importance; they should be worked into the texture of a novel. (158)

Altman further elaborates the significance of the letter within literature, writing that “...the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works” (4). Her working definition of epistolarity is “...the use of the letter’s formal properties to create meaning”; as such, it is a frame for reading which cannot be scientifically measured, but rather “argued by an interpretive act, which involves the critic’s description of a letter novel’s epistolarity as much as the novelist’s or novel’s actualization of the letter’s potential to create narrative, figurative, and other types of meaning” (4). These definitions of epistolarity, the

epistolary technique, and the letter itself are those that will inform the discussion of the letters in the plays of Iriarte and Moratín.

In spite of the absence of what might be called “epistolary drama,” Day, referring to the literary antecedents of using letter-fiction, claims that drama is one possible source. Of early authors, he writes that

In all respects they approached the method of the drama: the story was shown completely in the present, with the future always indefinite and events distorted because they were seen without the ordering process of retrospect. Making characters work out a story by exchanging letters was technically similar to making them do it by exchanging speeches, as the drama did ... The drama ... shared authors, readers, booksellers, and in a sense form and structure, with early letter fiction” and claims that epistolary fiction comes very close to the dramatic method. (194-195)

Likewise, Kany, referring specifically to the evolution of English epistolarity, acknowledges that there is no direct evidence to show that authors of early epistolary novels were working deliberately from plays, but suggests that there exists an intriguing relationship between the two genres that justifies further investigation (199). Moreover, in Altman’s study, she often discusses several points of contrast and comparison between epistolary prose and theater. Two important examples include the figure of the confidant, whose narrative and epistolary functions are distinct in some ways but quite similar in

others (51) and epistolary discourse and dialogue. Charles Oriel describes the potential impact of the inscription of written text within plays on the audience:

As a literary genre, drama is particularly effective in its foregrounding of written texts because, unlike other written and printed literary genres, it has a performative dimension that is essentially oral. As a result, written texts that appear in drama have an inherent irony that draws attention to them as objects worthy of question: we are forced by the very nature of dramatic art to sit up and take notice. (14)

Given the Neoclassicists' didactic objectives, this potential of the letter within drama to make the public "sit up and take notice" is especially revelant; not only the characters of the play but the viewers watching it are obligated to partipate in the process of interpreting the letters and the ideas they express. In spite of the temporal lag between the composition of a letter and its receipt, staging them makes them perpetually "present" for an audience. Furthermore, the fact that the letters within plays are "performed" explicitly, which is generally not the case in prose, compels the spectators to participate along with the onstage characters in their reading, interpret their message, and consider to what extent all language is artifice.

Finally, epistolary fiction is often described in terms which reference dramatic art. Referring to epistolary romance, Altman describes the exchange of letters as a "dialogue *ritardando*" (21, Atman's italics); Day, referring to the work of Aphra Behn, writes that on certain occasions "letters become *actors* in the story" (163, italics added); and often

letters are discussed in terms of the *roles* they play. Such expressions are only metaphors, of course, but as figurative language tends to be, they are suggestive of an embedded truth between the elements of comparison, and thus of a relationship between the letter and the play that merits purposeful attention.

With few exceptions, extensive discussion of Spanish Neoclassical drama – much less specific components of it – has been excluded from literary histories; when such discussion is present, it often centers on the extent to which the play in question succeeds in manifesting the tenets of Neoclassicism. Just as often, it seems that the plays are chastised for possessing overmuch the very characteristics they seek to exemplify. For example, decorum is viewed as lack of passion or obedience to the Aristotelian unities is seen as confining. Readers might be left with the sense that the criticism has been at least as regimented as it has accused the plays of being. But are the dramas of Iriarte and Moratín in fact so rigid? Does the strict adherence to neoclassical precepts necessarily translate into stifled art? Many critics have answered affirmatively, insisting that the neoclassic dramatists' obedience to Aristotelian unities and Luzanian rules squelched any real creative possibilities and repressed any true manifestation of imagination. But does the playwrights' adherence to accepted neoclassical tenets render them unimaginative, undeniably effective in their obligatory didacticism but bereft of literary richness? Previous criticism which has viewed the plays (or Neoclassicism in general) from a Romantic, Realist, Modernist, or even Postmodernist perspective, that is, through a nineteenth – or twentieth – century lens, has viewed them according to standards which the neoclassic playwrights could not have anticipated, and perhaps more significantly, that would have been in disaccord with their dramatic and theatrical objectives. Rather



than measure the worth of these plays against the aesthetics or ideological projects that were yet to come, this study will examine the plays according to the explicitly-stated goals of the playwrights, the aesthetic ideals of neoclassic dramaturgy, and the internal evidence afforded by the dramatic text itself. “*Carta canta*”, Iriarte’s pampered youth tells us.

The aforementioned presence of letters in plays predating the eighteenth century, together with the form’s ubiquity in the social and literary culture of the Age of Enlightenment, obliges the reader to consider whether its use in these neoclassical comedies is a reflection of convention or a conscious, creative decision. Although the intentions of the playwrights cannot be known, it is certain that it was characteristic of Iriarte and Moratín, especially the latter, to write in an exceedingly purposeful manner. Moratín himself admitted that that he wrote only five original comedies because he revised them so assiduously, paying attention to the smallest detail, to every word and image. Thus, it seems unlikely that their use of the letter form had no purpose other than to follow convention.

In fact, the letters in these plays are a fundamental means by which the playwrights achieve the objective of *enseñar deleitando*; through the role they play in plot advancement, character development, and the creation of dramatic irony, suspense, and humor, they are a source of pleasure and dramatic entertainment for the viewing public. While they delight the audience, they are instrumental in foregrounding the *preocupaciones ilustradas of hombría de bien*<sup>3</sup>, especially the Enlightenment ideal of

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<sup>3</sup> The eighteenth-century concept of “hombría de bien”, difficult to translate succinctly to English, consists of the notion that a gentleman be a good friend and family member, useful to society, and adept at employing reason and sound judgment. To avoid cumbersome translations, this study will retain the original Spanish when referring to this term or *hombre de bien*, one who is characterized by these qualities.

rational thought and critical thinking. The letters are used in these plays as masks that disguise the identities and motives of the letter-writers and at the same time bear within themselves the truth they seek to obscure. As vehicles of deception and truth, the letters demand that the onstage characters and the viewing public participate in their interpretation, and in this way, they are the principal means by which the playwrights not only entertain the audience but also achieve their dramatic and ideological objectives of interrogating the errors common to society and advocating virtue and truth.

The epistolary novel fell out of favor by the mid-nineteenth century; likewise, the letter becomes less frequent in later plays, yet it never entirely disappears, continuing to appear in plays of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in works as diverse as José Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio* to Alejandro Casona's *Los árboles mueren de pie* to Francisco Nieva's *Malditas sean doña Coronada y sus hijas*. Thus, this project is not intended to be exhaustive but rather an introductory consideration of epistolarity in eighteenth – century neoclassic comedy and an invitation for further investigation of the role of the letter in plays of the Enlightenment and beyond.

## A Prototype of Plays to Come: Nicolás Fernández de Moratín's *La petimetra*

One of eighteenth-century Spain's most ardent advocates of Neoclassic reform, Nicolás Fernández de Moratín (1737 – 1780) is best remembered for his treatises on aesthetic reform and condemnation of the dramatic style of the previous century and its contemporary manifestations; his poetry, especially the provocative *El arte de las putas*, which was censored by the Inquisition and remained unpublished until 1898 (Gies and Lama 31); and to a lesser extent for his dramatic tragedies *Hormesinda* (1770), *Lucrecia* (1763) and *Guzmán el bueno* (1777). His first dramatic effort and only comedy, *La petimetra* (1762), however, is recognized as "...the first Spanish comedy ever written 'according to the rules' (Gies *Moratín* 20) that he so staunchly defended. Moratín's own introduction to the play attests to its explicitly reformatory objective: "Conociendo los errores que han advertido los críticos en el teatro español, determiné purgar la Comedia de todas las impropiedades de que comúnmente abundan en las nuestras, y así compuse *La Petimetra*" (qtd. in Gies 51). *La petimetra* was never represented on stage, a circumstance which its creator, in his *Desengaños al teatro español*, attributed to its very reason for existence: "...pues en oyendo que está arreglada la desprecian" (153).

Most of the critical literature regarding the work of the elder Moratín focuses on his poetry and, to a lesser extent, his dramatic tragedies; that which focuses specifically on *La petimetra* is scarce and of the criticism that exists, its evaluation of the play is lukewarm at best. Perhaps the earliest comments on the play come from his son, whose review of the play was less than glowing and whose opinion would seem to influence

subsequent critics. In his *Discurso preliminar*, Leandro Fernández de Moratín writes that his father's comedy

...carece de fuerza cómica, de propiedad y correccion [sic] en el estilo; y mezclados los defectos de nuestras antiguas comedias con la regularidad violenta á que su autor quiso reducirla, resultó una imitación de caracter [sic] ambiguo y poco á propósito para sostenerse en el teatro, si alguna vez se hubiera intentado representarla. (316)

In his 1879 volume *Iriarte y su época*, Emilio Cotarelo y Mori describes *La petimetra* as a work "...en donde campean las famosas unidades, logradas á costas de otras inverosimilitudes mucho más repugnantes, y deprovista de interés, gracia y estilo" (43). Much of the criticism of this play focuses on its adherence to the tenets of Neoclassical reform. Juan Luis Alborg's history says that the *La petimetra* was the "...primer intento por parte de los neoclásicos españoles de escribir una comedia según las reglas" and asserts that the lengthy prologue, in which Moratín explains his objective, is "...mucho más importante que la misma comedia" (584). John Cook's study of Spanish Neoclassic drama summarizes the younger Moratín's comments in his and adds that the comedy is "only of historical interest as representing the first attempt to carry out in an original comedy the theories which had been so often expressed since the time of Luzán" (215).

In his important study *Teatro y sociedad en el Madrid del XVIII*, René Andioc refers to Moratín frequently, focusing primarily on his role as a reformist, his reaction to Golden Age drama and the *autos sacramentales*, his perception of the viewing public and

his three dramatic tragedies. Referring specifically to Moratín's comedy, Andioc summarizes the play and, like Cook, reiterates the younger Moratín chastisement of his father's play (419).

Recent scholarship focusing on the portrayal of women in eighteenth-century plays, especially the figure of the *petimetra*, have included mention Moratín's work. In her monograph "A School for Wives: Women in Eighteenth-Century Spanish Theater," Kathleen Kish discusses women's efforts to achieve social mobility in the eighteenth century, an effort manifest in the ostentatious behavior of the *Petimetra*, and the patriarchy's success in frustrating such attempts. Again focusing on this ubiquitous eighteenth-century figure, Rebecca Haidt, in "Luxury Consumption and Desire: Theorizing the *Petimetra*" examines more closely Moratín's comedy, employing its central character Jerónima as the locus of a discussion of the figure in other works. For Haidt, the *petimetra* is reflective of "...period tensions generated by fashion's capacity to blur established boundaries of class and gender" (34). For her, the play serves as a jumping of point to discuss the social, economic and political motivations and consequences of *petimetría* itself and thus she situates the play in a larger sociocultural context than do those critics who see it merely as the first example of neoclassic comedy. She identifies the play as one of the XVIII's "numerous economic, political and literary texts treating women's spending on fashion as not only morally unsalubrious but prejudicial in concrete ways to Spain's security" (35). In the same critic's article "The Name of the Clothes: *Petimetras* and the Problem of Luxury's Refinements", Haidt includes Moratín's *Petimetra* with those who desire to specifically name the vestments they wear and prefer French accoutrements to those of Spanish origin and thus Jerónima

is one more figure who represents “...a trope through which cultural uncertainties around women’s presence in the marketplace parallel tensions around luxury, domestic manufactures and imports” (71).

The most elaborated discussion of *La petimetra* is that of David Thatcher Gies, who presents a balanced view of the play’s merits and faults. He writes that “the comedy itself is broad, often strained, but often enchanting” (*Moratín* 130). Perhaps Gies’ most valuable contribution, and what other critics do not mention, is the important letter near the play’s conclusion. The discussion that follows seeks to elaborate on his observation.

Moratín’s plot includes many of the themes important to the *ilustrados*: the discrepancy between appearance and reality, especially as it is manifest in the eighteenth-century custom of *la petimetría*, the nature and obligations of friendship between *hombres de bien*; the criticism of excess and the advocacy of *el justo medio* or moderation; to a lesser extent, the idea that the woman should be free to choose her spouse, a topic that the playwright’s son will explore more fully and successfully. In *La petimetra*, dishonesty, imprudence, and disobedience are punished while virtue is rewarded. These themes of the play are brought to light in large part by the exchange and reading of letters.

*La petimetra* is a three-act comedy written in romance. In accordance with the playwright’s insistence upon the strictest interpretation of the Aristotelian unities, the play takes place entirely in the room of Jerónima and transpires in two to three hours. The action consists of a lovers’ triangle: the self-interested Damián is enamored of Jerónima, whose obsession with fashion and appearance far exceeds her social class or economic means and has earned her the nickname “la Petimetra,” or the female fop. When

Damián's acquaintance Félix arrives in town, Damián insists that he accompany him to introduce him to the object of his affection. This act backfires, however, for Félix is duped by Jerónima's superficial charms and falls – temporarily – in love with the same woman. Just as quickly, however, he regains his senses – and his judgment – and realizes that he truly loves María, Jerónima's prudent and modest cousin. María's feelings are reciprocal, and all seems near a definitive resolution when Damián learns that it is María, and not Jerónima, who has a 17000-ducat dowry, and now *his* sentiments alter according to this new information. The men's friendship is put to the test as they contend for the same woman. As the play nears its conclusion, the girls' uncle and guardian intervenes: Jerónima insists that Félix loves *her* until he soundly denies this, María and Félix declare their mutual love, and Damián sees that he has lost both the girl and her dowry. La Petimetra, having lost Félix, refuses to lose everything and insists that Damián also promised marriage. Although he vehemently denies wanting to marry her, she insists, saying "...cumplid, don Damián, lo que / me ofrecéis por estas letras" and produces a paper which offers proof of Damián's promise to marry her (III, 2821-22). The play concludes with the promise of marriage – if not felicity – for both couples.

One of the few critics to mention the use of this letter in the play is David Thatcher Gies, who asks, "Where did the letter which Jerónima produces in the end (an *epistola ex machina*?) to prove Damián's intention to marry her come from, and why wasn't it produced before?" (*Moratín* 131) Indeed, where did the letter come from? It seems to emerge from an extratextual place, that is, this letter seems to be a carryover from previous plays, the use of a convention that was ubiquitous in works of the Golden Age. Various critics have noted the position of the play as transitional between those of

the Golden Age and the Neoclassic ideal to which the elder Moratín aspired. Gies' comments in this regard specify the residual characteristics of Golden Age plays on *La petimetra*:

The influence of Lope, Calderón, Moreto, and Tirso on this comedy is so evident that, except for its adherence to the three Classical unities, its didactic bent, and the presence of that very eighteenth-century phenomenon, the *petimetra*, the play could have been written in Spain's seventeenth century. The plot, full of tricks, hidden boyfriends, love-at-first sightings, lovers' complaints, threatened duels, and the like, is strictly a residue of the efforts of the playwrights of the previous century. The servants parallel the love affairs of their masters. There are asides, mistaken identities, narrow escapes, ill-guarded secrets, and confusions which need to be sorted out at the end. The servants are full of wily cunning. They squabble comically. Pedigrees of nobility are important. True love is rewarded, and three marriages set everything right as the play draws to a close.

It is, in short, a comic honor play, supposedly updated to meet the new aesthetic concerns of the Neoclassicists . . . Moratín was conscious of the shadows of Lope and Calderón that hovered over him. He did not attempt to break away from their influence, but merely to create a play that avoided the excesses of dramaturgy that were so disturbing to him. . . If imitation is the greatest form of praise, then Moratín's praise of the Spanish *comedia* runs high in this work. (125-26)



He later adds “The play serves as a bridge from the wild abandon (in Moratín’s opinion) of the Golden-Age dramaturgy to the carefully controlled Neo-classical ideal later perfected by Nicolas’s son Leandro” (129) and calls it a “hybrid play” which “maintained the internal freedoms of the Golden Age while it adhered to certain of the new Neoclassical principles” (132).

What, then, of the “epistola ex machina” that Gies identifies? This is an intriguing image because it is reminiscent of the *deus ex machina*, a magical (and thereby unrealistic) theatrical technique of which Moratín, in his Neoclassical sensibility, would not have approved. He uses here instead a letter that, unlike an inexplicable or otherworldly figure, is a mundane, realistic instrument to conclude the play’s action. Moreover, it is a note written by Damián to Jerónima rather than by an authority figure. It is interpreted by the *hombre de bien* Rodrigo, and the conflict is resolved within the home and among the parties involved and not by an external authority. In this way, the letter seems to reflect an inheritance from previous plays and at the same time its use presages letters’ roles in subsequent plays, when the dramatic action, character development, conflict development and resolution take place in private homes or local inns. As the remainder of this study will illustrate, these dramatic elements often depend on letters.

Through their multiple functions in this prototypical play the public witnesses the transition between the spectacle-ridden plays Moratín so fiercely criticized and their manifestations in the comedies of the late eighteenth century: they allow Moratín to adhere to the Aristotelian unities, they contribute to character development and plot advancement, they help establish dramatic conflict and its resolution, they portray on stage objects and concerns of everyday society, they reflect a society in which

negotiations are often enacted through correspondence and they place the process of decision-making and the definition of virtue in the hands of those affected by such determinations.

Without a doubt, the letters of *La petimetra* are used to a much lesser extent than they are in Iriarte or the younger Moratín's works. Throughout the entire play, letters and letter-writing are mentioned four times and staged twice; even then, these letters' contents are conveyed only indirectly. Yet their importance is evident. Referring to the English Renaissance stage, Frederick Kiefer makes an observation, much of which could reasonably be applied to Moratín's comedy: "Letters are penned and sealed, delivered and scrutinized, answered and acted upon, ignored and destroyed. Documents of various kinds are signed and examined, debated and repudiated. Books are carried and consulted, disparaged and dismissed" (13). In the first act of *La petimetra* the audience learns that writing and reading form a principal component of the play's sociocultural context: Damián is "un escribiente de un señor" (I. 198) and Rodrigo is an attorney who spends much of his time studying his books. In the second act, characters leave the scene to await the arrival of a letter in the post or to write a letter. The first of the actual letters is one of recommendation that Félix has brought to Rodrigo, who, without revealing its content to the audience or characters, retires to his office to read it; the second is produced at the conclusion of the play and is instrumental in the resolution of the conflict.

This portrayal of letters, letter-writing, and reading occurs within a dramatic context in which language itself is of primary importance. In the opening scene of the play, Damián's hyperbolic description of Jerónima's charms not only convince Félix to accompany his friend to her home, but lays the groundwork for him to be equally

enchanted with the *Petimetra*. That is, Damián's discourse is so convincing, even seductive, that even before Félix meets Jerónima, he is predisposed to be captivated by her. It is her language that enchants Félix, who exclaims "esta mujer habla como/si cursase escuelas" (I. 746-47). Throughout the play, Jerónima depends upon her linguistic dexterity to manipulate Damián and later Félix, a technique that she uses to greatest effect when she produces a written document at the end of the play.

In several instances, the foregrounding of language foreshadows the role of the letter at the play's conclusion. Rodrigo depends upon his studies and his books to provide him with answers for his clients, and in one scene, he searches frantically for a book necessary to save life, honor and home of a client (I. 858). A letter personalizes this objective and foreshadows his finding the answer in the written word regarding about whom Jerónima should marry. Many of the dialogues throughout the play are metalinguistic in nature. For example, Félix and Damián discuss what Damián had said earlier about whom he loves; the conversation analyzes their previous discussion, and focuses not on whom he loves or why he loves her but rather on what he *said* or did not say about her. The use of an explicit double meaning further serves to foreground language between Félix and Damián. In the last scene of act I, Félix admits his feelings for Jerónima, leading him, along with Damián, to engage in a debate of semantics which concludes with a threatened duel: "Tal arrogancia merece / con la espada la respuesta; / ahora es buena ocasión" (I. 1048-50). When Damián suggests that they "take it outside", Félix responds, "Decís bien, que no es razón / armar aquí una pendencia. / que el tocador de una dama / no es bueno para palestra" (I.1052-55). This "palestra" suggests a double meaning that underscores a linguistic, as well as physical, combat, for although it

signifies a place in which sports or combats were practiced, *palestra* also connotes a “lugar en que se celebran competiciones literarias, se confrontan ideas o discuten determinados problemas,” that is , where literary competitions are celebrated, ideas are discussed and problems addressed. Although there are no explicit mentions of letters in the first act of the play, this planned “duel” foregrounds the linguistic debate that will be further developed in subsequent scenes of the play.

The repeated concern with flattery and its manipulative potential also focuses the audience’s attention on language and its capacity for deceit. Damián’s hyperbolic description of Jerónima predisposes Félix to fall in love with her. The effects of flattery are explicitly identified in Martina’s declaration that “tu prima se enamoró de un petate / sólo porque es lisonjero” (II. 1160-61). Language, especially flattery, is the instrument, one so effective it seems almost tangible, in influencing the actions, decisions and behaviors of the characters. The role of flattery in the play is indivisible from the capacity of language to manipulate others, and in *La petimetra*, the letter serves as an instrument of deception as well as the device that ultimately reveals the same deceit that it helped to foster. It is in this function of the letter in the play that it is most influential in the plays of Iriarte and the younger Moratín. In subtle ways, ones that will be explored much more explicitly in the following works, the letter allows the purposeful exploration of the veracity and trustworthiness of the spoken and written word and the need to carefully consider its source, for what is illustrated in this and even more so in the subsequent plays is that words in isolation are essentially dubious; it is only in combination with empirical evidence, critical thought and sound judgment that the truth they purport to communicate can be verified.

Undoubtedly the objective of the play is the criticism of the custom of *petimetría*, and the tenuous and potentially deceptive nature of the spoken word, which like a *petimetra* can present itself to be something that it is not, is a subtextual concern throughout the play. It is telling that at the conclusion the audience is left with the impression that the written word is more trustworthy than the spoken, at least in the case of Damián, who has produced a legally binding document. Yet whether spoken or written, the word is only as trustworthy as he who utters it. Rodrigo's word is good – Damián warns Félix that if Rodrigo were to find them in the girls' room, "...con ambas primas por fuerza / nos casáramos entrambos" (I. 114-15). When Jerónima produces Damián's written promise that he will marry her, Rodrigo is able to enact his threat.

Language and letters help establish various characters' social status and their true natures. The spectator learns from the household servant Martina that Damián is not the dapper galán he purports to be but rather an "escribiente de un señor, / con ración de nueve cuartos, / acribillado de trampas / a puro pedir prestado / y andar engañando bobas / con fingidos mayorazgos" (I. 197-203). But Damián is not alone in his deceit, for as Martina immediately reveals, Jerónima also "valdrá cuatro o cinco ochavos / ella, su dote y su ropa" (I. 209). Thus commences a mutual game of self – and interpersonal deceit that continues throughout the play. This deceit is propagated by most of the characters and is manifest in the lies they tell one another combined with the evidence supplied by unverifiable but linguistic sources: Damián believes Jerónima to have a generous dowry because she has *told* him she does, and her manner and her dress lend her credibility. What is established orally seems to be on shaky ground – what is said is easily invented, altered or denied.

The letters also contribute to the development of character and to the advancement of the plot. They reflect a society in which business was conducted by means of epistolary exchange and therefore lend a sense of realism to the characters' entrances and exits from the stage. In one instance, Félix has just told Martina of his feelings for María and wants her to convey the message to her. The mention of the letters seems to be an excuse for him to leave the scene and to get away from Damián. Félix's excuse that he needs to leave to write letters reveals to Damián and to the viewing public information about him: that he is awaiting news, that he has property and business interests, that he is a man of certain status. This brief scene lends credibility to the character, as it reflects the common practice of conducting business via correspondence. Moratín establishes Félix's position in society as contrast to the superficial and useless Damián, who works as an "escribiente de un señor" but only in an intermediary capacity – he does not write his own words but those of others. Even his clothes are borrowed. Félix, on the other hand, is the creator of his own epistolary exchanges. When Damián does write a note promising marriage to Jerónima, he does so because he desires her dowry.

The letter serves to establish relationships between characters and to establish dramatic intrigue. Upon arriving to the home of his host, Félix tells Rodrigo that he comes bearing a letter from his uncle with the instructions that he hand it over to Rodrigo, who excuses himself to leave and read the letter. Its content, according to what Félix tells him, describes extensively his reasons for having come to Madrid (I. 80).

In the final scene, the most important letter of the play takes center stage and is instrumental in the resolution of the conflict. María and Jerónima both want to marry

Félix, who confirms to Rodrigo that he had given his promise to María. Jerónima doesn't want to be left out. She produces a piece of a paper that seals the deal with Damián: "Pues no quede yo en afrenta / Cáseme, y sea el que fuere, / Sombra de marido tenga; / Cumplid, don Damián, lo que / me ofrecéis por estas letras" (III. 2818-22). Rodrigo reads the note and claims that "no hay remedio". Thus, the audience assumes that Damian has written of his intentions to marry Jerónima, or at least that he has declared his feelings for her in writing, thus legally obliging him to fulfill his word. On the one hand, this seems nothing more than a clean and expedient way to conclude the drama since there can be no further dispute; however, the use of a written document to conclude matters speaks to the importance of the written word as binding oath.

There are only a few letters used in this drama. They do not play a fundamental role in that they are not discussed much, the audience is not privy to their content, and in many cases they serve as an excuse for a character to exit the stage. They contribute somewhat to plot and character development, but dialogue remains the principal vehicle for these. In the case of the final note bearing the words that Damian has written, the action of the play is concluded and the conflict resolved. The written word decides the fate of both Jerónima and Damián.

The use of letters seems a bit haphazard in this play, perhaps even somewhat manipulative on the part of the playwright. Their use is often too convenient and at times seems reminiscent of a messenger from the king arriving to a town with a missive that quickly resolves a political or social dilemma. The letters often seem to be nothing more than a nod to the primary means of communication between those living at a distance from each other. Félix mentions early in the play that he is awaiting letters that will

resolve a litigation, but they never arrive during the play's action. The letter his uncle has sent for Rodrigo is said to explain in detail the reason for Felix's presence there, but the audience never hears more about that, either. The most important note at the end of the play, that which obliges Damián to wed Jerónima, exists without the audience having seen it written or having heard of its composition. Why include these letters at all? They allow mentions of incidents and explanations within the drama without going into detail that is unnecessary or that would interrupt the unity of action. Given Neoclassicism's insistence upon a single storyline, the letter here can serve to fill in the gaps without diverging from the main argument. Furthermore, an eighteenth-century audience, accustomed to the ubiquity of written correspondence and the emphasis on the solidity of "one's word", would not have been surprised that a character had to retire to his room to read a letter or that an amorous note was a binding document. That there seem to be unanswered questions might be more of a hurdle for the modern reader than one of enlightenment sensibility and cultural context. But because the foregrounding of language, especially written language, helps to maintain the unities, develop character, advance plot and resolve dramatic conflict – because they are multifunctional – they lay the groundwork for these same functions that will become more dramatically and thematically significant in Iriarte and the younger Moratín's works.



## CHAPTER 2

### “Jugar bien las cartas”: The Letter in Two Comedies of Tomás de Iriarte

Most often critically recognized as a fabulist, Tomás de Iriarte was also an advocate of dramatic reform (the topic, in fact, of several of his *Fábulas literarias* as well as *Los literatos en cuaresma*), a translator of French and English plays, and the author of original plays, the best known of which are *El señorito mimado* (1787) and *La señorita malcriada* (1788).

*El señorito mimado* first appeared in the 1787 *Collección de Obras en Verso y Prosa* de D. Tomás de Yriarte, an edition distributed by subscription to some 700 subscribers, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. It was represented on stage for the first time on September 9, 1788, by the Manuel Martínez Company. After being staged for nine days with favorable reviews, the comedy remained a part of the company's repertory and was occasionally represented until 1822. Although Iriarte wrote and published *La señorita malcriada* the following year, production was delayed until January 3, 1791, when it enjoyed a seven-day run. Both of Iriarte's comedies earned more revenue and lasted several days longer on stage than other comedies of the time, and as Sebold states, were therefore considered “successful” (41-42).

Notwithstanding this success, subsequent critical attention and reaction to the plays have been mixed. In general literary histories, including those that are specifically concerned with Spanish drama or with the eighteenth century, commentary about Iriarte and his dramatic work has been scant, and there are very few mentions of the use of the

letter. Most critics focus on the extent to which the playwright succeeded in manifesting the objective of dramatic reform. For instance, Robert E. Pellissier, in his 1918 study *The Neo-Classical Movement in Spain during the XVIII Century*, dedicates only a page and a half to discussion of Iriarte's plays, even though he acknowledges that "the honor of producing the first successful regular play was to fall to Iriarte" (114). Pellissier sees Iriarte's principal worth in his having laid the foundation for what would follow, stating that the playwright, more than any other of his group, was the "best representative of the rules since Luzán and he prepared royally the road on which Moratín the younger was to triumph" (115). Nigel Glendinning, in his *Historia de la literatura española: El siglo XVIII*, and Francisco Ruiz Ramón, in his *Historia del teatro español (Desde sus orígenes hasta 1900)* of 1992, offer a brief summary of each play and a brief overall evaluation of Iriarte. Of *El señorito mimado*, Ruiz Ramón writes that it is "la primera comedia original que se ha visto en los teatros de España, escrita según las reglas más esenciales que han dictado la filosofía y la buena crítica" (301).

In 1897, Emilio Cotarelo y Mori published his voluminous *Iriarte y su época*. Unlike most of the criticism, Cotarelo includes a brief mention of the use of letters in the play *La señorita malcriada*, writing that

Los críticos españoles le notan que 'hay dos escenas uniformes en todo, como son la VI del acto segundo, en que, buscando Don Eugenio las cartas que tratan sobre su fábrica, encuentra D. Gonzalo la fingida que le habían puesto en el bolsillo, y la VII del acto tercero, en que, buscando Doña Ambrosia los versos del Marqués, encuentra Don Eugenio los borradores de las dos cartas; y á pesar de que la

escena VII del acto segundo y la VII del acto tercero no han gustado al público, no obstante que están escritas con bastante destreza y filosofía, siendo éstos , según nuestro dictamen, unos pequeños lunares que no pueden oscurecer las bellezas de esta comedia en su exacta unidad, en su regularidad, en la pintura de los caracteres, en sus costumbres y en su dicción, la consideramos digna de los mayores elogios, de la estimación de los sabios, y de que la mire con respeto la turba de copleros... (362)

Aside from Cotarelo's mention of these letter-scenes and Russell Sebold's brief reference in to the letter as an object to lend realism to the plays (110), the criticism does not address the use of the letter in Iriarte's plays.

As their titles suggest, the protagonists of both plays are youngsters whose upbringing has resulted in their being spoiled and ill-mannered. Thematically, these comedies explore the eighteenth-century preoccupation with the proper upbringing of children. Unlike the elder Moratín's Jerónima, who is portrayed as essentially responsible for her own misguided behavior, Iriarte's characters are the result of their parents' excesses and permissiveness, as the adjectival forms of "to spoil" and "to raise poorly" attest: the parents have done this to their children, who, to be fair, readily take advantage of their parents' actions and attitudes.

The plays examine not only the behavior of the children but also the indulgences of their parents and the consequences that stem from their decisions. *La señorita malcriada*, written only a year after its predecessor, is in many ways a retelling of the same situation with a young girl as the object of the play's lesson, for there exist several

parallels between the two. In *El señorito mimado*, the character's mother arranges his marriage to Flora, an honorable and well-bred girl, while in *La señorita malcriada*, the indulgent Gonzalo encourages his daughter to marry the Marqués de Fontecalda, who represents himself to be an *hombre de bien* but in fact is a con artist. In both cases, the parents seek to place their children in a position of secure social standing, and in both the youngsters lose the opportunity to marry and are ultimately sent from their homes where they can be re-educated. Both works contain a profusion of letters and notes which are instrumental in developing both the dramatic elements and the thematic concerns of the plays; in both the letters are critical devices by which characters are drawn, plot lines are advanced, intrigue, suspense and humor are developed and conflict is created and resolved. They are strategies through which Iriarte illustrates the potentially deceptive nature of the written word, the crucial necessity for discourse to be examined critically, and the need for empirical evidence and sound judgment to accompany the interpretation of the word represented as fact. Through the use of letters in these plays, then, the dramatic characters, and concomitantly the spectators, are obligated to assume the epistemological responsibility of probing beyond the surface of the letter's words, of distinguishing the *real* from the *role* and of interrogating the discrepancy between authorship and authority.

### *El señorito mimado*

*El señorito mimado*, a three-act comedy written in romance, takes place in the home of Doña Dominga and her son Mariano, the "señorito" of the title. Mariano is an

irresponsible fop who has become involved with Mónica, a neighbor of dubious background and behavior. He is engaged to doña Flora, a proper girl and the daughter of a family friend, Alfonso. Mariano's uncle Cristóbal, despite the protestations of the indulgent Dominga, attempts to extricate his nephew from his many entanglements, the most perilous of which is a written promise of marriage to Mónica. At the conclusion of the play, Mariano loses his friendship with Alfonso; he loses Doña Flora to the *hombre de bien* Fausto; and Mónica is arrested for running a gambling house. Mariano, also arrested for serving as the establishment's banker, is released following his uncle's promise that he will be banished for two years to Valencia, where Cristóbal hopes to correct the young man's ways. Encompassed within the straightforward plot are the principal themes of miseducation of youth and its consequences, the nature of sincere friendship, the value of *el justo medio*, and the trustworthiness of one's word.

From the initial moments of the play, the presentation of letters foreshadows their dramatic and thematic role throughout the work. In fact, before the action of the play begins, Iriarte establishes in the stage directions the *motif* of the staged written word and presages its importance throughout the work: "D. Cristóbal, examinando con atención unos papeles, sentado junto a una mesa en que hay recado de escribir. D.a Dominga, sentada en una silla algo distante de la mesa" (Iriarte 141). Unlike many of earlier dramas' convention of commencing a play with the appearance of *criados* whose conversation introduces the audience to the main characters and conflicts of the play, in *El señorito mimado* the public immediately encounters two principal characters and their opposing viewpoints illustrated by means of written documents. Although we do not yet know the content of the documents, we learn that Cristóbal examines them attentively; he

is seated at a desk on which lies an assortment of writing materials. Dominga, on the other hand, is situated somewhat distant from the desk and the documents. As will soon become apparent, the characters' physical proximity to the documents reflects their different attitudes toward careful attention to domestic incidents as well as to the written word itself.

This attention to the word is, in fact, one of the principal, if subtle, concerns of the play. The opening scene clarifies for the audience the nature of these documents:

Cristóbal, "con la pluma en la mano," reads a series of numbers as he examines the papers, while Dominga tries to dissuade him from tending to the family accounts so soon following his return home. But the situation is, in fact, urgent. Referring to the family accounts, Cristóbal announces "Y cuanto más las ajusto, / menos las entiendo. Un año / de examen se necesita, / según encuentro enredados / estos papeles" (I.i. 7-11). With these words, he describes not only the state of the family's financial affairs but the state of the family itself.

The foregrounding of the written word is suggested not only by these initial stage directions but by Iriarte's original draft for the play's beginning. In his edition of the play, Russell Sebold includes the text from Iriarte's prose plan for the work. In the stage directions, following the last word "mesa," Iriarte had originally included "...y tomando chocolate" but deleted those words. Dominga's response is somewhat more lengthy and concludes with the following: "Descansa de tu viaje: que tiempo habrá para revolver despacio estos papelones" (141). While it is likely that such revisions were carried out for the sake of precision, the elimination of "tomando chocolate" allows the stage directions to end with the image of the papers and the desk without sacrificing the realism of the

scene. Dominga's revised lines allow her to try to dissuade Cristóbal from examining the papers without reinforcing the idea that there will be time to examine them later; that is, she again distances herself from these documents, a behavior that she will employ with the notes and documents she encounters throughout the play.

This initial image focuses the audience's attention immediately on the written word and simultaneously relates it to the character of the personages. Dominga and Cristóbal's spatial relationship to, and attitude toward, the written documents foreshadows the relationship that each of these adults will have with Mariano as well as with the written word and what it represents. The uncle is hands-on and insists on carefully reviewing the documents explaining the familial accounts while Dominga remains at a distance from them, denying the financial problems that the uncle's examination of the accounts has revealed. He states that the papers are "enredados" (I. i. 10-11); that is, they are entangled and in utter discord. This scene summarizes for the audience the family's impending financial ruin and introduces the theme of the miseducation of Mariano who has been left to his own whims and has subsequently squandered the money left them by the deceased father, preferring to squander it on games of chance and varied extravagances. The observation that the papers are "enredados" also introduces the importance of the letters and notes throughout the play, for just as these documents occupy a central space in this scene and reveal the family's dilemma, throughout the play they are dramatically and thematically central and contribute to the cause, the result, and the resolution of conflict. They are indicative not only of the family's financial situation but also inseparable from Mariano's social and

moral entanglements and from his and Dominga's fundamental weakness in critical thinking<sup>4</sup>.

The information contained in the accounts that Cristóbal examines is accurate; they are trustworthy documents. These are shortly thereafter contrasted with letters bearing false information. Cristóbal had sent thick letters from "las Indias" that detailed how Mariano was to be educated: "Desde allá, cada correo, / ¿no escribía un cartapacio,/dando mis disposiciones/para educar a Mariano . . .?" (I. i. 77-80). Although the uncle is physically absent from the home, he has employed the letter as a means by which to remain a presence in the life of the youngster as well as a way to exert his influence and offer his advice. Paradoxically, Dominga, who has been in immediate physical proximity to her son, has adopted a "hands off" attitude, having distanced herself from the responsibilities of raising him appropriately. Cristóbal complains of this: "El tiene mala conducta; / yo riño; no me hacen caso; / usted le contempla en todo" (I. i. 31-32). He realizes upon returning to Madrid that he had been deceived and that the samples of Mariano's academic work sent to him abroad were falsifications: drawings were falsified, the "retazos de latín y de francés" and the "muestras de gallarda letra;/ y nada era de su mano..." (I. i. 88-89; 93-94).

Here the writings introduce the theme of deceit and falsity; there is mutual correspondence but without mutual sincerity. Even though the letters were written in Mariano's handwriting, their content has not been truthful. This discrepancy between the

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<sup>4</sup> The Castilian word "enredo" is imbued with multiple connotations, both literal and metaphoric. According to the *DRAE* (*Diccionario de la Academia Real*), "enredar" encompasses the ideas of to catch or tie up in a net and to entangle as well as to entangle with someone or something else, to introduce discord, to become involved in a compromising or perilous obligation, and, simply, to get into a mess. "Enredo" means "plot" as well, and as the play nears its conclusion, the entangling of the various notes and letters is essential to its denouement.



content of letters and the veracity of their message is an idea explored throughout this scene and in fact introduces the play's ongoing criticism of erroneously equating form and content, mode and message. The written word has been utilized by the uncle to guide in good faith the education and *buena crianza* of his nephew, while Dominga has responded with samples of work that were not Mariano's. We witness her lack of concern for Mariano's achieving an education that is useful to society and befitting someone of his social standing. Dominga denies responsibility, as Mariano will do later, an attitude which will be revealed in the several notes. The theme of instilling a sense of responsibility in Mariano is indivisible from the word, both spoken and written.

In the second scene of the play, Iriarte employs the dramatic convention of utilizing the servant of the family to add information about the play's themes and characters. Cristóbal summons the servant Pantoja to give an unbiased account of what has happened in the uncle's absence and to share his observations of Mariano's behavior. Pantoja characterizes Mariano's faults as those of "entendimiento", or understanding, as well as "las que hallo / por lo que hace al corazón" (I. ii. 234-35), or sentiment. His description of Mariano's flaws and Dominga's ignoring them reflects the eighteenth-century's concern for the early and appropriate correction of youth. He further introduces two secondary characters whose presence and actions hold enormous sway -- more so, in fact, than does the influence of his own mother -- over Mariano: Mónica, a widow who resides in a home belonging to Mariano's family, who does so free of charge since she has been the only one capable of scaring away a "duende" that had been dwelling there, and her supposed brother-in-law, an alchemist. Pantoja's description of the pair, together with their relationship with the family, illustrate the latter's outmoded belief in

superstitions and dubious scientific practices and suggests the ease with which mother and son are duped, for Pantoja's final comment is that because Mariano has neglected his studies and is unexercised in the use of reason, and because Dominga has done nothing to remedy this, they are both easily fooled. This flaw will be evidenced tangibly in the exchange of written documents that follows. Hence, although there is no mention of letters in this scene, the additional information about Mariano, Dominga, and their neighbors sets the stage for what transpires with the letters. In the subsequent three scenes Iriarte continues to remind the audience of the relationship of the word – here both spoken and written – to the main topics of parental responsibility and the correction of misguided youth.

The emphasis on the “word”, in its spoken, but more significantly written, forms, suggests that the trustworthiness of one's word and the loyalty and critical attention which it warrants, is of key importance. In the initial scenes, the veracity of the written word, and its concomitant capacity to be a bearer of deceit, is illustrated in the forged letters and assignments sent by Mariano to his uncle during the latter's stay in America. The concern for keeping one's word is then represented in the character of Alfonso, whose principal concern, other than the welfare of his daughter, is remaining true to a promise – and concomitantly his honor as an *hombre de bien* – and preserving his long-standing friendship with Cristóbal. Much to Cristóbal's surprise, Dominga announces the impending marriage of Mariano to Flora, the daughter of long-time family friend Alfonso. She has made this arrangement without Cristóbal's knowledge, and Alfonso, who like Cristóbal personifies the characteristics of *hombría de bien*, has given his word

that his daughter would be free to marry Mariano following the resolution of a lawsuit between himself and Fausto.

These scenes introduce the audience to Alfonso and Fausto and advance the plot by announcing the marriage plans, while at the same time they underscore the importance of one's word, as well as the word's weight in friendship. Each of the three adults has specific concerns in terms of having given his/her word. For Alfonso, the importance of his having given his word and entered into this agreement is cause for his concern later in the act when he learns that Mariano is not the upstanding youth Dominga led him to believe he was. Alfonso will be torn between having given his word and "sacrificing" his daughter to a man who perhaps does not deserve her. As a loyal friend and man who recognizes the weight of having given one's word, Cristóbal is concerned that Alfonso entered into the agreement without being aware that Mariano is ill-prepared to fulfill his obligations as "buen padre, esposo ni amo" (I. iii. 534). On the other hand, Dominga's self-interest causes her to think only of Mariano's good placement rather than maintaining loyalty or honesty with Alfonso. In response to Cristóbal's concerns, her reply is that "... ha empeñado / don Alfonso su palabra / conmigo ..." (I. iii. 542-44). For her, the only thing that matters is that Alfonso has given his word, and her lack of concern for the context of the situation and the perspective of others will come back to haunt her and cause further injury, paradoxically, to the son she is so desperate to protect.

The gravity of having given one's word is clear: although Alfonso fears that Mariano is inappropriate for his daughter, her fondness of her fiancé, and his having given his word, give him much pause. He tells Cristóbal: "Amigo, veo que si hablo, /

hago un mal papel; que soy /un padre injusto si callo” (I. iv. 582-84); his concern encapsulates the relationship between the themes of friendship and responsible parenthood and their relationship to honoring one’s word. Dominga insists that Alfonso retract his words and again insists that he abide by his earlier promise to allow Flora to marry Mariano. Alfonso and Cristóbal make plans to discuss the matter privately after the latter returns from an errand whose purpose remains hidden from the audience. This scene emphasizes the need for honest communication and the need to get to the truth, even if doing so is uncomfortable. The situation is further complicated when Fausto enters and confesses to Alfonso his love for Flora. Although Alfonso knows that Fausto is a better option for his daughter, he fears that, because he has given his word, nothing can come of it. Although these scenes do not contain letters, they keep the issue of the word at the forefront by means of their metalinguistic discourse.

In the subsequent scenes, Iriarte introduces a fundamental notion of the play: there is a correlation between one’s character and one’s use of, and attitude toward, the written word. The relationship between one’s attitudes toward and use of written discourse and behavior, upbringing and even intellectual sophistication is established when the public finally meets el *señorito mimado*, Mariano, in the eighth scene of Act I. His interaction with Fausto is immediately characterized by Mariano’s arrogance and flippancy and Fausto’s restraint and sense of moderation. The conversation between Mariano and Fausto is a somewhat heavy-handed catalog of Enlightenment values, which for Fausto include useful work, decorous behavior, and education useful to society. Fausto’s lifestyle does not impress Mariano, who focuses on language as the means by which to criticize his rival. Mariano tells Fausto, “Usted no sabe vivir. / Siempre metido en

cuidados / de sus pleitos, de su hacienda;/ revolviendo unos legajos, / unos librotos... (I, viii, 849-53). His scorn for things written is obvious: “Jamás abro / un libro” (I. viii. 878-89) and he further ridicules Fausto for his fondness of reading. This debate between the philosophies of intellectual vagrancy and civic utility simultaneously serves to foreground language itself. This scene contrasts with the previous representation of the exemplary friendship between Fausto and Alfonso as well as between Alfonso and Cristóbal, and while the differences established in this scene are certainly those of character and relationship, the word is the lens through which they are established and illustrated. Just as Dominga had earlier boasted that Flora and Mariano must marry since Alfonso gave his word, Mariano now boasts that he needn't be a reader in order to enjoy life. In both cases these dismissive attitudes toward language will have unfortunate consequences.

The act concludes with an abrupt change in focus from written language to a concrete symbol of affection and deception, one which represents visually and tangibly what the written documents and spoken words do linguistically. Fausto has acquired from Mónica a portrait (*retrato*) of Flora, which she had earlier given to Mariano as a token of her affection. Upon learning that Fausto received it from Mónica, Flora suspects that Mariano did not guard it and cherish it as he should have. She tells Fausto that he who deserves it will end up with it. The scene leaves us with a suspicious Flora and a hopeful Fausto.

The first act reminds the spectator of the inseparable relationship between the use of language, especially when it is written, and the character of the personage. By means of the letter a person can pretend to be what he is not, and on the other hand, and

sometimes simultaneously, can also reveal his/her true nature. In this act, the audience learns much, if not most, about the characters through their attitudes toward the written word. The epistolary exchange between Mariano and Cristóbal during the uncle's stay in las Indias as well as Dominga's lying for her son show the missive's – and the family's – capacity for deception; the chaotic documents that Cristóbal must unravel upon his return reveal the state of the family's financial situation; Alfonso's concern for keeping his word characterize him as a loyal friend and a man of honor while Dominga's obstinate insistence on the same illustrates her self interest; Mariano's discourse with Fausto shows each young man's attitude toward the word and points to their attitudes toward life in general.

What is emphasized in these scenes is the letter's capacity to mask one's character while at the same time it reveals his true nature. Even when the words are deceitful, they bear the potential to ultimately reveal the truth about the character and the situation. Mariano's manipulation of his uncle (by sending him letters and assignments that were not his own work) is revealed when the financial documents are examined, for they prove that Mariano's only endeavors have involved losing the family money; moreover, his having lied in these documents is the proof that he is a liar and a manipulator. While the content is not true, the fact that he deceived his uncle – the very “untruth” of the content of the letters – proves that Mariano is a liar. Likewise, the same concern for the word can hold disparate meanings: Alfonso and Dominga's concern for keeping one's word are similar, but their motives differ. Alfonso's preoccupation reflects his desire to be loyal to not only his word but also to his friend and encompasses his concern for the welfare of his daughter; an entire web of relationships is at the core of his concern, and he realizes

that he must seek the truth about Mariano before considering breaking his word.

Dominga is concerned only for the advantageous placement of her son; she knows the truth but this is irrelevant to her. Mariano and Fausto's opposite views regarding the value of reading and writing, specifically Mariano's scorn for these activities, reveal the essence of their characters.

This dual and apparently paradoxical characteristic of the written and spoken word demands of the characters – and the viewing public – the responsibility to use other means – empirical observation, behavior, personal experience – to assess the veracity of what is said or written. It is significant that it is the exemplary characters of the play, those who encompass the characteristics of *hombria de bien* – who do this in order to discover the truth: Cristóbal seeks evidence from Pantoja during his absence and checks financial documents the moment he returns; Alfonso plans to pursue verifiable information about Mariano before making a decision. Those characters who rely on critical thought and whose behavior the *ilustrados* deemed worth emulating resort to a variety of empirical resources to arrive at trustworthy information. In contrast, those whose behavior the audience is to reject scorn the word or use it without the truth to back it up. While the first act's events certainly pave the way for the explicit didactic objective of highlighting the correction of youth, they simultaneously suggest to the audience to consider carefully the written and spoken word.

Iriarte provides further evidence of Mariano's follies so that the audience is not fooled by his charms as several of the characters are. The play's second act begins with yet another example of Mariano's capacity for manipulation and deceit. He confesses to his mother that he exchanged – in an apparently shady deal -- several watches for others

he never received and, worse, pawned to meet gambling debts a diamond ring that Dominga had set aside for Flora's wedding. Mariano does not hesitate to cast off his own responsibility for this, telling Dominga that it was Pantoja who arranged the pawn. The servant's apparent betrayal of the family infuriates Dominga, a situation that Mariano exploits by reminding her of a letter which had earlier suggested Pantoja's treacherous nature: "¿No quiere usted que le tenga / tirria desde aquella vez / que le cogí por sorpresa / una carta en que escribía / al tío contra mí ciertas / especies? También de usted / decía cosas horrendas; / pero todas con la capa / de su honradez, su conciencia, / su amor a la casa" (II. i. 1252-61). The indirect report of this letter demands that the spectator question its veracity and motive, for the missive is never seen on stage. It is reasonable to imagine that Pantoja has been writing to the uncle during the latter's absence, and it can be reasonably assumed that the uncle has also been responding. Because Cristóbal had earlier asked Pantoja to convey his observations of Mariano's behavior, the audience knows, at least, that Cristóbal trusts the servant's word. Pantoja claims that he has written this letter under the guise of honorable behavior – "la capa de su honradez", but which Mariano portrays as disloyal and hypocritical, full of malicious lies about Mariano and his mother.

Mariano's characterization of the letter is much more revealing about him than it is about Pantoja, who is, based upon the behavior throughout the play, in fact telling the truth to Cristóbal. Mariano's accusation that Pantoja has been disloyal is an attempt to protect his own interests. Because Pantoja's description of the situation is supported by empirical evidence that we have observed in the behavior of Mariano and Dominga, what Pantoja writes is likely true. Mariano uses these true words to cast Pantoja as a liar. He



convinces his mother that Pantoja is disloyal to the family while he simultaneously, and unintentionally, convinces the audience of his own capacity for manipulation as well as of Dominga's naivete. That is, Mariano's use of the letter as an instrument of deceit is really an illustration of the truth, for the letter he wrote to Cristóbal does indeed convey the truth as we have witnessed it throughout the play. The letter, in fact, illustrates Pantoja's loyalty to Cristóbal and to the principles for which he stands – which is the exact opposite of what Mariano claims to be true. It is intriguing that the audience assumes that Pantoja's letter speaks the truth even though its contents are not seen on stage and even though there is no proof whether this letter really exists or Mariano simply invented it to detract Monica from what Pantoja was saying. His indirectly conveying the content of this assumed letter to distract Dominga and to cast away from himself the blame for his having pawned the ring.

Although he is an unreliable mediator, the audience is inclined to believe that what Pantoja ostensibly wrote is, in fact, the truth, for Mariano has already shown his capacity for manipulation. Mariano's facile success in distracting his furious mother underscores her naivete and her lack of critical thinking skills. In spite of Mariano's confession and his general behavior, which Dominga has observed first-hand and for which she has been reprimanded by Cristóbal, she immediately faults Pantoja and expresses her intention to dismiss him without pausing to consider whether Mariano is telling the truth. The use of written documents to hide and to reveal the truth, and the characters' inability to see this truth is effectively dramatized in Pantoja's ghost letter. That is, while Dominga's blind acceptance of what Mariano tells her makes her all but forget is that her son has just admitted to losing valuable family property and to owing

vast sums of money, the *audience* has witnessed empirical evidence of Mariano's dishonesty. His use of the letter, then, helps serve the didactic objective of encouraging rational thinking in the spectator.

In the following scene, the play establishes the relationship between a character's ability to see the truth and their social and financial gains and losses, a phenomenon that will affect both Mariano and Dominga. Mariano confirms his irresponsibility as he confesses having lost money in a card game the night before, and the spectator learns that it is not unusual for him to lose what is valuable in a game of cards. In spite of the dire consequences that face him, the wordplay here – that is, that Mariano loses at “naipes”, or cartas, lends humor to the scene since the word “cartas” refers to both playing cards and letters and the audience suspects that Mariano will lose not only at the gaming table but because of written notes. In his ignorance, he does not realize, as the public does, that his losing at “naipes” foreshadows an impending, graver loss because of his dealings with “cartas”. When the housemaid Felipa enters and warns Mariano that his uncle and Flora are both upset with him, he dismisses her concern, saying “Con cuatro palabras/ la pondré como una seda” (II. ii. 1317-18). He is well aware of the capacity of words to serve as weapons and tools of deceit. Mariano demonstrates that, in spite of his scorn for reading and study, he is proficient at employing language to manipulate others. But this “talent” is an ironic one, for the danger of a little knowledge and his arrogance and ignorance subsequently cause him to fall by means of the same instrument of deception.

In the third scene of the act, the focus shifts again from the discussion of letters to the misplaced portrait of Flora, who insists that Mariano show her portrait that she has given him. Mariano's response, an effort on his part to evade her request, reveals the

fundamental message of the play: “¿A la prueba? No basta decirlo?” to which Flora replies “No.” (II. Iii.1371-72). The word alone, even when written, is insufficient, too susceptible to deceit and manipulation, and empirical evidence must accompany it; that is, veracity can be determined only by the correspondence of word and act. Mariano hesitantly shows Flora the portrait and everyone, including himself, is surprised to discover that the one in his possession is actually a portrait of Mónica. He explains that he had lent it to Mónica because she wanted an exact copy of the frame and that that very morning she had returned it to him, telling him “Cuidado no se desprenda/usted jamás de esa alhaja / porque vale más que piensa” (II. Iii. 1416-18). His naivete is again apparent as he tells everyone that he accepted its return and put it in his pocket without having looked at it. Flora, unimpressed, returns to him not only the portrait but the same words that Mónica used upon giving it to him (“Cuidado no se desprenda/usted jamás de esa alhaja/porque vale más que piensa” (II. Iii. 1440-42). As the scene concludes the characters and the audience are led to ask what does, in fact, give us an accurate “portrait” or image of a person, an event or the truth?

At the midpoint of the dramatic action, the frequency of letters – and their dramatic and thematic significance – increase substantially. In the seventh scene, Mónica arrives to Dominga’s home to defend her reputation. Offended that she has been accused of occupying the house without paying rent, she claims this is due to “la cobranza de unas letras”, or brief letters or notes, of which Mariano is aware (II. Vii. 1692). When Dominga does not question this mention of the “letras” but informs Mónica that Mariano is now forbidden from returning to her home, she announces that she wants to speak with Dominga privately to inform her of secret news. Her manner of announcing this news is

done in such a way as to provoke suspense in not only Dominga but to create dramatic suspense for the viewing public as well; she reveals a piece of paper and shows it to Dominga, and as she reads the note, we must wait for several lines before its content is revealed:

Mónica: ¿Quién ha firmado  
este papel?

Dominga: Esa es letra  
de mi hijo.

Mónica: Ya usted lo ve,  
Tiene tres meses de fecha.

Dominga: Cierto. Pero ¿qué contiene?

Mónica: Está bien claro. Usted lea.

Dominga: ¡Hola! ¿Qué es esto? Pues ¿cómo ...?

Mónica: Nada más que una promesa  
muy formal de casamiento.

Dominga: ¿Con usted?

Mónica: Conmigo; y sepan  
la madre, el tío, la novia  
y toda su parentela  
que no engaña don Mariano  
a una mujer de mis prendas.

Dominga: Pero, señora . . .

Mónica: A esta firma

se dará toda su fuerza

en tribunal competente

Si hay la menor resistencia. (II. vii. 1724-40)

This brief dialogue between Mónica and Dominga creates suspense in the play; the note is read silently by Dominga, forcing the viewing public to learn its contents (and realize its consequences) only indirectly and at the same delayed pace as that experienced by Dominga. In spite of its brevity, the note is also the cause of a significant twist of plot and thereby presents a pivotal moment in our understanding of the characters, their relationships and the outcome of the conflict. Mónica's possession of such a note not only complicates Dominga's view of her son and his future but also causes the audience to doubt what we thought we knew about the characters and the history of their relationships. Its content surprises us as much as it does Dominga and problematizes any sense of superiority the audience may have felt all along toward Dominga's naivete. It is an epistolary bombshell which will impact the remainder of the action of the play.

The note's suggestion that Mariano has been long involved with Mónica is dispelled just as quickly as it was suggested by the subsequent scene between the two. Mariano tells her that she returned to him the wrong picture; the audience is again led to believe that Mónica is alone responsible for the deception. Although this scene immediately follows Mónica's revelation to Dominga that Mariano had committed himself to marriage, there is no mention of the note in the conversation between Mónica and Mariano even though they are alone. Further, in spite of Mónica's threat that she will

take legal action rather than see Mariano released from his commitment, she does not reveal to him that Dominga is now aware of his promise. This silence suggests that perhaps Mariano is as unaware of this note as was Dominga. The public is again asked to question the veracity of the note and to check it against Mónica's actions. If Mariano has indeed signed such a note, how is it possible that he not refer to their commitment? Because of a simple note, the audience knows that Mónica is a master of deceit, but Mariano's role in this remains unclear.

Cristóbal and Dominga enter the scene and the spectator witnesses Cristóbal's reaction to the news: "Atónito me han dejado/las cosas que usted me cuenta. / ¿Conque el tal don Marianito/ha dado a esa forastera/palabra, mano y papel?" (II. ix. 1851). Dominga reinforces its veracity saying that "Yo lo he leído, yo misma". But her insistence that she has seen the note causes the audience to doubt, for her judgment has been questionable throughout the play. Moreover, the play has provided concrete evidence that the credibility one attributes to the content of a note is not contingent upon having actually seen it or read it.

The written word's presence and the subsequent discussion about it serve to increase dramatic tension. When confronted, Mariano confesses he signed the promissory note long before knowing Flora and blames the situation on his having signed the paper when his "... potencias / no estaban de lo más claro" (II. Ix. 1880-81); in other words, he was tricked into signing the paper after an evening of drinking and general revelry after which Monica's friends convinced him that she loved him and that they would be perfect together. The "brother in law" composed the promissory note while the others were persuading Mariano. In spite of his own history of writing letters to Cristóbal to deceive

him and his plan to use language to assuage Flora's anger, neither he nor his mother yet grasp the potential of the written word as manipulative or deceitful although they are now on the receiving end of such behavior. In fact, their lack of understanding of the written word, or their refusal to consider it critically is precisely what has brought them to this point. For the remainder of the play, the written word will be the site of secrets both concealed and revealed.

As is the case with the previous written documents, the promissory note for marriage will obscure the truth about Mónica's identity and is the same instrument that reveals who she really is. This discovery unleashes a series of revelations that provide the subclimax of the play. It is Alfonso, who has been preoccupied with maintaining the fidelity of his own word and defends having to retract it, who unmasks Mónica and reveals that she is Antoñuela, a known con-artist who has already had several skirmishes with the law. Shocked by such accusations, "Mónica" pretends to faint, thus employing another performance as she had with the letter. She is removed from the home, Alfonso and Cristóbal announce that they plan to report her to the authorities, and the audience is thus reminded that writing, as other behaviors, is a performative act needful of critical interpretation.

Mónica's performance is not limited to the promissory note, for she again takes advantage of Mariano's ignorance to use writing as a weapon against him and will use the same technique to extort money from Dominga. At the beginning of the third act of the play, she returns disguised as a servant to invite Mariano to a game at her home. After convincing him that she is risking everything by returning, she tells him that there "nos retiraremos / adonde pueda mostrarte / legítimos documentos que prueban mi ilustre

cuna, / ínterin que los presento / a algún juez que mande darme/un desagravio completo” (III. i. 2220-26). In order to manipulate him and obscure the truth, she again plans to use written documents, a rather bold decision since one has already led to the discovery of her true identity. Mariano is hesitant to attend since he has been forbidden from returning to her home, but is nonetheless tempted by the promise of documents that will confirm who she is. Mónica accuses him of being a traitor since she knows his feelings for Flora. To further convince him of her sincerity, she returns his signed promise of obligation: “Este papel que me firmaste. / Tómale. Yo te lo vuelvo. / Obra tú como te guste, / obrando yo como debo. / Sólo te pido la gracia/de que examines atento / lo que en esta obligación / prometiste, los expresos / términos en que juraste / ser el esposo más tierno. / Lee. Confúndate, ingrato” (III. i. 2281-91). She surrenders to him a folded note, and in doing so hands over concrete evidence of her deceit for the third time. The notes, like the portrait, serve as reminders of Mariano’s infinite capacity to be duped – he has learned nothing from Monica’s having returned to him the wrong portrait, for although she has handed him the promissory note folded, yet he does not open it until she is gone.

Mariano is again convinced of Mónica’s sincerity: “¡Y Mónica haberme vuelto / este papel! Tiene rasgos / muy nobles. No sin misterio/me habrá dicho que le lea. / A fe que apenas me acuerdo / de lo que firmé. Veamos” (III. Ii. 2304-09). His certainty that Mónica has done him a favor and has acted in good faith is suddenly destroyed by what he reads: “¡Hola! ¿Qué viene a ser esto?” (III. Ii. 2310) He reads the letter, the only instance in the play in which the text of an epistolary correspondence is read aloud on stage:



Adorada Flora: Extremado ha sido mi júbilo al recibir escrita de tu puño una confirmación tan clara de estar ya bien persuadida de la inconstancia, necesidad y desarreglada conducta de ese don Mimado. Te doy el parabién de verte libre de toda pasión a semejante loco, y me le doy a mí mismo de que te halles firmemente resuelta a premiar con tu mano la fidelidad y la ternura con que es y será tuyo hasta la muerte, *Fausto de Villegas*". (III. ii. 2311)

Again uncritical of Mónica's motives or the veracity of the letter, Mariano exclaims, "Toma tu papel de casamiento; y salimos con que es uno escrito a Flora" (III. ii. 2313-16).

An outraged Mariano accuses Fausto of doing exactly what, in reality, Mónica has done, "un indigno fingimiento / para enemistar así / a dos que se están queriendo" (III. iii. 2330-32). He accuses him of replicating the portrait and giving it to Flora to ingratiate himself to her. Fausto denies this and insists that Mariano support his accusations with proof:

Los hechos son que aquí tengo  
un papel que usted ha escrito  
a Flora, y en él merezco  
a su autor unos elogios  
tan magníficos como éstos" (*Mostrando el papel.*)  
Vea si hablo de memoria.  
Dígame: ¿Quién es el necio,

el loco, el desarreglado...? (III. iii. 2356-63)

Fausto responds incredulously, “¿eso escribí yo?” It never occurs to Mariano that it might be Mónica who wrote the note even though she was able to trick him to sign the marital promissory note, gives him a picture of herself rather than of Flora, returns to his home disguised as someone she is not, and asks him to disobey the explicit instructions of his uncle that he not return to her home. Fausto realizes the hoax and responds by producing on the spot a writing sample so that Mariano can compare the handwriting with that of the note: “Aquí hay papel y tintero. / Vea usted dos renglones; / y conocerá por ellos, / primero, cuál es mi letra; / después, que soy caballero” (III. iii. 2382-86).

Whereas Mariano accepts the veracity of the note without question, Fausto offers concrete evidence of its falsity and therefore of his innocence. He leaves Mariano the note he has written and exits. Mariano compares the two papers and comes to a double realization: first, he realizes that the handwriting samples are not an exact match: “Ambas letras se parecen, /pero no mucho...” but then is stunned by the note’s content: “Pues ¡cierto/que con sus dos renglones / me ha dado muy buen consuelo!/ ‘Mañana al amanecer/por el puente de Toledo/saldremos...’ Sí, que me espere. / ¡A mí lances quijotescos! (III. iii. 2387-94).

The subsequent conversation about, and treatment of, this letter furthermore illustrates the characteristics of *hombria de bien* as well as the notion that what one has written is indicative of the epistolographer’s character. Mónica’s use of the note to threaten Mariano’s relationship with Flora as well as Fausto’s response to Mariano’s accusation puts into play the idea of *carta – arma*, the notion that the letter can serve as a

weapon. This notion is further illustrated in the content of Fausto's note. In it, he has challenged Mariano to a duel, an act which is as surprising to the viewing public as it is to Mariano. Fausto's character has been consistently upstanding throughout the play and it seems inconsistent with his character, and a denial of his nature as an *hombre de bien*, to challenge Mariano to an already-outlawed mode of fighting. This has the potential to be a moment of dramatic crisis as well as one of the audience's perception of Fausto since he has proposed, in writing, a behavior which is clearly in opposition to the norms of *hombria de bien*. Fausto's apparent intention to recuperate his honor in a sword fight with Mariano is irrational and would paradoxically put his reputation in danger as such an action would be difficult to carry out in secrecy. It is, however, the public nature of the duel, and its illegality, on which Fausto depends, for the battle that he proposes is not truly one of swords but of words; that is, he employs the letter as a weapon to reveal Mariano's ignorance and lack of honor since he is well aware that Mariano will "tell on" Fausto in order to aggrandize himself in Flora and his family's eyes... and, of course, because he is fearful of the possible consequences of actually fighting Fausto.

This is, in fact, exactly what happens in the following scene. Mariano approaches his uncle, Alfonso, and Pantoja and produces the paper that documents Fausto's challenge. What he does not consider is that he is handing over the concrete evidence that the "Adorada Flora" note is written in handwriting other than Fausto's. The note used to compromise Fausto in fact proves his innocence. Mariano's plan backfires when Cristóbal criticizes his nephew for being a tattletale and tells him that if he were a man of discretion, he wouldn't have. To further criticize Fausto and to deflect his uncle's chastisement, Mariano reveals to Alfonso the "adorada Flora" note supposedly written to

Flora by Fausto. "... ¿sabe las maulas / de su hija, los papelejos / que ella y don Fausto se escriben, / y cómo me está vendiendo?" (III. iv. 2417-21). He shows the paper to Cristóbal, saying "carta canta." This expression is literal, as Mariano expects the letter to reveal the truth, but it suggests as well the language and behavior with which Mariano is most familiar, that of the gaming table. His gesture of handing the note to his uncle is evocative of showing one's hand – let the cards speak for themselves. Alfonso, like Fausto in the previous scene, doubts that this is the latter's handwriting and declares that "Ya sabremos la verdad" (III. iv. 2423-24). Pantoja reveals that he knows that the alchemist, Mónica's brother-in-law, is "...muy diestro/en fingir letras" and lends credibility to this assertion with a marvelous play of words: *Lo sé /de buena tinta* hace tiempo..."<sup>5</sup> (III. iii. 2428-30, italics added). Seeing that his efforts to discredit Fausto are failing, Mariano confesses his love for Flora and admits his friendship with Mónica, but to no avail.

The mention and exchange of the remaining notes and letters of the play do, in fact, reveal, *de buena tinta*, the truth about the characters and their activities. Alfonso and Cristóbal announce that the town's mayor has been informed that Mónica has been running a gambling establishment and that she has already been imprisoned. The question of how she was able to convince Mariano to sign a promise of marriage is revealed: Pantoja declares

Aunque el señor don Alfonso  
no la hubiera descubierto,

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<sup>5</sup> To know something "de buena tinta" means to know it from a reliable source, which is how Pantoja is using the expression here. The fact that "tinta" also means ink lends a humorous irony to the line since it is because of the written note that the truth is revealed.

bastaba saber las mañas  
con que ella y sus compañeros  
sacaron al señorito  
aquel papel. ¿Y el dinero  
que en seis meses le han chupado?  
¿Y el cuñadito, maestro  
de hacer oro y firmas falsas? (III.v. 2507-13)

The spectator thus learns that the brother-in-law is adept at forgery and that falsifying signatures is one of his and Mónica's methods for blackmailing Mariano and Dominga. The alchemist creates not only false gold but false letters as well, suggesting a sort of epistolary economy in which the written word can be utilized as a currency with which to gain financial and social advantage.

The use of apocryphal letters for personal gain is contrasted with a conversation between Fausto, Flora and Alfonso. Fausto assures them that the "Adorada Flora" letter was a forgery, insisting that he would have no reason to write to Flora when he can easily talk to her. He thus invokes one of the principal characteristics of the epistolary genre, the necessity of physical distance between correspondents.

Dominga remains an easy target for the written word's capacity to deceive. Posing as a notary, Tadeo, Mónica's brother-in-law, arrives to Dominga's home and announces that he must speak to Mariano to confirm that it is his signature on a note promising marriage to Mónica. Suggesting the legal complexities and expense of

resolving such disputes between comprometidos, he sees Dominga's dismay and presents an offer she cannot refuse:

¿Qué dirá usted si la entrego  
aquí mismo, sin más ver,  
el papel de casamiento  
para que pueda, si gusta,  
rasgarle o echarle al fuego? (III. xi. 2796-2800)

Unsuspecting of his identity and motives, and eager to protect her son, Dominga is easily convinced to pay Tadeo to retrieve the note. She gives him part of the money and agrees to pay the balance later, and he gives her a signed receipt. Her relief is immediate, underscoring the dramatic irony in her following words: “¿Qué ganas tengo / de hacerle dos mil añicos! / Y al alquimista embustero / que le escribió ... bailarí / sobre su alma un taconeó” (III. xi. 2844-48). She then folds the note he has given her and, like Mariano did with Mónica's note, puts it in her pocket without reading it. She notices only the signature of the receipt he has left on the table: Roberto Urreguezurreascoá. Just as Dominga proudly announces that she has “recogido el papel/que firmó el chico”, Pantoja asks if a man dressed in black has been by. He reveals the secret identity of Tadeo, along with Dominga's error. She produces the paper and they read the signature. Pantoja tells her the Basque name Urreguezurreascoá means *orofalso* o *contrahecho*. The sound of the first syllables of the name, “urre”, evoke as well the name “Urías”, or Uriah, the biblical

character sent by King David to deliver a letter to the front lines of battle.<sup>6</sup> In Spanish, a “carta de Urías” is a false means employed by someone to harm another, depending on his confidence and good faith (*DRAE*). At once Dominga understands that he is an alchemist not of metals, but of words, and she has purchased a note of no real value.

Mariano, like his mother, is easily deceived by “alchemists” of words. He understands only *juegos de cartas* – games with cards/letters – as instruments of personal gain. As the play concludes, Cristóbal catalogs his nephew’s flaws, chastises Dominga for having instilled them in her son, and issues a warning to his nephew, depending on the terminology of written discourse to do so. He tells Mariano that “...si algún día tienes hijos / les citarás este ejemplo; y si no los instruyeres / con mejores documentos, / esto que hoy pasa por ti / pasará tiempo por ellos” (III. xv. 3221-26). These “documentos” refer literally to instruction that is given to someone and specifically advice to dispel inappropriate behavior (*DRAE*) but remind the characters and spectators of the importance of the written word and all that it obfuscates and reveals about character and circumstance.

### *La señorita malcriada*

In 1788, a year following *El señorito mimado*, Iriarte wrote *La señorita malcriada*. In this comedy, Gonzalo’s zest for life has led him to raise with unbridled freedom his daughter Pepita, whose refusal to answer to anyone or anything but her own whims leads to her imprudent and often scandalous behavior. Her task is to choose a bridegroom between two men who seek her hand: Eugenio, a model gentleman and personification of

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Samuel 11: 14-15

Enlightenment principles, and the Marqués de Fontecalda, a *petimetre*, or fop, of deceitful character, whose future at the altar seems guaranteed in spite of his motives which are more monetary than amorous. *La señorita malcriada* takes place in a country house in the outskirts of Madrid during some four or five hours. Pepita dallies with her confidante Ambrosia, who secretly plots to marry Gonzalo, while his decorous sister, Clara, and brother-in-law, Basilio seek to convince both behave more judiciously. The characters' actions and attitudes throughout the play lead to its moral lesson stated explicitly at its conclusion: "...la mala conducta al fin da mal pago" (III. xiii. 3586-87).

As in *El señorito mimado*, the letter is a recurrent strategy through which characters are developed, plot advanced and conflict established and resolved. The Marqués writes letters in an effort to flatter and seduce Pepita and primarily as an instrument in a conspiracy to discredit Eugenio, to foment mistrust in Gonzalo and to create discord between the two for the Marqués's own financial and social advantage. The letters reveal, as they do in the play's counterpart, an economy of gain and loss in which literal and epistolary game-playing illustrate self-interested motives. The exchange of letters creates chaos and suspense throughout the play, until the conclusion when the final note, the only one not written by the Marqués, is delivered and reveals his true identity, the machinations of his plot, and the foolishness of those who trusted his words.

Throughout the play, the exchange and reading of notes and letters determine what the characters know about the dramatic situation as well as *how* they know this information. As likewise illustrated in *El señorito mimado*, the epistolary form is an especially appropriate vehicle for such an interrogation, or, as Altman has described the letter, an "instrument of discovery" (92). Within the play, some of the letters bear the



truth while others are apocryphal; that is, some conceal the truth while others reveal it. In many cases, the same letter does both. The ubiquitous use of the letter in *La señorita malcriada* demands that the characters and the viewing public acknowledge the heterogeneity of written discourse's significance and analyze its meanings through rational thought and empirical evidence. In *La señorita malcriada*, the letters are the principal vehicle by which the characters and the viewing public are encouraged to examine critically the motives and actions of the letter writers, the thought processes of the recipients and the trustworthiness of the written word itself.

The role of the letters in the plot, in character delineation, and in the overall didactic objective of the play is introduced in scene vii with the arrival of the Marqués, who explains his tardiness with epistolary justification: “He faltado al randevú. / Como es correo de Italia / hoy precisamente, quise / dejar escritas mis cartas” (I. vii. 863-66). Pepita is unimpressed, however, and in order to assuage her anger and prove his devotion, the Marqués surrenders to her as a “sacrifice” a handful of notes written by women with whom he had become acquainted during travels abroad:

Una lista detallada  
de las jóvenes bellezas  
que han sido objeto de varias  
intrigas galantes mías  
en Londres, París, La Haya  
y otras cortes. Estos son,  
sin que parezca jactancia,

billetes que me han escrito  
en lengua inglesa, italiana,  
francesa, etcétera ...

Y todo se lo sacrifico. (I. vii. 894-903)

This gesture falls flat as well, so he finally reads aloud a few poetic lines, a “producción en verso” (I. vii. 917) he has written just for Pepita. Still unmoved, Pepita storms off and Ambrosia announces that she will safeguard the notes and poetry since “a su tiempo harán efecto” (I. vii. 955). These notes used to woo Pepita, and which are initially portrayed as tokens of affection and loyalty, are quickly revealed to be instruments of deceit, for in order to discredit Eugenio in the eyes of Pepita and her father, Ambrosia and the Marqués plan to leave a mysterious letter, “abierta y sin sobreescrito,” in Eugenio’s pocket. While the rivals debate the merits of the Marqués’s poetry, (its authorship unbeknownst to Eugenio), Ambrosia slips a letter into the pocket of Eugenio, who is so distracted by the passionate debate about the poems that he notices nothing. Eugenio exits, and Ambrosia and the Marqués converse about the contents of the letter and their plan to send to Gonzalo another letter containing “el mismo aviso”.

The use of the letter in this brief scene establishes two characteristics important to the comedies of this era – verisimilitude and the Horatian notion of *utile dulci* – while it contributes to character development and the interpretive challenges that written discourse poses. Of utmost importance in the plays of the epoch was that they be credible. In his *Poética* written in 1737, Ignacio de Luzán claims that it is imperative that the comic story (*fábula*, in his words) be believable (120). Iriarte, obedient to Luzanian

norms for drama, insists on a certain degree of realism in his works (Cox 113). The letters are fundamental in order to achieve this credibility. For example, the tardiness of the Marqués's arrival because of a postal errand as well as his possession of notes from others are unsurprising, perhaps even expected, in an epoch characterized by improvements in the infrastructure of the postal system, the common practice of writing letters, and the importance of continental travel for young gentlemen. This scene reflects, in addition, the eighteenth-century interest in the details of daily life and the representation of that life within its literary works. As Jovellanos observes, "las obras literarias están llenas de descripciones de objetos y acciones naturales y morales que encantan por su verdad" (qtd. in Sebold 110) and Sebold adds that the tendency to include minute details respond to the less abstract vision of everyday reality (103). The letters – concrete, commonplace objects – contribute to the verisimilitude of the play and ensure that the chaos and convulsion seen in this scene are not silly or incredible since they reflect realistically the postal errands and exchange of epistolary correspondence that would have been taking place in the daily lives of the audience members.

The characteristic of verisimilitude is inseparable from the Horatian notion of *utile dulci*, that is, the pleasant instruction of the spectator, since "Lo inverosímil no es creíble y lo increíble no persuade ni mueve" (Luzán 27). Simply stated, the letters are pleasing dramatic vehicles. According to Ana Rueda, "Los escritores del dieciocho, persuadidos de que el medio más seguro de inspirar afición al objeto de su instrucción es el de presentarlo bajo un aspecto agradable, no dudan en recurrir a la carta" (75). Although Rueda is referring to prose, the letter functions similarly for Iriarte, for whom capturing the interest of the viewing public is necessary so that the dramatic piece is

successful in instructing the audience (Cox 113). In this brief scene between the Marqués and Pepita, the letters establish increasing dramatic intrigue and tension by creating a relationship among the characters on stage and by drawing the spectator closer to them. To recapitulate, upon arriving, the Marqués claims to have written letters that he needed to post, but he does not mention their content or addressees; later, he surrenders to Pepita the notes that he had received from admirers, giving the audience only a notion of what they entail, and finally he recites his own verses, making her the recipient of his authorial acts and making plain the author and recipient of them. Each “exchange” seems more intimate and personal. This serial presentation of the writings attempts to close the distance between the Marqués and Pepita.

In conventional epistolary exchange, of course, the letter writer and the addressee are separated by *physical* distance, without which there would be no reason to correspond in this manner. (Altman 19) The “distance” in this case, however, is not physical, but emotive, that which exists between the Marqués’s desires and Pepita’s sentiments. That is, the Marqués’s use of letters seems to be an attempt to bridge the distance between his desires and Pepita’s seeming apathy and to provoke a response from her. Furthermore, the letters are a particularly effective instrument since the epistolary genre inherently requires or requests a response of some type. Pepita is particularly obstinant, however, and it will require greater numbers of letters to capture her attention. Throughout the play the Marqués depends upon this form to achieve his goals.

The use of letters in this early scene draws the audience into the plot by creating dramatic tension. The writings that the Marqués surrenders to Pepita, as well as the false letter that Ambrosia surreptitiously slips into Eugenio’s pocket, serve to begin to

construct a bridge between public and personage through the dramatic irony that results from our being aware of a plot about which Eugenio, Pepita and Gonzalo know nothing. At the same time, though, these letters erect a barrier since the public is not privy to the entire plan – neither the content of the message in Eugenio’s pocket or the motive for its having been placed there. All we know, because of the letter, is that something is afoot. Dramatic tension is further developed by the use of the letter as an instrument of deceit; it is in this early scene that the device of *carta-arma*, that is, letter-as-weapon, is introduced, and this function of the letter will be intensified as the play progresses. The letter, then, arouses curiosity as the spectator is baffled by its ambiguity – it creates mystery at the same time that it is portrayed to be the key to answering the questions that it raises. Altman has succinctly described this characteristic of the epistle, stating that it “... emphasizes alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, mania and cure, bridge and barrier” (43). Thus, already in the play the audience witnesses the multifaceted potential of the epistolary form: the letter holds us at a distance at the same time it draws us near. In both a dramatic and a cognitive sense the public is compelled to see where it will lead.

Even at this early point in the play, the staged exchange and discussion of letters reveals much about the characters. Pepita’s reaction to the Marqués’s offer of letters and verse illustrates her capacity to play “hard to get”; the public sees that Eugenio focuses on a discussion about poetry so attentively that he is sufficiently distracted for an item to be physically placed in his pocket without his awareness. Indeed, this attentiveness to language will become important in the eventual resolution of the conflict. In the same way that the letter may not be what it appears to be, neither are Ambrosia nor the

Marqués who they represent themselves to be. Ambrosia is not a loyal friend to Pepita as she feigns to be but rather an accomplice in the Marqués's machinations. It is, however, the Marqués about whom we learn the most. His complicity in the scheme of an apocryphal letter reveals him to be not a devoted, sophisticated suitor but rather a swindler with ulterior motives.

The Marqués's manipulation of the written word eventually reveals that he is not who he purports to be, and the letter form provides him an especially effective instrument by which he is able to fashion a credible yet two-faced identity through which he seems poised to gain both the girl and her dowry. Just like the Marqués, the letter is a form adept at role-playing. John Howland describes epistolarity as "... a genre of role-playing" and Ana Rueda describes it as the "género – máscara por excelencia" (46). The letter's capacity to serve as a mask is the very characteristic upon which the Marqués depends to achieve his aims; simultaneously, it is this same characteristic which demands that the mask be peeled away to reveal what lies behind it. For the letter is not only a form of cover, but as Janet Altman has indicated, an "instrument of discovery." Paradoxically, the very method by which the Marqués betrays others contains the potential to unmask his true identity and intent.

The audience is unaware of the letter's content but its manner of delivery and ambiguous purpose suggest that the Marquis's efforts are manipulative and his intentions malicious. Furthermore, this mysterious letter, the last in a chain of writings of a single scene, calls into question the veracity of the letters that the Marquis had written before his arrival, the notes he surrenders to Pepita, or even the lines he recites to her. Hence, the notes and verses, no longer emblems of sacrifice and sincerity, are revealed to

be instruments of deceit, or as Altman has said of the letter, “insidious devices used by the seducer to break down his victim’s resistance” (15). Altman adds that the letter “...emphasizes alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, ... bridge and barrier” (43) The false letter, then, as well as the other writings, constructs a bridge between public and character while it simultaneously erects a barrier between the characters themselves. The false letter, the fabrication of which reveals the truth about the Marqués to the spectator, paradoxically hides his true nature and his intentions from the other characters. Through the Marqués’s manipulation of the written word, the audience learns that the Marqués is playing a role: he is the author of the writings and of the scheme; in other words, he is an actor in a drama of his own creation.

His role-playing, carried out through the mask-genre of the letter, underscores the profoundly metadramatic nature of the play. In *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, Richard Hornby identifies as one of the principal techniques of metadrama “role playing within the role”, which he describes as “...an excellent means for delineating character, by showing not only who the character is, but what he wants to be. When a playwright depicts a character who is himself playing a role, there is often the suggestion that, ironically, the role is closer to the character’s true self than his everyday, ‘real’ personality” (67). This idea perhaps seems counterintuitive; after all, Gonzalo and Pepita view the Marqués as charming and sophisticated – a good catch, as it were. Yet, their perceptions are based only on the evidence of notes and poetic lines that he has offered them. Through his letters, the Marquise engages in what Hornby describes as the most straightforward kind of role playing within the role: “voluntary”, in which “a character

consciously and willingly takes on a role different from his ordinary self in order to achieve some clear goal” (73). Through the letters he surrenders to Pepita, then, he creates the impression of being well-travelled, literate, desired, and desirable. In contrast, from the very first scenes of the play, the audience realizes that he is a self-interested, deceitful schemer who uses the written word to obfuscate who he truly is. In the second act, the marquise employs a more complex form of voluntary role-playing in which he assumes a complete disguise, “a totally different person from the character’s ordinary self” (73) and upon doing so, raises questions of the nature of, and the ability to know, identity itself.

Finally, the events of this scene suggest that the didactic objective of the play is not only the correction of youth but also an interrogation of unenlightened epistemological practices both in the play as well as in the reality of the spectator. Because the documents that the Marqués presents to Pepita are presented as emblems of devotion, but are, in fact, instruments of deceitful plot, careful viewers must immediately question the veracity of the former letters. The credibility of the excuse for the Marqués’s delay because of letter writing, surrendered notes from former lovers – written in languages that Pepita may not be able to read – , even poetic lines must be called into doubt. The audience is put into a situation similar to that in which Eugenio finds himself: he is unaware that there is a letter in his pocket, and while the public might feel privileged to know that it is there, it is truly as much in the dark as he is since it is unaware of its content or the specific motives of Ambrosia and the Marqués for having put it there. Any security the audience members have of knowing what is going on with the Marqués and Ambrosia – since they are aware of what these characters have done – is



just as quickly dispelled as they realize that we are unaware of the letter's content or the reason for its being used in that manner.

In the second act of the play, the letter becomes increasingly important as the principal vehicle through which not only what is known, but how these things are known, are explored. The focal point of the Act I is a letter which Gonzalo receives, the one bearing "el mismo aviso" that Ambrosia has slipped into Eugenio's pocket. Even more so than the letters exchanged and discussed earlier, this letter reveals much about the characters, complicates the plot and is concrete evidence of the letter's capacity to deceive and manipulate.

In the second scene of the act, the caretaker of the estate, Pedro, delivers to Gonzalo a letter enveloped in double ambiguity. It is brought to him by "un hombre de capa", who "no ha esperao [sic] respuesta" and who ". . . vinía [sic] de parte / de uno que no se me acuerda / el nombre" (II. ii. 1349-53). When Gonzalo notes that the envelope is not postmarked, Ambrosia quickly suggests that "será de Madrid" (II. ii. 1354). Gonzalo thinks not, and the Marqués offers another explanation: "la habrán enviado de fuera / inclusa en otra, encargando / la comisión de su entrega" (II. ii. 1356-59). The audience realizes, of course, that this is the letter that the Marquis and Ambrosia had discussed earlier. In spite of this implausible explanation, Gonzalo seems convinced ("así será") and proceeds to read the letter aloud:

Muy señor mío: Aunque no tengo el honor de conocer a usted sino de reputación, la probidad me exhorta a comunicarle un aviso importante. El correo último hice saber a D. Eugenio de Lara que los que le administran la fábrica o manufactura

que ha establecido en esta villa, le han malversado una suma enorme; y que viéndose ya en un descubierto que no puede tardar en hacerse público, están preparando secretamente su fuga fuera de España, y dejarán arruinado al propietario. Vengo de saber que es usted uno de los principales interesados en los fondos de la fábrica en cuestión; y sensible a una tan desagradable catástrofe de que está amenazado, le doy reservadamente la misma noticia para su gobierno. Bien entendido que éste es un secreto que nadie sino yo ha penetrado hasta ahora.

Firma: don Víctor de Sierra. (II. ii. 1362-63)

As is true in the first act of the play, this letter contributes to the credibility and the realism of the drama. The letter that Gonzalo receives from Víctor de Sierra “no tiene marca / del correo en la cubierta” (II. ii. 1353-54), an example of the minute details and the realism characteristic of the literature of the time. In addition, this letter makes reference to the economic system: through the letter we see a society in which businesses are conducted via correspondence and the business owners or investors are distant from their industries and from one another. This absenteeism, seen not only here but in Cristóbal’s absence from the family during his tenure in las Indias, is certainly one reason that their families and properties are targeted by the unscrupulous and that their children are misguided. Referring to the letter from Sierra, Sebold observes its social content, writing that “Con tal ocasión también se alude en la obra de Iriarte, a la administración de fábricas, las manufacturas, la malversación de sumas enormes, la ruina de propietarios, los principios interesados, etc.” (108). Upon receiving the letter, Gonzalo states, “Ni aun aquí me dejan / respirar? Cierto que estamos/hoy para correspondencias” (II. ii. 1345-47).

Gonzalo's comment suggests that he routinely conducts business in this manner; what's more is that he surrenders control to others, which he realizes upon receipt of the letter that such a practice has consequences: as he explains to Ambrosia, "Me fiaba de un amigo / a quien entregué mi hacienda, / y él me callaba que estoy / en término de perderlo" (II. ii. 2363-66). One of the reasons that Gonzalo believes the news in the letter is, of course, that he himself has not been present to monitor the business.

The letter is a credible means of convincing Gonzalo of Eugenio's disloyalty not only due to the news it contains but also because of the eighteenth-century attitude toward epistolary correspondence. Because the letter implies equality and shared interests between the correspondents and "eighteenth-century man confidently expected the letter to offer a distortion-free reflection of the soul" (Howland 67), it is not entirely surprising that Gonzalo would trust the letter's message.

The letter is multiply injurious: its contents reveal an imminent threat not only to Gonzalo's financial well-being and business standing but also to the friendship between him and Eugenio as well as Eugenio's potential relationship with Pepita. Because of these threats to economic and familial well-being, this letter causes greater dramatic tension. The audience suspects, but cannot be entirely certain, that this letter is false. If it is true, doubt is cast on whether Eugenio is not the noble gentleman he is portrayed to be. The public further questions whether Gonzalo's holdings are indeed in peril. This suspense is based upon a series of lies and morals in chaos, an unacceptable situation within Enlightenment epistemology. Its resolution requires not only the participation of the characters but that of the viewing public as well, whose successful instruction depends upon the disentanglement of this disorder. Rosbottom, referring to the epistolary novel,

but whose observation applies equally validly to drama, says that “We, the real readers (the spectators) from our ‘privileged’ and artificially neutral status, are asked to structure the apparent disorder of an epistolary novel, thereby imitating the fictional readers who too are trying to order their responses to stimuli of disparate and contradictory letters” (298). In this way, Iriarte demands that the public participate actively in its own learning process; Gonzalo reads the letter aloud so we, too, can read it. This is the only letter read aloud and whose content the audience has access to, and, staged thus, Iriarte obliges the spectator to carefully consider Gonzalo’s manner of understanding it and its content. This is the epistemological responsibility of Gonzalo *and* the spectator.

Gonzalo accepts without hesitation the veracity of the letter. In his defense, there exists some evidence which makes Gonzalo’s reading plausible. First, his reading of the letter is consistent with his manner of thinking. Early in the play, Gonzalo is convinced of the Marqués’s sincerity and worth due only to his physical appearance: “Basta / para conocerle ver / cómo se porta, cómo habla, / su buen modo, su instrucción” (I. iv. 624-25). Later, when he receives the false letter from “Víctor de Sierra”, he accepts *its* validity for the same reason: the formal and external characteristics of the missive. It contains a signature, and although it arrives without a postmark, the Marquis has explained why. Thus, the letter *seems* authentic, and the existence of a piece of writing is often accepted as sufficient evidence of the truthfulness of its content (Howland 67). Confronting Eugenio, Gonzalo declares, “...digo que eso es jugarme una pieza atroz; y aquí está la carta que lo declara” (II. vi. 1846-47). Furthermore, since the exchange of letters was a common convention, and because Gonzalo often conducts business through the post, to receive a letter with news about the factory would not have been unusual or

suspect. Moreover, as Howland has written, the letter form implies equality and shared interests between the correspondents (67). Since the author of the letter has characterized himself as “decent” and expresses concern for Gonzalo’s interests, Gonzalo, like many others of the eighteenth century, confidently expects that, as Howland has articulated “the letter offers a distortion-free reflection of the soul” (100).

But is Gonzalo’s perspective any more trustworthy than that of the author of the letter? The inherent nature of the epistolary genre is that it is a written document that is received and read outside the time and place of its composition and this very distance – its very textuality – leaves it open to interpretation. Charles Oriel writes that the letter “... is an object unto itself which appears to create its own context and reality and which more often than not is subject to those contexts and realities that the reader wishes independently to impose upon it” (5); indeed, Gonzalo’s agenda – including his financial self-interest as well as his mistaken belief that the Marqués is a more promising suitor for his daughter – affects his reading and influences the facile acceptance of the letter’s message. With little skepticism, he interprets the letter according to the conventions of epistolary discourse, as well as according to his own biases rather than observable fact or his experiences with the parties involved. Accepting the content of the letter as indisputable, and aided by the Marqués’s lies, Gonzalo allows his knowledge of the business and his impression of the accused Eugenio to be swayed with little proof that this should be the case.

The letter is rife with internal inconsistencies. The self-declared “author” of the letter, a fictitious Víctor de Sierra, admits in his first sentence that he knows Gonzalo only by reputation, but that decency demands that he communicate an important notice,

although he does so *reservadamente*. Thus, he implies his own respectability, discretion, and hesitance to alarm Gonzalo while simultaneously employing vocabulary – *malversado, arruinado, catástrofe, amenazado* – that imbues the letter with a sense of urgency. In spite of this imminent disaster, he offers concrete evidence neither of the factory’s imminent financial ruin nor of Eugenio’s plans to escape. In a manner similar to traditional, distant authority, the letter announces claim after claim without revealing a specific agent responsible for the information or the manner by which it was acquired. Nor does “V́ctor” explain what his own relationship to this situation is or why he is the only one who is aware of the dilemma. In spite of the fact that Gonzalo receives regular notices about the factory’s business (“¿Ni aún aqú me dejan respirar?”) and has no reason to believe it to be in jeopardy, this news from an unknown source gives him no pause. In addition to ignoring the manipulative content and the inconsistencies of the letter, Gonzalo is blind to the irony inherent in the name with which it is signed: “V́ctor”, a name which reflects the role that the Marqús expects to fulfill in his plot and whose manipulation is especially underscored through the double meaning of the word “papel” since it is on paper that he plays his role. Indeed, the paper that Gonzalo holds in his hand and whose veracity he accepts without question is the concrete proof of the role-playing scheme.

Gonzalo’s reading is a denial of the mode of thinking advocated by the *philosophes*, one characterized by dialogue, rational inquiry and empirical evidence. Ernst Cassirer explains this intellectual energy of the eighteenth century as the drive for knowledge dissatisfied with appearances, whose favorite instrument was analysis (12); likewise, Diderot advocates intellectual autonomy, which tramples underfoot prejudices,

tradition, antiquity, assent, authority and insists upon a mind which dares to think for itself, and to admit nothing save on the testimony of experience and reasoning (qtd. in Gay 160). Lessing called for the “search for truth -- ...the unremitting and unending exercise of criticism” (Gay 131). The letter, simultaneously a genre of role-playing as well as an instrument of discovery poses the question and posits the answer since the form demands that the reader, and here, the viewing public, acknowledge the heterogeneity of written discourse and analyze its meanings rationally. Simply put, *how* Gonzalo reads the letter does not necessarily correspond with how he *should* read it. For instance, the letter as genre is associated with the convention of flattery to achieve ulterior motives (Howland 115). It is this characteristic of epistolary discourse which Gonzalo ignores, just as he does not heed the ambiguity of the letter’s content or insist upon corroborating proof of its news.

Eugenio’s response reveals that he understands an inherent characteristic of the genre: the letter is a carefully constructed discourse which presents itself as natural and spontaneous (Howland 45). He insists to Gonzalo, in what is the epistemological equivalent of the moral of the play, “Será carta verdadera, / mas la noticia no lo es” (II. vi. 1858-59). The message for the audience is this: written discourse, especially that written from a distance and without known authorship, is polyvalent, and its form – its very existence as text – does not automatically validate its content. Its meaning must be examined with care and evaluated by means of reason and experience. Through these letters Iriarte dramatizes the folly of uncritical thought, for as the play nears its conclusion, family ties fail to be restored, long-standing friendships are threatened, impostors are granted undeserved trust, and the future of a daughter is sacrificed. As

Oriel explains, the letter is characterized by a powerful and paradoxical ability to be the bearer of the truth as well as the instrument that subverts authority. “ ‘Papeles’ may be used to establish and authenticate the truth of a given state of affairs, but they may also be exploited for the purpose of deception; although they are the ‘witnesses’ of sin, they are ‘mute’...While purporting to be a proof, the bearer of truth, and thereby an authentic preserver of the social order, written documents may also serve to subvert that order by virtue of the same authority” (2). Víctor de Sierra’s letter encapsulates both criticism of careless thinking as well as its cure.

Gonzalo’s accusation and Eugenio’s denial of wrongdoing are staged through a flurry of letters with the result that the fundamental argument is not about whether Eugenio has deceived his host but rather about the confusion created by written discourse divorced from factual evidence. Eugenio denies knowing Víctor – “Ni conozco a este don Víctor, / ni he visto jamás su letra” (II. vi. 1853-54) and assures Gonzalo that the news about the factory is untrue: “. . . porque sé con *evidencia* / que aquel establecimiento / hoy, más que nunca, prospera” (II. Vi. 1858-62, emphasis added). Paradoxically, Eugenio’s evidence of the factory’s solvency is also born in letters, the content of which contradict that of Víctor de Sierra’s letter: “Las cartas que últimamente / he recibido, comprueban / lo contrario. A bien que todas / las traigo en las faltriqueras” (II. vi. 1865-68). Eugenio, Gonzalo and Basilio unfold and read the various letters that Eugenio removes from his pockets when Gonzalo suddenly, and much to Eugenio’s bewilderment, discovers one written in the same handwriting as that of Sierra. Although stunned by this development, Eugenio recognizes that “Este aviso bien conviene con el otro” (II. vi. 1886-87) and is left to suppose that “a menos que recibiera / yo esta carta, / y



la guardara / con las otras sin leerla” (II. Vi. 1907-10). He frets that the only certainty is that appearances, in spite of his integrity, condemn him. But unlike Gonzalo, Eugenio acknowledges the discrepancy between appearance and reality and reveals his confidence in the power of reason to reach the truth: “. . .al fin, medios habrá / de vindicar mi inocencia / si me escucha don Gonzalo / con más espacio” (II. vi. 1915-18).

A following scene focusing on a friendly card game alleviates some of the tension of the previous scenes; in contrast to the threatened friendship and accusations of deceit, in this subsequent scene Pepita, Ambrosia and the Marqués are playing a game of cards. The spectator sees Pepita’s competitive nature since she is losing and insists that they up the ante in the next game. More about the Marqués and Eugenio’s characters are illustrated in light of their attitudes toward the game: the Marqués is eager to play – and to win – while Eugenio, when asked if he plays, responds “Sólo por condescendencia; / por afición, nunca” (II. ix. 2328-39). In the last act, it is discovered that the Marqués has been cheating at the card game. In a humorous, ironic statement, Basilio observes that “Yo he reparado / que el Marqués no juega limpio” (III. ii. 2600-01). His manner of cheating at cards is already familiar to the audience, which has seen him hide other “cartas” in order to discredit Eugenio and to win at his game:

Por debajo de la mesa al disimulo  
sacaba de cuando en cuando  
naipes para completar  
el punto de quince ...  
Sin duda en la faltriquera

Los traía preparados. (III. ii. 2602-06)

Basilio realizes the Marqués's scheme when the servant Bartolo confesses that he had seen Ambrosia slip a letter into Eugenio's pocket. Subsequently, the tension between the Marquis and Eugenio over the verses that the Marqués had composed, and which Eugenio had soundly criticized, escalates until they decide to stage a duel, not with swords but with words, in a competition of poetry writing that concretizes the ideal of word-weapon. Eugenio states that “. . . no tocan al honor / cuestiones sobre vocablos, / las cuales, no con la espada, / con los libros en la mano / se aclaran” (III. v. 2921-25). With these lines Iriarte foreshadows how the Marqués's scheme will be discovered and the conflict resolved: by means of the written word. Ambrosia searches for the verses she had safeguarded but cannot find them. When Eugenio helps her to look for them, he finds (quite accidentally, as Gonzalo had found the letter in Sierra's handwriting), a draft of the letter that Gonzalo had received, written in the handwriting of the Marqués. He reads the first lines and the draft converts into what Altman calls an instrument of revelation (92). All is revealed in this moment to the characters: the secret of the plot, the identity of its author, and the innocence of Eugenio. The same letter which had earlier condemned Eugenio now verifies his innocence. The Marqués's careful adherence to epistolary practice, which initially promised him victory in his scheme but at the conclusion is the cause of his downfall, is also the cause of the victory of the truth over lies. The drafts provide the empirical evidence that, according to Howland, reflects the eighteenth-century need to “get to the bottom of things”, many times depending upon the letter to do so (5).

In an effort to protect himself, the Marqués lies to them again, explaining that he had written the letters to warn them anonymously of the imminent failure of the factory. The doubts are resolved definitively with the arrival of Carlos, the nephew of Ambrosia, who has discovered the true identity of the Marqués “por quien me ha dado el encargo/de que entregase esta carta/al esposo más ingrato” (III. xiii. 3496-98). It is, then, another letter, and the only one not written by the Marqués, which reveals the truth and unmasks the impostor. With the revelation that the Marquis is married (and his real identity), he is stripped of his last mask. Unlike the letter of Víctor, this time the author is clearly identified, as is the deliverer, making the content of this letter more trustworthy. This letter is the instrument of a double dramatic peripeteia appropriate to the comedies: the truth is recognized first when the various drafts of the Marqués’s plot are read and again when the characters and audience learn of his abandoned wife. In Aristotelic terms, Luzán explains, the use of peripeteia and agnition constitutes the implex comedy, thereby making the work “más maravillosa, más enredada y, por consiguiente, más deleitosa y más apta para mover los afectos . . .” (48).

In *La señorita malcriada*, the letter is the motif que propels the action of the drama and provides interest to the public by creating suspense, movement and intrigue. It enriches the plot and the instruction without sacrificing verisimilitude. It reflects the complex, ambiguous and masked nature not only of the Marqués but of the written word itself while it is transformed into the necessary empirical evidence to reach the truth.

### CHAPTER 3

#### Missives and Marriage in Four Comedies of

Leandro Fernández de Moratín

Leandro Fernández de Moratín composed five original comedies: *El viejo y la niña* (1786), *El barón* (1803), *La mojigata* (1804), *La comedia nueva, o el café* (1792) and *El sí de las niñas* (1806). Like his father and his contemporary Iriarte, he was a staunch advocate of dramatic reform and has been identified by various critics as the dramatist who was first, and most successfully, able to transform the neoclassic dramatic principles into art<sup>7</sup>. Dowling considers him “the most influential dramatist in Spanish literature” next to Lope de Vega (23); David C. Johnston asserts that he gave “first voice to that growing bourgeois strand in Spain which refused to pact with the feudal and which would have no truck with the romantics or the irrationalists” and that his plays represent “. . . a late-flowering Enlightenment in which radical liberal rationalism was to take root”; for these reasons, Johnston calls Moratín the “father of the modern Spanish drama” (58).

In Iriarte’s plays, the theme of marriage plays a small role in the greater thematic context of the proper upbringing of youth. In spite of the complications brought about by el señorito mimado’s promissory note to doña Mónica and his commitment to Flora

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<sup>7</sup> Johnston acknowledges other dramatists’ attempts to do just this: “There were one or two potentially good dramatists among them – Tomás de Iriarte is surely worth more than an historical footnote – but nearly all of them were weighed down by their sense of mission. An enlightened ethos, translated into the stage-rules of verisimilitude, proportion, harmony and order sat heavily upon their work, and they were unable to generate fully their creative imagination under such a weight. Their plays conformed dully to the exercise of precept, and were stillborn on stage and page” (59). Regarding the work of Iriarte I am in disagreement with Johnston’s assertion and see quite a bit of creative imagination in his work.

and Pepita's choice between don Enrique and the Marqués de Fontecalda, the dramatic dilemma really is not their impending marriages but rather these protagonists' injudicious behavior and the indulgence of their respective parents. In the plays of Moratín, on the other hand, unequal or inappropriate marriages are truly the thematic core. In *Teatro y sociedad en el Madrid del siglo XVIII* René Andioc explains that while the topic of unequal marriages had many antecedents in Spanish literature, Moratín's return to the matter was not motivated by his desire to "aumentar la colección" but to address an issue of current and grave import at the time of the plays' composition. Citing census data published in the *Diario de Madrid* (November 15, 1787), he writes that the number of married men over the age of fifty far exceeded that of women of similar age; that is, a population disparate in age and marital status made the marriage between an older man and a young girl a very real, and to government and economic authorities, alarming, social reality (436), the consequence of which was the frequent pairing of the two for motives of social and economic security. Moratín's plays explore this sociohistorical situation in four different manifestations. In *El barón*, the playwright presents the impending marriage between two people of unequal social stations; *La mojegata* illustrates the familial and personal consequences of a marriage carried out in secrecy as a result of the protagonist's hypocrisy; *El viejo y la niña* explores the consequences of a forced marriage between an elderly man and a teenage girl, and *El sí de las niñas* dramatizes the impending marriage between two of vastly different ages.

That is not to say that the theme of raising children is absent from these plays, but Moratín's perspective is distinct from that of his predecessor. In Iriarte's work, even if their motives are better social or economic standing, the parents are overly permissive; in

Moratín's, on the other hand, the parents, often with financial or social motives, are excessively strict and rigid and abuse their parental authority. In all of the plays, the dramatists represent excess and illustrate its consequences. The lackadaisical attitudes of the parents in Iriarte's plays, and the unyielding drive of those of Moratín find a common goal in the words of Don Diego of *El sí de las niñas* who tells the young Paquita "¡Mandar, hija mía! ... En estas materias tan delicadas los padres que tienen juicio no mandan. Insinúan, proponen, aconsejan; eso sí, todo eso sí; ¡pero mandar! ..." (II. v. 100). Andioc writes that the implicit moral of Iriarte and Moratín's distinct perspectives is that it is more worthy to propose or suggest than it is to impose or insist ("Más vale proponer que imponer") (475).

As is true with Iriarte's plays, those of Moratín employ letters with multiple dramatic and thematic effects. In accordance with his insistence on neoclassical dramatic reform, they contribute to the adherence to the Aristotelian unities. Hidehito Higashitani's study, *El teatro de Leandro Fernández de Moratín*, is one of the few critical works focusing on Moratinian dramaturgy that explicitly mentions the use of letters. Although this study stresses the structure of the plays above all else, his insightful summary of the relationship between the letters and the unities merits mention. He writes,

Hay un fenómeno muy característico que todo el mundo advierte al estudiar las cinco comedias. En todas ellas siempre aparecen cartas o escritos. En *El viejo y la niña*, vemos a Don Juan entregar dos veces cartas acerca del embarque al criado Ginés. Después en *La mojigata*, desempeña un papel muy importante la carta de un tío de Sevilla acerca de una herencia, y la carta de Perico. . . En *El barón* salen

muchas veces las cartas falsas que el protagonista enseña a la Tía Mónica y, por último, en *El sí de las niñas*, la carta de Don Carlos a su novia desempeña un papel importante para llegar al desenlace. Entonces, ¿por qué Moratín utilizó las cartas con tanta insistencia? Nos damos cuenta de que esto tiene no poca relación con las unidades. Cuando el autor quería añadir un hecho al argumento central, lo podía hacer en una forma muy condensada con un solo papel; en muy poco tiempo, además, sin necesidad de cambiar el lugar. Y este uso de cartas se identifica por su intención con aquella técnica de las *claves preliminares* por las cuales antes de empezar la acción, se van asimilando todos los hechos del pasado a través de un simple diálogo entre dos personajes. En muchos casos la carta se utiliza para acelerar el desarrollo del argumento o para iniciar la partida hacia el desenlace. De esta manera con el uso de una simple carta se simplifica la acción complicada y sin preocuparse del tiempo ni del lugar, se incorporan los hechos sucedidos en otros sitios en tiempos distintos al argumento central que se está desarrollando. Así, desde el punto de vista del conjunto de las unidades de acción, de tiempo y de lugar, observamos que este uso de cartas facilita enormemente su observancia. (83-84)

The subsequent discussion of the plays themselves will illustrate concretely Higashitani's observations, which, while both accurate and useful, do tend to limit somewhat the polyvalent significance of the letters in Moratín's work. The critical focus on the Neoclassicists' obedience to the unities has been, perhaps, one of the reasons for their work having been undervalued. Johnston writes that “. . . Moratín's fierce loyalty

to the strict precepts of neoclassicism does not endear him to an age like ours, grimly devoted as it is to the ludic, to the theatre of spectacle. Moreover, these are plays that are strictly controlled by authorial intention, leaving little scope for variety of interpretation” (58). Yet an understanding of Moratín’s objective, which Johnston articulates as the restoration of a “... a degree of measure to the Spanish stage” and the laying of “...the cooling hand of rational thought and moral example onto the turbulent passions of this hothouse society” (58) help in justifying this dependence on the unities as well as his unapologetic authorial control of the elements of each play. The use of letters in these plays facilitates not only adherence to the unities, but simultaneously contributes to a literature rich in imagination and challenging in its confrontation of accepted ideologies. If there is a clear authorial control, it is a *despotismo ilustrado*, an enlightened management of the plays’ elements, the purpose of which is to challenge prevailing ideologies rather than to preserve them.

Further, the use of the letter in these plays suggests a different kind of “authorial intention”: the viewing public not only scrutinizes Moratín’s play, but also the epistolary creations of many of the characters themselves, whose use of letters to achieve specific ends and express their thoughts is foregrounded on the stage where their motivations and ideologies can be interrogated and concomitantly where the members of the public can question their own motives and beliefs as well as those of the society in which they live. While a playwright’s intent might not be immediately apparent to the public, the motives and actions of the characters are staged so as to be explicitly examined. The recognizable motif of the letter, as an object and genre with which the audience is likely to have first-



hand experience, is an ideal tool to examine that intent in a tangible manner since it is asked to “read” the letters exchanged on stage just as the dramatic characters must:

The play’s storyline, together with the formal expression of that storyline (the realism of the familiar) are geared to enable the spectator to investigate the implications of his ... ideological assumptions and concomitant social mores. Consequently, the complicity which the play establishes with its audience should not be one based on the play as spectacle or as a vehicle for maintaining suspense, but rather as one designed to turn the spectator into the ideological accomplice of the action. The possibility of holding the mirror up to the monster has been created. (Johnston 65)

Throughout Moratín’s dramaturgy, the letter is the instrument that holds a mirror up to the audience members, reflecting the characters as well as themselves and the society that they comprise. Johnston cites *El sí de las niñas* as an example, asserting that “. . . the dramatic axis . . . is not formed upon the suspense of whether she will choose the young or the old suitor, but . . . on the social dynamic which is forcing her to consider the preposterous possibility in the first place” (65-66). In this play, as well as the others, the social conditions that dictate the customs regarding marriage, the human capacity for manipulation and deceit and the ability to uncover such manipulation are dramatized via the letter.

## *El barón*

Like Iriarte's Doña Mónica of *El señorito mimado*, who lives rent-free in a house owned by Mariano's family, the so-called Barón de Montepino is an impostor who has managed to finagle an invitation to reside in the home of Tía Mónica during his stay in Illescas after complaining about the inadequacy of his lodgings and gaining her confidence. Feigning an aristocratic background, he explains his lack of nobility's usual accompaniments – fancy clothing, luggage, servants – with tales of legal difficulties with the king and other undefined persecutions, all of which have forced him to flee from his landholdings, staff and family. Mónica, eager to rise above her comfortable but modest social class, is blinded by his stories and sees the situation as the ideal opportunity to marry her daughter to someone above their family's social standing. The baron, in reality a penniless swindler, also sees the advantages of such an opportunity and spins tales throughout the play to ingratiate himself to Mónica and to convince the other characters, for whom his deception is transparent, of his nobility. The daughter Isabel is in love with the humble but decent Leonardo and only when he challenges the baron to a duel does the impostor reveal his false and cowardly nature and force Mónica to recognize her error.

Lacking the concrete manifestations of his nobility, the baron depends on words, especially fictional ones, to seduce Mónica. The housemaid Fermina explains to Leonardo the presence of the baron in the home by telling him that the baron "*Hablaba de sus vasallos, / de su apellido y sus rentas, / de sus pleitos con el Rey, / de sus mulas, etcétera. / Mi señora les escuchaba / embebecida y suspensa, / y todo cuanto él decía / era un chiste para ella*" (I. i. 37-44, emphasis added). For the astute Fermina, his motives for

being there are “aquellos de las novelas” (I. i. 96); that is, they are all lies. It is not only the baron’s capacity for creative storytelling that convinces Mónica, but her own propensity to believe in the tales more appropriate to the world of the novel, of fiction, than that of reality. In a certain sense, Mónica is inclined to believe the fictions of the baron because she too lives in a world of fiction, a world in which she pretends to be something she is not, as if she were a character of the novels of which she is so fond. Fermina asks her “¡Señora! / Pues ¿a qué santo es la fiesta? / ¡No es cosa! ¡La palentina, / la saya rica, las vueltas / de corales! ...” (I. ii. 141-45) and reminds her that her deceased husband criticized Mónica’s pretentious displays and that she is only repeating what he said and what everyone knew. It is not only the baron who is playing a role and employing fiction to achieve his aims, Mónica as well puts on a costume to appear to be that which she is not.

The reality that Mónica desires is found only in literature, so it is not surprising that the baron’s tales and the letters he shows her convince her of his identity and circumstances. Confronted with her brother Pedro’s skepticism about the baron’s identity and his reasons for coming to Illescas, she repeats what she has been told, describing the baron as if he were the protagonist of a play filled with intrigue, escapades, and hyperbolic characters – the very type of drama that motivated Moratín’s call for reform. The machinations of a count, brother of a duchess who is the sister-in-law of the baron’s cousin, caused a rift between him and the king, causing the baron to disguise his nobility and to wander throughout the country while awaiting the truth to out. While his stories have served to earn her sympathy, the letters he has shown her -- but that the audience, of course, does not see, impress her with their promises of his victory. She explains to

Pedro that “El me enseña / todas sus cartas y algunas / que vienen en otras lenguas, / de Francia y de más allá / de Francia; para que sepa/ lo que dicen, las explica / en español todas ellas. / Pero ¡qué cosas le escriben!” (I. iv. 292-99). According to the baron’s explanation of these letters, which Mónica has seen but cannot read because they are written in languages other than Castilian, he has been advised to travel to “London or to England” where the king there will bequeath to him great amounts of money and lands but that he does not want to leave Spain since subsequent messages have assured him that his innocence will soon be proven and his persecutors punished. These mysterious letters help to define the character of both the baron and Mónica, both of whom purport to be something they are not and who depend on language to do so.

According to Andioc, Mónica’s flaws are pride, ambition and vanity (185). It is these traits that the baron takes advantage of. Upon learning that Isabel already has a suitor and fearing that he will lose the opportunity to marry her, the Baron presents to Mónica two letters that are instrumental in securing her confidence and his own standing. The letters promise something grand that when “read” carefully, in reality amount to nothing; they are fictional creations as is the baron himself and the “future” he promises, the private information and confidence he shares with Mónica to make her feel part of his noble family and a lifestyle to which she does not belong, are ultimately the creation of a drama within a drama in which Mónica is a character of Moratín’s play as well as of the baron’s fictional scheme. Since the audience is well aware that the baron is an impostor, the content of the letters illustrates his own capacity for deceit and manipulation as well as Mónica’s ignorance and the ease with which her desire to ascend in social ranks blinds her the letters’ exaggerations. That is, these letters do not provoke dramatic suspense

between the happenings on stage and the audience but rather the dramatic irony they create underscores the ease with which Mónica believes and participates in a work of fiction. Surprisingly, this creates a kind of complicity between the baron and the viewing public, without doubt an undesirable position for them since his conduct is so reprehensible, and any suspense created by the letters for the audience involves its anticipation of when Mónica will realize that she is being duped. Careful spectators will, at the same time, be compelled to consider whether they have been similarly manipulated by flattery and deceit and if their own vanity or ambitions have blinded them to untruths.

The baron enters pensively, the stage directions instruct, holding papers. Relying on Mónica's happiness from their recent agreement that would marry Isabel and her anticipation of good news about his legal dilemma, he announces the arrival of the news they have been awaiting and piques Mónica's curiosity – and instills in her a sense of foreboding as he utters the following words: “¡Cómo se mezclan / entre las mayores dichas / los cuidados y las penas! / Aquel sujeto de quien / os dije veces diversas / que va a Madrid disfrazado / y allí examina y observa, ve a mis gentes y conduce / toda la correspondencia, / ya llegó” (I. ix. 680-89). She inquires about whether he has received good news, and he offers her the letter he has received from his sister: “Si queréis, podéis leerla”. Unlike his reporting to her the content of the previous letters, he hands her the letter, which she reads aloud:

Mi querido hermano: he recibido la última tuya y la sortija de diamantes que me envías de parte de esa señora, a quien darás en mi nombre las más atentas gracias, asegurándola de los vivos deseos que tengo de conocerla y diciéndola también

que no la envió por ahora cosa ninguna, para que no juzgue que aspiro a pagar sus expresiones y la merced que te hace con dádivas que, por muy exquisitas que fueran, siempre serían inferiores al cordial afecto que le profeso. Nuestro primo el arzobispo de Andrinópolis ha escrito desde Cacabelos, y parece que dentro de pocos días llegará a su diócesis. Mil expresiones del condestable y del marqués de Famagosta, su cuñado. Ya puedes considerar cuál habrá sido nuestra alegría al ver aclarada tu inocencia y castigados tus enemigos. El Rey desea verte, lo mismo tus amigos y deudos, y más que todos, tu querida hermana. La Vizcondesa de Mostagán. (I. ix. 691)

This letter reveals to the public further, concrete evidence of the baron's capacity for manipulation and of Mónica's ignorance. Not only has she sent, via the baron, a diamond ring to his sister – a woman who probably does not exist and is certainly not a countess if she does – but she receives nothing in return, which the “sister” explains as an effort to not offend Mónica's generosity. Of course, the author of the letter writes that she is not sending a gift “for now”, suggesting to the materialistic Mónica that in the future she can expect reciprocation. The letter is emblematic of the relationship between the baron and Mónica: she has provided him with lodging as well as with money, and he, just as the letter-writer does, responds only with flattering and vacuous words. The sister's expressed affection for Mónica and her subsequent mention of other family members draw the ignorant townswoman more closely into the baron's web. For the baron as well as the audience, she is ridiculed as she reads the impressive-sounding, but in reality foolish, names and titles of the family members– the archbishop of Andrinópolis, the

marquise of Famagosta, the vice-countess of Mostagán. That she does not perceive the geographic disparities or the irony in these names lends humor to the scene, but at the same time underscores the extent to which her ambition destroys her notion of reality.<sup>8</sup> The last sentences of the letter contain the good news she and the baron have been awaiting: his accusers have been discovered and punished, he has been declared innocent, and the king wishes to see him. The letter, therefore, is constructed to best manipulate Mónica, for it concludes with a happy ending, and the baron is free to return to his home and to marry Isabel. Again, the baron takes advantage of Mónica's happiness. She notices that he is troubled, and he hands her a second letter, telling her "... Ved esta carta / y hallaréis mi muerte en ella" (I. xi. 698-700):

En efecto, amado sobrino, tus cosas se han compuesto como deseábamos. Ayer se publicó la resolución del Rey: declara injustos cuantos cargos se te han hecho, y el conde de la Península, tu acusador, está sentenciado a prisión perpetua en el castillo de las Siete-Torres. Quedo disponiendo a toda prisa los coches y criados que deben conducirte y, entre tanto, no puedo menos de recordarte que tu boda con doña Violante de Quincoces, hija del marqués de Utrique, capitán general de las islas Filipinas y costa Patagónica, concluido este asunto que la retardó, no tiene al presente ninguna dificultad. El caballero Wolfgango de Remestein, jefe de

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<sup>8</sup> The place names mentioned include Adrianopolis, near Venice; Cacabelos, a city of the Castile-León region of Spain; Famagosta, a city of Cyprus; and Mostagán, near Valencia. In addition to the geographic disparity of these locations, the ironic, crude or humorous nature of the morphology of some of the names underscores Mónica's ignorance and lends dramatic irony to the letters as the viewing public realizes that she is being made fun of without her awareness: "Caca", for example, is a colloquial word for excrement; "fama agosta" is suggestive of "august reputation"; to treat someone "a coces" means to treat someone like "dirt" or to be rude to someone; and "violante" is suggestive of the Castilian verb and noun "violiar" and "violación", to violate or violation. All hint at the manner in which the baron perceives or is treating his hostess.

escuadra del Emperador (que se halla en Madrid, de vuelta de los baños de Trillo), será el padrino, y esperamos con ansia ver efectuado este consorcio, en que tanto interesan las dos familias. Recibe por todo mis enhorabuenas y manda a tu tío que te estima. El Príncipe de Siracusa (I, ix, 701)

The beginning of the letter reaffirms the good news contained in the baron's sister's missive. His accuser has been brought to justice. However, the letter writer is quick to remind the baron of his impending marriage to doña Violante de Quincoces, the daughter of the marquise of Utrique and captain of the Philippine Islands and the Patagonian coast. This time, the mention of the baron's noble family members and friends is not cause for joy for Mónica but dismay, for everyone is eager to see carried out this wedding between social equals. The congratulations sent by the Prince of Syracuse, uncle of the baron, imbues this news a sense of finality regarding the baron's plans, and Mónica's aspirations. In spite of this news, the baron insists that he loves Isabel and wants to marry her. Feigning concern for dealing decently with the family, he insists on speaking with Pedro. In reality, he is trying to decide only if he can get away his plan and at the same time acquire Isabel's dowry. He and Mónica plan a secret wedding between himself and her daughter. The act concludes with a tender conversation between Isabel and Leonardo, who announces that he will challenge the baron to a duel if Mónica insists on marrying her daughter to the impostor.

When Isabel confesses to her uncle that Leonardo and the baron plan to fight that night, he reassures his niece that her mother will soon know the difference between reality and appearance. The audience is reminded of Mónica's propensity for believing in



a world found only on the stage in exaggerated comedies or in the pages of novels rather than reality when, in a subsequent conversation with his sister, Pedro criticizes her obsession with social climbing and tries to convince her that a noble marrying a humble girl and living happily ever after is a thing of fiction, something created with pen and paper. His description of staged romances is similar to the very situation that has been developing in her own home and in which she has been a principal player, or in the case of the information contained in the letters the baron received, a spellbound reader:

En las comedias que vienen  
Principles de Dinamarca  
vestidos de jardineros  
y están de amores que rabian  
por alguna pastorcita,  
con su zurrón y sus cabras.  
Se dicen flores, hay celos,  
desdenes, lloros, mudanzas ...  
se casa, al fin, y luego  
salen con la patochada  
de que la tal moza es hija  
del duque de Transilvania  
y otros delirios así;  
Pero en el mundo no pasa  
nada de eso. (II. vi. 455-69)

If marriages between unlikely participants do occur, he warns her, “ojo avizor, que allí hay trampa.” Pedro explains that such arrangements are the result of calculating interests and not love: “Cogen / la pluma y en una llana / de papel suman partidas” (I. iv. 477-79). He accuses of her arranging such a marriage out of her own ambition rather than concern for the welfare of her daughter. For Andioc, Mónica’s ignorance of the baron’s machinations are the result not only of her own desire for greater social status but of the ubiquitous literary representation of such possibilities. He writes that “Si la tía Mónica cae tan fácilmente en la trampa (formulemos esta idea de otro modo: si Moratín . . . presenta como escénicamente *verosímil* la credulidad de su heroína), no se debe únicamente a que ella aspire con todas sus fuerzas a elevarse; también la literatura de la época le deja creer que la cosa es perfectamente factible” (196). The letters that are so successful in convincing her of the baron’s status, then, not only illustrate a gullibility born of ambition but also serve as a kind of metaliterary device which foregrounds, on the stage and for the viewing public, the capacity of fictional stories to deceive and obscure social reality. If the baron acts as a character and Mónica as a spectator of his dramatic and literary productions, as Andioc suggests (203), the audience – the extratextual spectator of the play and therefore cast in the same role as that of Mónica – is likewise obligated to consider its acceptance of that which is not reflective of the truth of things.

Whereas the baron initially uses letters to manipulate Mónica and to work his way into the family (and its money), he uses them for the remainder of the play to extricate himself from uncomfortable circumstances and ultimately to plan his escape. Despite his

boldness with Mónica, the baron is a coward. After Leonardo challenges him to a duel and Pedro threatens that anyone who would treat the family deceptively would repent that night or be buried in the morning, the baron realizes that he cannot deceive Pedro and tells him: “Si me permitís que vaya.../ Tengo que escribir ... Estuve a buscaros ... solo [sic] para / Tener el gusto de veros, Y ... pues...” (II. iv. 233-37). In an effort to dispel Pedro’s suspicions, the baron later confesses that he wants to “come clean” and explains that his legal circumstances forced him to abandon his life and escape disguised and under a false name. Since his legal problems have been resolved, and because he does not want to cause further problems for the family or suffer the insult to his integrity caused by Pedro’s accusations, he announces that he will leave Mónica’s home, return to the inn and abandon hope of marrying Isabel, telling Pedro that “Mi estimación es primero que mi amor.” Pedro is delighted to hear this while the incredulous Mónica is devastated. Mónica has again unwittingly served as the audience to the baron’s fictional production for, once Pedro has left, he tells her that he has invented that whole plan in order to deceive her, and that the truth is that neither his feelings nor his plans, have changed. “Ficción ha sido”, he announces, ironically revealing the truth about his entire story rather than the recent performance for Pedro. In fact, the baron tells Mónica the truth again and again, and in his interaction with Pedro concretely shows her his capacity for role-playing, but in her arrogance and foolishness she is blind to his manipulation, even praising the credibility of his performance.

The remainder of the dialogue between the baron and Mónica is peppered with his mentioning various letters that promise her the future she seeks but in fact serve to help him escape unsuspected from her home and his commitment to Isabel. The first of these

forms part of his plan to bring Mónica and Isabel to his home, where they can hold the secret marriage ceremony. He tells her that he will leave, return to his home and then, several days later, he will send for her and Isabel: "...y el sábado, sin tardanza / ninguna, recibiréis / a media noche una carta / que os dará mi mayordomo, / y al instante, acompañadas / de él y de un negro, salís / adonde el coche os aguarda / y ... ya lo he dicho, el domingo / se logran mis esperanzas" (II. viii. 742-51). He never specifies what this letter will say or what Mónica is supposed to do with it, but the anticipation of a missive, along with the other details the baron outlines, lends concreteness to the plan that immediately convinces Mónica of its viability. She is again duped by form and unconcerned with content.

He then assures Mónica that he will avoid difficulties with those awaiting him in Madrid by writing some letters: "... a este enlace sin que haya Desazones, y á este fin Pienso escribir unas cartas Para evitar desde luego Que vengan por mí, con varias excusas que fingiré" (II. viii. 784-89). He admits using the letters to lie and to escape an undesirable situation, which is the very method he is using with her, but still she is blind to his machinations. Once again, he does not mention what these letters will communicate or how writing them will help them avoid problematic encounters; instead, he depends on the accepted trustworthiness of the letter to convince Monica that all will be well. His successful use of letters as a manipulative tool are reflective of Monica's trust of, and dependence on, appearance rather than reality, and reveal as much about her as they do about him. Finally, to seal the deal, he reveals his plan to marry Mónica to his rich uncle, flattering her youth and sexuality, and in order to at last be able to escape, he tells her that he must write to "al príncipe vuestro esposo" who is anxiously waiting to

know the resolution, and asks that he not be interrupted while he is writing. That Mónica imagines that the baron is arranging via letter her marriage to a wealthy noble affords him the time and space he needs to exact his final escape from the home.

The ensuing chaos of a barking dog outside the inn and a subsequent knock at the door unnerves Mónica who is frantic to allow the baron to write in peace. Even when the servant Pascual announces that the dog is barking because the baron is climbing through the upstairs window, Mónica is concerned only for the baron's comfort and refuses to suspect his motives: "Es desgracia / por cierto! Precisamente / esta noche, que me encarga / que nadie suba, que nadie / le incomode ni distraiga, / porque tiene que escribir, / y ha de recogerse para / madrugar ..." (III. xv. 1172-79). Pedro enters and announces that the baron has fulfilled his word and left after dropping a package.

Only when the characters open the package of stolen household items does Mónica realize how foolish she has been. As the play concludes, Pedro reminds Mónica – and the viewing public – that her error has been useful because it instructs and undeceives. The baron's letters, filled with promises of material wealth and heightened social standing, easily convince her of his sincerity; his theft of her possessions is the only act that unmask his true nature and her mistake. The letters of the play illustrate that Mónica is as much an impostor, a poser, as is the Barón de Montepino. The discovery of his deceit leads him to prison, while Mónica's willingness to remove her own mask results in the marriage of Isabel and Leonardo and the "felicidad más alta" of her family.

*La mojigata*

While in *El barón* tía Mónica rebels against her social status and in order to rise above it promises her daughter to a an impostor, the title character of Moratín's *La mojigata*<sup>9</sup> rebels against her father's oppressive authority and, in order to appease him, poses as a hyperbolically, and hypocritically, pious girl who feigns disinterest in marriage in favor of professing religious vows and entering the convent. Like Iriarte's plays, this one explores the proper upbringing of children and contrasts the reasonable liberty with which Luis raises his daughter Inés with the rigidity and uncompromising strictness that characterizes the parental attitude and behavior of his brother Martín, the father of the title character. Clara's hypocrisy is revealed each time she announces to her father that she will retire to her room to read devotional literature and then, in fact, reads novels or flirts with young men passing under her window and even more so when she agrees to marry the scoundrel Claudio, who comes to Toledo as a potential husband for her cousin Inés, but who decides he prefers Clara when he learns that she will soon inherit the fortune of a dying relative. Throughout the play Clara behaves abysmally towards the members of her family, lies to even those who seek to help her and finally rebels scandalously against the authority of her father. As the play nears its conclusion, she is

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<sup>9</sup> The term "mojigato/a" escapes a concise or precise translation to English. Dowling defines a "mojigata" as "somewhere between the *beata* ("an excessively devout woman who haunts churches" ) and the hypocrite. Mojigato ... was derived from an Arabic word meaning concealed or feigned ... in the sense that Moratín used it, the word might be taken to mean a dissembler, especially in a moral or religious sense, who, on occasion, feigns humility in order to achieve his end" (76). The title is typically translated as "The Pious Deceiver" or "The Female Hypocrite."

punished, not by losing the opportunity to marry the man with whom she is in love but rather by having to marry the rogue.

For Andioc, it is Clara who is the true guilty character of the play for her open and conscious rebellion against paternal authority (462); on the other hand, Ruiz Ramón asserts that the truly culpable party is her father Martín, a representative of a socially and morally erroneous education system and mentality. In an 1818 interview with Moratín, George Ticknor asked the playwright to define the moral aim of the play, to which Moratín responded, “To show that true virtue lies in actions and not in words since under the guise of piety and devotion the greatest vices are often concealed” (qtd. in Dowling 89). Throughout the play, the letters reveal that, in fact, words are capable of deceit.

In the first scene of the play, a letter helps to contextualize the presence of Claudio in Toledo, acquaints the audience with several characters and creates dramatic intrigue. Beginning *in media res*, the brothers Luis and Martín are arguing – as they will throughout the play – about their distinct manners of raising their daughters. When Martín mentions that Claudio is already in Toledo and asks his brother why he has not yet proceeded with the wedding between the youngsters, Luis describes the letters he has received from Claudio’s father which praise the young man and reveal at the same time much of the motivation and measure of Luis:

...Yo te dire,  
me escribió veces diversas  
Don Pedro del asunto;

me levanto a las estrellas  
los méritos de su hijo;  
yo, que me acordaba apenas  
de haberle visto pequeño,  
esperaba a que vinieran  
ciertos informes de Ocaña  
para darle una respuesta  
decisiva; pero el padre,  
que gasta poca paciencia,  
sin avisarme le hizo  
venir aquí. Siendo fuerza  
admitir, no juzgué  
conveniente que supiera  
Inés nuestras intenciones. (I. i. 22-37)

Luis's summary of the letter, and his reaction to it, reveals to the audience much information about the suitor Claudio and his father as well as about Luis himself. First, the fact that Pedro has written several times, as well as Luis's observation about his impatience, suggests the extent to which the father is eager that his son should marry into Luis's family. His hyperbolic claims about Claudio's charms – that is, that he “raises to the stars the merits of his son” – make the audience suspect that these are exaggerated, especially in light of Luis's preference to wait for third-party, perhaps more objective reports about Claudio. That Luis prefers to read other information about Claudio before



inviting him to his home to meet his daughter also suggests that he is not quick to accept information from a single source, especially a biased one. His reaction to Pedro's letters illustrates his desire to ensure the well-being and happiness of his daughter even before the audience sees this behavior represented on stage. Soon thereafter Luis describes Claudio's behavior, the nature of which justifies his skepticism toward the praise in the letters. Claudio is, as Luis tells his brother, somewhat simple; worse, he stays out all night and spends his time gambling.

In the second scene of the play, when Claudio arrives home, his disrespectful manner of speaking with Luis, and his dismissal of the necessity of social graces, confirm that Pedro's accounts of his son's character are, in fact, inaccurate. Not only is Claudio's behavior rather crude but his use of language reveals his inherently boorish and immature nature: during a social gathering in someone else's home, Claudio has smoked when no one else was doing so, whistled, scratched his legs and dipped his fingers into his cup of hot cocoa and afterward licked them. His inattention to appropriate language is graver. He interrupts when others are speaking, responds without common sense or reflection to others' comments, he is unaware – or pays no attention – when others are clearly unimpressed by what he is saying. Luis states

Si ves al ir a decir una gracia se te suelta un disparate, y el ceño de los demás te demuestra que fuiste poco gracioso, ¿por qué repites la escena? ¿Por qué quieres que a ti solo te escuchen? ¿Por qué no piensas antes lo que has de decir? ¡Que haya cátedras y escuelas de saber hablar, y el arte de callar nadie lo enseña!

(I. ii. 253-64)

Claudio's insists that he should have the freedom to say what he likes; this disregard for authority and his obstinance in acting and speaking how he wants to will later have lasting implications when he and Clara sign the promissory note for marriage.

Throughout the rest of the play, Claudio will use not only oral language, but that written in letters in order to manipulate others and achieve his monetary and amorous goals.

A second letter from Pedro, given to Claudio's servant Perico to deliver to the young man, provides further evidence of Claudio's character as it creates dramatic intrigue and complicates the plot. Upon arriving to Toledo, Perico responds to Claudio's inquiry about his father, stating "Tan contento / de la dicha que os espera. / Me dió una carta ... Y por cierto / Que al mudarme la chaqueta / me la dejé en el mesón" (I. ii. 289-93). Claudio never expresses interest in the content of the letter but rather asks if his father has sent money. The audience does not learn what the missive says, if it contains money, or if Perico truly forgot it in another jacket. This letter functions as a device to further illustrate Claudio's character and to initiate a conversation about his lack of funds and his inability to pay his gambling debts at the same time that Perico's having forgotten it in another jacket – together with his interest in getting paid for his service – casts doubt on the servant's loyalty to Claudio. Although this letter is not mentioned again nor seen on stage, its existence leads to the men's conversation about their financial dilemma, which reveals that Claudio is completely broke and has pressing gambling debts. Perico offers a solution, telling Claudio that Clara is going to inherit a great sum of money. Claudio begins to scheme to wed her rather than her cousin.

Whereas Pedro's missing letter provokes a conversation that reveals the young men's characters, the next letter to arrive is quickly intercepted and provides Claudio and Perico a more immediate opportunity to acquire money. With this letter, the plot is further complicated. Juan, a messenger from the convent where Clara is destined to take vows, comes to deliver a note to Martín. He is away, and Perico, suspecting that he can benefit from the information it contains, seizes the chance to take advantage of the situation. He convinces Juan to leave the letter with him so that he can pass it to Martín. Left alone with Claudio, Perico reads the letter and, as the stage directions indicate, becomes extremely pleased and exclaims, "¡Santo papel, / que así nuestro mal remedias!" (I. v. 469-70). He reads the letter aloud and then carefully tucks it away:

*J.M. y J. – Mi señor Don Martín: A consecuencia del aviso que recibimos el otro día de que usted nos había hecho la caridad (Dios se lo pague) de cobrarnos en Illescas, cuando volvió de Madrid, los tres mil cuatrocientos reales de aquel censillo, había dado orden a Don Lorenzo, el mayordomo, para que pasase a ver a usted y se hiciera cargo de ellos; pero desde ayer está el pobrecito con un cólico terrible: el Señor quiera mejor, que harto se lo rogamos todos. El dador de ésta es persona muy segura, y podrá entregarle dicha cantidad. Usted perdone estos enfados, dando memorias a todos los de su casa, y a nuestra Clara en particular, que deseamos verla, y pedimos a Dios le dé su gracia para que le sirva. – B.L.M. de usted su mayor servidora. – Juana María de la Resurrección del Señor, abadesa indigna. (I.v. original italics)*

The simple Claudio does not realize the information's potential to help them with their debt, so Perico explains the plot that this astute servant formulates immediately upon reading the letter. The abbess has written to Martín to request the money owed by the convent he graciously agreed to pay. The letter informs Martín that the usual messenger has taken ill but that he can trust the bearer of the message. Perico, therefore, plans to pose as Juan to retrieve the money from Martín, who has not seen him and will not realize that he is not the messenger, and then disappear. Even if his scheme is discovered, he assures Claudio, he will have already left town:

Pues bien;  
Me voy; y aunque el hombre vuelva,  
¿A quién dirá el desdichado  
que entregó la triste esquila?  
Sospechan en mí, no importa.  
Me escriben, respondo; vuelta  
a escribir y á responder;  
los canso, se desesperan ...  
Y si el asunto va mal,  
que me escriban a Ginebra. (I. v. 499-508)

Perico intimates that he will not share the money with Claudio, who, since Clara loves him, will receive her inheritance. He stops before explaining this explicitly, though, since Clara enters the room.

The development of the scheme is interrupted by several scenes in which Perico tells Clara of Claudio's feelings for her and she confesses her own; she explains her reasons for feigning piety: because of her father's insistence on perfection, her only recourse is pretense; and finally, she confirms that her cousin does not love Claudio and the two women argue about the nature of virtue. The concluding scenes return to Perico's scheme. Disguised as the messenger, Perico arrives and hands the note to Martin and asks him to read it. Martin inquires about Lorenzo's health, but Perico, increasingly anxious to obtain the money and leave, reminds him of the letter's request for the money. Finally Martin gives the money to Perico, and as the act concludes, the money, like the abbess's letter itself, has fallen into the wrong hands.

Letters play only a minor role in the second act of the play; instead the dialogue continues the debate regarding proper upbringing of children, develops the relationship between Clara and Claudio and contrasts the hypocrisy of Clara with the virtue of her cousin Inés. The few letters that are mentioned do not substantially advance the plot or develop character but contribute to those elements already established in the first act. Perico returns and delivers to Claudio the "citada carta", the content of which the audience is not aware; as in the first act, though, this letter provokes a conversation about money, and Perico reminds Claudio that, since the lender has been paid, Perico too is awaiting payment. In an encounter between Perico and Luis, who believes that the servant has just arrived, the elder asks if Claudio's father has sent a letter for him, to which Perico responds "Dice que por el correo / os escribió, y no le ocurre / nada que decir de nuevo. / Para el señorito traigo / Cuatro letras" (II. vii. 334-38). It is not surprising that Pedro has not written to Luis: his motive for doing so was to encourage

the marriage between his son and Inés, and since Claudio is already at the home, there is no further reason for Pedro to write. The mention of letters in this act serve only to remind the audience that all the letter writers – or thieves of letters, as in the case of Perico – have used the device to achieve some gain advantageous for themselves. When Luis inquires about Pedro's letter to his son, Claudio responds that his father has written that he is planning to come to Toledo. Luis expresses his pleasure at the impending visit of his friend whom he has not seen in ten years, while Claudio utters under his breath that he wishes his father would remain at home but tells Luis that he is happy that his father is coming. The discussion about the letter illustrates again Claudio's contempt for paternal authority and foreshadows the same attitude seen in Clara at the play's conclusion.

The manipulation and deceit which the letters have facilitated throughout the play reach their climax in the third act. This is the culmination of dramatic tension, which does not stem from the debate about child rearing or Claudio and Clara's unacceptable behavior, but rather from the letters that lend suspense and energy to the action. In the final act they are the site of the greatest tension and the reading of them resolves the conflict.

The importance of the letter returns in the first scene of the act. Like Pedro and Perico before, Clara now realizes the potential of a written note to assist her in getting what she wants: marriage with Claudio rather than a life in the convent. Knowing that Martín will vehemently oppose such a union and fearing that Luis might discover them, Clara has sought the help of an acquaintance in Madrid who is well known for assisting in such clandestine affairs. Her plan is that she and Claudio sign a promissory note, so that "Si llegara / el caso de que mi tío maliciase lo que pasa, / hecho y firmado el papel

...” (III. i. 36-39). That she uses a written, ostensibly legal, document to guarantee that her father and uncle cannot prevent her marriage to Claudio concretizes more than their relationship, for it is abiding and tangible evidence as well of her disregard for their authority. At the play’s conclusion this same document is what will be used as the primary evidence in order to exact her punishment.

Hers is not the only note that, used by its author for self-serving ends, provides the proof of their machinations and destroys the goals of their self-interest. Martín is certainly not exempt from such selfishness. He has been eagerly awaiting letters from Seville, which he expects to bear news of the decease of his relative. Because Clara plans to take vows, Martín has assumed that he is the logical beneficiary of the inheritance. The extent of his greed is illustrated following a conversation about Clara’s entering the convent; her comments are the most hyperbolic, she seems to be in agony, she grasps his hands ... and he tells her enough, that he he has to leave to check if letters from Seville have arrived. He is capable of leaving a daughter who he believes to be in great distress to check the mail, revealing that he is more interested in news of his inheritance than he is in his daughter’s “suffering.” The letter that arrives towards the conclusion of the play will contain news that serves as his punishment.

Perico’s efforts to defraud the family with the letter from the convent continue and ultimately lead to his and Claudio’s punishment as well. The servant tells Luis that a young man at the door gave him a letter. When Luis asks if it was Juan de Miranda, the convent’s messenger, Perico answers affirmatively and tells Luis that “Cierto ...que ha venido inclusa / En otra que le enviaba / El mismo sujeto.” (III. V. 369-71)<sup>10</sup>. Perico’s

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<sup>10</sup> These words are reminiscent of those uttered by Iriarte’s Marqués de Fontcalda as he hands the apocryphal letter to Gonzalo; in both cases, the purpose of the letter is to deceive its recipient for personal

delivery of the letter portrays him to be a loyal servant when the audience is well aware that the opposite is true, for he has already used the missive to steal money from Martín. Perico subsequently tells Claudio that the secret marriage to Clara has been arranged and asks him if he and Clara have prepared the promissory note. This, too, bears within it the promise of monetary gain, for it not only expresses their intention to wed but catalogs the gifts they will exchange. Claudio tells Perico that ““Ahí he puesto los regalos / que le hago yo. Doña Clara / pondrá lo que a mí me dé; / firma luego, y santas pascuas” (I. vi. 409-12). Perico then reads the entire letter aloud, allowing the audience to be aware of its content well before Luis and Martín discover the plan:

*Yo, Don Claudio Melitón Pérez y Pérez, caballero hidalgo, natural de Ocaña; y yo, Doña Clara Francisca Bustillo, doncella toledana. Estando en perfecta salud y con nuestro cabal entendimiento, hacemos de mancomún la presente obligacion de contraer himeneo marital y consorcio de primeras nupcias, al instante o cuanto mas presto fuere posible; que tal es nuestra última voluntad. Y queremos ser obligados por justicia, si alguno de nosotros se llamase andana, lo que Dios no quiera ni permita, amén. Y amén de esto nos hemos dado mano y palabra, y nos hemos dado otras frioleras, las cuales van puestas al fin de esta escritura, por modo de un inventario. Fecha en Toledo, etc. – Yo Don Claudio Melitón Pérez y Pérez, caballero hidalgo, natural de Ocaña. (III.vi. 413, original italics)*

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gain. In neither situation does the bearer of the letter reveal the content or purpose of the “other letter” that accompanies the one delivered. Here Moratín seems to be giving a nod to Iriarte’s use of the letter as an instrument of deceit.



Like the only other letter read in its entirety, the message from the convent requesting payment, this note expresses a legally binding arrangement, a document that conveys the sense of a contractual obligation. That Perico reads both these letters aloud rather than summarizes their content helps to establish their dramatic significance, for they both are instrumental in creating the dramatic tension of the play that results from the ongoing schemes. The second letter, moreover, beyond concretizing Clara and Claudio's marital plans, is the culmination of Clara's disregard for Martín's authority. Unlike her hypocrisy and lies, which throughout the play form part of oral conversations with her family members, this letter reveals her willingness to disobey the wishes of her father in a concrete and legally binding manner; with it, she has crossed a line that cannot be erased. Describing Clara's falsity, Philip Deacon writes that "... lo que habría empezado como mera disimulación, se ha convertido, con el tiempo y el reconocimiento de su utilidad, en una manera de actuar normal" (4). The promissory note is tangible evidence that her behavior is not merely a mask that she wears to protect herself from her father's perfectionism but proof that her years of lying and disrespect have fundamentally changed who she is. It is evidence of her true character.

As the play nears its conclusion, the same notes that allow the characters to deceive each other and to achieve personal gain fall into new hands and, as the dramatic conflict crescendos, become instruments of the unraveling of their schemes. The ninth scene of the act, for example, stages the long-awaited arrival of the letter from Seville. Luis enters holding a paper in his hand and says to himself that Martin will regret the news. The play's pervasive dramatic irony – the public has been aware throughout of the various schemes, which were hidden only from their victims – now switches its focus, for

the few moments that Luis holds the letter, he is the only one aware of its surprising news. Claudio, who has overheard Luis's statement of concern, voices the audience's thoughts: "¿Qué diantre / de papel será el que saca? ... ¿Cuánto va que la muchacha / Se le ha dejado pillar? (III. xi. 579-80; 583-84). Claudio believes, as perhaps does the audience, that Luis has somehow obtained the promissory note. Martin quickly enters and dispels this notion: "Ya me han dicho / que has recibido una carta / de Sevilla. . . Yo no entiendo... / A mí no me escriben nada, / ni una letra." (III. xi. 589-92). Even though the audience now knows that it is the letter from Seville that Luis holds and not the promissory note, Martín's frustration is a reminder that it is he, and not Luis, who has expected news from the dying relative. It is not that another letter has been intercepted, however, but rather that the news has changed significantly and the letter was sent to Luis so that he could convey its news to his brother. The brothers' conversation summarizes Martín's correspondence with the dying cousin, and the audience learns that once again the exchange of letters has altered the fortune of their writers:

Luis : ... ha ocurrido una mudanza  
bien imprevista ...¿Dijiste  
al primo que se casaba  
Inesilla?

Martin: No por cierto.

Sólo le escribí que Clara,  
manifestando deseos  
de ser religiosa, estaba

resuelta a empezar muy pronto  
su noviciado, y que ...

Luis:           Y basta  
  
Eso para conocer  
que tuvo razón sobrada  
de revocar su primera  
disposición. (III. xi. 594-605)

Martín is furious to learn that, because Clara plans to enter the convent and has no need for money, the cousin has deemed it more appropriate to name Inés as his beneficiary. Paradoxically, it is because of Martin's bragging about the piety of his daughter – as well as her feigning such devotion – that she, that is, her father, ultimately loses the inheritance. Still he has not learned his lesson. He believes that he has done as reason and good will dictate, and furthermore that their earlier correspondence sealed the deal:

¿... Quién pensara  
esta salida, después  
de tanto esperar y tantas  
promesas? ... Si me escribió  
habrá dos o tres semanas  
diciéndome que sus males  
no le daban esperanzas  
de vida, que ya tenía

todas sus deudas pagadas  
y arreglado el testamento;  
que a Clarita la dejaba  
por heredera, y que ... Yo  
respondí dándole gracias,  
como era razon ...” (III. xi. 610-23)

Martín’s comments illustrate his belief that having observed polite epistolary convention by responding to and thanking him makes him worthy of the inheritance, although it is evident to the audience that his thankfulness is nothing but a facade since he reveals his utter lack of concern for the welfare of the cousin – other than preoccupation for his financial well-being, since he mentions that his debts were paid and his will prepared.

The discussion about and discovery of letters continues to unmask the characters’ actions and motives in the following scene when Juan, the messenger from the convent, returns to the home and asks Martín if he has been given a note signed by the abbess. Martín tells him that he has already sent the money with “Sempronio”, and when Juan describes him, Luis immediately suspects Perico, from whom he demands the truth and the money. When he implicates Claudio as well, Luis calls him and chastises him for his villainous behavior. Martín threatens him, and Claudio immediately believes, again, that the men have discovered the promissory note: “Maldito sea / el papel ...” (III. xiv. 785-86). Believing that they know the truth, Claudio confesses to all present his feelings for Clara and reveals to them that the two have married. The enraged Martín calls his daughter. She tells everyone that she and Claudio have “papeles” that prove their

marriage and that a ceremony the following day will finalize the union. Claudio isn't worried about their future since he expects to receive Clara's inheritance, but Luis soon reveals the change in plans: He hands the letter to Clara who reads it and expresses her surprise and disappointment.

Inés tries to convince Martín to forgive Clara and offers to share the inheritance. Luis accepts this proposal, but insists that the arrangement be done without signatures nor obligation, and states, in a comment that could be said of the letters in the play, virtue is in actions and not words.

### *El viejo y la niña*

Moratin's first original comedy, *El viejo y la niña*, written in 1786 and first performed on stage in 1790, revisits the theme of unequal marriage found in tragic and comic drama from Classical works onward (Doménech Rico 9-14). In Moratin's first treatment of the theme, the play concerns the recent but problem-riddled marriage between Roque, in his seventies and a three-time widower, and the nineteen-year-old Isabel. Orphaned and left in the care of her tutor, Isabel has acquiesced to marrying Roque because her guardian has lied to her, telling her that her long-beloved Juan has already married another. When Juan appears at Roque's home and Isabel learns that she has been deceived, she is torn between her feelings for him and her social and moral obligations to her new husband. The action of the play concerns Juan and Isabel's conflicting feelings and Roque's efforts to eliminate Juan's presence and defend his new marriage. The play concludes with Isabel's decision to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of virtue and chooses to cloister herself in a convent. The characters' honor is

preserved and social order is thus restored, but at the expense of her happiness and that of Juan.

Unlike so many other plays of the period, however, the sense of stability and justice that results from the restoration of social order – and perhaps more important the sense that all now is “right with the world” since virtue is rewarded and familial disobedience, social imprudence or even criminal behavior meet their corresponding punishment – is fundamentally unsatisfying and tragic. In *El viejo y la niña*, virtue is punished, and Roque, as well as the others who conspired via correspondence to create Isabel’s unfortunate circumstances, are left unpunished. The characters, as well as the viewing public, witness that the consequences of a marriage between people of such different ages, and furthermore, one arranged by treacherous means, are emotional and social discord that is not stabilized but reaches its logical, tragic conclusion with Isabel’s decision to cloister herself; that is, Isabel’s decision, the only one she makes for herself, is an unsatisfying resolution and does not truly restore virtuous order but rather the order of a system in which a woman is a commodity whose only recourse to escape from this emotional economy is to remove herself from society.

Throughout the play Moratín employs the letter to provide insight about the nature of the principal characters and to advance the plot within the confines of space and time dictated by the Aristotelian unities. For instance, through the letter the audience learns several characters’ histories and significant events that will have direct bearing on the circumstances of the play; letters that have been exchanged outside the confines of the time, space, and circumstances of the play’s action are used to establish characters’ motives and plot movements. In order to remain faithful to the unities of time and space,

such information would otherwise have had to be conveyed by the dramatic convention of using servants on stage. Moratín elects to employ written discourse to convey this information, perhaps to lend realism and credibility to an audience accustomed to epistolary exchange.

The play's written notes also touch upon the questionable trustworthiness of written discourse in the sense that many of the letters bear lies; however, while *El señorito mimado* and *La señorita malcriada* depend on this form to interrogate critical thinking skills and to model preferred Enlightenment thinking based on reason and empirical evidence, the letters of *El viejo y la niña* function primarily to reflect and illustrate the play's themes of betrayal and the pendulum-like vacillation of joy and despair, love and scorn, aperture and enclosure. Absent from Moratín's first comedic effort are the physical movement, light-hearted suspense, and humor created via the letters in Iriarte's plays; the play itself, and the use of letters within it, are much more characterized by sentimentality as the primary vehicle to convey the moral. For its somber tone and tragic conclusion, Paul Merimée has called Moratín's first comedy "una comedia lacrimosa" (qtd. in Ruiz Ramón 303), and the treatment of the letters serve to intensify the emotions of the characters as well as of the public. The letters are, above all, instruments that illustrate an economy in which business, emotional and marital relationships are established via correspondence.

The initial images of *El viejo y la niña* are of enclosure and entrapment – Roque asks his servant Muñoz if he has been sure to close the stable door – an image which appears in different forms throughout the play and illustrates Roque's predominant obsession and his approach to all aspects of his life. He is a paranoid individual obsessed

with enclosure, an idea immediately connected with the letter. Explaining his distress to Muñoz, he tells him that he has been obliged to correspond with the nephew of a deceased business associate due to “cuentas / que quedaban *sin concluir*” (I. i. 82-83, emphasis added). Juan, the nephew, is the specific cause of Roque’s dismay: “Digo / que el autor de mi disgracia [sic] / es este don Juan que vino / a Cádiz ayer mañana . . .” (I. i. 57-60). Not only has he had to grudgingly maintain correspondence with Juan, he has, in the last of the letters sent when the business matter had concluded, invited Juan to stay at his home during his next visit to Cádiz. But Roque’s offer was insincere, as he never expected, nor desired, that Juan accept his offer; indeed, for one who seeks only to enclose himself and his family within the confines of his property, inviting another to enter that protected space results paradoxically in self-entrapment. Roque’s distress over Juan’s acceptance reveals that he intended that the final letter would conclude the relationship and that his invitation was but a nod to polite convention. His confession to Muñoz that his invitation reflected the opposite of his true feelings establishes early in the play a fundamental insincerity in Roque’s character and the opposite notion of the eighteenth-century conception of friendship and *hombria de bien*. Roque’s effort to terminate the relationship opens the door to Juan’s presence in his home and unleashes a series of catastrophic circumstances for all involved. This is only the first of several unfortunate events brought about by insincere letters. The discrepancy between one’s words and intentions is one that characterizes much of the inscribed discourse throughout the play.

This dramatic world is characterized by imposed enclosure. As Muñoz states, Roque does not allow Isabel the liberty of enjoying parties or even taking a stroll. The



servant warns Roque that such restrictions will be impossible to maintain, and Juan's acceptance of the invitation and arrival at the home already threaten Roque's enclosure of his young wife. Although Roque has clearly brought this uncomfortable situation upon himself, he claims that Juan is the "author" of his despair, -- not only because he simply doesn't want any outsiders in his home, but even more so because shortly after Juan's arrival Roque witnesses Juan and Isabel in a private conversation that they conclude quickly and with awkward silence when the husband enters the room to join them.

In the first scene of the play a letter of invitation written by Roque draws the unwanted visitor Juan to Roque's home, bringing the two men together in a physical space, much to Roque's consternation. Rather than the letter being a means by which absent friends separated by physical distance are joined in spirit and communication, here they join two whose relationship is soon to be characterized by animosity. Other letters in the play serve to nurture relationships among those who are separated by physical distance: the viewing public soon learns that Juan and Isabel have been friends since childhood and have maintained their friendship, a friendship that has developed into love by means of amatory letters that they exchanged when circumstances separated them. In both cases, the letters are the reason that the relationships -- between Juan and Roque as well as between Juan and Isabel -- exist.

After discovering Juan with Isabel, Roque claims that he fears the cat will escape, an excuse to lock the young man in his study until he can devise a way to make him leave the home. In fact, he keeps all the doors of his home locked. Even family members are subject to his obsession to isolate himself with his wife: Roque tells his sister Beatriz, who has been staying with the family to help Isabel adjust to married life and is Isabel's

only confidante, that she must leave and return to her own home. This is a way of enclosing himself in the home with Isabel, of denying her the presence of the outside world. Beatriz, the play's only voice of reason, responds to this mandate not by leaving but by soundly criticizing her brother for his irrational behavior and for having married a child. In spite of his bluster, his words are powerless; when he is insincere, as in his invitation to Juan, he gets what he asks for, yet when he demands that Beatriz leave – something he desperately desires – he is ignored. He has no true authority in his own home, seemingly because he abuses any authority he might have, as is evidenced by his treatment of family members and his deceptive use of letters.

Roque's insincere invitation to Juan reveals much about the former's character while it simultaneously initiates dramatic conflict by bringing Juan into the home. The play's next letter-writer is Juan himself, and as before, his note both provides the audience information about his dilemma (and ultimately about his character) while it advances the plot. Juan asks his servant Ginés to go to the port to deliver to a ship's captain a note in which Juan conveys that he needs to take care of some things and will not be able to come see him in person to make arrangements. He stresses to Ginés the importance of delivering the message and of waiting for the captain's response, "que es preciso, por escrito o de palabra" (I. iv. 435). His urgency underscores the note's importance and provokes suspense in the viewing public. Although the audience does not hear the note's exact words, Ginés serves as a kind of stand-in reader as he asks Juan the content of the note and Juan explains that it expresses his intention to leave Spain that same day or the following day at the latest. This message resolves the audience's curiosity about the content of the urgent note but simultaneously provokes further

questions: it suggests a potential resolution to Roque's dilemma since Juan plans to leave Cádiz; however, his departure means that he and Isabel will not have another opportunity to converse again and that her fate is, therefore, sealed. These first two correspondences of the play, then, are emblematic of the theme of enclosure that runs throughout. Roque's letter of invitation, because it is insincere, is an effort on his part to sever the relationship with Juan but paradoxically opens his home to unforeseen and potentially catastrophic (for him, anyway) consequences. Juan's message to the captain, which in contrast to Roque's correspondence expresses his true intent – at least for the time being – closes off further possibilities with Isabel. One letter brings Juan to Roque's home; the second is his way to escape; in both cases it is the motive of the conflict and its potential resolution.

It is also by means of their correspondence that Juan and Isabel's relationship developed and deepened while Juan was in Madrid with his uncle. As he tells Ginés, during their separation, only "su letra me consolaba" (I. iv. 486). Her letters served metonymically as the absent lover until her correspondence inexplicably ended: "Escribióme mil finezas, / Yo la repetí otras tantas; / y al cabo de cuatro meses / cesó del todo en sus cartas" (I. iv. 487-90). Juan, who does not mention whether he continued to write to her, is perplexed by her silence but not bereft of hope until he receives from a friend a letter bearing devastating news: "me escribió que se casaba Isabel" (I. iii. 496-97). Both Isabel's halted correspondence as well as the friend's explanation for its motive again underscore the sense of finality, the end of possibilities.

Juan's acceptance of Roque's invitation to stay with him in Cádiz is not coincidental. He confesses to Ginés that because he is aware of his host's habit of keeping everything closed and locked up and he believes no one will find him, and that

he too can enclose himself there so he can figure out what has happened with Isabel. The irony is double - Roque does not want Juan to come, and his arrival introduces a threat not only from the outside but from Isabel's past; likewise, Juan has ulterior motives in accepting the invitation, for he has done so not out of friendship or familial loyalty and shared history but to hide from the world and to heal. Both characters' use of and reaction to information conveyed in the letters reveal much of their natures. Most surprisingly, they are not dissimilar. In Iriarte's plays, as well as the others of Moratín, there exists a conventional, clearly-delineated contrast between the two principal male characters: the *hombre de bien* is contrasted with one who is a *petimetre*, or self-interested, or foolish, or some combination thereof. Superficially, at the outset of the play, Roque and Juan seem to be another representation of this dynamic. Here, Roque is the self-interested lout who seeks to protect his own interests at the expense of others and Juan is the devoted lover. Nevertheless, although Juan is not motivated to accept Roque's invitation out of maliciousness but an effort to heal, his objectives are, essentially, selfish, no less self-interested than are Roque's.

However distinct their motives, they share similar characteristics. Roque wants only to separate himself and his wife from outside influence, and Juan wants to escape the painful news contained in his friend's letter. They share as well a sense of urgency – Roque is desperate to see Juan leave as quickly as possible, and once Juan realizes that Isabel is Roque's wife, he too seeks to escape, making plans to leave Cádiz the same day. The most striking contrast between them, on the other hand, is illustrated in Roque's obsessiveness: throughout the play he never changes his mind or his behavior. The only contradiction or vacillation the public sees in Roque is the discrepancy between what he

feels and what he writes. Juan, on the other hand, vacillates wildly: what he wants to do, what he feels about Isabel, how he behaves with her. His emotions and his actions are pendulum-like. What is surprising is that *neither* man is an example of emotional or behavioral stability or reason; both are controlled by unbridled passion. The fundamental difference between them is that Juan is in torment; Roque is a tormentor, but both suffer because of the content of a letter.

In spite of these letters' importance, the viewing public never sees their content; they are discussed only indirectly. And in spite of the conflict they cause Roque and Juan, it is really Isabel who ultimately suffers the gravest consequences because her participation in epistolary correspondence is limited to the letters she exchanged with Juan. The fact that the content of these letters, besides those that are seen in the remainder of the play, is intimately related to Isabel's circumstances and future but conveyed indirectly, reflects the extent that she is out of the equation. Dowling describes the plot of the play as a love triangle, but this is inaccurate in terms of the epistolary exchange: a triangle consists of three connected lines, and while the length of its sides is not necessarily equal, the form assumes interaction, connection, and communication between those lines. However, with the exception of a few brief scenes, Isabel is talked or written *about*, an object of the discourse rather than an active participant in it. When Juan refers to the letters they exchanged, for example, he describes them and their content in general terms. The viewing public has no access to Isabel's words, to the "mil finezas" that she composed. Her words are interpreted indirectly through Juan's voice, and her ideas are conveyed only in the grammatical third person. Given the profoundly sentimental tone of the play, would her own words not have lent more pathos to the separation of the lovers?

Even in a later scene when she speaks directly with Juan, Roque is hiding and has told her what she must say; her physical voice is heard, but her words are not representative of her thoughts – she is a puppet forced into mouthing the words of another. This is a play that does not avoid excessive emotion, yet the indirect reporting of the content of her love letters is the sole instance of the sentimentality that courses throughout. Juan’s brief recounting of their love letters is dramatically expedient, of course, but this does not seem reason enough to have avoided including explicit discussion or onstage reading of the messages they contain, for in other plays, the audience hears the words of letters without this affecting unity of action or plot movement; doing so, in fact, contributes to both.<sup>11</sup>

That letters have gravely impacted Isabel’s life without her having the opportunity to participate is even clearer in the following scene. When Juan and Isabel have to opportunity to briefly converse alone and Juan expresses his anger and despair for Isabel’s having betrayed him, she reveals to him that she married for vengeance. Isabel tells Juan that her tutor, seeing the opportunity to marry her to Roque and thereby benefit himself financially, “fingió dos cartas” in which “le daban / cuenta dos amigos suyos / de que ya casado estabas, / obedeciendo a tu tío” (I. xii. 919-22). The tutor “Hizo que las viera yo; / logró su astucia villana” (I. xii. 926). Thus a false letter is used to deceive Isabel. Her manner of expressing how she was shown the letters – “hizo que las viera yo” – he made me see them – underscores that she has been an object in this exchange, traded with little opportunity to exert her own will. Not only is she objectified, for her tutor

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<sup>11</sup> This is especially important in *El sí de las niñas*, given the thematic similarity between the two plays. In that case, although the content of several letters is reported indirectly, the letter that clarifies/ establishes Carlos’ feelings for Paquita and his reason for having to leave town is read aloud by his uncle Diego. Furthermore, even though the letter that she sends to Félix (Carlos) to tell him of her circumstances is not read, it is she who tells the audience what she wrote. This letter will be discussed at greater length in a subsequent section of this study.

sought this arrangement for his own financial and social advantage, Isabel has been commodified, first by her guardian and later by her husband who seeks only to protect his *interests*. The letters that are so often used in the eighteenth century to carry out business deals (and where else better than Cádiz, Spain's bustling site of commercialism in the eighteenth century?) are here used to commodify Isabel.

Throughout several scenes Moratín reminds the viewing public of the relationship between written documents and business endeavors. In spite of Juan's earlier intention to flee the country as soon as possible, his recollection of the letters he exchanged with Isabel and his realization that she was deceived into marriage with false letters causes him to waver in his decision to leave, and he asks that Ginés return to him the letter to the captain. He is suffering, as he tells Ginés, “*contrarias ideas al mismo tiempo*”, which the public witnesses when shortly thereafter. He subsequently asks that the letter be returned and tells Ginés to gather his papers in preparation for their departure. Roque, feigning concern, assures him that their remaining accounts have been settled “*todo en papel*” so that Juan does not have to travel with cash. A subsequent scene focusing on Roque's other negotiations underscores the role of written discourse; in spite of his insularity, or perhaps because of it, Roque is engaged in multiple international transactions, all of which depend on letters between the parties involved. In one instance, Roque is awaiting “*cartas de nuestros amigos / de Hamburgo*” (I. vii. 670-71). The audience witnesses the gathering of documents, the exchange between Juan and Ginés of the note to the captain, and his exchange of receipts and documents with Roque, all of which reinforce the notion that both men conduct their business – and are dependent upon – written correspondence to achieve their objectives. Roque promises to give Juan a receipt upon his departure, to

signal that that document will “seal the deal”, as if it were a payment or insurance that Juan will leave.

In the first act of the play, then, all of the letters or written documents that are discussed or staged, with the exception of the love letters between Juan and Isabel, share several characteristics. First, they are deceptive in nature, bearing lies that serve to benefit only the writer. As such, they show no regard for the welfare of the recipient. Whereas social mores of *hombra de bien* dictate that letters between correspondents should establish sincere and mutually beneficial communication, the letters here serve to sever relationships or, as in the case of the false letters of the tutor, create new ones, but ones based on personal advantage. Their insincerity – as in the case of Roque’s invitation to Juan – or the perception of insincerity – as Juan believes Isabel’s were since she married another – break the bonds between correspondents. Much of the first act focuses on the efforts of various characters to distance themselves from others or to draw others near – to establish a bond as we see in the letters that Juan and Isabel write to each other when he is in Madrid or to flee, as we see in Juan’s note to the captain requesting sailing away. The letters sever bonds, or they establish them not between lovers, those who belong together, but between business associates. This characteristic of the letters reinforces the notion that the letters are inseparable from commerce since most of the letters have to do with negotiations or transactions. In what seems to be an epistolary economy, Isabel is the desired commodity, the product jealously guarded or desperately desired.

Although the second act of the play does not substantially develop the plot<sup>12</sup>, the letter form appears again and again and serves as an instrument in the development of

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<sup>12</sup> For Higashitani, one of the gravest flaws of the play is the lack of plot development, especially the minimal advancement of action in the second act, the scenes of which he sees as mere repetition of those of



character, of conflict and of commerce. It is increasingly an instrument of destruction. Roque convinces Muñoz to hide and eavesdrop on Isabela's conversations with Beatriz. Such a request seems unlikely for a man of Roque's position and age – as well as for a comedy of this epoch, belonging more credibly, perhaps, to comedies of the Golden Age – but it certainly underscores Roque's need to control what happens in his home. After encouraging Juan to leave, Roque excuses himself from his conversation by announcing that it is mail day and that he has some letters to finish “ . . . que hoy es día de correo / y aún me falta que cerrar unas cartas” (II.ii. 336-38). Thus, the letter provides a convenient, and credible, excuse to exit the stage while the audience is again reminded that letters are a manner of conducting business. Further, his manner of expressing this reminds the public of his obsession with enclosure: he does not leave to write or send letters but to “*cerrar* unas cartas”, or conclude, seal, close them (emphasis added). Muñoz lectures Roque about the nature of young women and warns him that “ . . . a cada paso / habrá silbidos, acechos, / *billeticos*, *tercerías*” (II. vi. 603-05, emphasis added); that is, there will always be efforts to attract Isabel's attention, and the passing of notes between lovers is a distinct threat. This “epistolary threat” unnerves Roque, who subsequently speaks with Isabel, reminding her cruelly of her childhood with Juan and bringing her to tears.

Roque's boorish behavior is reinforced when Ginés arrives bearing a letter. Roque is immediately suspicious; in an aside he whispers, “Hola, recado tenemos, / y billetico también; / yo he de verle” (II. viii. 784-85). Addressing the servant, he asks . . . ¿Y ese

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the first act. To a certain extent, I agree; overall, not much *happens* in this play. Higashitani goes as far as to suggest that the entire second act could have been eliminated: “Moratín podía haber eliminado este acto II que es una parada total del argumento y, conectando el acto I con el tercero, después de hacer un pequeño arreglo, podía hacer reducido esta obra a dos actos” (63). This perspective, however, considers only Juan's decision to leave, Isabel's distress and Roque's attempts to rid his home of unwanted company, all of which is, indeed, expressed in the first act. The treatment of letters and their role in the eventual outcome, however, are developed here in ways not seen in Act I, making the second act seem anything but superfluous.

papelillo abierto / es para el amo . . . ? Dádmele acá” (II. viii. 790-92). His obsession allows no regard for the privacy of correspondence. Ginés hesitantly surrenders the note and Roque reads it while a nervous Isabel, unaware of its message or author, observes. Without revealing its content to the characters on stage or to the audience, Roque tells Ginés to deliver it immediately to Juan. The audience suspects it is the response from the ship’s captain to Juan since he asked Ginés to return with a reply, but the possibility of its being something else – a note from Juan to Isabel? – creates tension that the audience shares with Isabel, who is “llena de temor” (II. viii. 799). Roque quickly announces that Juan is planning to leave for America that same day. His revealing the content of the note immediately resolves any doubt about it but at the same time causes Isabel much distress. This is another incidence in which the content of a letter is reported indirectly, this time increasing the effect the news has on Isabel since the public witnesses her reaction. This supposed resolution – Juan’s impending departure – causes Isabel great despair and foreshadows the unhappy conclusion of Act III. In spite of his wife’s sadness, Roque makes another excuse to leave. During this episode, Muñoz is hiding and eavesdropping; Roque has dramatized the reading of the letter and his exit in order to cause Isabel to suffer and to be left alone with Beatriz so that she confesses her feelings for Juan and so that Roque, through Muñoz, gains evidence of her deceit. Even when she has the chance to express her feelings, she is denied being able to do so privately and is again the victim of manipulation. Beatriz tells her to protect her virtue and exits. Juan and Isabel find a moment for a “private” conversation and Juan tells her goodbye while Muñoz overhears everything. He exits, and shortly thereafter Ginés enters. Isabela asks him to tell Juan to

return that evening so she can talk to him. In this scene, as throughout the play, Isabel remains in a single room, subject to the comings and goings of others.

The third act of the play is characterized by an increasingly dramatic use of letters. Beatriz and Isabela converse and Isabela convinces her sister-in-law that she will abandon her feelings for Juan. Roque returns and wants the report from Muñoz, who tells him that Isabel has asked Juan to return to talk to her. Roque feigns leaving again but returns secretly through a back door, fearing that Juan is waiting for a message from Isabel: "... y espera, / para asegurar el lance, / billete, recado, o seña, / saliendo yo, desde luego / su duda se desvanezca; / porque si Ginés le avisa, / o están encargadas ellas / de hacerlo ...vendrá sin remedio a verla, / ..." (III. viii. 354-62). When Isabel enters, Roque tells her that he knows that Juan is coming to see her. The audience never learns what Isabel had planned to say to Juan when she asked Ginés to send him back to the house – she is again silenced; instead, her discourse is determined by Roque, who forces her to keep her meeting with Juan and to tell him that she will never see him again. As Roque eavesdrops, Isabel lies to Juan, who is perplexed by her vacillations: although she has asked him to return, she now behaves like she wants him to leave. And he is convinced that she has called him there just to be cruel to him. Juan tells her that he will go, that she will never see him again, and that he wants only to die. To make the final break, to sever any hope of their relationship, in what is perhaps the most violent scene of Moratín's plays, Juan takes out the letters she has sent him and tears them to pieces:

. . . Perezcan

Perezcan; yo las creí

Alivio de mis tristezas. Tuyas son ...

¡Traidoras cartas!

Míralas; tuya

Es la letra. No quede memoria alguna. (III. x. 518-23)

No las quiero, no. Me acuerdan

Tus engaños. (II. x. 526-27)

Whereas Roque has been heartless throughout the action of the play, in this climactic scene Juan shows his own capacity for cruelty. Juan is literally breaking his bond with Isabel by destroying the sole physical manifestation of their love. Letters metonymically represent absent lovers (Altman 19) who find themselves emotionally connected but physically separated by time and space. Letters are capable, therefore, of *connecting* the writer and the recipient; further, they connect the past with the present, since the recipient reads a letter subsequent to its composition, and with the future, since the writer awaits a response. Paradoxically, although Juan and Isabel are finally physically reunited, albeit by means of deceitful letters, his destruction of her letters concretely destroys the bond they share. Throughout the play false letters break bonds and sincere ones bring people together, but in this scene the destruction of the love letters kills the last hope of the lovers being together. Letters are by their nature emblematic of communication since they are always written with a specific recipient in mind (or in heart); they represent possibility of a future, of a response and, therefore, of hope. They are characterized by an open-endedness since they anticipate a response. When Juan destroys Isabel's letters, a much more dramatically intense moment for the audience than would be a simple exit, he

is negating their past, wounding himself and her in the present moment, and cutting off the possibility of a future. These letters are a written record of dialogue, of interaction, and interchange; they are the only manifestation of Isabel's having had any agency in her own life. His act silences her.

Whereas Roque, in his agreement with the tutor to marry Isabel initiates the closing off of her future, it is Juan who, abandoned to his passions and bereft of reason, finishes this process. Isabel's strongest words conclude the play as she announces that she will enter the convent. Thus the play ends, for all practical purposes with the end of her marriage to Roque and the end of her relationship with Juan and with her sacrificing any hope of freedom or happiness, summarized in her words which sadly echo her position as nothing but a commodity: "mucho vale la virtud, pues tanto cuesta".

#### *El sí de las niñas*

In Moratín's last original comedy, he offers another perspective. Initially the plot of *El sí de las niñas* (1806) seems quite similar to that of *El viejo y la niña*. Sixteen-year old Paquita has been promised by her mother Doña Irene to be married to Don Diego, a gentleman of fifty-nine years. Although she is an obedient daughter who likes and respects Diego, she is in love with the young soldier Don Félix, whom she met while attending convent school. The conflict intensifies when Paquita and Félix are temporarily reunited and even more so when it is discovered that Félix is in fact Carlos, the nephew of Diego. At the play's conclusion, the characters learn the truth about these relationships, Diego allows his reason to override his desires and the young lovers are united.

Although *El viejo y la niña* is Moratín's first play and the well-known *El sí de las niñas* is his last, in many ways, including the treatment of the letter within the plays, *El sí de las niñas* seems to be a response to the *El viejo y la niña*. In several ways the two plays are quite similar in theme. In both cases the girls' guardians (the tutor in the case of the first play; the mother in the second) have arranged marriages for financial and social motives, and both, at least early in each play's action, are resigned to their fate, Isabel because she has already married Roque and Paquita because she is an obedient daughter who cannot disregard the will of her mother. The girls are in love with someone else, both young men of ages similar to that of the girls' and with whom they have had an enduring, affectionate relationship. For that reason, both are certainly conflicted between what they feel and what they understand to be virtuous; that is, both are torn between private emotions and public and social expectations. Moreover, there is a sense of "enclosure" in both. In the first play this enclosure is quite literal as well as social. In *El sí de las niñas*, Paquita's enclosure is verbal, imposed by her mother who often interrupts or answers for her daughter.

The dramatic and thematic contrast between the two plays is manifest principally in their treatment of language, both verbal and epistolary. A significant contrast regarding each girl's opportunity to express herself is that, in *El sí de las niñas*, Diego repeatedly asks Paquita what her feelings are, at one point even insisting that Irene be quiet so that Paquita can speak, whereas Roque tells Isabel what she must say. In the almost-excessively sentimental *El viejo y la niña*, Roque dictates what Isabel must say, while in the more measured *El sí de las niñas*, Diego asks Paquita what she *feels*. This is one of the most substantial differences between the two plays: both girls are subject to strict

familial and social conventions of obedience, and when Isabel finally does have the chance to state her feelings, she does so to articulate her hopelessness and that of the situation, announcing that she will leave Roque and enter the convent. When Paquita breaks the shackles of her mother's control, she shares what she feels about Carlos, and the result is a much happier ending and one characterized by hope for the future. The warped notion of restoration of order and the tragic consequences of a skewed notion of virtue that are illustrated in *El viejo y la niña* are replaced in *El sí de las niñas* with a restored "order" more reflective of a natural, or organic, one that corresponds with, rather than negates, the feelings of those involved. It is, in short, an order that extends outwards from an internal source and is sincere rather than one that is based on societal convention and, worse, imposed authority.

Whereas *El viejo y la niña* begins, and is characterized throughout, by images of enclosure, the opposite is true in *El sí de las niñas*. As the play begins, Paquita is leaving the convent and returning to her home. There is a sense that a new future awaits her. In both plays the setting serves to underscore the eventual resolution as well as the contrast between the two. *El viejo* takes place during the day and concludes as evening falls and hope is lost, whereas in *El sí de las niñas*, the action has occurred throughout the night and dawn breaks as the truth is revealed and reason (and Paquita and Carlos's future) is restored. An early conversation between her mother and suitor concerns whether marriage between them is appropriate. In *El viejo y la niña*, the marriage has already been consummated. Physically and socially, there is no escape for Isabel; on the other hand, in *El sí de las niñas*, Paquita's fiancée Diego seeks her opinion about their impending marriage again and again. He is acutely aware of the disgrace and unfairness of

“matrimonios desiguales” and is convinced, at least initially, that Paquita has freely chosen this arrangement because she has said so much in writing: Irene has told Diego that she has written about the plan to Paquita, who has responded that she is in agreement and is even pleased about the proposal. Diego tries to convince his servant and confidant Simón that he is aware of the potential dangers inherent in marriages between those of such disparate ages. His words seem to be an explicit criticism of Don Roque’s behavior:

... si los matrimonios desiguales tienen por lo común desgraciada resulta, consiste en alguna de las partes procede sin libertad, en que hay violencia, seducción, engaño, amenazas, tiranía doméstica. Pero aquí no hay nada de eso. (I. i. 61)

In *El viejo y la niña*, Roque is principally concerned with denying Isabel’s freedom; in contrast, over and over again Diego seeks to protect that of Paquita. Roque fears that Isabel will find a way to pass a message to Juan; in contrast, when Diego discovers a letter that Carlos has written to Paquita, he acknowledges his error and his unreasonableness. In broad terms, in *El viejo y la niña*, letters betray their own generic potential of expressing the writers’ sincere feelings and establishing bonds between the correspondents; they do not do what, within the parameters of eighteenth-century ideology, they are supposed to do. In *El sí de las niñas*, the letters reflect the opposite, a “society of the word”, in Johnston’s terms, characterized by sincerity, selflessness, communication, and bond-building.

In both plays, seemingly insignificant scenes use the letters in similar way. For example, doña Irene has a letter that she wants to deal with urgently just as Juan wants



Ginés to deliver a letter to the captain. In *El viejo y la niña*, Roque's letter unintentionally brings Juan to his home where he accidentally encounters Isabel. In *El sí de las niñas*, Paquita writes to Carlos to tell him that she is to be married. The irony is quite different: Roque does not want Juan to come and is not initially aware that Juan and Isabel know each other, whereas Paquita seeks Carlos' help and requests that he come. In the case of the first play, the letter of invitation, written bereft of sincerity, unleashes a chain of events that closes off possibility of happiness and in the last play the sincere letter written seeking Carlos's presence results in a happy ending. The key letter-scenes in both plays are crucial, but are very different as evidenced in the emotive and dramatic difference between Juan's destruction of Isabel's love letters and Diego's reading Carlos's letter and realizing the truth in it and acting according to reason and kindness.

Criticism of the *El sí de las niñas* is overwhelmingly positive. Dowling praises its result and its structure, saying that it "provided the general public with moral instruction of parenthood and guardianship and it gave several generations of playwrights a lesson in dramatic craftsmanship" (93). Ruiz Ramón considers this play Moratín's masterpiece for its intelligence and sentiment, for the theatrical rhythm that ties the situations together and for the natural and unforced obedience to the unities, and for the "...naturalness and dramatic efficacy of the dialogue, manifested in the consistency between word and character, word and situation" (305). The play's harmonious and satisfying conclusion stems from, as Ruiz Ramón describes it, the triumph of the truth, "... that is, nature, which is neither only rational nor only sentimental" (306). The letters are used to develop character, to advance the plot, to contribute to the adherence to the classical unities;

moreover, they are the driving force that leads to the “triumph of the truth” over the characters’ deception of other and of self.

In the first scene of the play, the mention of letters between several of the characters establishes the circumstances that are already underway. The initial scene finds Diego and his servant Simón awaiting the arrival to the inn of Paquita, who is en route from her convent school. Diego has been cautious to remain within the inn and to avoid his many acquaintances in Alcalá; his reasons for being there are mysterious, but Paquita’s impending arrival compels him to reveal to Simón his plans. Even before meeting the young girl, he explains, he has heard much about her from her mother and through letters that she and her aunt have written, he feels that he knows her and that her words and those of others have painted a true picture of her character: “... he leído muchas de las cartas que escribía; he visto algunas de su tía la monja, con quien ha vivido en Guadalajara; en suma, he tenido cuantos informes pudiera desear acerca de sus inclinaciones y su conducta” (I. i. 55). Having subsequently seen her, he is convinced that the impression the letters created for him is not only trustworthy but that they underestimated her beauty, grace and humility (I. i. 56). The astute Simón quickly concludes that Diego is planning a marriage but in this early, and humorous, scene, he erroneously assumes that the nuptials are to be between Paquita and Diego’s young nephew Carlos. Astounded to learn that the elderly Diego plans to wed the girl, he states the theme of the play: Si está usted bien seguro de que ella le quiere, si no asusta la diferencia de la edad, su si elección es libre” (I. i. 60). Diego is confident of Paquita’s approval because Doña Irene has written to her daughter with the news of the arrangement and in the subsequent meeting between Diego and Paquita, she “ha

respondido que está bien, que admite gustosa el partido que le propone” (I. i. 60). He is emphatic that bad marriages are not those that take place between people of disparate ages but rather ones that proceed without free choice and that are based on violence, threats and domestic tyranny (I. i. 61).

Paquita’s letters convince Diego of her admirable character, while others he receives from his nephew reveal something about that young man’s nature. Wounded by Simón’s disapproval of this arrangement and his assumption that Carlos would make a much more appropriate husband for Paquita, Diego is quick to remind him that Carlos too has his flaws, for after the young army officer was recalled to his post in Zaragoza, he tells Simón, “siguió escribiéndome, aunque algo perezoso, siempre con la data de Zaragoza ... pero el pícaro no estaba allí cuando me escribió tales cartas” (I. i. 62). He adds that although his nephew had departed on the third of July, he still had not arrived to his post by the end of September. The erroneous postmarks let Diego know that his nephew has been lying to him, motivated, Diego suspects, for Carlos’ fondness of the ladies: “Si encuentra un par de ojos negros, ya es hombre perdido” (I. i. 63). Diego worries about his spending time with a woman of the kind who “trueca(n) el honor por el matrimonio” but Simón assures him that if he “tropieza con alguna fullera de amor, buenas cartas ha de tener para que le engañe” (I. i. 63). Even though the public has not seen or directly heard the content of Paquita’s or Carlos’s letters, Diego’s discussion of them establishes the principal motive of the plot – the impending marriage between him and Paquita – as well as give insight into the young personages’ characters. Furthermore, the concordance between Paquita’s letters and what Diego has experienced of her personality, as well as Carlos’s deceptive letters reinforce Diego’s assertion that he is the

better suitor for Paquita. Such as this is, there seems little reason to continue the play – but these same letters that purport to express Paquita’s agreement with the arrangement and suggest that Carlos has other interests simultaneously provoke questions that compel the plot to advance: the public has heard about them only indirectly, Paquita has not appeared onstage, much less spoken of her feelings, and Carlos’s whereabouts and motives are unknown. If his letters serve as a kind of alibi, what has he been up to? Has Paquita truly expressed pleasure upon hearing that she is to be married?

Paquita’s true feelings are further put into question following the women’s arrival at the inn. Diego tries again and again to solicit the girl’s opinion – “oyéndoselo decir con aquella boquilla tan graciosa que tiene, sería para mí una satisfacción imponderable” (I. iv. 71) – about their upcoming marriage and each time is met with Irene’s answering for her or Paquita’s efforts to change the topic or to leave the room. The contrast between the approval and happiness that Irene has said that Paquita expressed in their exchange of letters and her reticence and obvious discomfort in the presence of Diego casts doubt on the sincerity of her feelings, and her passive and polite behavior throughout the conversation intimates that her epistolary responses were motivated more by obedience than by sincere sentiment. The physical and temporal distance between epistolographer and recipient allows both the possibility of obfuscating their true feelings, for the letter is artifice in which the feelings and attitudes of the *I* expressed in ink may or may not faithfully mirror those of the *I* wielding the pen. Hiding behind a letter, Paquita has been able to respond obediently; faced with Diego, she can respond with only silence.

This insincerity is reinforced in Irene’s letter to her sister. Although Irene has arrived to the inn only hours before, she claims that the correspondence cannot wait:

“¡Qué pereza tengo de escribir! Pero es preciso, que estará con mucho cuidado la pobre Circuncisión” (I. vi. 77). Rita’s response suggests that such urgency is the result of Irene’s wanting to gossip about Paquita’s impending “colocación” (I. iv.71) than it is concern to let her know that they have arrived safely: “¡Qué chapucerías! No ha dos horas, como quien dice, que salimos de allá, y ya empiezan a ir y venir correos. ¡Qué poco me gustan a mí las mujeres gazmoñas y zalameras!” (I. vi. 77) Rita’s criticism of false devotion and virtues reveals not only a degree of self-interest of Irene’s character but reminds the viewing public of the potential discrepancy between what one writes and feels and the motives for responding in a particular way. The public is thus invited to question whether the same might be true of Paquita’s letters.

The dramatic conflict is further intensified, and Paquita’s true feelings revealed, as the public learns of another letter she has written to “Félix”. He and his servant Calamocha arrive at the inn, their motive the note that she has written. Félix’s quickness to respond, the steps he has taken to be able to leave his post, and his desperation to find Paquita speak to the urgency of her note’s message although the public does not yet know its content. They also help to reveal the reasons for Paquita’s behavior as they further complicate the plot. He explains to Rita

Apenas recibió la carta de doña Paquita, yo no sé adónde fue, ni con quién habló, ni cómo lo dispuso; sólo sé decirte que aquella tarde salimos de Zaragoza. Hemos venido como dos centellas por ese camino. Llegamos esta mañana a Guadalajara, y a las primeras diligencias nos hallamos con que los pájaros volaron ya. A caballo otra vez, y vuelta a correr y a sudar y a dar chasquidos ... En suma,

molidos los rocines y nosotros a medio moler, hemos parado aquí con ánimo de salir mañana ... y enamorado más que nunca, celoso, amenazando vidas ...  
Aventurado a quitar el hipo a cuantos le disputen la posesión de su Currita idolatrada. (I. viii. 79)

This letter has not only compelled Félix to search for his beloved but drives the plot forward: what the public has perhaps suspected is more strongly suggested here – since Félix has left his post in Zaragoza, it is likely that he and Carlos are one and the same. The wayward nephew of Diego is Paquita’s love interest and is under the same roof with his uncle. The “ojos negros” are those of Paquita. The dramatic irony of the audience’s knowing this while the characters remain unaware creates intrigue and suspense in the play.

The fact that a letter brings Carlos to the inn is relevant for several reasons. It allows Paquita to reach out to her lover, and him to react to her, in a dramatically expedient way, without disregarding the unities of time and place. It creates suspense as well, since the audience witnesses Carlos’s (Félix, for her) possible reaction; as she contemplates what his response might be, the public sees her anguish and the depth of her feelings for him, which in dialogue has been hidden from the other characters. The letter’s quality of serving as mask and as mirror reinforces the duality of sentiment and of identity that pervade the play to this point: what Paquita has written to her mother does not convey her true feelings, whereas her note to “Félix” does just that. And the recipient of her missive is not really “Félix” but Carlos. He pretends that he is someone else, just

as she does in the conversations with and letters to her mother and Diego, and it will be a letter again that resolves these discrepancies.

Rita's explanation of why she and Paquita are at the inn serves to inform the public that Paquita's insincerity is not motivated by selfishness or self-interest but rather by obedience to her mother and a sense of filial duty. When Calamocha asks Rita how they came to be at the same inn, she reveals the content of Paquita's letter to Félix and summarizes the dilemma in which the girl finds herself:

Ya te lo diré. La madre de doña Paquita dio en escribir cartas y más cartas, diciendo que tenía concertado su casamiento en Madrid con un caballero rico, honrado, bienquisto, en suma, cabal y perfecto, que no había más que apetecer. Acosada la señorita con tales propuestas, y angustiada incesantemente con los sermones de aquella bendita monja, se vio en la necesidad de responder que estaba pronto a todo lo que la mandasen... Pero no te puedo ponderar cuánto lloró la pobrecita, qué afligida estuvo. No quería comer, ni podía dormir... Y al mismo tiempo era preciso disimular, para que su tía no sospechara la verdad del caso. Ello es cuando, pasado el primer susto, hubo lugar de discurrir escapatorias y arbitrios, no hallamos otro que el de avisar a tu amo, esperando que si era su cariño tan verdadero y de buena ley como nos había ponderado, no consentiría que su pobre Paquita pasara a manos de un desconocido, y se perdiesen para siempre tantas caricias, tantas lágrimas y tantos suspiros estrellados en las tapias del corral. Apenas partió la carta a su destino, cata el coche de colleras y el mayoral Gasparet, con sus medias azules, y la madre y el novio, que vienen por

ella: recogimos a toda prisa nuestros meriñagues, se atan los cofres, nos despedimos de aquellas buenas mujeres, y con dos latizagos llegamos antes de ayer a Alcalá. (I. viii. 81)

The exchange between Rita and Paquita about Félix's reaction seems itself to be rather epistolary in its representation: Paquita has written a desperate note to her lover; while she contemplates his reaction, Rita's delay in revealing the news forces her to wait as if she were waiting for a real response from a letter. Her eventual explanation of what is happening seems almost like a moment in which one opens an envelope and reads – in this case with joy – the answer one for which one had hoped. Once Rita is again alone with Paquita, the fact that she does not immediately reveal that Félix has come to the inn continues to develop the dramatic suspense since the public is eagerly waiting for her to hear this news and to see the anticipated relief it will bring her. The public is made to appreciate more concretely her sense of hopelessness as she contemplates Félix's response, one which she assumes to be apathetic, to her note: “¿Qué habrá dicho al ver la carta? ... ¡Oh! Yo bien sé lo que habrá dicho... ¡Válgate Dios! ¡Es lástima! Cierto ¡Pobre Paquita! ... Y se acabó. No habrá dicho más ... Nada más” (I. ix. 86). Little by little Rita assures her that she is wrong – as if Rita's report of the news were the content of a letter read line by line, she tells Paquita that “Apenas haya leído la carta se habrá puesto en camino, y vendrá volando a consolar a su amiga ...” (I. ix. 86). After making sure that doña Irene is still distracted with writing her own letters, Rita finally reveals to Paquita that Félix is, in fact, in Alcalá and that Paquita did not misunderstand his feelings for her. Rita agrees to bring him to see the overjoyed Paquita and the act concludes perched



between Paquita's relief and hopefulness and the precarious situation of two suitors under the same roof.

As in *El viejo y la niña*, the young lovers find themselves by accident at the same place, a situation that in both plays complicates the action and drives the plot forward. The behavior of the paternal figures is ironic in both: whereas in *El viejo y la niña* the irony consists of Roque's (insincere) invitation bringing Juan to Isabel's home, the irony here is that Irene is so preoccupied with writing a letter to inform her sister about the impending nuptials – the motive for writing the letter is insincere, Rita has said – that she is unaware that her daughter has written a letter of her own that will initiate the undoing of the event about which Irene so proudly writes! But the differences are substantial: Juan comes to Cádiz at Roque's invitation and does so in order to hide himself from the world and recover from the news that Isabel has married another; in *El sí de las niñas*, of course, Paquita has written the letter to "Félix" seeking his help, and he has travelled with scarcely a moment's rest to find her. His arrival at the inn where Paquita is lodging for the night is a happy circumstance; in the case of *El viejo*, Juan's arrival precipitates unhappiness for all involved. Perhaps the most important distinction between the two is that Paquita is the author of the note bearing her true feelings that brings "Félix" to her; in spite of her reticence with her mother and Diego, she acts on her own behalf by writing the note, whereas Isabel's only option is to *react* until the conclusion of the play when there can no longer be any hope. This is one principal way that *El sí de las niñas* is a profoundly more hopeful play, not only in its conclusion but in its tone and outlook throughout.

In the initial scenes of the second act, the audience – as well as Paquita – are obliged to wait for the meeting between the young lovers as Irene catalogs her many ailments and their resultant expenses and reminds her daughter of the many advantages that her marriage to Diego will bring to the family. His subsequent return to the inn further delays the meeting as the dialogue returns to his request that Paquita articulate her feelings.

Moratín does not allow the spectator to forget that Irene has been busy with her letter and in doing so continues to emphasize her self-interest. She says to Rita “Oyes, aquella carta que está sobre la mesa, dásela al mozo de la posada para que la lleve al instante al correo ... (II. iii. 94). The servant girl exits with the letter in her hand and the stage directions specify that “hasta el fin de la escena hace que se va y vuelve” (94). The audience sees her entering and exiting the stage for the remainder of the scene, always with the letter in her hand, in an attempt to delay sending the letter and the news that it contains. Irene changes her mind “Pero no, señor; mejor es ... no quiero que la lleve él, que son unos borrachones, que no se les puede ... Has de decir a Simón que digo yo que me haga el gusto de echarla en el correo. ¿Lo entiendes?” (II. iii. 95). Her urgency and concern about the letter’s reaching its destination suggests that communicating with others through written discourse will somehow seal the deal, that is, that writing a letter and having someone read it will make its message come to pass. This scene lends humor to the drama as well and reinforces a certain flightiness in Irene’s nature and in her discourse.

Diego, on the other hand, reminds the women that his heart and his words never contradict each other and that the only thing he desires of Paquita is her sincerity (II. v.

101). This concordance between sentiment and expression articulates one of the principal qualities of *hombria de bien* while at the same time reminds the public that this is a trait lacking in Irene, of course, but also, more surprisingly so, in Paquita, who assures her mother that "...yo no sé mentir" (II. iv. 98). She does just that every time she affirms that she is happy about the upcoming marriage when the audience witnesses her more honest conversations with Rita and when she has written a letter to Félix in which she has expressed her despair.

Diego offers her the opportunity to tell him if she finds disagreeable any of his traits, or if she has other preoccupations that give her pause. Irene, increasingly concerned that the deal will fall through, interrupts her daughter to such an extent that Diego responds angrily "Con ella he de casarme, con usted no" (II. v. 102) and reminds her that parents who have sound judgment do not command their children. Offended by Diego's suggestion that perhaps there is a reason for Paquita's reticence as well as for his scolding tone, Irene recounts the content of the letter she has received from Paquita's godfather, whose approval of the arrangement and upstanding character she hopes will convince Diego of the family's worth; it is not only her opinion that they should marry, but that of Paquita's godfather as well, whose letter offers an "objective" perspective about the worthiness of the marriage. Like much of her discourse, this is characterized by digression and humor, and thus reinforces her character while it alleviates the tension following their conversation:

¿En qué concepto nos tiene usted? ... Bien dice su padrino, y bien claro me lo escribió pocos días ha, cuando le di parte de este casamiento. Que aunque no la ha

vuelto a ver desde que la tuvo en la pila, la quiere muchísimo; y a cuantos pasan por el Burgo de Osma les pregunta cómo está, y continuamente nos envía memorias con el ordinario. (II. v. 102)

Diego is perplexed by the irrelevance of what she has said, so she further explains

Sí señor que tiene que ver, sí señor. Y aunque yo lo diga, le aseguro a usted que ni un padre de Atocha hubiera puesto una carta mejor que la que me envió sobre el matrimonio de la niña ... Y no es ningún catedrático, ni bachiller, ni nada de eso, sino un cualquiera, como quien dice, un hombre de capa y espada, con un empleillo infeliz en el ramo del viento, que apenas le da para comer ... pero es muy ladino, y sabe de todo, y tiene una labia y escribe que da gusto ... Cuasi toda la carta venía en latín, no le parezca a usted, y muy buenos consejos que me daba en ella ... Que no es posible sino que adivinase lo que nos está sucediendo.

(II. v. 102-03)

Not only does her description of the godfather undermine her own attempt to present him as impressive, she never tells Diego what it is that he wrote about the marriage; perhaps, since much of the letter was written in Latin, she doesn't even understand what he said. It doesn't matter, of course, since she mentions it only to dispel the idea that there is some reason why they should not marry. Irene obliges Paquita to tell Diego that she is happy about the upcoming wedding, and wanting to obey her mother – who reminds her that she

wants only to see her daughter well placed before she dies –Paquita does so. The matter is apparently resolved.

Nothing could be further from the truth, for the remainder of the act is comprised of a series of unexpected encounters that complicate the action, lend increased irony to the plot, and weave an entanglement of lies that only the final letter of the play will resolve: Paquita, who has just again agreed to marry Diego, enjoys a tender reunion with Félix in which he assures her that he can depend upon the help of his beloved uncle in Madrid to help the young lovers with their dilemma; upon leaving, Félix (Carlos) encounters Simón, and both are stunned to find each other at the inn; their surprise encounter makes Carlos realize that his own uncle, the one of whom he intends to ask for help, is Paquita's betrothed. When Carlos and Diego are reunited shortly thereafter, Carlos lies, telling his uncle that he has come to the inn because he wanted to see him. Diego, desperate to hide his impending marriage from his nephew, insists that he return to his post immediately and that he ought to "Portarse como hombre de bien ... Como oficial de honor" (II. xii. 126). In spite of the loss that this means for Carlos, he obeys his uncle, who also has his misgivings about sending Carlos away without telling him about the marriage: "Pero no es lo mismo escribirsele que ... Después de hecho, no importa nada ... ¡Pero siempre aquel respeto al tío!" (I. xiii. 126). The act concludes with Paquita's despair upon learning that Félix has left the inn without any explanation.

A letter, the most important one of the play, is the focal point of the final act and encapsulates the multifaceted and powerful dramatic potential of the staged epistle. A brief letter that Carlos throws through the window of the inn causes the play's most intense suspense and at the same time provides for the resolution of this dramatic tension;

it provides the opportunity for the principal characters to examine their true natures, the truth of their feelings, and what is reasonable in terms of the relationships and the treatment of young girls.

This letter's importance is highlighted by the dramatic setting. The action of the play progresses from late afternoon to dusk to nightfall, so that by the time the impending marriage between Paquita and Diego seems certain and Carlos has apparently left Alcalá, the inn is enshrouded in total darkness; likewise, the truth of Paquita and Carlos's feelings has been obscured by their willingness to sacrifice self out of loyalty and obedience to their families. This "darkness" encompasses even Diego, who has allowed himself to believe that marrying Paquita is a reasonable act when he is, in fact, trying to assuage his loneliness and fear of solitude and mortality. The absence of any light on stage reinforces the notion that the motives and words of all concerned have not been honest, that the characters have not been frank with themselves or with one another. The letter that Carlos tosses through the window into this blackened space will intensify the dramatic tension and, as it is read and discussed as dawn is breaking, ultimately will serve to illuminate the truth they have all denied.

Serenaders outside the window draw the attention of Diego and Simón, both of whom hide in an alcove as they hear Paquita and Rita approach. Paquita realizes it is Carlos, and the audience overhears her part of their brief conversation, in which he seems to tell her only that he must leave and that the letter will explain: "¿Para siempre? ¡Triste de mí! ... Bien está, tírela usted ... Pero no acabo de entender ... ¡Ay, don Félix! Nunca le he visto a usted tan tímido ..." (III. ii. 138). He throws the letter through the window,

but Paquita is unable to find it in the darkness and returns to the ledge, pleading with Carlos for an explanation:

¿Y no he de saber yo hasta que llegue el día los motivos que tiene usted para dejarme muriendo? ... Sí, yo quiero saberlo de [su boca] de usted. Su Paquita de usted se lo manda... Y ¿cómo le parece a usted que estará el mío? ... No me cabe en el pecho. Diga usted. (III. ii. 138-39)

Carlos's response is inadvertently interrupted by Simón, who, moving forward to better hear the conversation, bumps into the birdcage, causing it to fall to the floor. The noise startles the girls, who fear that they are not alone in the room and quickly exit with no choice but to leave the letter behind. Simón locates the letter, hands it to Diego, and leaves to find a lamp in another room.

Alone in the darkness, Diego contemplates what he assumes to be Paquita's disloyalty: "¿Qué amante es éste? ... ¡Y dieciséis años y criada en un convento! Acabó ya toda mi ilusión" (III. iii. 140). He is overcome by envy, shame and indignation, a torrent of emotions he feels before he even reads the letter, as if its physical presence and the manner in which it penetrated the space of the inn is sufficiently suggestive of its message. Hearing a noise from Paquita's room, he hides in a corner as Rita returns to search for the letter and, just as Diego has assumed the worst of Paquita, imagines the worst of Félix, that all hope is lost for Paquita and herself:

¡Válgame Dios! ... El papel estará muy bien escrito, pero el señor don Félix es un grandísimo picarón ... ¡Pobrecita de mi alma! ... Se muere sin remedio ... Nada, ni perros parecen por la calle ... ¡Ojalá no los hubiéramos conocido! ¿Y este maldito papel? ... Pues buena la hiciéramos si no pareciese ... ¿Qué dirá? ... Mentiras, mentiras y todo mentira. (III. v. 141)

Rita encounters Diego, who leaves to read the letter, and Paquita returns to help look for it. The girls suspect that Diego and Simón had been in the room when Carlos threw the letter, and Paquita realizes that it has fallen into Diego's hands: "Le tendrán ellos, no te canses ... Si es lo único que faltaba a mi desdicha ... No le busques. Ellos le tienen" (III. vi. 143-44). She is despondent not only because she has been discovered by Diego but because of Carlos's actions. Her loss of Carlos and of the letter solidify her despair:

Me dijo que en aquella carta vería yo los motivos justos que le precisaban a volverse; que la había escrito para dejársela a persona fiel que la pusiera en mis manos, suponiendo que el verme sería imposible. Todo engaños, Rita, de un hombre aleve que prometió lo que no pensaba cumplir. (III. vi. 144)

Ironically, of course, what she complains about is exactly what she was doing to Diego. This is the moment of the greatest emotional turmoil and dramatic suspense. The letter has fallen into the wrong hands, all hope seems lost for the three principal characters, and the truth, undoubtedly difficult for all, is about to be revealed. As Dowling describes it, this scene represents the "maximum disturbance in the equilibrium [of the play], the



maximum point of emotion and tension” (99). Indeed, Diego believes himself to have been betrayed; Paquita believes herself to have been abandoned by Félix and is fearful that Diego is about to discover her relationship with him, a relationship that she now believes was superficial and insincere. All seems lost for Paquita and her suitors.

The darkened stage and the unexpected encounters of the characters are fundamental in establishing the intensity of emotion and situation for the characters and the viewing public; even more key, though, is Moratín’s use of the letter here. Its unknown content – whether that be an explanation of Félix’s hasty departure or his admission that he is not willing to fight another for Paquita’s hand, as she fears, either way contains a potentially injurious message. Why, then, a letter and not a conversation that, as long as it is not overheard by others, remains private between the participants and leaves no tangible trace of itself? In accordance with the plot, of course, Carlos’s only recourse is to explain in a letter his departure since it is unlikely that he will have the opportunity again to speak freely with Paquita. The astounding discovery that Paquita is engaged to his uncle, as well as his familial loyalty, warrant his immediate departure.

Throughout the play, spoken conversation has proven useless in exposing the truth. In speaking with Diego and Irene, Paquita has once and again affirmed her willingness to marry Diego and has denied having any motive for not doing so; she still believes that Carlos is Félix, who, for his part, has not revealed his true identity to her. Diego’s pleas for her to be frank have been met with lies or efforts to evade the conversation. Moreover, a conversation’s ephemeral nature means that it cannot be repeated exactly as it was uttered; it can be shared with others only through indirect discourse, through the interpretation of the speaker. A letter, on the other hand, can be

reread and shared directly with or among others. A conversation by its nature can never be reproduced literally, whereas the fact that letters are engraved in time by a specific hand makes the confessions they often contain – as does Carlos’s letter to Paquita – visible and discussable among those who were not its intended recipients. Moratín employs the trope of the intercepted letter to enlighten the characters, as well as the viewing public, about the relationship between Paquita and Carlos as well as the truth of the character of the personages. “Delivered” inadvertently into the wrong hands, Carlos’s letter obliges the characters to shed, finally and definitively, the socially-mandated, but insincere, sense of obligation and obedience to their parental – paternal – figures that had forced them into silence.

The brief note – its content as well as the fact that it is a written document and not a conversation – allows it be viewed and re-viewed and ultimately is instrumental in reason’s victory over illogical social constructs. Diego’s having read the letter prompts an interaction between him and each of the play’s principal characters, including with himself, and ultimately leads to the resolution of the dramatic tension and to a sense of authenticity for the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. The first interaction occurs between Diego and Paquita. Diego’s knowledge of the letter’s content leads him to, one final time, provoke from her a confession of her true feelings. She does not confess what Diego already knows, and resigns herself to marrying Diego, but no longer tries to hide her despair. Without acknowledging so explicitly, they each refer to Diego’s having read the letter: When she refuses to tell him why she can no longer be happy, he responds “Pero ¡qué obstinado, qué imprudente silencio! ... Cuando usted misma debe presumir que no estoy ignorante de lo que hay”, to which Paquita replies, “Si

usted lo ignora, señor don Diego, por Dios no finja que lo sabe; y si en efecto lo sabe usted, no me lo pregunte (III. viii. 150). His response to her refusal to admit her relationship is to remind her that they will marry within the week – a final, rather unkind, last attempt to force her to confess her true feelings – , and again she responds only by saying that this will please her mother while she will live unhappily. Such resignation and extreme, irrational obedience compels Diego to utter the play’s moral message, its audience not only Paquita but the viewing public:

Ve aquí los frutos de la educación. Esto es lo que se llama criar bien a una niña: enseñarla a que desmienta y oculte las pasiones más inocentes con una páfida disimulación. Las juzgan honestas luego que las ven instruidas en el arte de callar y mentir. Se obstinan en que el temperamento, la edad ni el genio no han de tener influencia alguna en sus inclinaciones, o en que su voluntad ha de torcerse al capricho de quien las gobierna. Todo se las permite, menos la sinceridad. Con tal que no digan lo que sienten, con tal que finjan aborrecer lo que más desean, con tal que se prestan a pronunciar, cuando se lo manden, un sí perjuro, sacrílego, origen de tantos escándalos, ya están bien criadas, y se llama excelente educación la que inspira en ellas el temor, la astucia y el silencio de un esclavo.

(III.viii.150)

It is because of the intercepted letter that Diego finally recognizes Paquita's pain and the reasons for her behavior. Furthermore, the fact that it is a written note that begins to clarify matters, that is, that "speaks" the truth and concretizes it in a tangible and reviewable form is thematically potent since much of the problem Diego identifies is articulated in terms of oppressed language ("desmentir", "callar", "mentir", "no decir", "pronunciar un sí perjuro, sacrílego", "silencio"); this letter, then, serves as a kind of counter-discourse to what has been said, or silenced, throughout the play. Diego assures Paquita that all is not lost and that he will not abandon her to the dolorous situation in which she finds herself (III.viii.150).

While the information contained in the note has allowed Diego to begin to resolve matters with Paquita, it simultaneously demands a confrontation between him and Carlos, for whom Diego's compassion is not as immediate. Upon hearing Carlos's excuse that he has not left Alcalá immediately because it was necessary that he speak with "someone", he presents him with the evidence of his deceit, scarcely restraining his sarcasm and anger:

Ya. En habiendo tantas obligaciones de por medio ... Pero venirle a ver a las tres de la mañana, me parece mucho desacuerdo ... ¿Por qué no le escribiste un papel? ... Mira, aquí he de tener ... Con este papel que le hubieras enviado en mejor ocasión, no había necesidad de hacerle trasnochar, ni molestar a nadie. (III.x.155)

He hands the note to Carlos, who, recognizing it as the one he threw through the window to Paquita and realizing the gravity of the situation, rises to leave. Diego insists, however,

that he explain himself, and again, placed in the hands of someone other than its intended recipient, the letter demands that the truth be told. Carlos recounts their history, including the exchange of letters that deepened his feelings for her: “Logré que doña Paquita leyese algunas cartas mías; y con las pocas respuestas que de [ellas] tuve, acabé de precipitarme en una pasión que mientras viva me hará infeliz” (III.x.157). Surely the audience would recall Diego’s confession to Simón early in the play that he, too, became fond of Paquita after reading her letters. Obligated by his military duties to leave the city, Carlos finds consolation in her letters until her last one reveals that Irene was planning Paquita’s marriage and, obliged by his vows to her and unable to accept her betrothal to another, he abandons his post to find her. Diego remains unmoved and the confrontation between uncle and nephew is increasingly tense as Diego insists that he will be the one to marry Paquita. Carlos agrees to leave, and only his intimation that he will participate in impending war – seeking to risk his life rather than live without Paquita – affects Diego, who insists that Carlos remain at the inn and wait for him in another room.

The next interaction provoked by the note takes place between Irene and Diego, who reveals to her that Paquita is in love with another. Despite her protestations, he assures her this is the truth, and that it is a committed relationship, for “Se han hablado muchas veces, se han escrito, se han prometido amor, fidelidad, constancia ...” (III.xi.165). His efforts to convince Irene of Paquita’s innocence and honor do little to assuage her anger; on the other hand, the information that Diego has read in the note, and his sharing its content with Irene, does lead him to come to his senses, and more substantially, to acknowledge that he and Paquita’s guardians, the authority figures of the play, have been in error:

Su hija de usted en una niña muy honrada, y no es capaz de deslizarse ... Lo que digo es que la madre Circuncisión, y la Soledad, y la Candelaria, y todas las madres, y usted, y yo el primero, nos hemos equivocado solemnemente. La muchacha se quiere casar con otro, y no conmigo . . . Hemos llegado tarde; usted ha contado muy ligero con la voluntad de su hija . . . Vaya, ¿para qué es cansarnos? Lea usted ese papel, y verá si tengo razón. (III.xi.166)

He offers her the note as proof of what he is saying, and although she refuses to read it, Diego has succeeded in convincing himself, and the viewing public witnessing the scene, that the parental figures of the play have been in error. Thus, the brief note that Carlos tosses through the window not only reveals to its readers the knowledge of his relationship with Paquita, it initiates an examination of the value of the knowledge accepted as definitive among figures of authority. Through the truth contained in the letter the audience sees that the financial and social drive that has motivated Irene to marry her daughter to Diego. His allowing himself to believe that such an arrangement would have been reasonable and natural is emblematic of beliefs and behaviors that are accepted because they are those of ones who exert authority over others; they are not, however, in accordance with what is true or right. His handing the paper to Irene seems to be a way to hand it as well to the audience, as if to encourage them to “read” it and accept the truth.

Irene refuses to do so and calls for Paquita, to whom she thrusts the open letter and demands an explanation. Diego takes it from her, and reads it aloud, finally revealing to all the evening's events:

Bien mío: si no consigo hablar con usted, haré lo posible para que llegue a sus manos esta carta. Apenas me separé de usted, encontré en la posada al que yo llamaba mi enemigo, y al verle no sé cómo no expiré de dolor. Me mandó que saliera inmediatamente de la ciudad, y fue preciso obedecerle. Yo me llamo don Carlos, no don Félix. Don Diego es mi tío. Viva usted dichosa y olvide para siempre a su infeliz amigo. *Carlos de Urbina* (III.xii.168)

Diego does not deny the angst the situation has caused him, telling Irene that his nephew “que con sus palmadas, y su música, y su papel me ha dado la noche más terrible que he tenido en mi vida” (III.xiii.170); in spite of his own disillusion, his knowledge of Carlos and Paquita's love, and the sacrifice that Carlos is willing to make, move him to join the two together and to bless their union. His capacity for reason and compassion conquers his own desires, and as he tells the group, his conscience cannot bear separating them. He reiterates the error that he and Irene have made, reinforcing the notion that they have irresponsibly exercised their authority:

El y su hija de usted estaban locos de amor, mientras que usted y las tías fundaban castillos en el aire, y me llenaban la cabeza de ilusiones, que han desaparecido como un sueño . . . Esto resulta del abuso de [la] autoridad,

de la opresión que la juventud padece; estas son las seguridades que dan los padres y los tutores, y esto lo que se debe fiar en el sí de las niñas . . . Por una casualidad he sabido a tiempo el error en que estaba . . . ¡Ay de aquellos que lo saben tarde! (III.xiii.170-71)

This “casualidad”, is not only the happy coincidence of Carlos’s having written a note to Paquita and Diego’s intercepting it, but also the truthfulness of the content which frees Diego to surrender his authority to a social order which is more organic and natural than that imposed or sanctioned by society. This letter is the instrument that ultimately allows Paquita and Carlos to be together, Diego to no longer fear the terrible solitude of old age, the personages and the audience hope for a future characterized by reason and compassion rather than adherence to long-standing but illogical social and familial obligations.



## CHAPTER 4

### Concluding Remarks

The comedies of Tomás de Iriarte and Leandro Fernández de Moratín have many merits, including their success in illustrating the tenets of Neoclassical dramatic reform, their ability to enlighten their audiences while entertaining them and their thought-provoking exploration of eighteenth-century ideological concerns. They bring to the stage the day-to-day lives of real people in real places and upon doing so invite the spectators to participate in the dilemmas that the characters must confront as well as in the resolution of these conflicts. The use of the letter in these works is instrumental in the plays' exemplary characteristics, and without their presence, the plays would be fundamentally altered and their dramatic and thematic richness diminished.

The variety of the forms of written discourse and its polyvalent functions illustrate the creativity of the plays and at the same time the kaleidoscopic possibilities of the epistolary mode. The types of letters used in these plays provide a catalog of epistolary forms and uses; included are notices of the results of lawsuits and other legal entanglements, letters of introduction and recommendation, documents which communicate negotiations for goods, a warning about the impending failure of a business, missives to family members bearing news of upcoming weddings, a note sent asking for help, amorous letters which draw together lovers who are separated by physical distance or by unfortunate circumstance, promissory notes of marriage, promises of future relationships, a letter of gratitude from the recipient of a gift, angry words from

an abandoned wife, a letter that explains why a lover must depart. Letters are purposefully stolen, inadvertently intercepted, tucked surreptitiously into another's pocket, delivered from afar. They are sometimes apocryphal, written by an epistolographer posing as someone he is not and communicating a message he knows to be untrue; in other incidences they accurately reflect the composer's most heartfelt sentiments. Often the need to write letters or check the mail provides a character with an excuse to exit the stage or to extricate himself from an uncomfortable situation or to attend to matters that are brought to light because of the receipt of a letter. Their content is reported indirectly or read aloud on stage.

In these plays letters contribute substantially to character development, often revealing more about the personage than do his dialogue or actions. Flattering words spoken in conversation or obedient silence before parental figures obscure the true identities or feelings of characters until their written words ultimately reveal their real motives. The recipients' reactions to and interpretation of the letters reveals much of their characters, too, for those who exercise sound judgment and reasoned thinking are able to read the letters well, while those behaviors and attitudes are characterized by ignorance, naivete, ambition or self-interest are blinded to the message. The letters allow the playwrights to adhere to the Aristotelian unities without sacrificing dramatic interest or important information. Characters and spectators learn of other characters' stories, whether true or invented, and the history of relationships between characters, all of which take place outside the parameters of the play. Several letters arrive from great distances, allowing characters to portray themselves as well traveled or worldly without having to leave the inn or home where the play takes place. Details are provided which further the

dramatic conflict without forsaking the unity of action. Dramatic suspense is heightened when the audience is privy to the information contained in a letter and a character is not or when a character onstage is and the spectator is not.

The foregrounding of letters, the fact that they are performed onstage, and the characters' interpretation of the messages they communicate reinforce over and over again the necessity, for both character and spectator, of reading critically, of questioning the meaning and the trustworthiness of written discourse handed down or delivered from an unknown source. The paradoxical quality of many of the letters of these plays, that is, that the written documents allow characters to *engañar con la verdad* – to deceive with the truth – illustrates that the written word alone, isolated from empirical experience and critical interpretation, is an insufficient bearer of the truth. The letters are not only devices that develop the dramatic elements of these plays, they motivate the interrogation of prevailing social practices, regarding the upbringing of children and the consent of maidens, certainly, but also of the nature of how the veracity of knowledge is determined.

Staged letters make public a discourse that is traditionally private so that not only the characters within the play but the work's extratextual public is obliged to "read" them and become participants in the process of their interpretation. The involvement of the dramatic characters and the spectators in the process of interpretation and decision-making, brought upon chiefly by the letters, is reflective of the Enlightenment as Dorinda Outram, following Kantian thought, characterizes it: not as a homogenous project but rather as a series of processes, problems and debates (3). This time seems to be not as much an "Age of Reason," as an "Age of Reasoning", a term which perhaps more fully

describes the complexity of the Enlightenment as well as the importance of process and participation to which the letters in these plays contribute.

The plays included in this study have been called “Neoclassical comedies”, “sentimental comedies”, “comedies of manners”, and in the case of *El viejo y la niña*, “lachrymose comedy.” Altman considers a literary work to be “epistolary” when its meaning is derived, at least in part, by its use of letters. Because the meaning of the dramatic world created in these plays, the exploration of the extratextual world they represent, and the interrogation of how the audience comes to this awareness is founded on the exchange and interpretation of missives, it seems appropriate to add the term “epistolary comedy” to the list of subgenres in which these works are included.

If epistolary novels are not limited to a specific type or literary epoch, it stands to reason that nor are “epistolary comedies” so confined. This study has examined the use of letters within the work of two playwrights of a specific style and time, and as the letters in these plays often do, does not seek to close communication but rather to invite further investigation. Such avenues could include the comedies of the type that Iriarte and Moratín so soundly criticized, such as those of their contemporary Comella, whose comedy *La Jacoba* features the use of many letters. An analysis of a dramatist such as María Rosa Galván would provoke consideration of whether the use of letters in the work of a female playwright change the use – or authorship – of the missives. Finally, how are letters used in plays of the same period that are not comedies?

Since letters are a common device in plays of Spain’s Golden Age and in its Enlightenment, what is their frequency and role in drama of subsequent centuries? A few examples from the nineteenth century reveal that the use of the letter remains an

important instrument in that epoch's drama. Tamayo y Baus's *Un drama nuevo* employs letters as a metadramatic focal point. Used as a weapon in the play within a play that takes place in that work, a letter that is intended to serve as a prop but reveals the infidelity of a the jealous husband Edmundo's wife Alicia compels him to murder her onstage. *Don Juan Tenorio*, perhaps one of Spain's most well-known and influential works employs the device as well as an instrument of seduction. These Romantic plays underscore the theatricality of the letter and foreground it against a background of heightened emotion. In Larra's *No más mostrador*, which more explicitly examines the commercial environment of mid-nineteenth-century, the letter returns as an instrument by which to conduct business and arrange marriages. While Moratín and Iriarte employ the letter as an instrument of deception and truth to model for their audiences the actions and attitudes of the *hombre de bien*, Larra too uses the missive to obscure the intentions of his characters and then to ultimately reveal their true motives; but his view is broader, showing by means of the letter not only what an *hombre de bien* is, but what an *español* is. The letter's capacity for conveying the notion of identity is thus broadened in his work. The fact that the letter plays an important role in the dramatic work suggests the need to further explore its manifestations in other plays of the nineteenth century.

The ideological and social goals of the eighteenth century and its literary production – the nature of friendship and citizenship, the analysis of discourse, knowledge and authority, the necessity to discern between deception and truth – are as important now, and perhaps more so, that they were when Iriarte and Moratín composed their plays. The intention of this study of the letters in the comedies of Iriarte and Moratín has not sought not only to address a neglected genre of Spanish comedy but to be like the

letter-form itself: to be open-ended, to encourage ongoing response and to invite further debate about epistolary drama and its multifaceted and rich manifestations in the literature of Spain's *Ilustración* and beyond.

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