

THE USE OF LETTERS IN THE COMEDIES OF IRIARTE AND MORATIN

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dramatic and thematic role of staged letters in the neoclassic comedies of Spain's eminent comedigraphs 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.