


Of the thirteen most successful Spanish films set in the early modern period and produced between 2000 and 2012 — those with a viewership of more than one million — over half of them feature a female protagonist who assumes a conventional social role.¹ The tension and consequent negotiations between the heroine’s desires and the social impositions placed upon her by these conventions are a recurrent pattern in these films. The gender debates of more than five hundred years ago, revisited on the screen in the immediate present, therefore necessitate that the films’ early modern values be updated so that these visual narratives are not reduced to purely archaeological recreations of Spain’s distant past.

For stage director Ernesto Caballero, adapting classical works for present-day audiences requires “navigating delicately between the Scylla of my own condition as an individual in the twenty-first century, and the Charybdis of the historical and cultural context in which the work was written.”² Although Caballero’s comments specifically address the process of adapting classical texts for the contemporary stage, they are equally meaningful for the screen. That is, the historical distance between the contemporary director/spectator and the


period in which the work was produced must be acknowledged and preserved by
establishing connections that, however, do not obscure its original essence. This
sensitive dialogue with the past implies a gradual training of the audience, for
whom the adaptation should seem realistic and past values may become un-
derstandable and, in some cases, even justifiable (103). 3

In the four films discussed here — Juana la loca [Mad Love]; La princesa de
Éboli [The Princess of Éboli]; and the two filmed theatrical adaptations of Lope
de Vega’s plays, El perro del hortelano [The Dog in the Manger]; and La dama
boba [A Lady of Little Sense] — the directors have deliberately cast as their major
protagonists modern “stars” with extensive careers and wide-ranging roles to
their credit. The audience’s familiarity with these popular actors, who are known
mostly for their contemporary roles, creates an aura around the protagonists
that anchors them in the present and distances them from the films’ historical
context. 4 In what is as much a commercial as an aesthetic strategy, all four direc-
tors effectively transmit early modern values by means of the non-conformist
attitudes of these modern actors, who, when playing their roles, break established
gender expectations with varying degrees of success. Yet what characterizes the
female protagonists’ modernity is not whether they prevail in their efforts to resist
patriarchal strictures, but their awareness of women’s subordinate roles in early
modern patriarchal society, which compels them to engage in struggles to become
desiring subjects, subjects of authority, and free agents.

3 In the case of biopics, directors often insert a disclaimer at the beginning of their films
that allows them to modify or adjust historical events in a more meaningful way for contemporary
audiences. This is the case for La princesa de Éboli, which begins with the disclaimer: “The historical
people and events depicted in the following film pertain to a crucial period in Spanish history. . . .
However, some of the situations and attitudes presented here have been given a liberal interpreta-
tion of the events portrayed, especially those that, still today, remain unclear in history books.”

4 All of the actors — Pilar López de Ayala (Juana of Castile), Belén Rueda (Doña Ana de
Mendoza), Ema Suárez (Diana, Countess of Belfort), Silvia Abascal (Finea), and Verónica Forqué
(Otavia) — have played a broad range of roles over their respective careers, which have made them
easily identifiable to contemporary audiences. Moreover, in these films, the directors fetishize not
only the female actor’s body, but also that of the male protagonists. Duncan Wheeler emphasizes
this point when discussing the performance by actor José Coronado in his role as Laurencio in La
dama boba: ‘As a result of Finea’s childish innocence for much of the film, [the actor] Abascal is,
in spite of her good looks, far less of an erotic spectacle than Coronado. From his first appearance
pushing past passers-by with sword in hand so as to reach Nise, he delivers a virtuoso perfor-
mance’ (Golden Age Drama in Contemporary Spain. The comedia on Page, Stage and Screen, Cardiff:
University of Wales Press, 2012), 183.
Indeed, the films’ four protagonists all strive to become subjects of desire at the risk of endangering their lives and reputations. Perhaps the most obvious example is doña Ana de Mendoza, the Princess of Éboli, who adamantly defends her freedom to love without being held accountable to anyone, not even King Philip II:

PHILIP II: Antonio Pérez is your lover?

PRINCESS: Yes. Does that bother you? I’m a widow, Your Majesty. My father is dead and I do not have any brothers. Thank God I do not have to answer to any man.

PHILIP II: Not even to me?

PRINCESS: No, not even to you.

PHILIP II: I am your king.

PRINCESS: Yes, but you are not my owner. I decide whom I love, only I decide.

If, in reality, the princess dies incarcerated within her own palace by Philip II, her life on the screen, as conceived by the director Belén Macías, revolves around the affirmation of the protagonist’s desire to love and live in full freedom and independence.

In the same vein, Vicente Aranda also characterizes the sixteenth-century queen of Spain, Juana of Castile, as an agent of desire, capable of expressing her passionate feelings for her husband, Philip the Handsome, in defiance of societal rules:

JUANA: I hate all that comes between your body and mine.

PHILIP: Juana, your behavior is scandalous.

JUANA: I am the sovereign of Burgundy, and I have made you king of Castile. But I also want to be your wife, your woman, and your whore.

PHILIP: And you think you can force that upon me?

JUANA: I have more power than you and more cunning.

PHILIP: And more impudence to speak to me in that way.

JUANA: It is not impudence — it is passion, overwhelming passion.
Aranda’s film is an exploration of Juana’s desire for Philip from adolescence to old age. Departing from the legend that, as a widow, she forlornly followed Philip’s casket throughout Spain, Aranda’s Juana openly deploys her sexuality and legitimizes her desire until the very end of her life, affording her a sense of sexual fulfillment that is reflected in the script’s circularity. The film begins and ends with a septuagenarian Juana who still remembers the pleasure of her husband’s touch and the feelings of sensual arousal:

(Opening scene)

JUANA: When I close my eyes, he approaches. I can touch his skin with my fingertips, his voice fills my ears, I can smell the odor of his armpits. My desire increases. I do not fear death, for whatever it is, it will take me to Philip.

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(Final scene)

JUANA: Did everything I remember really happen? Perhaps I will forget your name but never the embrace that caused me to moan with pleasure.

Both Juana of Castile and doña Ana de Mendoza carry out their desire to its ultimate conclusion, to the point of alienating themselves from society by being imprisoned for the rest of their lives. Juana will end up confined in her castle in Tordesillas for more than five decades, while the Princess of Éboli is jailed in “her prison of Pastrana” (La princesa de Éboli, my emphasis).

Women's struggle for the right to desire may also be seen in the two adaptations of Lope de Vega's playtexts, albeit in more subtle ways. In contrast to Juana la loca and La princesa de Éboli, in which the protagonists are presented as desiring subjects right from the beginning of both films, Finea, in La dama boba, and Diana, Countess of Belfort, in El perro del hortelano, increasingly realize their capacity to desire and their ability to become subjects of seduction.

Given that the focus of film is considerably more intimate than that of the stage, the camera closely follows Finea's and Diana's motivations, making them the center of the action. According to Javier Aguirresarobe, El perro del hortelano's cinematographer, “Each actor enjoys the spotlight. The image of the precious condesa [Diana] is awesome and then there are all the others. Fundamentally, she
stands apart from all the others." In the case of Finea, the camera enters her most intimate psychic and physical world — the interior of her bedroom when she awakens as a new being, transformed by the power of love. Unlike Juana and Ana de Mendoza, whose explorations of desire keep them as social outcasts, by the end of their storylines, Diana and Finea are re-integrated into the patriarchy — a system that they both seem to resist at the beginning of each plot — by entering into marriages that have a dubious future, and that could easily become tragic. 

In addition to being agents of desire, three of the protagonists — Juana of Castile, the Princess of Éboli, and Diana, the Countess of Belfort — assume leadership roles within strongly masculinist milieus that attempt to undermine their power. The most obvious example is Queen Juana, whose supposed madness was the cause of her being declared incompetent to govern. Nonetheless, in Aranda's film, Juana is not presented as an insane heroine — in comparison with other versions of her historical legend — but as a woman who bluntly accepts her passionate attraction towards her husband as something natural and whose jealousy is fully justified in response to his womanizing. Indeed, Juana's stirring monologue before she is removed from the throne demonstrates extreme mental clarity and perfect knowledge of the ambition and hypocrisy of those around her. To prove her sanity and reclaim her right as queen, she deconstructs her supposed madness, demonstrating her mental strength to govern and the unconditional support of her people:

JUANA: Yes, by Christ, the hour has rung for me to reign. For all women, to love is to love a man, in the likeness of God, so must a queen reign, loving an entire people. Open the doors. What do you want, Philip? My people have lost their sanity, as have I . . . as you can see, there are many of us crazies in Burgos. Señores, go with God, the mad queen salutes you.

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6 The ambition and opportunism displayed by both husbands render them untrustworthy characters that threaten the prospects of a happy ending for their marriages.
7 The female protagonists in La dama boba do not occupy any positions of political authority; yet, in an attempt to render the film more accessible to contemporary audiences, the director transforms Otavio — the pater familias in Lope's play — into the mother, Otavia. This conversion of an authoritarian figure into a woman runs into problems, however; at the film's beginning, the mother herself rejects her daughter, Nise's intellect, aligning herself with Finea's naivety.
In comparison with a previous film version by Manuel de Orduña, *Locura de amor* [Love's Madness] (1948), in which this same scene is performed but shows a much weaker Juana, Aranda’s queen leaves no doubt about her sanity. Aranda shoots a long and uninterrupted monologue in which her voice and presence — dressed in her “most dazzling finery,” as she herself acknowledges — become the center of attention for the court and the camera. In accordance with the expectations of contemporary audiences, this scene is an anticipated and climactic moment when the protagonist herself assumes the reins of authority as heir to a vast empire and exposes to full view the misogynistic treason to which she has fallen victim.

The Countess Diana is, like Queen Juana, a woman ruler, although with less responsibility insofar as her dominion is limited to the county of Belfort. Although neither Lope’s original play nor Miró’s film version deals with the countess’s ability to govern, but with her emotional attachments to her secretary, both the play and the film provide glimpses of how she manipulates strict hierarchical rules to seduce and marry her secretary without stirring suspicions or tarnishing her social reputation. For Wheeler, Diana is “an unusually powerful female whose position might theoretically be seen to imbue her freedom yet that very same position makes her particularly vulnerable to judgment and criticism” (172). Although the fool Tristan’s cleverness cannot be denied — he is responsible in large part for the lie that transforms Teodoro into Diana’s equal — the countess, aware of her secretary’s deception and having accepted it, endangers her reputation as a ruler and as a woman. Thus we are presented with a fearsome protagonist, a consummate expert on the system who is able to subvert it for her own ends. Although this type of heroine — very common in seventeenth-century comedias — was ideal for their audience, by the mid-1990s, Miró’s Diana was perfectly tailored for the modern-day spectator, as she belonged to a generation of women who had struggled for gender equality in the 1970s.

The Princess of Éboli is also depicted as a woman who moves with ease in a highly masculine environment in which she expects to be treated as an equal. This attitude is apparent in the film’s very first scene, where we see her advising her son on how to wield the sword and demonstrating her mastery of the art with the fencing master, Bartolomé:

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PRINCESS: Rodrigo, don't bend over. Control your leg. Give it to me, darling, give it to me. Come at me, Bartolomé.

BARTOLOMÉ: My lady, I'd prefer not to.

RODRIGO: Leave him alone, mother.

PRINCESS: What are you afraid of? Are you afraid you'll blind me? Think of what the masters say. Imagine you have a bird in your hand, you don't want to kill it nor do you want it to fly away.

ANTONIO PÉREZ: I see you keep practicing.

PRINCESS: In this world we live in, a woman like me has to know how to defend herself.

As she herself recognizes, a woman exposed to court intrigues and with an absent husband must take full control over her self-defense. Later we see her hosting a dinner behind closed doors in which affairs of state are discussed and at which she is the only woman. The princess shows herself as opinionated, fully aware of state matters, and exceedingly respected by the other diners. From the beginning, the film portrays the protagonist as being very close to the king who keeps her at his side almost as if she were another of his political advisors. While maintaining proper distance in accordance with protocol, she relates to him as an equal. Although she is not portrayed as an actual woman ruler, the film clearly endows her with an influential personality at the highest political levels. Indeed, these three film narratives highlight the authority and influence of their respective heroines as political and social leaders who openly exercise their leadership, just as they have done with their desire, without any fear of the consequences.

The protagonists’ courage is also on display in the way they confront social prohibitions. In the case of Diana, the class difference between her and Teodoro makes a union between equals impossible. Nevertheless, she does not hesitate to subvert the prohibition by accepting the subordinate’s solution of a secret agreement on which, however, both her reputation and even her life will depend. In the case of Queen Juana, Aranda shows her as a political leader who also resists the feminine codes of conduct dictated by the period. The most notable example

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9 However, this gathering behind closed doors will later be used against her when Philip II’s secretary searches for any information that will compromise her in the king’s eyes.
is her decision to breastfeed her children, an unthinkable custom among high
society and one that would be added to the list of extravagances, earning her the
label of madness in court circles. We not only see Juana feeling pleasure in the act
of breastfeeding, but also becoming sexually aroused in her husband's presence,
who seems unable to understand such behavior. Another act that would have
been considered scandalous at the time is that of giving birth in solitude, which
we witness in a scene in which Juana gives birth by herself in a private room and
severs the umbilical cord with her own teeth. This pride in her biological instincts
transforms her into a heroine, in perfect consonance with open attitudes toward
sexuality and maternity.

For her part, the Princess of Éboli, in Belén Macías's film, also subverts
social prohibitions, as demonstrated by her willingness to be painted nude by
the artist, Sofonisba Anguissola, appointed Isabel de Valois's maid of honor
and tutor by Philip II in 1559. This artist — like any other woman artist of the
period — did not have access to female nude models of any sort. The director
creates an alliance of respect and mutual support between these two women that
transgresses a prohibition closely tied to their gender and demonstrates their
openness to experiencing and sharing new sensations:

PRINCESS: Let me tell you a secret. Sofonisba Anguissola is painting my
portrait.

ANTONIO PÉREZ: And this has to be a secret.

PRINCESS: Nude.

ANTONIO PÉREZ: You cannot pose nude! You are endangering yourself
and her if someone were to find out.

PRINCESS: No one has to find out unless you say something. I don’t
understand this stupid prohibition. What’s wrong with a nude body? What
is the crime?

ANTONIO PÉREZ: How do you feel?

PRINCESS: I like it.

ANTONIO PÉREZ: You like it? Hours and hours nude, letting that
woman stare at you. You like that?

PRINCESS: At times she looks at me the way a man would look at me.
The act of these two women accessing these prohibited experiences on the physical, sensorial, and professional levels contrasts with the actions of the other female characters who acquiesce to strict gender expectations. Perhaps the most salient example is Ana of Austria, his aunt, Empress María of Austria’s daughter, and Philip II’s fourth wife. Her duty, as the king himself acknowledges, is to provide heirs to the crown, especially a male who will survive:

PHILIP II: Do not call me uncle again; it has been many years since we stopped being uncle and niece. I am your husband and king, and you are the queen. It is your duty to give birth as many times as necessary to ensure succession to the throne and it is your only mission in this life.

In all of these films, the directors have filtered the condition of women in the seventeenth century through a contemporary gaze that draws them closer to our own sensibilities. None of these filmic narratives pretends to document the past faithfully. Rather they seek to reflect history with large doses of fiction, as in the case of La princesa de Éboli. Nonetheless, one of the recurring themes, characterizing all these heroines, is their resistance to and subversion of imposed rules. This element is an effective means of drawing the modern-day spectator into a past injected with a dose of the present, yet with spontaneity and genuineness. These heroines are presented to us straddling two historical periods, but the way they are conceived permits them to preserve a certain degree of transhistorical distance. Their characters on the screen embody a palimpsest of the thorny path followed in the struggle for female agency over the course of five centuries.

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