

**Teaching *El eterno femenino* by Rosario Castellanos:  
“The Dreams of Reason produce Monsters”<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

In *The Eternal Feminine*, a farce, written by Rosario Castellanos (Mexico, 1925-1974), the effect of sexism on women is dramatized in a comic, exaggerated form to raise the consciousness of women about the pernicious consequences of feminine passivity, inauthenticity, and self-sacrifice. The article characterizes the play's text using Castellanos' essays to explain some of its more elusive meanings. It discusses the experience of teaching the play in advanced university classes in the U.S.A. with teaching goals as diverse as to improve the Spanish of the students, to inform them about the history of ideas in Mexico, and to teach methods of cultural and literary critical analysis.

**Keywords:** Rosario Castellanos, *The Eternal Feminine*, feminism, Mexican literature, farce

***El Eterno femenino* por Rosario Castellanos en el aula:  
“El sueño de la razón engendra monstruos”**

**RESUMEN**

En *El eterno femenino*, farsa, por Rosario Castellanos (México, 1925-1974), se dramatizan de forma exagerada y cómica el efecto en las mujeres del sexismo de hombres y mujeres con el propósito de concientizar a las mujeres en particular sobre las consecuencias negativas de la pasividad, inautenticidad, y la abnegación femeninas. El artículo analiza el texto escrito usando ensayos de Castellanos para explicar algunos de los significados más elusivos. Discute la experiencia de enseñar la obra de teatro en aulas avanzadas universitarias en los Estados Unidos, con metas tan diversas como para mejorar el español de los estudiantes, informarles sobre la historia de las ideas en México, y enseñar métodos de análisis cultural y literario crítico.

**Palabras clave:** Rosario Castellanos, *El eterno femenino*, feminismo, literatura mexicana, farsa

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## INTRODUCCIÓN

Goya's famous engraving, *Caprichos #43* (1797-1799), portrays an author asleep on his desk with owls and bats in the air behind him and a title, "El sueño de la razón engendra monstruos." At the very least Goya's drawing speaks about the haunting of creative people by nightmares; in its most general interpretation, the title implies that being awake, that is, being imbued with reason and rational thought, keeps the monsters of the unconscious and the imagination at bay.<sup>3</sup> This idea of the contrast between dream and



De Francisco de Goya -  
FAF4YL0zP9cjHg en el Instituto Cultural  
de Google resolución máxima, Dominio  
público,  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.p  
hp?curid=21982951](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21982951)

reason is meaningful for interpreting *El eterno femenino, farsa* (1975; hereafter *Eterno*) by Mexican Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974). The idea that thinking and rationality are missing in women's dreamscapes is the most significant theme of *Eterno*; the contrast between dreams and rational thought populates most of the exaggerated scenes of Castellanos' farce. The humor she employs often derives from reason, thinking, and abstract thought masquerading as dreams and nightmares, and vice versa. Filled with irony and parody, *Eterno*, requires greater effort, more background information and cultural knowledge, to make a successful interpretation than would a straightforward work. Both silly and comical, *Eterno* is fun to teach and read but difficult for students to fully

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<sup>3</sup> Goya's title has been interpreted in several ways, even by those historians with access to his manuscripts and the writings on the back of copies of the work: "Explicación de esta estampa del manuscrito del Museo del Prado: 'La fantasía abandonada de la razón produce monstruos imposibles: unida con ella es madre de las artes y origen de las maravillas'; Manuscrito de Ayala: 'La fantasía abandonada de la razón produce monstruos, y unida con ella es madre de las artes'; Manuscrito de la Biblioteca Nacional: 'Portada para esta obra: cuando los hombres no oyen el grito de la razón, todo se vuelve visiones.'" Helman, Edith (1983: 221), *Trasmundo de Goya*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, cited in Wikipedia en español, "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" (acceso 22 oct. 2018). The full text on the back of several contemporary versions make the contrast explicit between being awake and being asleep, the latter forging monsters and the former allowing reason to mold the monsters into creative works of art.

comprehend because the lines between hyperbole and reality, history and stereotypes, are difficult to assess.

Castellanos' play is long and satirical, batting about clichés and labels regarding women's lives and actions from literature and life. From the outset, the author warns readers and the audience that patterns will be difficult to find in her play: "El texto, como se avisa desde el principio, es el de una farsa que, en ciertos momentos, se enternece, se intelectualiza o, por contrario, se torna grotesca" (Castellanos, 1975: 22). She charges the director to work to help the audience understand the great variety of scenes. In the classroom, this demanding task lies with the teacher. The best way I have found to help students to understand the works' premises, ideas, and jokes is to tease out the meaning of the theatrical script through close readings and comparisons to other works by the same author. Rosario Castellanos is often included in surveys of literature at the university level. She is known as a major Mexican poet and fiction writer, but her essays, journalism, and theater are still struggling for recognition.

## **DESARROLLO**

How do I handle all the play's special requirements? I primarily teach the play in an advanced literature class on women writers for Spanish majors and Masters students. The class tends to self-select for feminist-leaning students, both male and female, and the discussions are robust on many sides of each question. The age of my students has been fairly uniform, usually in their twenties. Although the feminist impulse accompanies Castellanos' erudition from the title to the last line, I have found that readers of the play need not be feminists in orientation to enjoy and learn from the work. I do not think it needs to be a class on women writers. My students have sufficient Spanish-language skills to successfully wrestle with Mexican slang or enough maturity to ask for help. Importantly, they may need to read other works of Mexican literature in preparation for understanding the feminist impulse or the humor, so an advanced class is recommended. For example, we read Sor Juana's *Los empeños de una casa* and *Respuesta a sor Filotea* earlier in the same semester, which facilitates understanding of the scenes with Sor Juana in Castellanos' Acto II. But some scenes can easily be taught without any such preparation and could be included in a literature survey at a lower level. Due to the high number of episodes in the lengthy play —over thirty not counting the brief scenes connecting

episodes— I discuss only the most prominent and likely ones for teaching the main themes of the play.

My general goals for teaching the play include combatting my students' stereotype of *machismo* in Hispanic cultures, teaching colloquial expressions and Mexican slang, exposing students to Mexican woman's history and Mexican feminism, and teaching vocabulary for performing and interpreting theater. I handle vocabulary difficulties largely with handouts and PowerPoint presentations in class. Additionally, my students may come to my class with some recognition of Castellanos' name but in general they have yet to read any of her works. In this article I discuss how in the classroom the play's themes develop, based on my experiences at a large U.S. university in advanced Spanish classes for Spanish language learners and Spanish heritage speakers.<sup>4</sup> I analyze one or two scenes from each of the three acts in order to give examples of the kind of challenges the farce presents in the classroom. If teaching the entire play in a given course, I devote from three to nine hours of classroom time to it, depending on the students' level of Spanish. But teaching one or two scenes in a literature survey course or an advanced language course would be easy and profitable for students.

*Eterno* makes us laugh when we see the feminine roles that society holds up as suitable exposed as illogical, unfair, unwelcome, or unkind to the women who accept or desire the traditional female functions. If there were any doubt, Castellanos states clearly in "La abnegación: una virtud loca" that "no existe la esencia de lo femenino" (Castellanos, 2006: 664). To make her point in the farce, humor and exaggeration are Castellanos' literary devices for raising consciousness about the nonexistent 'essential feminine.' Instead of *telling* about the consequences of unthinkingly, reflexively 'performing gender,' the play *shows* the audience through absurdity the pernicious effects of Western society's traditional ideas about women. The critic Amalia Gladhart agrees that "*El eterno femenino* ... forces an understanding of the traps in the requirement that all women (and men)

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<sup>4</sup> I co-translated the play for a volume published by the University of Texas Press, *The Rosario Castellanos Reader*, but have not had the opportunity to teach it in English.

perform” gender in specific, traditional ways (Gladhart, 1996: 66).<sup>5</sup> Female characters in the play usually have made one of two choices with regard to tradition. Either they fulfill a gender role to the extreme and suffer the consequences of their actions or else they exploit the opportunities provided when others assume they are fulfilling their roles —when in fact they are actually awaiting their chance to succeed in the same way men would.

The first scene of *Eterno*, “Obertura,” establishes the basis for the dreams the spectators see in a performance of the play. This framing episode contains subthemes and characters that last until the end of the play. “Obertura” takes place in a Mexico City beauty salon of the 1960s installed with the old-style, large cone-shaped hair dryers. In the stage directions these dryers are to be exaggerated so as to appear “Martian” (“marciano”) (Castellanos, 1975: 23). The Owner (La Dueña) is speaking with the Salesman (el Agente) and the Hair Stylist (La Peinadora) listens to them and interrupts. The Agente wants to sell the Dueña a new device but she protests she has not yet paid off the last item he sold her. The Agente explains that this time he has come to solve a major problem with her business, so she grudgingly listens to his sales pitch. He reminds her that her customers are getting bored, especially the pampered ones who come frequently and tend to be under the hair dryers and getting a manicure at the same time. These women cannot chat with friends or do anything with their hands the entire time under the dryers. There is a very real danger that these women might begin to *think*. Luckily, his contraption will prevent such a catastrophe. When one attaches his device to the back of a hair dryer, the woman under it begins to dream.

Unconvinced, the Dueña is worried that the dreams might be ordinary but the Agente assures her that they are machine-created and therefore infallible.<sup>6</sup> Still unsure, the Dueña decides to test the product before committing to a purchase. They decide on Lupita, who has come to the shop to have her hair done on her wedding day because it is a wedding gift of sorts. Lupita functions as a young Everywoman with everyday dreams and frustrations. The Peinadora then activates the device on Lupita’s hair dryer without her

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<sup>5</sup> Gladhart looks at *El eterno femenino* as a “feminist theory play” as defined by Gayle Austin in her essay “Creating a Feminist Theory Environment: The Feminist Theory Play” (1996: 69).

<sup>6</sup> There are jokes about the significance of technology and globalization in the idea of an imported machine designed to prevent women from thinking.

knowledge. A contrast is established between Lupita's visions and what she might have been thinking without the device, between the dreams that the machine creates for her and her normal thinking process. The episodes in the play are Lupita's dreams, designed to entertain her and distract her from thinking. This premise lasts for the first two acts—a total of at least a dozen scenes not counting short transitions. In the third act there is a slight change in that Lupita tries on a series of wigs and lets her imagination run free regarding what life would be like if she wore each hairstyle. In all three acts, the play dramatizes Lupita's worst fears about her future, about Mexico's past, and about woman's role in Western society. These *machine-created* visions and Lupita's imaginings via the wigs are all nightmares, not rational ideas about her capacities and socio-economic condition. Some characters do not reason well at all and experience the nightmarish consequences of an unreflective life, while others are rational and thoughtful and manage to make choices and live by them despite social pressures to conform to gender rules.

These monstrous and humorous nightmares are not only the counterparts to Lupita's thinking but also parallel much of Rosario Castellanos' logical reasoning and argumentation in her essays, including essays in *Mujer que sabe latín* (hereafter *Mujer*, 1973), and *El uso de la palabra, una mirada a la realidad* (1974), collections published during her mature period, and the aforementioned "La abnegación" (2006). In fact, the first essay of *Mujer*, "La mujer y su imagen" (hereafter "Imagen," 1973), foreshadows *Eterno* in the thematic contrast between reason and dreams, thinking and monsters. Castellanos stresses how discourses of the feminine cloud everyone's reasoning and make it impossible to see women for who they are.<sup>7</sup> She introduces her essay with these comments:

En el caso que nos ocupa el hombre convierte a lo femenino en un receptáculo de estados de ánimo contradictorios y lo coloca en un más allá en el que nos muestra una figura, si bien variable en sus formas, monótona en su significado. Y el proceso mitificador, que es acumulativo, alcanza a cubrir sus invenciones de una densidad tan opaca; las aloja en niveles tan profundos de la conciencia y en estratos tan remotos del pasado que impide la contemplación libre y directa del objeto, el conocimiento claro del ser al que ha sustituido y usurpado (Castellanos, 1973: 7).

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<sup>7</sup> The greatest difference between the essay and the play is the emphasis in "Imagen" on men's culpability in women's nightmarish existence. In *Eterno* women and men share this burden.

Notice the importance in this quotation of the variety of forms that mask women under the guise of *the feminine*. Most important is the fact that, both here and elsewhere, Castellanos describes a dense false image that obscures women's true nature with its mythmaking, following Simone de Beauvoir. In Castellanos' writing about women's self-concept in "Imagen," she recognizes the power of the myth of the feminine to deform women's self-image because the punishment for not complying with men's desires for women can be marginalization, ostracism and worse. She writes: "Y el miedo engendra nuevos delirios monstruosos" ("Imagen," 1973: 8).

In "Imagen," Castellanos distinguishes between three main types of discourses about women —i.e., myths about *the feminine*— that prevent women from seeing themselves as they are: the beauty trap, the ethical trap, and the intellectual trap.<sup>8</sup> The first trap, esthetics, is brandished most clearly in the beauty salon where the frame story of *Eterno* occurs and where Lupita hopes to have her hair styled. According to Castellanos' essay, the pressure on women to look beautiful makes most people undervalue women's unadorned appearance. The cultural weight placed on beauty for women also can make it hard for women to work or even to walk, due to fashion trends like long fingernails and high heels. Graciela Hierro confirms this idea, stating: "Por una parte se exalta a una mujer por su belleza, sin embargo, para cumplir con los requisitos que marca este ideal — dados por los hombres— la mujer debe convertirse en una inválida" (Hierro, 1981: 31). Regarding the exhausting efforts women must make to become as beautiful as possible, Castellanos comments further: "Las complicaciones del peinado y el maquillaje absorben una enorme cantidad de tiempo y, para esplendor, exigen un ámbito adecuado," by which she means out of the rain and the wind (Castellanos, 1973: 11).

Beauty and the effort to maintain one's looks appear in several scenes of Castellanos' play, in addition to the frame of the beauty salon. For instance, throughout the play, husbands prefer their secretaries to their wives because of the younger secretaries'

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<sup>8</sup> See also the summary and discussion by Graciela Hierro de Matte (1981) from an unpublished thesis on *Mujer* by María Rosa Fiscal Pérez Gavilán in "La filosofía de Rosario Castellanos." According to Hierro, Castellanos felt that men's weapons against woman were twofold (not threefold): "los hombres aniquilan el poder negativo de lo femenino, nos dice Castellanos, utilizando para ello dos recursos: el *de la estética* y el *de la ética*" (1981: 31, emphasis in Hierro). For some reason, Hierro deemphasizes the myths that impede women from recognizing their intellectual selves by subsuming them under the ethical myths that harm women.

more attractive appearance. In a related sense, even virginity before marriage is reduced to a theme of woman's staging of her life for a man to see. In Lupita's first dream, "Luna de miel," the morning after her honeymoon she takes care to display the red stain on her wedding dress attesting to her virginity. Of course, this scene is ludicrous because a woman would presumably undress before losing her virginity on her wedding night, except in extremely traditional cases. And the historical place to look for the stain of blood is on the bed sheets not on the wedding dress itself. In Castellanos' play, however, Lupita assures her doubting husband—who thinks the stain might be catsup—that she purchased the best quality plasma in the Banco de Sangre and so he is satisfied.

In Castellanos' farce, these silly scenes about the exaggerated importance for women of laboring to maintain a youthful and desirable appearance largely provoke laughter, comprehension and empathy in my classroom here in Mississippi without much need for explanation. On the other hand, an emphasis on virginity before marriage in "Luna de miel," and during which scene the wedding night is a time for women to trick their husbands into accepting a fake virginity is not so easy for them to understand, unless they are widely read in pre-twentieth-century history or literature. As a teacher, I strive to engage their historical imagination from other works of literature. I remind them of plays like Shakespeare's *Othello*, in which the protagonist kills his beloved wife because he doubts her fidelity, or Golden Age plays in which loss of virginity or, in extreme cases, being seen alone with a man may cost a woman her life. And of course, the don Juan character, whose trickery and betrayal are notorious, began in the Spanish canon before entering world literature. These examples help them to understand why a modern feminist author from Mexico might want to turn the tables on a male character. Virginity no longer serves to assign women the status of objects to be passed intact from fathers to husbands to insure the legitimacy of children.<sup>9</sup> The time that has passed since the play was written, thankfully, has also created some changes in the reception of the play.

The "Luna de miel" episode is also an example of how times have changed since Castellanos wrote *Eterno*. Before the sexual liberation of the 1970s, at the time of the

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<sup>9</sup> The celebrated TV show, "Mad Men," has helped to introduce my students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the gender wars of the 1960s in the U.S. with its prominent images of sexism, homophobia, and class prejudice.



play's writing, virginity was still important in Mexico and the U.S.A. in middle-class society. (Working-class society has never placed such a high value on virginity and upper-class society has always had ways of appearing traditional without necessarily being so.) Today in 2019, it is more valued in both countries among groups of young people due to fear of diseases like AIDS (SIDA) and to the importance of commitment in today's college-age crowd. Today pre-marital virginity is a choice of patience and love over risky behaviors for both men and women. However, my students' intimate feelings about virginity on the wedding night means they struggle to find humor in Castellanos' portrayal of the male and female characters' pact to fulfill the social rules fraudulently.

When Castellanos considers the consequences for women of men's desire for female purity and innocence to be a "situación de confinamiento, que se llama por lo común inocencia o virginidad" (Castellanos, 1973: 14), she is discussing the double standard in which a man is free to have many sexual partners but a woman is not. María Mercedes Velasco points to the "signos grotescos" in "Luna de miel," which dramatize the "incoherencia de los actos humanos" due to the "efecto deformador que tienen el marianismo y el machismo" in the play (Velasco, 1990: 192). For a class discussion of this scene, *el marianismo* and *el machismo* can be fruitfully defined and explained and then their possible effects on the play debated.

According to Castellanos, a woman who is ignorant of her own body and of sex is a "monstruo de su laberinto," like a minotaur at the center of the maze, waiting to devour all who enter her space (Castellanos, 1973: 13). This image of a dangerous woman appears in a later dream, entitled "La cruda realidad," in which a mature Lupita competes with her husband's secretary for his affections based on her looks. When Lupita discovers his infidelity for certain, she murders both her husband and his secretary Cuquita. The play's *corrido* written to celebrate Lupita's actions emphasizes the secretary's attractive figure: "Al grito de 'Mueran todas/ las de talla treinta y dos',/ sobre el pecho de Cuquita/ la pistola descargó" (Castellanos, 1975: 49). On a television talk show and in newspapers, the murderer Lupita —celebrated with the neologism "autoviuda"— is considering several offers to film her life story. In one interview, Lupita shares pictures of the secretary and asks the Announcer (El Locutor) if Cuquita can compare to Lupita in beauty. The Locutor admits that, since the pictures were taken *after* the secretary's autopsy in the morgue,

Lupita does look a lot better. This grotesque humor does not escape my students, but they wonder why such violence would be lauded even as a joke. In other words, they do not always see the difference between Mexican reality and the targets of Castellanos' satire, which are myths of the feminine and scripts about how women should behave. Reminding my students that the author worked as a journalist helps them to understand that newspapers and TV shows are being lampooned here as well as the broader society's emphasis on ideals of beauty for women.

Additionally, these scenes of the female *monster* demonstrate how the beauty trap and the ethical trap are often intertwined. Questions of beauty and fidelity, of *marianismo* and *machismo*, of innocence and violence, cannot be easily separated in life or in Castellanos' work. While Lupita is victorious over the more beautiful Cuquita, Lupita must leave her home and enter the public stage to enjoy her victory —violating the (sexist) ethical models of feminine self-sacrifice and domesticity that she supposedly represents. At this juncture, I discuss the nature of irony and its double message in this part of the play. While Lupita has become a media star for having murdered two people, her aggressiveness and ferocity are unbecoming and unfitting in a wife.

The unfair and unnecessary solitude and confinement to which women are subjected by traditional society does not end when women marry, according to "Imagen," but continues with the value placed on maternity and excessive self-sacrifice. During pregnancy and the child-rearing years a woman may be almost entirely alone or only accompanied by her children the entire day in middle-class society. Calling it the "claustro materno" (Castellanos, 1973: 15), Castellanos ridicules antiquated standards of good motherhood that require such self-sacrifice in two scenes from Acto I of *Eterno*. The first of these, in the section mentioned above entitled "The Crude Reality" ("La Cruda Realidad"), depicts a bored young wife who ignores and badly educates her children. The second, in the section called "Twilight" ("Crepusculario") is a conversation between a mature Lupita and her college-age daughter. This latter scene connects easily with classes because it focuses on the conflict between the daughter (Lupita II) who wants to attend university and

the mother Lupita I who has an equally strong desire to keep her daughter from enrolling.<sup>10</sup> Lupita I will not allow it: “Porque no vas a ser distinta de lo que fui yo. Como yo no fui distinta de mi madre. Ni mi madre distinta de mi abuela” (Castellanos, 1975: 61). In this scene, Castellanos blames mothers for perpetuating cultural myths that harm their daughters.<sup>11</sup> The strong mother-daughter disagreement is made humorous by the comments of their pet parrot that gives its own iconoclastic and sarcastic opinions, such as: “No hay nada comparable al amor maternal” (Castellanos, 1975: 62). Similarly, in “The Annunciation” (“La Anunciación”), in which Lupita joyfully tells her mother she is pregnant, Lupita’s mother makes sure she is not happy for long. Her mother gives her a salt-water mixture to drink to make Lupita sick to her stomach. The mother next deliberately messes up Lupita’s hair before suggesting to her husband that he go find certain foods so that the baby will be born happy and healthy. Like the scenes in Acto I about virginity, pregnancy, and children, “La Anunciación” ironically and satirically promotes the idea that devoting oneself exclusively to one’s children is one of many ethical traps keeping women from seeing their true worth and from achieving self-fulfillment. In addition to motherhood with respect to small children and to grown daughters, both essay and play remark on the consequences of traditional imperatives for “cabecitas blancas,” elderly women whose husbands have passed away and whose grown children have abandoned them.<sup>12</sup>

Castellanos lays a heavy dose of guilt at the feet of mothers in several of her other works as well as her comments concerning her own mother.<sup>13</sup> In class we discuss the role a writer’s personal trajectory can have on values and beliefs manifested in a literary work. I discourage their use of biographical information as definite evidence of a textual characteristic or outcome in the play. The nature of that which constitutes weak versus strong evidence in literary and cultural analysis appears repeatedly in class discussion.

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<sup>10</sup> This is one of several scenes that could be easily and meaningfully taught in isolation if a syllabus did not permit teaching the entire *Eterno*, as long as the scene was properly introduced and contextualized.

<sup>11</sup> See also, “La maternidad: instinto y vocación” (Castellanos, 2006: 322-325).

<sup>12</sup> See “Imagen” (1973: 16) and in *Eterno*, “Apoteosis” (Acto I, 1975: 62-69).

<sup>13</sup> Both of Castellanos’ major novels, *Balún Canán* (1957) and *Oficio de tinieblas* (1962) have flawed mothers who mistreat their daughters and indigenous nannies who try to substitute their own maternal affection for the actual mothers’ abuse. See Joann O’Connell, *Prospero’s Daughter, The prose of Rosario Castellanos* (University of Texas Press, 1995) for more on the negative portrayal of mothers in Castellanos’ works.

In “Imagen” Castellanos describes the third trap that keeps women from being authentic, the intellectual trap: “Hemos mencionado la anulación de la mujer en el aspecto estético y en el ético. ¿Será necesario aludir al aspecto intelectual, tan obvio?” (Castellanos, 1973: 17). Castellanos proposes that the women who break free from the mythmaking that has given them false self-images have done so during the process of transcending existential crises: “Para elegirse a sí misma y preferirse por encima de lo demás se necesita haber llegado, vital, emocional o reflexivamente a lo que [Jean-Paul] Sartre llama una situación límite” (Castellanos, 1973: 19). Her examples of famous women from history and literature who have been able to “*convertirse en lo que se es* (hazaña de privilegiados sea el que sea su sexo y sus condiciones)” include figures as diverse as Sor Juana, Melibea, Anna Karenina and Hedda Gabler (Castellanos, 1973: 20, emphasis in the text). In class, both women and men can identify with the need to find one’s own path and not follow one’s parents blindly. The play treats this theme repeatedly in a variety of ways. For example, in Acto I about women’s life stages, the theme of bad mothers who *teach* their daughters to be ignorant and to lie is closely associated with the intellectual trap for women. The hypocritical mothers, wives and daughters perpetuate inauthenticity as a matter of tradition, as we have seen in the case of the bride who buys plasma to prove she was a virgin on her wedding night. Acto I is the easiest to teach outside of Mexico because the stages of women’s lives that are satirized are common in Western society.

The figures of historical women in Acto II, on the other hand, are the best examples of overcoming (or succumbing to) the intellectual trap of not thinking clearly or not being able to “*conciliar su conducta con sus apetencias más secretas*” (Castellanos, 1973: 21) for individual reasons. Acto II revives women from the past who explain the personal crises that have made them famous. In contrast to Acto I, Acto II requires a kind of knowledge of Mexican history uncommon outside Mexico, even in university students. This act thus provides an opportunity for students to discover elements of Mexican women’s history. I assign oral presentations to individuals or groups on the topic of each of the simultaneously famous yet unknown ‘Mexican’ women. The six figures from Mexican history in Acto II do not appear in chronological order but rather in an improvised order depending on their contrasting themes and the dramatic demands of their stories. In addition to the extraordinary nun and poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695), the

characters are: the Malinche (16th century), elsewhere also called Doña Marina or Malintzin, Hernán Cortés' translator and mistress; doña Josefa Ortiz y Domínguez (1768-1829), a co-conspirator and spy during the Mexican revolution from Spain; Empress (la Emperatriz) Carlota (1840-1927), a ruler imposed on Mexico by Napoleon III; Rosario de la Peña (b. 1847), famous for Manuel de Acuña's love poem to her, "Nocturno a Rosario"; and la Adelita (early twentieth century), the subject of a famous *corrido* of the Mexican Revolution. These women's stories are changed in *Eterno* from fitting into popular ideas about the feminine to performances about women making their own decisions about their lives and country. We know from "Imagen" that Castellanos believes a crisis is necessary to realize the importance of authenticity, and she shows each of these women in their particular *situación límite*.

Acto II begins when the dream machine on Lupita's hair dryer is reset, and a different kind of dream is produced. Lupita enters a circus tent and finds wax figures first of Adam (Adán) and Eve (Eva), then of the six female figures from Mexican history inside. As spectator, Lupita has paid to watch the various characters tell their stories from their own perspective. The women tell versions often at odds with the traditional stories of their lives told by history, religion and myth. For example, the main outlines of the Biblical story of Adán and Eva remain unchanged in *Eterno*; there is the theme of knowledge and innocence versus the loss of paradise and the (monstrous) painful way women are punished by childbirth. But Eva's encounter with the serpent is dramatized as a positive opportunity and a rebellion, an authentic decision. There is ridiculous dialogue for humorous effect in which Eva chooses to wear clothes and to participate in fashion because she wants to, not out of shame at her nakedness. One might argue she gains self-knowledge and authenticity but still falls into the beauty trap of trying to please a man. However, that interpretation would need to account for the existence of the three traps as interconnected false choices imposed by outside forces rather than as freely chosen options.

Each character appears featured in a scene and also comments on the other characters in transitional scenes and Sor Juana is no exception.<sup>14</sup> This figure is the most

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<sup>14</sup> Although called Sor Juana in Castellanos' stage directions, the character in the main episode most likely had not taken her vows yet and should have been called Juana de Asbaje. Given the popularizing and consciousness-raising purposes of *Eterno*, this technical point was probably

complex and difficult to interpret in Castellanos's farce because her scene is written in verse and requires some knowledge of Sor Juana's writings. Students struggle to understand what transpires let alone what it means. As I explain here and in class, in essence Sor Juana represents a woman who escapes the intellectual trap preventing women from understanding themselves and making choices they will find fulfilling.

During Sor Juana's crisis, a character named Celia is meeting her lover in a dark room of the (viceregal) palace. Instead of the male lover Celia is expecting, she encounters a young Juana who has cut her hair and dressed as a man. Still in the dark Celia recites Juana's poetry to the person she believes to be her lover. When Juana praises the poem and rebuffs Celia, the latter becomes jealous, supposing her suitor to have become enamored of Juana. Celia hurls insults about Juana, thinking of her as a rival, and declares undying love to the person before her that she believes to be her lover. As with the *gracioso* Castaño in *Los empeños de una casa* (1683) who reveals himself to Pedro in the end, Juana eventually reveals herself to Celia.<sup>15</sup> Reacting strongly to Celia's insults, Juana declares the end of her life as a woman, an end to her inner conflicts, to music and to conversation with friends. Upon discovering the opinion of the court, or at least Celia's negative version of what the court says about her, Juana decides to give up palace life. This dramatization of Juana's decision accords with the little that Sor Juana wrote in *Respuesta a sor Filotea* (1691) about her decision to enter the convent but not with the popular notion that Juana had been unlucky in love and entered the nunnery for

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sacrificed for purposes of clarity and ease of comprehension. It could also be justified by the fact that the scene is a re-vision of past events so she is called Sor Juana because she is the nun remembering the moment she decided to enter the convent.

<sup>15</sup> Sor Juana's main episode in the farce can be associated with *Los empeños de una casa* (1683) because it consists of a courtly dialogue with a woman named Celia. Although Celia is a common name, Castellanos' character has characteristics shared with Sor Juana's. A bedroom farce (*comedia de enredos*), *Los empeños de una casa* involves many mistaken identities and a lengthy defense of women's intellectual life given by Doña Leonor. Doña Ana de Arellano and her brother Pedro both have unrequited love for another; they manage to sequester their beloveds in their house through purpose and accident. Celia is Ana's maid and does her bidding in an effort to gain the love of Carlos de Olmedo but she also shines a light in dark rooms where people have mistaken identities or brings the audience up to date on what is happening. In Castellanos, Celia is inauthentic but she provokes Juana to become more authentic to her intellectual gifts and proclivities.

that reason.<sup>16</sup> Juana feels betrayed by those of the court and palace who seek love over truth and knowledge and who thrive on hypocrisy. Just as important is the fact that Celia's *monsters*—her insults and mistakes— were created when her reason *slept*, out of jealousy. In my experience, a teacher of this scene not only needs to provide historical context but also to guide the students line-by-line in a commentary of the dialogue. Advanced vocabulary help can be given by teaching about the best ways to use specialized dictionaries.

In the transition to Castellanos' next scene, Lupita and the other historical figures debate the merits of what they have just seen and contrast it to the traditional story about Sor Juana's unrequited love. Juana explains that she entered the convent "ni por vocación ni desengaño, sino por sentido práctico" (Castellanos, 1975: 108). She cannot understand why everyone insists on inventing other reasons when she wrote that she was professing "empujada por 'la total repugnancia que me inspiraba el matrimonio'" (Castellanos, 1975: 108). In "Imagen" Castellanos admires Sor Juana for having been truly able to deny the conventional ("niega lo convencional") and to be her own authentic self ("logra la realización de lo auténtico") (Castellanos, "Imagen," 1973: 20).

In Castellanos' play Sor Juana almost quotes verbatim Castellanos' sentiments in "Otra vez, Sor Juana" (1963), an earlier essay than "Imagen," in which she berates those who do not believe Juana's words regarding her decision to enter the religious life. Castellanos excoriates those who have treated Juana as a neurotic for her love of letters and ideas; she notes the inconsistency of those who want to beatify Sor Juana despite the nun's secular preferences. Furthermore, Castellanos asserts that Juana's genius needs no explanation simply because she was a woman. In *Eterno* Castellanos has fun with Juana's desire not to be identified or limited by her sex, since she portrays the colonial writer as a cross-dresser who is thought to be a young man in the dark. In other words, Juana seeks to avoid being recognized as a woman but finds that being *recognized* as a man is no better. Juana's beliefs are condensed in *Eterno* into a declaration that she is headed "Adonde es/la inteligencia soledad en llamas" (Castellanos, 1975: 107). Topics for class

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<sup>16</sup> See *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Poesía lírica*, especially pp. 15-17. Ed. José Carlos González Boixo. Madrid: Cátedra, 1992.

discussion of this scene include the lack of historical models for women intellectuals, the role of the Church in censorship, and the restrictions on female education.

In the scenes with Doña Josefa, la Malinche, Rosario de la Peña, and la Adelita, their own versions of their histories stress their reasoning abilities and capacity for independent thinking. For instance, Josefa's husband, the Chief Magistrate (el Corregidor), asks Josefa why she has betrayed him to the republican side. Josefa explains: "Porque me aburría" (Castellanos, 1975: 120) fulfilling the Agente's warning in "Obertura" in Acto I that a woman's boredom was a dangerous thing. There was no device to make her dream like Lupita is doing and thus save Josefa from thinking.<sup>17</sup> In the transition between the main scene of Josefa and that of Carlota, the Empress agrees that "El aburrimiento es uno de los grandes motores de la historia" (Castellanos, 1975: 120) but she does not understand why her husband, the Emperor Maximilian, could spend hours watching the ocean. Sor Juana suggests in sympathy that Max "quizá pensaba" (Castellanos, 1975: 121). Carlota understands the value of boredom as a motivating force for historical change, but her actions betray a false play for a throne that disregards the situation in Mexico that she and Maximilian are facing. Of the women in this act, only the Empress Carlota does not reason based on the facts of her plight but instead madly and obstinately acts on her desire for an empire. She is also the one figure from Mexican women's history in Castellanos' play who is not particularly admired today. Carlota takes action, leaving for Europe, but she does not become authentic in her existential moment of crisis as dramatized. María Mercedes de Velasco interprets the scenes with Carlota as an inversion of the *marianismo-machismo* dynamic: "Al invertir los estereotipos en la pareja real, la autora los hace irrisorios y los desacraliza" (Velasco, 1990: 196). In other words, Carlota and Maximilian are impelled by motives that are less than authentic in Castellanos' play, despite the reversal of roles. Notwithstanding this exception of Carlota in Acto II who does not choose thought over emotion, the other scenes in this act stress that the choice of reason and thought over tradition, myth, and desire comes from and brings about powerful

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<sup>17</sup> Velasco finds masculine (*machista*) qualities in Josefa and Adelita. While I agree that Josefa and Adelita are portrayed as brave, clearheaded and powerful, I want to resist seeing these qualities as *machistas*. While concern for politics and war have often not been considered a feminine quality, both do affect women and men. The two sexes have responded actively to conflicts in society and politics. If Castellanos portrays these women as brave, she most likely wanted to rescue them from the discourse of *the feminine* that would require a love interest or passivity in their portrait.



female figures who live authentic lives. And Carlota, while undoubtedly famous, nevertheless was supposed to have died after bouts of insanity; one could interpret her character as already plagued by monsters, set loose by the sleep of reason. The revenant is after all, confused, haughty and unsympathetic.

Performances of the play have often left out the second act due to the heavy demands it makes on the audience's knowledge of Mexican women's history. But since in a classroom our goal is to foment such knowledge, I especially recommend scenes from Act II for teaching. Nevertheless, I caution those planning to teach it that the changing states of knowledge about historical figures such as Doña Josefa Domínguez, Rosario de la Peña, or Adelita, will challenge any teacher. However, the lesson that history is not static or monolithic is an important idea for students to understand, probably a more important message than any concrete detail about the women in the play. The extensive research about Sor Juana's life in Octavio Paz's *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o Las Trampas de la Fe* (1982)—and by those who have been inspired negatively and positively by his monumental study—is perhaps the most prominent example of how ideas about a character's life have changed since *Eterno* was published in 1975.

Another example of change in Mexican women's history lies in the episode regarding Adelita. In general Mexican culture she often represents *soldaderas* as a group. Her scene cannot be well understood without possessing some historical knowledge about the Mexican Revolution. The spirit of exaggeration and satire that pervades the whole play appears here in the characters of two nameless generals who promote each other, reciprocally, while they get drunk on tequila. However, student reports on Adelita usually inform the class that her name refers to a Mexican *corrido* (a popular song) written during the Revolution by Sargent Antonio del Río Armenta, according to the research by Herrera-Sobek published in 1990. Río Armenta wrote the song about his love for Adela Velarde, a woman who was not a *soldadera* but a nurse. Unfortunately, this information about Adelita being a nurse and not a *soldadera* was not available to Castellanos and thus does not inform the play. It is therefore more useful for teaching this particular scene to assign a general introduction to the chaos of the Mexican Revolution and the role of women as soldiers and as camp followers in the war rather than a student report on la Adelita.

Acto II suddenly comes to a conclusion due to a blackout in the whole area. The dream device no longer functions and Lupita's hair is still wet on her wedding day. Increasingly desperate about having her hair styled for her wedding, Lupita tries on wigs, although the symbolism of fake hair makes her uncomfortable. With each wig, a new scene (or scenes) ensues in which Lupita fulfills a role or works in a profession. Pamela McNab sees Acto III as episodes in which Lupita acts out "alternatives to traditional domesticity" (McNab, 2000: 83). The five wigs Lupita tries on each have names. When she wears "The Life of a Single Woman" ("Jornada de la soltera"), we read Castellanos' poem of the same name. With the wig "The Soiled Flower" ("Flor de fango"), prostitution and men's role in it are dramatized. "The Usurper" ("Usurpadora") transforms Lupita into a kept woman in the process of being abandoned by her married lover. Wearing the wig "Woman of Action" ("Mujer de acción") Lupita works as a reporter who interviews three prominent women: a pianist (The Celebrity, "La Celebridad"); a political operative of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, la Funcionaria); and a female astronomer (la Astrónoma). "At the Edge of the Storm" ("Al filo del agua") is the name of the fifth wig which converts Lupita into a teacher or professor.

Many nightmares appear in Acto III, from the sadness of enforced solitude to the poverty of discrimination against women in STEM fields.<sup>18</sup> One such scene from Acto III that contrasts reason and nightmares is that of the Female Astronomer: She has discovered a new star. Lupita arrives to interview the suddenly famous scientist who works from home. The astronomer is happy at her discovery because she hopes it might bring enough money to fix her leaking roof. Clearly a thinker, the Astronomer also lives alone with her cats and her telescope, an outsider living on the margins of society and the scientific establishment. My students do not always understand the humor in her behavior or why Lupita insists on reporting on her personal life more than on the scientific discovery itself. They ask: Why would the Astronomer be so marginalized? Why is she so poor? They believe she should be treated equally. It is comforting to see how some things have changed for my students who do not see why female scientists in the past would have been treated differently from male ones.

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<sup>18</sup> STEM is an acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

The last scene of the play, featuring a wig called “Al filo del agua,” is one of several entry points through which Castellanos critiques modern Mexican civilization as much as or more than globalized, internationally shared culture. These criticisms of Mexican culture rebound onto elements asserted by philosophers and essayists such as Samuel Ramos (1934) or Octavio Paz (1950) to be intrinsic to Mexican society (*la mexicanidad*) and not just accidents of the Mexican panorama. “Al filo del agua” reveals a satiric view of *la mexicanidad* as it relates to feminism and woman’s self-understanding. At the same time, the final segment of Acto III is metatheatrical like Acto II in which the episodes were plays within the play performed for Lupita’s benefit, but “Al filo del agua” is metatheatrical in a different way. The characters discuss the very play they are performing in, *a la Pirandello*.

In “Al filo del agua,” Professor Lupita tries to galvanize her socialite group of students to protest against the lies about Mexican womanhood found in a new play called *El eterno femenino* written by a woman named Rosario Castellanos. After the students mistakenly identify the author several times as other Mexican women with the first name Rosario, Lupita herself erroneously asserts that Castellanos has written (the) *Chilam Balam*, a series of collections of Mayan myths, laws, and history. These anthologies are often published with the name of the region they pertain to, such as the most famous one, the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries). Castellanos’ actual novel is *Balún Canán* (1957), whose title means ‘nine guardians.’ Lupita and the four women who speak in her class discuss the best course of action to take against the play’s outrageous treatment of Mexican femininity. The speaking students represent (stereo)typical women’s reactions to feminism; either they condemn it (Señora 1), praise it (Señora 4), or fall somewhere in-between (Señoras 2 and 3). For her part, Lupita hopes to provoke discussion (and perhaps a solution) by proposing to the class three options for dealing with feminism: keeping and modernizing Mexican mores; imitating their sisters in the U.S.A.;<sup>19</sup> or finding a third path for the third world (Castellanos, 1975: 193-94). Lupita seems to suggest the second option, but the final words are given to Señora 4 in favor of a third way. Señora 4 proposes that this choice involves the difficult task of women re-inventing themselves rather than accepting notions imposed on them. In other words, women must

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<sup>19</sup> For information on Castellanos’ opinion on the U.S. feminist movement, see “La liberación de la mujer, aquí,” pp. 63-67. *El uso de la palabra* (1982). Originally published in *Excélsior*, 5 de septiembre 1970.

think about who they want to be and what they want to do. Rather than discussing Lupita's alternatives for action, however, some women in class become hysterical, screaming for their mother and crying, while others sing protest songs. The opposition between reasoned thought (Lupita's options) and nightmarish chaos appears in the "pandemonium" that results from the Señoras' unwillingness to agree on any route for women in modern Mexico. When thinking goes out the window, no concerted action is possible. The intellectual trap caught Lupita's whole class in its snare. Serna infers a connection to Mexican national character. The critic asserts that the Señoras do not decide on action together not only because they fear taking responsibility for themselves but also because: "a algunas las imbuje el pesimismo de lo poco que se puede hacer en este país porque aunque se cambia la superficie permanece idéntica la raíz" (Serna, 2014: 466). Readings about the debate over Mexican character should perhaps be assigned in order to avoid clichés and stereotypes but I have been successful by providing summaries in class as needed.

Discussing *El eterno femenino* in these final scenes of *Eterno* is mirrored again by being taught in my classroom. My students, male and female, find "Al filo del agua" easy to analyze and amusing. They identify with the classroom context and with the question of what they should do with their lives. However, they rarely speak in an individual response to one or all of the Señoras. After all, the Señoras belong to caricature and their responses appear schematic and exaggerated rather than individualized and heartfelt.

In reaction to the chaos on stage when Professor Lupita asks her students to define themselves with regard to feminism, Lupita grabs the wig off her head and throws it on the ground, stamping on it for good measure. The beauty salon returns to the stage. The Dueña demands payment from Lupita for the damaged wig. Lupita replies demanding that her hair be styled, as it is still dripping in locks around her face. The Dueña dares Lupita to style her own hair, saying Lupita's hair is Lupita's problem, not hers. Lupita declares she is capable of doing it and stares in defiance. But then she questions that what has happened is her problem alone. Her repeated question, "¿mi problema?" brings the play to a close (Castellanos, 1975: 197).

## CONCLUSIÓN

Overall, we have seen that Castellanos' feminism and pro-woman stance inspired her to rewrite found narratives of female submission and domination as stories of woman's resistance and independent thinking. Examples of both have been hidden from view and/or distorted in mainstream Western culture so Castellanos teases them out to surprise us. In Acto I, Lupita experiences major female life events like marriage and raising children. She is intelligent but for a variety of reasons and circumstances, she engages too much with others' expectations of her. Trapped by society's demand that she cultivate her appearance and sacrifice herself for her family first and foremost, she acts in contorted and bizarre fashion. Pamela McNab stresses that "the conflict between inner truth and exterior appearances marks all of these roles" (McNab, 2000: 83). This idea is particularly true of the beauty trap diverting women from authentic actions. In contrast to U.S. feminism's focus on advertising and media campaigns or consumerism as creating false or impossible goals blocking women's genuine physical self-image, Castellanos explores scenes of women competing for men against other women when they have excessive concern about their own attractiveness. Intrinsically related to the negativity of measuring oneself on a scale of beauty is the ethical trap in which women believe that their greatest ideal is to sacrifice themselves for others. The idea is that women should never attempt to satisfy their own needs. In Acto I, self-sacrifice is always related to children. While students may be aware of the greater importance of family in Hispanic culture than in Anglo U.S.A. culture, through this play they acquire a more nuanced view. They learn how Castellanos has responded to the challenge of the cultural prominence of marriage and family by separating out and valuing self-respect as distinct from the overvaluation of self-sacrifice for women.

Castellanos' second act reveals Lupita as a spectator of women profiled in discourses of history. As an audience of one, Lupita watches as women from the past, both well known and little known, return to life and tell their versions of a crucial moment in their lives. Their existential crises provide them with opportunities to correct the historical record and show that they have become authentically themselves, rather than allowing scripts of the feminine to dominate such discourses. The metatheatricality of these scenes about Sor Juana and other Mexican women deconstructs popular representations of women's role in society. For my classes, students research and give reports on the

standard representations of these women, as I mentioned above, except with the Adelita and Eve characters.<sup>20</sup> Afterward, we analyze together the differences between the typical view and the presentation in *Eterno*. A comparison of the normal image of these women in Mexican history and/or common knowledge to Castellanos' parodies of them teaches my students about the distortions of history, education, and the media. It is ironic but true that I have found that the study of the Mexican author's caricatures and exaggerations help to highlight for my students the more subtle distortions frequently seen in popular representations of women from history today.

Wigs cover Lupita's head in Acto III and transform her in absurd ways. As a new prostitute Lupita learns about her working conditions as if she were an intern. Unlike her prostitute avatar, Lupita the mistress hides behind a dream of love and the trap of trying to make herself more beautiful for her lover. When she becomes a kept woman, Lupita acquires from her maid an understanding of the likely denouement of her living arrangement now that her married lover does not appear as regularly as before. Castellanos explains the beauty trap in her essay as caused by men: "Antítesis de Pigmalión el hombre no aspira, al través de la belleza, a convertir una estatua en un ser vivo, sino un ser vivo en una estatua" (Castellanos, "Imagen," 1973: 12). My students find the discussion of the prostitute and the kept woman extremely remote and literary, in the sense that the situation seems distant from reality and reminiscent of books and movies. Next, Lupita is transformed into a reporter and follows her boss' orders to write her stories in order to mold her female interviewees into predictable feminine types. Finally, as teacher Lupita tries to promote a defense of traditional Mexican womanhood against what she sees as an attack on it in *El eterno femenino*. Her students not only fail to take action, they fundamentally disagree with each other about what that action should be. Few of them are able to handle the idea of freedom from the script they have been given for being a woman. In contrast to the first scenes in this act, the reporter's interviews and the teacher's class are accessible and make for self-reflection by my students on journalism and education as discourses contributing to the idea of an *eternal feminine*.

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<sup>20</sup> Eve is present in this act, but the students have sufficient basic knowledge of her story to understand the changes Castellanos has made without student reports.

Finally, the three acts consist of Lupita's adventures when she is not thinking. The machine forces her to dream outlandish adventures in which discourses of the feminine cause her suffering or encourage her to be duplicitous. Whether bride, daughter, mother, a historical figure or a woman earning a living, Lupita strives for happiness and success but only finds nightmares of infelicity. Castellanos' essays are useful for interpreting *Eterno* because, as Marta Lamas asserts: "Aunque *El eterno femenino* reúne muchas de las críticas que Rosario ya venía realizando, su feminismo es más frontal en sus artículos periodísticos" (Lamas, 2017: 38). Castellanos portrays in *Eterno* the ethical trap of self-sacrifice as endemic to stories of motherhood but in her essays the writer finds it crystallized in many female roles, attitudes, and professions.<sup>21</sup> Women do not accept the intellectual trickery of society in *Eterno* because its characters by and large avoid the attractions of hiding one's intelligence or of giving up schooling to attract men. For instance, though the mother (Lupita I) tries to keep her daughter (Lupita II) from the university, this stance is represented as clearly ridiculous. Aptly represented in the farce by Sor Juana, women intellectuals are more intelligent than discourses about women would make them appear. Thus, teaching *Eterno* rewards teachers and students with surprising twists on the cliché of women's ignorance and lack of intelligence. It is also true that to understand the play, the students must use their intellectual skills, and doing so will be its own reward.

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<sup>21</sup> See especially Castellanos (2006), "La abnegación, una virtud loca."

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