

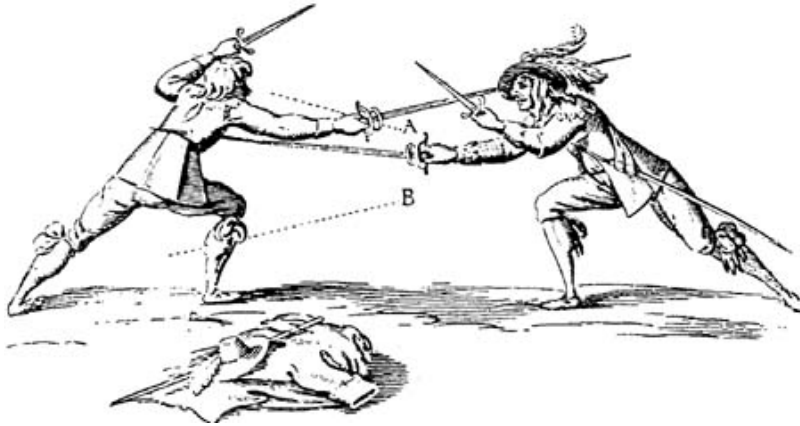
*The Force of Habit (La fuerza de la costumbre)*  
by Guillén de Castro y Bellvís

Dramaturgy packet compiled by Rhonda Sharrah

Based on the translation by  
The UCLA Working Group on the *Comedia* in Translation and Performance  
with an introduction by Laura Muñoz and Payton Phillips Quintanilla



Guillén de Castro's *The Force of Habit* is a play that asks: Can gender be learned and unlearned? Félix and Hipólita, two siblings separated at birth, are brought up in the habits of the opposite gender. Kept close by his mother's side, Félix is cautious and sensitive. Hipólita, trained by her father on the battlefield, is fiercely attached to her sword. When the family is reunited, the father insists on making the siblings conform to traditional gender roles, but they discover old habits die hard. Will a change of clothes make the man—and woman? Could a change of heart help them along? As habit clashes with tradition, desire conquers all in this fast-paced comedy of identity that explores the limitations of rigid gender roles in one unconventional 17<sup>th</sup>-century family.



## Synopsis

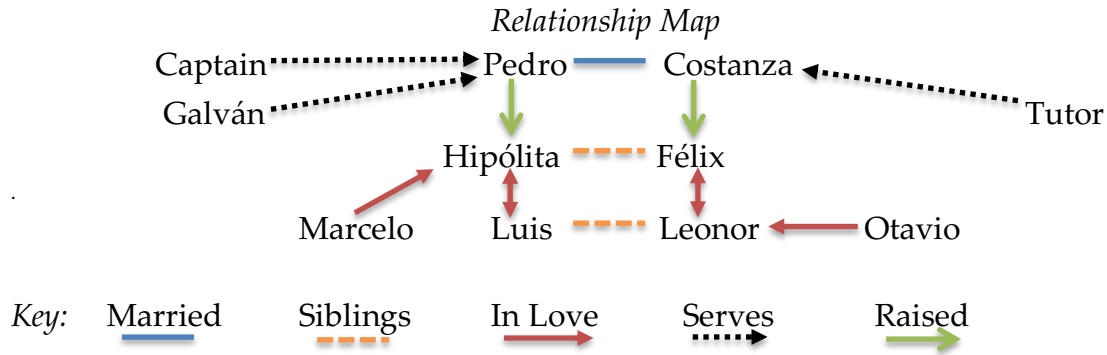
**Before the play begins:** Twenty years ago, Pedro and Costanza began a secret affair, eventually discovered by Costanza's brother, who challenged Pedro to a fight. After Pedro tragically killed her brother, he left Costanza pregnant with a son, Félix, while he fled with their daughter, Hipólita. Costanza kept Félix sheltered by her side while Pedro raised Hipólita as a soldier (and a man) on the battlefields of Flanders.

**Act I:** The play opens with Pedro finally returning home. The parents are chagrined to realize that they have each raised their children in the traditional habits of the opposite gender. Both siblings resist being forced to change their ways, but when they meet Luis and his sister, Leonor, they are each instantly smitten. The parents hope that love will be the motivation to change their children.

**Act II:** The siblings' struggles with their historically expected gender roles anger their father. When Otavio and Marcelo cause trouble trying to woo Leonor and Hipólita, Félix ends up humiliated by Otavio, and Hipólita gets into a physical fight with Galván, the family servant. Félix swears to restore his honor, Galván vows revenge against Hipólita for humiliating him, and Hipólita's feelings for Luis make her feel newly vulnerable.

**Act III:** As payback, Galván tricks Hipólita into a fit of jealousy over Luis. When she challenges Luis to a duel, they instead engage in an ambiguous physical struggle that turns sexual, leaving Hipólita confused and distraught, but willing to change for love. Meanwhile, Félix defeats Otavio in a duel and finally becomes "manly" in the eyes of his society. The play ends with the siblings conforming to the contemporary expectations of their genders, and both engaged to marry, but with a lingering sense of loss for Hipólita.

## Characters



### Guillén de Castro y Bellvís (1569–1631)

From a young age, the nobleman Guillén de Castro was highly involved with the literary world of his native Valencia, an influential Mediterranean trading city in Spain. After a period of military service in Italy, Castro moved to Madrid, where he befriended the famous playwright Lope de Vega. Castro remained active in literary circles in Madrid until his death in 1631.

Castro's plays range from the mythological to the urban. He was not afraid to tackle controversial subjects on stage, including regicide, bigamy, and sexuality. His works explore the formation of identity, power and authority, and the troubled domestic relationships of husbands and wives. His skill in adapting popular stories, such as the medieval ballads on El Cid or the exploits of Don Quijote, and his unflinching presentation of urban life make him one of the most interesting playwrights of Spanish *comedia*.

## Contexts

*The Comedia*: The *comedia* developed in Spain in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Though influenced by Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the Spanish *comedia* includes not only comic plays, but also histories, tragedies, and tragicomedies. Roughly three thousand lines, they are usually divided into three *jornadas*, or acts. Plots move quickly across time and space, without much regard for the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place. The plays are written in verse, and employ different forms for different characters and situations. Hugely popular in their time, over ten thousand plays survive today.

*Original Performance Conditions* : The *comedia* was performed in rectangular courtyard spaces known as *corrales* (see image below). Built between houses of two or three stories, the *corral* offered seating based on social position. A performance would have included the play as well as songs, dances, and *entremeses*, or short comic interludes, before, after, and between the acts.



*Theatrical Cross-Dressing*: While cross-dressing plots were common in the *comedia*, Félix and Hipólita are unconventional even within that tradition. The successful cross-dressers in most plays normally do so for a short time and with a specific goal in mind, and then easily return to their normal clothing, names, and behavior once the job is done. In *The Force of Habit*, the siblings arrive onstage at ease in the expected dress and manners of the opposite sex, and their struggle to conform to their parents' demands is long, difficult, and painful.

## Themes

*The Force of Habit* raises complex questions about the importance of nature vs. nurture and the power of habit to shape identity. As we watch the siblings Félix and Hipólita comically fail to perform their “natural” roles — wearing high-heeled shoes or wielding a sword — we are encouraged to look around at other characters and evaluate the relative success or failure of their various performances. When Don Pedro rages at his son and attacks him, he may be performing a certain kind of masculinity, while also failing to be a good father. Once something as seemingly basic as gender enters a state of flux, identity categories of all kinds come unmoored and reduced to mere custom. Otavio and Luis agree that nurture seems to come out ahead:

LUIS            That’s how strong habit becomes  
                      after a long time.

OTAVIO        It is powerfully strong!  
                      More than popes or kings—  
                      beyond laws  
                      human or divine!  
                      Its force is beyond words.

## Staging Challenges

*Act 1, Scene 2 – Hipólita’s Transformation:*

In her first appearance, Hipólita’s gendered performance appears to be more internalized and complete than that of Félix—even her parents initially refer to her as a young man, as opposed to a woman with traditional masculine qualities—and her physical, psychological, and emotional suffering as a result of the switch is more severe. How do you portray this journey in light of the complicated questions raised about her gender?

*Act 3, Scenes 6-8 – Masculinity and Violence:*

Throughout the play, Félix’s father and the other men both threaten him with violence and encourage him to become more violent in order to prove he is a man. At the same time, the culmination of Hipólita’s transformation comes after an ambiguous offstage encounter, quite possibly violent, with the man she loves. This scene is complicated in that Hipólita relates it to her mother after the fact: did Hipólita willingly allow herself to be overpowered, was the sexual act entirely nonconsensual, or was it something in

between? In the play, does masculinity equate with violent dominance and femininity with submission, and does the play itself align with that view or hold it up for critique?

*Act 3, Scene 9 – (Un)happy Ending:*

After three acts that brazenly challenge traditional presentations of gender, modern audiences may be surprised when the play ends with heterosexual marriage allegedly curing the siblings of their gender-bending ills. Modern productions are presented with a similar dilemma as in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Measure for Measure*, other plays where the traditional comic ending is complicated by the seeming triumph of gender hierarchies.

## Production History

The date of first performance is unknown; the play was first published in 1625 in Castro's second volume of collected plays. It later became a likely source for Massinger, Fletcher, and Beaumont's *Love's Cure, or The Martial Maid*, which follows the plot of the siblings raised in their opposite gender, but more strongly condemns the male characters and allows the daughter to retain some of her gender flexibility at the end.

## Further Reading

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