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Women and Servants

Lope De Vega

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Women and Servants Lope De Vega
Lope de Vega's Women and Servants (Mujeres y criados, c. 1613-14), newly translated by Barbara Fuchs, depicts a sophisticated urban culture of self-fashioning and social mobility, as the titular figures outsmart fathers and masters to marry those they love. Recently rediscovered in an overlooked 17th-century manuscript in Madrid's Biblioteca Nacional, the comedia emerges from its 400-year sleep with a remarkable freshness: it presents a world of suave dissimulation and accommodation, where creaky notions of honor and vengeance have virtually no place. Full protagonists of their own stories, women and servants take control of their fates despite their assigned roles in a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Set in Madrid, Women and Servants tells the story of Luciana and Violante, the two daughters of the gentleman Florencio. The young women are in love with Teodoro and Claridan, secretary and valet, respectively, to Count Prospero. As the play opens, the Count decides to pursue Luciana. At the same time, Florencio's friend Emiliano proposes that Violante should marry his eligible son, Don Pedro. Presented with favorable alliances they do not want, the two sisters must manipulate the action to favor instead the men they love. Violante uses her wit and rhetorical prowess to demolish Don Pedro's pretensions, while Luciana concocts an elaborate plot in which almost all the characters find themselves entangled. Meanwhile, a subplot follows the loves and jealousies of the servants Ines, Lope, and Mars. The play's urban setting is crucial to the action, as much of the women's freedom comes from their location in Madrid and their ability to meet their lovers in public spaces such as the park, away from parental supervision. The oscillation between scenes in the house, the park, and the street allows Lope to explore how different characters negotiate reputation and visibility, from the cowardly miles gloriosus Mars, to the noble Prospero, who is reduced to spying behind trees, to the sisters whose "exercise" takes them far from their father's solicitous eye."

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