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Freedom and Constraint in Courtship across the Boundary of Rank: The “Jest Unseen” of Love Letters in Two Gentlemen of Verona and Lope de Vega’s El Perro del Hortelano (Dog in a Manger)

Both *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Lope de Vega’s *El Perro del Hortelano (Dog in a Manger)* take up a condition of subjection and explore its effects on those above and below on the ladder of service. Each play looks at the “servant” of the high-ranking woman as dominated, willing to turn and twist according to the will of their mistress, but also expose the high ranking lady herself suffering substantial constraint. In Shakespeare’s *Two Gentleman*, the fantasy of escape from this hierarchy becomes more important than the courtly scenes illustrating the problems of status hierarchy and difference, especially in love, although this fantasy is sharply qualified in the final scene.

The implication of both these plays is that the ladder of service is a ladder of domination, and that there is no liberty at the top of the ladder, and especially not for women, where the rulers and their heirs are shown to be also constrained and lacking in freedom. The social order itself in both plays is represented as dominating (in Pettit’s sense) individuals within it, and comedy as a genre participates in both representing that degree of domination, and also imagining an escape from it. This double domination – the domination of the servant by the master or mistress, and the constraints imposed by the social hierarchy on the individual of high rank – are vividly dramatized by the theatergram (to use Louise Clubb’s term) of the lover made to write a love letter to himself. Thus both plays dramatize the need for liberty while suggesting that comic compromises that appear to reconcile desire and the social order do not in fact allow the protagonists to escape from social dilemma created by a reliance on domination to create order.

Both Silvia in Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Diana in Lope’s play *Dog in a Manger* (1613-1615) use a device that tricks the male “servants” whom they love, and use this ruse to get around the limitations placed to prevent them, as women of a high rank, from courting men of lower standing. Each of them causes the man she loves to write a love letter to himself, avoiding having it marked as being from the high born lady herself. Silvia in Shakespeare’s comedy is the daughter of the Duke of Milan, though, perhaps to convey the extent to which this social position stands far above that of the two gentlemen of the play, both Proteus and Panthino in I.3 refer to the Duke as “the Emperor”. Diana is the Countess (Condesa) of Belflor, an heiress who rules her household. Silvia, as the daughter to the Duke, is not free to woo Valentine, her “servant,” who is a gentleman, but nonetheless significantly below Silvia in rank, and below her on the ladder of service and prestige. He is not an example of the kind of match her father would accept. Both women are severely constrained in their freedom to marry, and both plays include the ridiculous but class-appropriate lovers who must be avoided. The extent of the limitations placed on each are symbolized by key plot elements: in *Two Gentleman*, Silvia and Valentine must escape the court entirely by running away to the woods, while in *Dog in a Manger*, the two acceptable suitors, who are also rivals and one of whom is a relative, team up to try to kill the secretary who is receiving the favor of Diana [rather more like the reaction of the relatives in *Duchess of Malfi*].

These two scenes and situations suggest that notions of liberty and freedom from domination must include understanding of bondage of both literal and figurative kinds. I hope to explore the different uses to which each play puts this theatergram by focusing in part on the kinds of constraint that prevail in the highly ranked society of the imaginary aristocracies of the plays. Each play is concerned to show that the character with the most power (Diana) or most likely to inherit positions of wealth and rule (Silvia) is as much disempowered by rank as liberated by it; while the parallel sense of constraint on the part of the “servants” shown to be, especially in the Spanish play, even more potentially destructive. How the “danger” and threat represented by seeking free choice

in marriage across the boundaries of rank and status are negotiated in these comedies, and with what effect, will contribute to understanding how drama represents and enacts constraint while using wit, fiction, ruses and deceit to trick the audience and the characters into believing briefly in a world where these constraints can be evaded if not abolished entirely.

In addition to exploring this theatergram in the two plays, I will also briefly explore its origins in pastoral romance, especially in Jorge de Montemayor's *Diana*, already identified as a Spanish source for *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.