Creating identity in the face of the Other: A Levinian reading of Luis Vélez de Guevara's La serrana de la Vera

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Creating Identity in the Face of the Other: A Levinian Reading of

Luis Vélez de Guevara’s La serrana de la Vera

Elizabeth Anne Jensen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Creating Identity in the Face of the Other: A Levinian reading of Luis Vélez de Guevara’s *La serrana de la Vera*

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Master of Arts

Among the works of theater of the Spanish Golden Age which feature a *mujer varonil*, Luis Vélez de Guevara’s play, *La serrana de la Vera* (1613), is particularly provocative. The intensity and ambiguity of the dual nature of its female protagonist, Gila, has been the subject of much recent scholarly investigation. The staging of the play lends itself to a Levinian reading, a new approach to this particular text and theater of the Golden Age in general. Emmanuel Levinas moves beyond metaphysics, phenomenology and intentionality to posit ethics as first philosophy. Levinas explains that the face of the Other is a revelation before which my own presence is an epiphany and summons me into an ethical relationship before I am aware of my own being. A correct ethical relationship is maintained only when the Other is allowed her absolute alterity, otherwise the Other is subsumed into the matrix of the Self and the result is suffering. A Levinian reading of *La serrana de la Vera* moves beyond exploring systems of class and gender and discovers that the suffering in the play can be traced to face-to-face encounters in which individuals are unable or unwilling to truly see the face of the Other.

Keywords: Luis Vélez de Guevara, serrana, Emmanuel Levinas, other, Golden Age Theater, Gila, face
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Introduction

Less than a three-hour drive west of Madrid is a comarca called La Vera where the legend of a local woman turned serial killer has circulated for centuries: “La serrana de la Vera,” or, “the Mountain Woman of la Vera.” The woman possessed, as legends often require, exceptional beauty, but what set her apart was her extraordinary virility, her manliness if you will. With her crossbow, or her bare hands, or her rifle (depending on the recounting you come across), she could live completely off the land and no woman nor man rivaled her for athleticism. The pivotal moment of the tale occurred when this local woman was irrevocably betrayed by a lover. The maiden huntress was rent with agony and shame. Anger and vengeance propelled her to leave the town and take to the hills, to live on her own in a cave in the mountainside. There, if a man happened into her vicinity and the mood struck her, she would approach him, seduce him, bed him, and murder him. The skulls of her victims littered the floor of her cave. Some versions end with her capture and execution; others claim she eluded the authorities, and still others that she continues to roam the mountains.

In 1598, the monstrously prolific playwright of the Spanish Golden Age, Lope de Vega, wrote a play concerning the legend which he named La serrana de la Vera.1 His comedia begins with a dozen lovestruck souls, includes one woman who turns mildly homicidal, and ends with a delightful multi-couple wedding. While his style is masterful, Lope de Vega’s plot is rather disappointing, but perfectly in line with his passionate belief in the inevitable dependence of

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1 In Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Study of the Mujer Varonil, McKendrick determines which one of a handful of popular extant versions of the legend Lope would have drawn inspiration from for his play: specifically a traditional ballad entitled Romance de la serrana de la Vera. She also effectively argues that Lope was “the [first dramatist] adaptor of the Romance de la serrana de la Vera and the creator of the female bandit of the theatre” (276-279).
woman on man and marriage as the natural order of human happiness as decreed by God 
*Women* 131).

A playwright of the same period, Luis Vélez de Guevara, wrote a much more thought-
provoking work of theater with the same title concerning the legend in 1613. The *serrana* that we meet in his play is truly singular. Her name is Gila and her entrance is spectacular. Amber hair flies away from her bronzed face revealing intense, black, almond-shaped eyes and blood-
red lips. She is dressed for the hunt with a sash, a dagger tucked into her tunic, and a rifle under her plumed saddle. Punctured by three stakes and held aloft, the pelts of a boar, a wolf, and a bear—all of which Gila single-handedly brought to a grisly demise—fly above the company of villagers who sing Gila’s praises to the sound of drums. She is so beautiful that the very air that touches the young woman falls in love with her. More important to Gila, however, is that no woman or man can best her in the hunt, in swordplay, or in contests of speed or strength or agility.

In her 1974 book, *Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Study of the Mujer Varonil*, Melveena McKendrick provides an excellent comparison of how the role of the *bandolera* is played out in Lope’s and Vélez de Guevara’s theatrical treatments of the same legend. Lope crafts an accumulation of motivating factors and psychological build-up to propel Leonarda into banditry, then errs on the side of generosity, dismissing Leonarda’s crimes as *yerros de amor*, pardoning her in full through the King’s lips after she openly repents and accepts her femininity. Gila, in contrast, is driven to madness by a sudden crisis, commits unspeakable crimes, and is horrifically executed. McKendrick opines, “That Luis Vélez disapproves of Gila there can be no doubt” (117). Both *serranas* are extremely “mannah,” but while Leonarda eventually falls in love, Gila’s sexuality and gender remain ambiguous and
transgressive and the subject of much study. McKendrick warns that modern observers need to carefully consider the ethos of the seventeenth-century theater before automatically ascribing a woman’s rejection of marriage to lesbian tendencies (“Women” 116). Emilie Bergmann in “Folklore as Queer,” however, gives an insightful look at how Vélez’s *serrana* disrupts binary categories of gender identity and sexuality from the very first scene. Gila is not simply a *mujer vestida de hombre* who can throw off her manly disguise at the end of the play to neatly bring balance to the patriarchal hegemony, but an extreme version of the *mujer varonil*: a biological female who is psychologically hypermasculine. Bergmann cites such phrases as “recognized as a transsexual,”2 a “hermaphroditic character,”3 and “butch rather than just *varonil.*”4 She goes on to say that a number of scholars have “produced convincing arguments that Gila’s adulation of Queen Isabel is homoerotic and would have been perceived as such by Vélez’s audience” (71). J.A. Drinkwater, in turn, diagnoses her as a “classic hysteric” (80), and Darci Strother describes her as, at least initially, a “complete individual” who lacked neither a male nor a female side, and that only accepting a marriage would upset the “balance of Gila’s male-female equilibrium” (169). A number of other scholars have produced thoughtful studies concerning the historicity of the legend and the mythological underpinnings of the *serrana.*5 To this point no one has yet

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3 Mujica (226)
4 Mujica (230)
approached Gila through Emmanuel Levinas’s theory of ethics as first philosophy: that our identity is created and constantly shaped by face-to-face encounters with the Other—that the ethical relation is prior even to self-awareness. Such an approach reveals that honoring the ethical relationship summoned by each confrontation between characters in the play brings peace and wholeness, while ignoring the primordial ethical responsibility to allow for radical alterity in the face of the other results in suffering.

The first word of Vélez’s play does not belong to Gila. It is spoken, instead, by an old widower, Giraldo, a white-haired laborer standing on the earth looking up into the face of a young, gallant soldier, a captain in the Royal army who has just arrived on horseback. His first word is telling: “Si.” The outcome of the play, the happily ever after, the well- or ill-being of the characters who follow depend upon the answer to the implied question in the word “si.” Will the denouement revolve around a trait the ancient father hopes to find expressed in himself? If I behave bravely enough, if I am rich enough, if I run quickly enough… Is it an exclamation of impossibility and thus despair? If I were younger, if the day had not dawned, if only my wife were here… I posit that the final scene of this drama depends upon the question of being prompted by such face-to-face encounters, on how the rider defines himself, specifically through the Levinian lens of “ethics as first philosophy” (Gschwandtner 43). Giraldo confirms the ontological meaning of the question, “Si sois…” In this face-to-face confrontation, the old man and the young captain, Don Lucas, must work out who they are in regards to the Other. Will the young captain allow the face of the Other to exist first and awaken in him a sense of responsibility and permit that awakening to inform his own identity, as Emmanuel Levinas

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6 Also “Ethics as First Philosophy” first published in Justifications de l’éthique (Bruxelles: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles), 1984, pp. 41-55.
demands we do, or will his own Self come first, prompting him to dig in his heels, Heideggerian style, perhaps resulting in violence against the Other?

**Levinas and First Philosophy**

Levinas felt great affinity for the radical intellectual projects of Husserl and Heidegger, who helped mark the end of the metaphysics of presence. He was inspired by Husserl’s phenomenology and indebted to Heidegger for his work on *Dasein*, or “being-in-the-world,” but as the years passed, he found himself at odds with some key elements of each philosophical system. Heidegger continued to think of being as a coming-into-presence, still an egology (or study of the ego) reflected in how he subordinated the relation with the Other to the relation with Being. Levinas argues, contrary to Heidegger, that the Other exists before language, before rational thought, even before consciousness. He uses the term “face” to denote “the way in which the presentation of the Other to me exceeds all idea of the Other in me… My presence before the face is therefore an epiphany… to be oneself is to be for the other” (Hand 5). Levinas explains that the plea the face of the Other makes of us is: Don’t kill me. He wrote in “Beyond Intentionality:” “The sense of the human is not to be measured by presence, not even by self-presence… The face signifies in the fact of summoning, of *summoning me* - in its nudity or its destitution, in everything that is precarious in questioning, in all the hazards of mortality - to the unresolved alternative between Being and Nothingness, a questioning which, *ipso facto*, *summons me*” (112-13). Levinas posited that the flaw in western philosophical traditions is that they start with the Self and then move out to the world and Others, Others become a reflection of the Self or a puzzle to be worked out and that Otherness leads to negative feelings that range from simple discomfort to anger and hate. We sometimes try to control the Otherness in the
Other by dominating them. Even in what we consider loving relationships we often try to satisfy our own needs through the existence of the Other, and often attempt to change or control that Other or make them more like ourselves in order to achieve our own satisfaction. Ultimately, this desire to dominate Others or make them more like ourselves leads to suffering: exploitation, war, colonialism, slavery, genocide, rape, and other social ills.

Levinas explains that it is the Other that exists before language, before rational thought, even before consciousness. He uses the term “face” to denote “the way in which the presentation of the other to me exceeds all idea of the other in me… My presence before the face is therefore an epiphany” (Hand 5). Instead of considering an encounter with the Other as a chance to make sense of them, often leading to discomfort as we work to puzzle out their differences and make them understandable or relatable, we should consider an encounter with the Other as revelation. Seeing Others as revealing themselves allows the Other to remain absolutely Other, and not subsumed into the matrix of the Self. Levinas explains that we can only develop a sense of Self because of encounters with Others. Our knowledge of ourselves and our identity expand with every interaction with Others. The face of the Other is the first source of sensation and awareness. It is the first philosophy. When we conceive of the Other as existing completely separately from ourselves, that gives them the right to exist and invites us to work ethically toward them and even love them. “To be oneself is to be for the other” (Hand 5). The struggle against this awakening of responsibility, again, leads to all sorts of unhappiness and abuse.

**Giraldo then Gila Encounter the Captain**

The old man who opens Vélez de Guevara’s play is Giraldo, Gila’s father. The soldier, Don Lucas de Caravajal, captain in the royal army, legally represents the king and queen and can
commandeer anything he desires. Knowing this makes Giraldo’s first words all the more remarkable. He says, “Si sois capitán del rey, / seldo muy enhorabuena, /que no me puede dar pena / el serville a toda ley; / pero en mi casa jamás / se aloxó nadie, y sospecho / que el conexo no le ha hecho, / ni el alcalde” (1-8).7 Two things, at least, inspire his audacity. First, Giraldo feels himself to be at least as noble of heart and blood as the captain, his age and standing as an old Christian8 merit Don Lucas’s respect. Second, no matter what he says, his daughter, Gila, will not allow any person outside the family to stay the night and will physically oust any who dare defy her.

Don Lucas is caught off guard by this reception. The face of the old man, according to Levinas, immediately strikes the captain with its Otherness and the plea: “Do not kill me.” His face should inspire the first philosophy, ethics, and awaken a responsibility to the Other that should inform his own course of action and who, in the end, he himself is. The captain struggles against the uncomfortable feelings this face-to-face encounter creates in him. He has the legal authority to commandeer from any citizen that which he deems necessary for himself or his men, yet this elderly man speaks boldly as if something about him demands consideration and perhaps respect. The captain is stung by feelings of discomfort during the encounter, struggles to make sense of the Otherness in this laborer, and mockingly asks, “¿Sois hidalgo?” This question intimates the following: Are you the son of something (hijo de algo)? A nobleman? Someone whose status in life legally or culturally demands my deference? This type of totalizing, of trying

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7 The spelling in this edition of Vélez de Guevara’s play has not been standardized.
8 Don Lucas has come to La Vera just before 1492 to gather recruits for the impending offensive against Granada, the last Muslim kingdom in Iberia. Jews and Muslims who had converted to Christianity, whether willingly, under threat, or for political mobility, and their descendents were categorized as new Christians. The term old Christian was not so much used to proclaim a person’s religious lineage, but rather to distinguish him or her as “clean-blooded” (without a trace of Jewish or Moorish ancestry). The leyes de limpieza de sangre from the early fifteenth century established a pattern which excluded converts from the power structures of Christian society. These laws became a powerful societal force within a hundred years, encouraging intense anti-semitism, and ultimately the complete expulsion of the Jews from the peninsula (Gitlitz 2). Muslims were forced to convert or leave in 1502.
to fit the Other into a preconceived notion in relation to Self, is exactly what Levinas finds most harmful in western philosophical traditions. Giraldo affirms his ancient Christian blood\(^9\) and honorable life and explains that if he could have decided the time and place of his coming into the world he would have been born better than the captain, to which Don Lucas exclaims, again attempting to define this other man, “¡Qué filósofo villano!” which could be interpreted as either a villainous philosopher or a philosophical peasant. Giraldo clarifies that he is not a villain, and that the young soldier should treat his old white head with more respect. Here the captain begins to threaten Giraldo. Instead of allowing the face of the widower to inspire an ethical response he reverts instead to the Heideggerian ego and proclaims, “Haré / lo que digo, por la fe / de soldado y caballero” (118-20), stating in effect, ‘I will do what I must do in order to not have my selfhood usurped!’ This retreat into himself and the blandishing of mental arms prefigure the tragedy that will unfold.

The peasant sees that he has failed to appeal to the captain’s honor, that Don Lucas will not recognize him as deserving of consideration, so he will now have to resort to other tactics. Giraldo proceeds to explain that even though the heavens have not blessed him with a son, he has been given a strikingly beautiful daughter who can outfight, outrun, outshoot, outhunt, outjump any man and is, in fact, worth two sons. This daughter is on her way home from a hunt and the captain will have to deal with her. Don Lucas welcomes the challenge with relish, exits and watches, hidden, as the new face approaches. When Don Lucas beholds the outrageous spectacle of Gila’s entrance and her commanding presence he whispers his initial impression from his hiding place, “De puro admirado callo. / No he visto en hombre jamás / tan varonil biçarría”

\(^9\) It is curious that Giraldo restates that he is an old Christian. While on the surface he seems to simply reaffirm his claim to certain respect, there could be a more sinister interpretation. His reiteration could be pointing to anti-semitic beliefs, his comments a thinly veiled accusation that Don Lucas does not hail from a purely non-Jewish family—a dangerous position at the time in Spain’s highly structured society.
We are hearing the unfettered, authentic response in the moment of perfect vulnerability when the face of the Other first breaks into the captain’s presence. Sadly, he will not allow this authenticity, awakened by Gila’s Otherness, to survive.

When the reader first meets Gila, we are struck by her intense presence and the conundrum of her physical feminine beauty juxtaposed with her intense masculinity. Gila dismounts and hurries to her father who expounds on her physical beauty, comparing her with various flowers. He has already proclaimed, emotionally, that she is worth two sons. She, ignoring his admiration, launches into an enthusiastic play-by-play of her harrowing struggle to the death with a boar. The disconnect between what she recounts and what Giraldo praises is telling. Giraldo adores his daughter but subsumes her Otherness into his own identity, that of being a man (or, in this case, two men) or that of being what will satisfy a man. What he does not see is that she desires to move in the world as only a man can in her society, she wishes to be free and self-determining in a way that is only available to a man. The inability to allow Gila’s infinite Otherness to be revealed to him confines Giraldo to work only in relation to himself, preventing him from truly ethical behavior, which flaw Levinas locates as the source of suffering. Indeed, this flaw will be instrumental in Gila’s eventual demise. She asks her father if the man he had been talking with desires lodging at their home, and Giraldo confirms that he does. She states that she doesn’t want him to stay, upon which declaration the captain comes into view and speaks, “Yo, sí” (344). While Giraldo does not seem to see her quite clearly, he and the other villagers do glory in her dual nature—both her ruby lips and her feats of valor—and, up

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10 I say reader here instead of audience as Bárbara Mujica points out that George C. Peale shows that the text we have access to now was never staged. Luis Vélez redacted the more homoerotic references, indecorous passages and shocking final execution. “Vélez made extensive alterations to his manuscript for the purpose of performance. The playtext shows clearly the cuts that were made, perhaps during rehearsal, for the theater company of Juan de Morales” (232).
until this point, nothing has required her to circumscribe her activity in order to fit into a category delineated by her society.

**Gila’s Face-to-Face with the Captain**

The captain’s arrival will upend Gila’s relatively peaceful and self-determined life. They confront each other for the first time:

Gila: “¿No hay más que quererlo vos?”

Don Lucas: “Aquí no pienso que hay más.”

Gila: “No vi capitán jamás / tan resuelto, ¡vive Dios!”

Don Lucas: “Ni yo muger que tan bien / lo jure.”

Gila senses his blindness, that he cannot imagine that she—a woman—has any power to command here, and corrects him, using the only language he might be able to understand, “Si imagináis / que lo soy, os engañáis, / que soy muy hombre” (344-52). The captain, like her father, cannot conceive of a woman who claims self-determination, even pointedly couched in terms of the masculine and instead defines her in relation to himself, “Pues bien, / ¿qué importa, señora Gila, / cuando fuera su merzed / dos Hércules?” She takes out her gun and marches the captain out of town.

An oft-repeated trope in Golden Age Theater is the comparison of brave or Otherwise virile women to mythological female warriors and heroines of classical antiquity. Later in the play, for example, Rodrigo, *el maestre de Calatrava*, remarks on queen Isabel’s brave stoicism in the face of hearing of the death of her only son, “¡Oh castellana / Evadnes! ¡Oh Semíramis

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11 In Chapter 10 of *Woman and Society in the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age: A Study of the Mujer Varonil*, McKendrick provides an excellent list of female protagonists in dozens of plays and the legendary heroines invoked for comparison.
cristiana! ... Tú puedes ser dêl mundo Fenis sola” (1927-30). The above interaction between Gila and Don Lucas brings to mind a similar, yet simultaneously inverted, moment in Homer’s Odyssey, in which the warrior goddess Athena appears to Telemachus disguised as Mentes, king of Taphia. Even Athena cannot enter into the mortal relationship so essential in the ancient Greek tradition of *xenia*—host-guest, friend-foreigner—unless disguised as a man (Vandiver). She wears a male mask in order to be admitted into a stranger’s home and provided all the obligatory niceties. Even when Telemachus removes her spear she has nothing to fear because she can enjoy the security of a *xenos*, a male guest, in the strict social tradition. Gila, inversely, confronts a male stranger who, according to law is permitted to lodge wherever he may, but the only male trappings available to her are her weapons. She cannot put them down and be an equal, a *xenos*, worthy of security and respect. *Xenia* was not a concept based on friendship, but social obligation. Levinas takes that one step further and positions a sort of *xenia*, an awareness and treatment of the Other, as the basis of being.

Levinas held that the flaw in western philosophical traditions is that they start with the Self and then move out to the world and Others, and that Otherness ignites discomfort in the Self that can lead to anger, or rivalry, or hate. A desire to make sense of the Other in terms of the Self and ignore the infinite responsibility to protect the precariousness of the Other’s life can lead to an effort to assimilate, control, or destroy the Other. The captain’s shock at encountering someone who exceeds all his preconceptions of her undoes him, which, according to Levinas, is a necessary step prior to individuation, and will lead to peace within the Self if . Don Lucas exclaims, “Estoy sin mí” (460-61)—literally, ‘I am without myself.’ The captain’s encounter with the Other, with Gila, struck him first with awe, then extreme discomfort as she did not fold into his predetermined pattern for all peasants, and finally with such a feeling of being forced
from his own pattern that he felt physically outside of himself. Judith Butler’s clarification of Levinas’s philosophy as pertains to this moment for the captain is illuminating, “Another way to put this point is that the “I” becomes undone in its ethical relation to the “you,” which means that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical relationality possible. If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation” (Precarious 142). Don Lucas cries out that he is blind with fury, vows to raze the serrana’s town to the ground and plots to make the brave mountain woman submit to him. Instead of nurturing the claim of this Other to exist—even be protected by him—Don Lucas fans his spark of discomfort, of being undone, into a destructive flame of revenge.

**Gila’s Thoughts of Queen Isabel**

A much debated aspect of Gila’s personality concerns her feelings for the queen of Castille. Hours after the serrana drives the captain from her village, the nearby larger town of Plasencia teems with party goers who have arrived from miles around, not just because of the regularly-planned festival activities, but because the Catholic Monarchs (Isabel and Fernando) will be in attendance. Gila jokes with her cousin Madalena that nature erred in making her, Gila, a woman, and later sighs her love for the queen. As has been noted, many scholars have convincingly shown that these and other statements by Gila can point to lesbianism or transexualism in the serrana. Another possible reading reveals, instead, Gila’s craving for the freedom that being a man would afford her. Her admiration of Queen Isabel goes so far as to covet the monarch’s ability to do heroic deeds, command armies, and defend her people, yet she never fails to mention that Isabel does these things at the side of her admirable husband, Fernando, King of Aragón—“que le guarde Dios mil años” (634). Isabel maintained an
autonomous role as Queen of Castilla, preserving her independence but creating a unique bond with the King of Aragón while they jointly ruled Spain. Even in death Isabel had established a method to continue her independent rule of Castilla, passing the crown to her daughter, Juana, and not to her husband. Gila confesses her admiration to her cousin, “Madalena, en viendo yo / mugeres dêsta manera, / me vuelvo de gusto loca” (642-44). Furthermore, Fernando openly admires his wife, this “Católica Diana y venzedora / de tanto cuello alarbe belicoso, / ese heroico valor que España adora” (1041-44). It is possible to read Gila’s amorous appeals to Queen Isabel not as erotic in nature, but rather as an attempt at self-love and creation. McKendrick points out that in Spain’s highly structured society marriage was the only passport to what freedom was available to biological women. “Unmarried girls were treated with the care due to a valuable commodity and their movements were limited” (28). Although Gila appears to enjoy the freedom of a son, hunting for the household, engaging in contests of athleticism, swearing and plowing in the field, these statements about the queen reveal that she is acutely aware of what her society expects of her. In Isabel she sees a way to hold on to her unique dual nature; a way to be true to herself and yet live for the Other.

**Gila’s Friendship with Mingo**

Gila displays her hypermasculinity at the festival where she defeats a group of visiting competitors in swordplay, then taunts them, “huyeron / como gallinas mojadas” (833-4). We also meet perhaps the only character who can see Gila clearly, the *gracioso* of the play, Mingo. Infelicitously for Mingo, we see him with his pants around his ankles running from the bull that Gila subdues with her bare hands in order to save his hide, a provocative reversal of masculine symbols. He is unapologetic in his cowardice and lack of skill with a sword, and is equally
unapologetic in his love for Gila. He allows Gila to reveal herself to him. He sees a fabulously beautiful and athletic woman, a fearless soul who loves her people, and he does not need to shape her into any dream he has. Neither does he need to become something he is not in order to please or win her. He does not attempt to dominate her. He allows her to be absolutely everything he is not, and therefore, even though she does not confess passion for him, he finds peace next to her. While the *gracioso* is a stock character of the Spanish Golden Age of theater, Mingo here is unique in that, if he did not have sexual desire for Gila, they would have been truly authentic friends: a friendship based on the ethical relationship Levinas puts at the foundation of peaceful living.

Later, while Gila is working in the fields, Mingo approaches and cries out, admiringly, that she is all fierceness and rigor: “Todo es fiereza y rigor, / todo es matar” (1114-5), and what she does to him is also kill, only with love. He hopes that she will love him in spite of his virginity and cowardice, having taken courage from a story he heard about a fiery queen who left her husband to make love to an ugly dwarf. Gila is entertained and says she will try to do him favors, and entreats him to continue with his flirtatious remarks. He blathers on for a few pages until he gets to what he most loves about her, her purplish ears. Gila, mischievously, offers Mingo her hand and he nearly leaps out of his skin with joy. Their fingers touch and Gila proceeds to squeeze and wring his hand until it feels to him that his bones have been crushed to flour. She calls Mingo a chicken and laughs at his weakness and cowardice. He responds with a long and humorous condemnation for having left him without fingers, that Gila is not, in the end, a woman but biting pliers, a kicking horse, an onion that makes him cry, a cough that hurts his chest. Finally he sniffs: “Quédate, que yo me voy / donde jamás vuelva a verte; aunque voy, Gila, de suerte / que han de darte nuevas hoy / de que me han visto ahorcar” (1292-339). Gila, at
first a bully, responds gently, “Vuelve, Mingo, que no quiero / verte morir, … antes pretendo … hazerte favores más / si tú apercebido estás; / que para cosas tan justas / tengo el pecho más humano” (1340-47). Two important points come out of this interchange. For one, we are allowed to see Gila being a bit of a bully but also show a moment of vulnerable tenderness for her friend. Secondly, Mingo does not offer marriage. This is perfectly in line with him being the only person who truly sees her Otherness and does not attempt to push it into the mold of the role set for Spanish women of the time. Marriage to another peasant would mean subordination to a man with no power outside the home, would mean choosing her biology over all else in her. He instead asks her to make love to him with the whimsy that a man of her society could entertain.

All of Gila’s life has been fierce competition and she will later claim that her father’s parenting pushed her to wish to conquer and win above all else, an accusation with which he will agree at the end of the play. She has never been given the space to reveal herself to anyone, as Levinas insists we allow for the Other, except to Mingo. To everyone else she is described in terms of a reflection of whatever Self is viewing her. She is two sons (“vale por dos hijos” 131), two Hercules (“dos Hércules” 355), a sapphire wallflower (“Los azules alhelíes, / ¿han querido competir / con tus venas de çafir?” 261-63), an archetypal beauty (“lisa frente, roxos labios / pelo de ámbar, blancas manos” 215-16), and an example for Spanish women (“para exemplo de mugeres españolas” 256-57). Over the years, Mingo alone allows for Gila’s absolute alterity. Seán Hand explains that Levinas posited that the revelation of the face of the Other, the coming into my presence of the face of the Other, that shocks me into considering Being, creates an asymmetrical indebtedness on my part towards the Other’s moral summons which is based not on a prior knowledge, but on the primacy of the Other’s right to exist (Hand 5). He describes the responsibility for the Other that arises from this revelation as, in Levinas’s words, “having-the-
other-in-one’s skin” (Hand 6). Mingo has gotten in Gila’s skin because her Otherness has not been circumscribed in his presence and she has, in turn, allowed him to reveal his own absolute Otherness. (This will be key when she is later in the drama on the mountainside, oath-bound to assassinate any man that crosses her path.) Mingo nervously decides not to take Gila’s hand again, just as Gila’s cousin, Madalena, bursts onto the scene with the news that the captain has been spotted at her father’s house with 200 soldiers. Gila flies home, again to play the part of the protector, the son or patriarchal figure in her family.

The Captain Returns

The following scene, according to Drinkwater, more than the subsequent act of betrayal in bed, is the actual pivotal moment that is Gila’s undoing: the moment when Giraldo and the captain collude to marry off Gila, shaking hands and turning Gila into an object of barter (80). Don Lucas sets his trap, carefully deceiving Gila’s father, Giraldo. The captain praises his noble heritage—his good blood as an old Christian. He appeals to his paternal desire to see his daughter well married, convinces him of his deepest love for Gila, and that no other woman would equal her as the mother of his children and, thus, he overcomes Giraldo’s every doubt. Gila enters, stone in her raised slingshot, ready to end the captain but sees them embracing in friendship. She turns to leave but her father stops her with the words, “Vuelve acá, Gila, mira que te aguardan / con la dicha mayor que muger tuvo.” In the very next line she tries to reveal herself to her father again, however cynically, “¿Hanme elegido / por general, por rey, obispo o papa? … ¿Llámanme para h[az]erme prncipessa / de Castilla y León, o prestejuana / en las Indias, del Cairo gran señora, / u de Alimaña y Roma emperadora?” (1555-63). In response, Giraldo affirms our suspicion that he also will not allow Gila her Otherness. He explains that
what he is offering is her “remedio” (1570). Gila pleads with her father, signaling the problems of marrying above her station, spurning courtly dress and manners, and most movingly, “No me quiero casar, padre, que creo / que mientras no me caso que soy hombre” (1584-85). While this statement can again point to transsexualism (Mujica 230), it is also be read as a woman, like Rosaura in La vida es sueño (1636), like Estela in Zayas’s El juez de su causa (1637), like Portia in The Merchant of Venice (1600), whose only path to self-determination requires her to take on the trappings of a man. Gila affirms this idea, “No quiero ver que nadie me sujete, / no quiero que ninguno se imagine / dueño de mi; la libertad pretendo” (1583-88). Up until this point she has been able to carry out the physical activities she prefers, usually assigned only to men. She has also been allowed to choose her female dress and flowing hair. The illusory freedom she has enjoyed vaporizes as she sees her life commodified between these two men who effectively intend to deny her Otherness.

This conversation may also bring to mind, understandably, the infamous Catalina de Erauso (1592-1650). Similar to Catalina, Gila yearns for freedom and action, plays dice with soldiers, and curses when she is angry, but there are important differences. Her yearning is not for adventure on the high seas or the new world, but for wielding her ferocity to protect home and country. While Gila does wear a dagger, a tunic, and hunting shoes, she does not cut her hair or try to give the physical impression that she is actually a man, nor entertain relationships with other women, as Catalina does. Furthermore, Catalina kills a number of men, influenced by drink and gaming, while Gila initiates her bloody rampage believing herself to avenge her “agravio de muger” (2680). In Vélez de Guevara’s play, this serrana does not sleep with or rob her victims. Her vengeance is not pleasurable to her.
Don Lucas steps in and cunningly tells her the only thing that could convince her to marry him. He explains that at his side she could follow in the footsteps of great women warriors: Semiramis, Evadne, Palas, and especially her revered Isabel. She acquiesces: “Esa razón me puede obligar sola, / por imitar a vuestro lado luego / a la gran Isabel, que al de Fernando / emprende heroicos hechos” (1613-16). Bárbara Mujica observes, “Gila’s betrothal represents a turning point. For the first time, she ignores her true nature and bows to society’s demands. Now, finally, she acknowledges that she is a woman and that biological sex, not inclination, determines her fate” (229). Mujica continues, “Once she has accepted her lot in life, Gila yields easily to Don Lucas’s sexual demands. She does not resist kicking and screaming, but submits… given Gila’s superior physical strength, it is clear that Don Lucas does not rape her” (229). I cannot agree with this last statement. Although it was a socially acceptable practice at the time for affianced couples to engage in sexual relations before the official marriage ceremony, it was the captain’s explicit intent to have sex with Gila without marrying her, solely for the purpose of revenge, to leave her humiliated and socially destroyed. He used sex as a weapon. Knowing he could never physically overpower Gila, his plan included careful trickery and seduction, something we now call grooming: “Yo llegué, engañé y venzí” (2049). This is a case of coercive rape. As a result, according to J. A. Drinkwater, Gila “becomes Freud’s classic hysterical, a violent, uncontrollable, social outcast” (80). Don Lucas devalues Gila in two steps; first by making her solely female (eliminating her masculine possibilities), and then by dishonoring her.

Until now, Gila had always been able to see the face of the captain clearly, fully aware of his tendency to totalize or insist on the obedience to stereotypes and class and gender structures in their society rather than on the ethical responsibility that should spring from individual face-
to-face encounters. In this moment of seduction, however, the glass fogs, so to speak. Why?
Perhaps Gila’s vision blurs with the fantasy of what her future could hold. Instead of allowing
the captain to remain utterly revealed to her, she imposes on him an image of King Fernando, a
prop in her suddenly attainable dream. Perhaps the influence of her father’s wishes and her
town’s desire, expressed in songs of praise along with her feats of strength, that life “la dé un
galán amante, / la serrana de la Vera, / para que con ella case / la serrana de la Vera, / y para a los
doze pares”¹² (237-41) weaken her resolve to stay absolutely true to herself. Perhaps it is a desire
for fame as aptly argued by Strother (172-4). Whatever the reason, she momentarily sees in this
Other what she desires to see and the result is the abuse of which Levinas warns. One of the great
misgivings Levinas felt about western philosophy is that signification begins with one’s own Self
and then flows outward, planting the Self as primary and the Other in a position to be controlled
or eliminated to suit the Self’s purposes.

A Serial Killer is Born

Gila accepts her role as commodity in the transaction between her father and the captain,
retires that night to her room with Don Lucas, then succumbs to his midnight words of love and
praise finally relinquishing her virginity to him. Early the next morning she awakens to the
absence of the captain in her bed and her screams of agony rend the very air. She is on fire with
shame and fury. Others in the house come running at her wailing and ask what happened, “Mi

¹² Legendary figures known in English as the Twelve Peers or paladins of Charlemagne (748-814). Each elite knight
was a formidable warrior, the most famous of which was Roland. Their deeds are described in the La Chanson de
Roland, the best known of the old French epics, whose authorship is lost in time. Thought to have been composed
some time in the 10th or 11th century, the earliest extant manuscript, designated as Oxford Digby 23, was found in
the 12th century. The idea of a crusading king defending the borders of Christianity with the help of his chivalrous
knights appealed greatly to Catholic Spain during this time and allusions to this epic narrative are common
throughout Golden Age literature in the peninsula. See Karl D. Uitti’s chapter, “Song of Roland” in Story, Myth, and
Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry, 1050-1200, Princeton UP, 1973, pp. 65-127 for an interesting study of
what can be gleaned from the poem that speaks to the historicity of its inspiration.
desdicha y vuestra culpa, / mi engaño y vuestros consejos” (2078-9). She does not blame the men in her life for not protecting her honor, but rather spits her anger at their bad advice and her own foolishness for listening to it, then radically¹³ takes the work of vengeance into her own hands. In her torment, she swears to not leave a single man who crosses her path alive until she kills the captain. She will take to the mountains and not bathe, sleep unarmed, eat at a table, or look into the heavens until she dies or avenges herself. McKendrick posits that

the woman who resents her sex or who despises men, and is their physical equal, even superior, will react more violently than the normal woman when she is sexually victimized and has no means of real retaliation… The course of revenge upon which she now embarks is monstrous, yet Gila is the only female bandit whose excesses seem plausible, such is the nature of her personality. (“Women” 116)

Unlike other bandoleras and mujeres varoniles of the time who seek to restore their tarnished honra by hunting down and forcing their seducer to marry them, thus restoring the natural order, Gila’s aim is sheer vengeance on her betrayer, and before she catches up with the captain, she has planted two thousand white crosses indicating the sites where she has hurled men off the cliff to their death. Gila suffers an identity crisis of such magnitude that she must defeat the captain over and over again symbolically until she annihilates both him and herself.

Although Gila screams that no woman could have resisted such ardent words of praise such as fell from the captain’s lips, until now we have seen Gila fight, taunt, hunt, command, rage, and dream of famous deeds to such a degree that it is difficult to imagine she could have

¹³ The duty of avenging a woman’s honor, according to the cultural norms of the era, typically fell to the man: a father or brother. However, in Spanish Golden Age theater the mujer varonil often avenged her own wrongs, yet Gila is singled out in nearly every study as the most violent example of this transgressive act.
fallen prey to such romantic entreaties. The playwright, however, confirms Gila’s dual nature when she cries out a particular literary allusion before making her homicidal vow:

Echaldo de ver, pues marcha
ese capitán Bireno
haziéndome Olimpia a mí
y roca su ingrato pecho.
¡Ay furia! ¡Ay rabia! ¡Ay zielos,
que se me abrasa el alma! ¡Fuego! ¡Fuego! (2108-14)

Olimpia, a character from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, was to wed King Cimosco, but was utterly in love with the Frisian Bireno. She cries and threatens suicide if forced to marry the man of her parents’ choice. Her father acquiesces, even in the face of severe political consequences, and allows her to follow her heart. MacCarthy comments on the paternal indulgence in response to Olimpia’s tantrums, “Olimpia ignores her duty as noblewoman, playing on her father’s sentimentality to aid her personal desire. Her father, in turn, responds equally impulsively, disregarding his public duty for thoughts of his daughter’s sorrow” (110). She immediately gives herself sexually to Bireno, who then leaves the next morning with the King’s daughter in a great ship. Olimpia runs to the seashore and cries out,

“Oh! May I but escape the wild corsair,
Nor taken be, and after sold for slave!
Rather than this may lion, wolf, or bear,
Tiger, or other beast, if fiercer rave,

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14 One of the greatest Italian epic poems, a chivalric romance of mythical proportions and qualities by Ludovico Ariosto which was heavily referenced in literature, and commented upon, during the Spanish Golden Age. First printed in 1516, then later in its completed form in 1532. Orlando is the Christian knight known as Roland in French, and the epic shares many features of *La Chanson de Roland*. 
Me with his claws and rushes rend and tear,
And drag my bleeding body to his cave."
So saying she her golden hair offends,
And lock by lock the scattered tresses rends. (*Orlando* XXXIII)

Gila does not seem to resemble Olimpia in the character of damsel in distress, so the similarity must lie elsewhere. Perhaps Gila here berates herself for acting rashly, as Olimpia did, allowing herself to be blinded by romantic passion. We must remember, however, the following departure from Olimpia’s story: it is first upon Gila’s father’s wishes that she even considers a union with Don Lucas. She retains the correct *pietas*, or right relationship with her father, and allows his authority to blur her vision of Don Lucas and her possible future with him. Paternal influence was not the only factor in Gila’s sleeping with the captain. Olimpia did not have sex with Bireno in order to secure an illustrious future of heroic deeds, to become another Queen Isabel, but was, instead, simply smitten with him. It is intriguing to imagine Gila capable of sexual desire for a man intense enough to persuade her to act against her better judgment, but the comparison with Olimpia¹⁵ points compellingly to that end. The captain seems to have been able to see that vulnerability in Gila that she could not see in herself, and use it to devastate her to reassert his cultural position in the world.

This comparison, offered by Gila herself, with the foolish Olimpia does not weaken the claim that Gila was raped. Don Lucas specifically intends to take something from Gila that she does not want to give, in the only way available to him: cunning (grooming in modern terms). He

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¹⁵ It is likely from what we know of Gila that she would have been happier following in the footsteps of Bradamante, another female in the same epic as Olimpia. In contrast to Olimpia, Bradamante is a Christian knight, expert in battle and immensely patient. She also finds herself betrothed to one man but in love with another. She brilliantly arranges events so that she can both obey her parents and marry the man she chooses. Again in contrast to Olimpia, however, she puts her lover through a series of trials and concedes the ultimi frutti only after the marriage ceremony. Together they give rise to the noble House of Este.
robs the “jewel” as referred to by Laurencia in *Fuenteovejuna,* her virginity, to induce a state of bondage, to re-establish his dominance and therefore pride. It is a very physical act, and he takes his booty and disappears into the night. His cohorts applaud his audacity and accomplishment. Gila has no legal redress. Levinas asserts that one’s responsibility to the Other is intrinsic, is part of one’s own existence, and is not an external construct imposed upon the interior Self. As long as the captain fights against this imperative he will leave psychological destruction in his wake and put his own internal peace in constant peril.

**How Mingo and King Fernando Escape**

The final act of the play presents Gila in full—according to Drinkwater—hysteria; she has departed completely from society to carry out her single-minded labor to kill all men who cross her path and therefore keep them from committing the same crime as the captain. It opens with one of Gila’s many murders, a stranger who follows her up the mountain animated by the prospect of going to bed with her. Shortly, without ever having reached a bed chamber, as Gila is interested solely in assassination and not sex, she hurls the man off the cliff and as he falls to the distant river below he cries out, “Engañásteme, sirena.” She cries back, “También a mí me engañaron” (2261-62) and then she fashions yet another cross with two small sticks. Rather than

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16 Play by Lope de Vega published in 1619.
17 See Freud’s “The Taboo of Virginity,” also referred to in Marcia L. Welles’ *Persephone’s Girdle: Narratives of Rape in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature* (p.19).
18 The siren as a symbol of the dangerous woman has been a commonly employed archetype in literature. Over the centuries the siren has taken various shapes—half-eagle, half-woman; half-fish, half-woman; half-sparrow, half-woman—and her attraction may come from the sound of her voice or an expertly played lyre, but always her song means death. Some sirens were thought to promise carnal pleasure, others appealed to the soul (as in the *Odyssey*), only to devour the seduced, or cause their shipwreck or starve them upon the shore, but always they lured, and always they lured men, and always to their death. The symbol has worked to foment a fear of the female and promote a cultural system that subjugates women (See Sylvia Veronica Morin’s Dissertation: “Silent Sirens and Reticent Revenants: Reconceptualizations of the Femme Fatale in the Twentieth Century Spanish and Mexican Women’s Fictions,” 2012, University of Houton).
a siren, Gila resembles more in practice a harpy—another half-woman, half-bird: a swift, violent, female agent of punishment who takes evil doers down into the abyss of Tartarus to await divine punishment. She can no longer feel any responsibility for the life of any male Other.

The next man on the scene recalls Gila to herself. It is Mingo, hopelessly lost and pretending to be a horse—he has saddled himself and holds the bit in his mouth—in case he runs into Gila. She spies the horse-man and laments that she can make no exception, but does postpone his fate by first asking after people in town: the priest, the tailor, weddings and funerals, and her father. Mingo reveals that Giraldo cries for her every day and was forced to accept the position of mayor of the town. She is pleased he cries, yet firmly, and rightly, believes he will use his authority to hunt her down. Mingo warns her there is a bounty on her head and that the entire Santa Hermandad\(^\text{19}\) seeks her and will execute her on sight. She is unruffled and returns to the business at hand. Mingo asks if he could be excused seeing how he is a horse. She counters that if he were a horse without a tongue, his life would be excused, but since he talks and he is a man, he has the potential to lie and bite and therefore must die for she must be absolutely faithful to her vow. However, she will let him choose how to die. Gila urges him to decide quickly because the Catholic Monarchs are nearby and she wonders aloud if the captain has accompanied them. Just then, she hears male voices and offers Mingo one more delay. She will leave him tied to an oak and only kill him upon her speedy return. She does not throw him

\(^{19}\) Throughout the Middle Ages, towns in northern Spain organized peacekeeping associations of armed individuals and patrolled the roads that connected their communities. The first such groups, denominated hermandades, originated along the pilgrim road to Santiago in Galicia in the 12th century, in order to protect pilgrims, the primary source of income for the area, against rogue knights. These brotherhoods were known for their rough and ready delivery of justice (Kamen 7). In 1476, the Catholic Monarchs, instead of abolishing the existing network of various local hermandades, converted it into a centralized royal general police force, with themselves at its head, dubbing it Santa Hermandad. Fame of their brutality grew, however, and discontent compelled Isabel and Fernando to reduce the status and expense of the organization in 1498 (Triano 175). The Santa Hermandad survived as an inefficient constabulary until the 18th century.
summarily off the mountain. Mingo has lived more authentically than any other, refusing to act in ways contrary to his uniqueness and refusing to define himself in a way that would please his peers, a concept important to Heidegger’s construction of identity. However, Mingo takes it one step further into Levinas’s ethics as first philosophy when he feels responsibility for Gila’s right to live. He warns Gila of the 500 crown bounty on her head while, in contrast to Mingo’s actions, Pascuala, a little girl stopped by Gila in the woods, revels in telling her how wicked everyone thinks the *serrana* is and how she will not get away with her crimes for long. Giving Mingo a few extra minutes to live is the greatest mercy Gila will extend him now. His friendship without qualifications has reminded Gila to the smallest degree that to be is to be for the Other, that “being-in-one’s-skin” is “having-the-other-in-one’s-skin,” but she is not entirely in her own skin and therefore can only offer half a mercy.

The next encounter is important to consider as we try to work out Gila’s state of mind. Gila, weapons drawn, leaves her friend tied tight to the tree and, luckily for Mingo, King Fernando immediately enters with a boar-spear and unties the singular man. Gila reappears, rifle aimed at the king’s back. When he turns to face her, she recognizes him as the husband of Isabel, that “hermosa hiedra de tus brazos,” proclaims “Vivas / eternos años y seas / señor de cuanto ve el sol” (2543-46), and takes off her hat to reverence him. Gila is caught in a conundrum even more acute than finding Mingo on her mountain.

Her next words are curious, for how can she pardon his life and yet remain true to her oath? She speaks:

Por satisfazer la ofensa

de un hombre, y hasta matalle

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20 Quoted from Levinas’s essay “Substitution” as found in Seán Hand’s book: *The Levinas Reader* (104).
he prosupuesto que mueran
con solene juramento
cuantos encontrare, y piensa
que tú solo has sido el hombre
que perdona mi fiereza,
y no quiebro el juramento,
que el rey es Dios en la tierra,
y en lugar suyo, Fernando,
la justicia representas.

Y pues no eres hombre. (2557-68)

There are many ways to read this passage. Does Gila look for a loophole in order not to wound Queen Isabel, the woman she most admires? Does a fervent religious belief in the divinity of the king take primacy over and therefore absolve her of her sacred oath? A modern reader might wonder if the playwright simply sold out because killing the king onstage would have destroyed his career, but alternative history had not yet been introduced as a genre. Since the serrana did not kill Fernando in real life, a playwright would not have incorporated a murder blatantly contrary to historical fact into his play. It may be instructive to take Levinas’s theory of the Other to its final, seemingly theological conclusion. Séan Hand summarizes the theory:

In the Jewish Revelation, the freedom of Being becomes the ‘difficult freedom’ of the ethical ‘Here I am!’ , an open greeting based on a deferring to a towards-God, an à-Dieu. Levinas is not afraid to use the term God to designate this ethical exigency: invisible, infinite, non-thematizable and irreducible to intentionality. But God is not an absolute rule; rather, He ‘comes to the idea’ as the absolute alterity revealed in the sacredness of
the face-to-face relation…. The individual is not just Dasein; he is also the site of
transcendence, responding to the unfulfillable obligation of the Revelation [of the face
the Other]. (7)

Levinas employs the term “God” to represent irreducible Otherness. God is the Otherness behind
the Other that always reiterates my responsibility even as I try to evade or subvert it
(Gschwandtner 54). Gila’s exquisite desire for freedom has only found incarnation in the
example she sees in Fernando and Isabel, and that appearance of equal dominion side by side
inspires a drive stronger than her thirst for revenge. She lets go of herself and her vow only for
this moment, and with her gun trained on the king, exits into the woods. It could be said that in
the presence of the only man Gila knows who champions his wife’s dual nature—her radical
alterity—so similar to how Gila imagines herself, that she has a moment of altruism, or at least
inspiration to fulfill her obligation to protect the Other.

That spark of ethical responsibility evaporates as quickly as Gila leaves the king’s
presence. Mere hours later, one of the captain’s henchmen appears, searching for two lost mules.
Gila quickly throws him off the mountain. Within moments, the captain himself stumbles on
stage, completely disoriented and furious with the darkness of the night and the steepness of the
pathless hillside. Gila opens the door of her mountain shack and offers him lodging, which he
gladly accepts without recognizing his would-be hostess. After some brief and telling
conversation, he realizes who she is and offers to marry her to save his life. Gila refuses: “Ya es
tarde, ingrato. De aquí / has de volar, pues por ti / al zielo he sido traidora / con tantas culpas”
(3069-72). Without any further preamble she launches him into the air, off the cliff to his death.
She is suddenly surrounded by angry, yet frightened villagers and armed members of the Santa
Hermandad. She tells them that she will not put up a fight, as she has been avenged. Gila knows
that she will be executed, but does not fear or fight. However unjust her lot in life as a woman who wants to live outside the bounds of what society allows, she acknowledges that now she has killed the captain her honor has been avenged and her own death is inevitable.

Gila agrees to deliver her weapons up, but only to her father, whose ear she bites off as punishment for his failure as a parent to recognize her Otherness or appreciate her dual nature in a way that would have helped her navigate her most hypermasculine, bloodthirsty tendencies and avoid such an extreme end. While at the moment of her capture Giraldo refuses to recognize her as his daughter, now he confesses that her accusation is just. Mingo asks her forgiveness for having been the one assigned to handcuff her, and she gently relents in a seeming acknowledgment of their genuine friendship, a reminder of their ability to allow each other’s alterity.

Gila’s execution is horrific, even for the baroque aesthetic at the time which had a taste for spectacle, for all things prodigious, striking, bizarre, hyperbolic or shocking—that which produced admiratio. She is marched offstage, handcuffed and feet fettered. Madalena (Gila’s cousin) and Pascuala (the girl caught in the woods and released earlier by Gila) give a play-by-play description of the execution and then the curtains at the back of the stage open to reveal the body of Gila tied to a post, garroted and shot through with arrows. Commenting on this final extreme image, Bergmann draws on Mariscal’s approach to point out that “Gila’s execution transformed the figure of the manly-woman into that of the womanish-man (St. Sebastian)” and that, according to Otero-Torres, Gila’s punishment is calculated to destroy a body “that

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21 In the notes at the end of Persephone’s Girdle: Narratives of Rape in the Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature, Welles cites other plays in which an offspring bites off the nose or ear of a parent as punishment and assumes that these versions were known to Vélez. She also speculates that in the case of Gila it may be an upwardly displaced castration (211). Bergmann also suggests that this final bit of savagery is in line with similar scenes in other play intended to be a warning to all parents that they should correctly discipline their children. In Gila’s case it could also serve to reduce her to the level of an animal (“Women” 150).
transgresses the natural and symbolic limits between femininity and masculinity” (“Folklore” 81-82). Scholars argue over what Vélez intended with this grotesque image: just punishment or martyrdom. McKendrick states instead: “That Luis Vélez disapproves of Gila there can be no doubt” (Woman 117). Mujica points out that the playwright himself called this work a tragedia, that the serrana dies satisfied that she has avenged her honor and that even in death she inspires admiratio (231). The audience itself is drawn into the debate due to the inevitable visceral reaction from the horrific display. We must also decide. Gila embodies a liminal space between masculine and femenine, an Otherness at the time so unique that every individual is shocked by a face-to-face encounter with her. Levinas would not approve of her homicidal revenge, but would empathize with the tearing apart of the soul that she sustained. The repeated refusal to accept the radical alterity that Levinas prescribes in each face-to-face encounter with the Other has led, as predicted, to suffering on all fronts.

Since the face of the Other is repeatedly masked, assimilated and destroyed, the end of the play is, in this sense, tragic. Instead of a ludic costume change in which the mujer varonil casts off her transgression and reenters the natural order espoused by her society through repentance and marriage, a mood of martyrdom and regret permeates the play’s end. Gila peacefully accepts her execution as just and calmly states, “Nadie de mí se lastime / los que me ven tan amarga / muerte morir, porque yo / no la tengo por desgracia” (3226-29). The same little girl, Pascuala, from the woods asks God to forgive her after witnessing her disturbing execution. The queen feels a “tenderness in her soul” at the sight of her death. The play concludes with the words, “Aquí acaba / la Serrana de la Vera, / que fue prodigio de España” (3303-05). With this final admiration the playwright seems to invite us to contemplate Gila as a wonder. If Gila’s class had admitted her to the ranks of nobility perhaps she would have seen an opportunity to
play a role similar to Queen Isabel whose independence, piety and celebrated rule won her the honorary title of “Isabel la Católica” from Pope Alexander VI. If Gila had been a man perhaps she/he could have participated in the battle against Granada and brought glory to the village and satisfaction through a vigorous life. We do not have evidence that individuals during the Spanish Golden Age were investigating the conundrum of ontology in the same way that Levinas did, with ethics as first philosophy, but Vélez’s enigmatic ending does invite contemplation of societal norms and our reception of radical alterity.

In the absence of honoring the ethical relationship that arises with every encounter between two people, everyone will suffer and those whose Self seems to lie far outside the society’s cultural norms will suffer most. Judith Butler, like Levinas, does not propose an ethics based on an empathy whose foundation is in what sameness we can find in the Other. After all, it is easy to treat well those we see as being like us. It is much more difficult to behave ethically towards someone radically different from us. Butler and Levinas and others urge us to contemplate Otherness instead of sameness as the foundation for ethical action. When being confronted by someone utterly different from you—in the case of our play, someone (Gila) who is better than you (Don Lucas) in all the things you deem valuable, someone of another gender, someone you do not understand, someone legally powerless—recognize this as the urgent signal that there is a life in need of your protection. If we can hold ourselves less rigidly and let go of rivalry with and domination of the Other we will begin to see options that facilitate peaceful cohabitation that we have not been able to contemplate before and avoid the tragedy that Luis Vélez de Guevara painted so heart-rendingly.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A: CONFERENCE-LENGTH VERSION

Less than a three hour drive west of Madrid is a comarca called La Vera where the legend of a local woman turned serial killer has been circulating for centuries. The legend is called “La serrana de la Vera,” or, “the Mountain Woman of la Vera.” This woman was, as legends often require, of extraordinary beauty, but what was unique to her was her virility, her manliness if you will. With her crossbow, or her bare hands, or her rifle (it depends on the recounting you come across), she could live completely off the land and her athleticism was without rival in woman or man. The pivotal moment of the legend is when this local woman was irrevocably betrayed by a lover. The maiden huntress was rent with agony and shame. Anger and vengeance propelled her to leave the town and take to the hills, to live on her own in a cave in the mountainside. There, if a man happened into her vicinity and the mood struck her, she would approach him, seduce him, bed him and murder him. Her cave was littered with the skulls of her victims. Some recountings end with her capture and execution. Others claim she eluded the authorities, and still others that she continues to roam the mountains.

The monstrously prolific playwright of the Spanish Golden Age, Lope de Vega, wrote a play about this legend that begins with a dozen lovestruck souls, includes one woman who turns mildly homicidal and ends with a delightful multi-couple wedding. While his style is masterful, Lope de Vega’s plot is rather disappointing, but perfectly inline with his passionate belief in the inevitable dependence of woman on man and marriage as the natural order of human happiness (Women 131). A playwright of the same period, Luis Vélez de Guevara, however, wrote a more heretical and thought-provoking work concerning the same legend. The serrana that we meet in his play is truly singular. Her name is Gila and her entrance is spectacular. Her amber hair is pulled away from her bronzed face revealing intense, black, almond-shaped eyes and blood-red
lips, yet she is unaware of her beauty and disdainful of all attempts of feminine decoration. She is dressed for the hunt, with a sash, a dagger tucked into her tunic and a rifle under her plumed saddle. Punctured by three stakes and held aloft, the pelts of a boar, a wolf and a bear, all of which Gila single-handedly brought to a grizzly demise, fly above the company of villagers who sing Gila’s praises to the sound of drums. They proclaim she is so beautiful that the very air that touches the young woman falls in love with her. More important to Gila, however, is that no woman or man can best her in the hunt, in swordplay, in contests of speed or strength or agility.

The first words of the play are spoken by an old widower, Giraldo, Gila’s father, a white-haired laborer standing on the earth looking up at a young, gallant soldier, a captain in the Royal army who has just arrived on horseback. The first words are curious and, ultimately, decisive: “If you are-.” The outcome of the play, the happily ever after, the well- or poor- being of those who follow hinge on the answer to the ontological query “if you are-” summoned by such face to face encounters, which Emmanuel Levinas posits are the beginning of identity. These face to face encounters, specifically in regards to the serrana, Gila, as seen through the lense of Levinas’s “ethics as first philosophy” (Gschwandtner 43)22, reveal the repeated inability of each character to let the other be a revelation to him or her, and that such struggle against the awakening of responsibility to the other breeds the suffering predicted by Levinas.

The peasant widower refuses to lodge the captain in his home, and they immediately devolve into flustered posturing. Levinas explains that the presence of the Other, what he terms the face of the Other, enters our presence like an epiphany or like a wound that startles us, awakening a primordial responsibility toward the Other and a beginning of self individuation. These two citizens, instead of allowing each other his own alterity, struggle to define the other in

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22 Also “Ethics as First Philosophy” first published in Justifications de l’éthique (Bruxelles: Editions de l’Université de Bruxelles), 1984, pp. 41-55.
terms of the self. This type of totalizing, of trying to subsume the Other into the matrix of the
Self, is exactly what Levinas finds most harmful in Western philosophical traditions, leads to
suffering, and, in this case, prefigures the play’s eventual tragedy.

Giraldo changes tack and explains that his formidable daughter is on her way home and
the captain will have to deal with her. From a hiding place, Don Lucas beholds the outrageous
fanfare of Gila’s entrance and her commanding presence and whispers, “I fall silent in pure
admiration. I have never seen such virile gallantry in any man.”23 We are hearing the unfettered,
authentic response in the moment of perfect vulnerability when the face of the other first breaks
into the captain’s presence. Sadly, he will not allow this authenticity, awakened by Gila’s
otherness, to survive.

Gila dismounts and hurries to her father who expounds on her physical beauty,
comparing her with various flowers. He has already proclaimed, emotionally, that she is worth
two sons. She, ignoring his admiration, launches into an enthusiastic play-by-play of her
harrowing struggle to the death with a boar. We hear her voice for the first time and the
disconnect between what she recounts and what Giraldo compliments is telling. Giraldo adores
his daughter but subsumes her otherness into his own identity, that of being a man (or, in this
case, two men) or that of being what will satisfy a man. What he does not see is that she desires
to move in the world as, in her society, only a man can, to be free and self-determining in a way
that is only available to a man. The inability to allow Gila’s infinite otherness to be revealed to
him confines Giraldo to work only in relation to himself, preventing him from truly ethical
behavior, which flaw Levinas locates as the source of suffering. Indeed, this flaw will be
instrumental in Gila’s eventual demise. She asks her father if the man he had been talking with

23 “De puro admirado callo. No he visto en hombre jamás tan varonil biçarría.”
The captain comes into view and speaks, “Well, I do.”

Gila: “Wanting is all you have to do in order to get it?”

Don Lucas: “In this situation, nothing else.”

Gila: “I have never seen, by God, a captain so decided!”

Don Lucas: “And I swear I’ve never seen a better woman!”

Gila senses his blindness and corrects him, using the only language he might be able to understand, “If you imagine that I am (a woman), you are deceived, for I am very much a man.”

The captain, like her father, cannot conceive of a woman who claims self-determination, even couched in terms of the masculine and instead defines her in relation to himself, “Who cares, señora Gila, even if you were worth two Hercules?” She takes out her gun and marches the captain out of town. Levinas saw that the flaw in Western philosophical traditions is that they start with the Self and then move out to the world and Others, and that Otherness ignites discomfort in the Self that can lead to anger and hate. A desire to make sense of the Other in terms of the Self and ignore the infinite responsibility to protect the precariousness of the other’s life can lead to an effort to assimilate, control or destroy the other. The captain’s shock at encountering someone who exceeds all preconception of her undoes him, according to Levinas, a necessary step prior to individuation. Don Lucas exclaims, “I am without myself” (460-461).

Instead nurturing the claim of this other to exist and even be protected by him, Don Lucas fans his spark of discomfort into a destructive flame of revenge. Judith Butler writes, “If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation” (Precarious 109). Don Lucas cries out that he is blind with fury, vows to raze the serrana’s town to the ground and plots to make the brave mountain woman submit to him.
Levinas explains that it is the Other that exists before language, before rational thought, even before consciousness. He uses the term \textit{face} to denote “the way in which the presentation of the other to me exceeds all idea of the other in me… My presence before the face is therefore an epiphany” (Hand 5). Levinas furthers that we only develop a sense of self because of encounters with others. Our knowledge of ourselves and our identity expand with every interaction. The face of the Other is the first source of sensation and awareness. It is the first philosophy.

That night, at the festival, Gila jokes that Nature erred in making her a woman, and later sighs her love for Queen Isabella. Many have taken these comments and others to show a lesbianism or transexualism in the \textit{serrana}. While not impossible, McKendrick warns against reading a lesbian motif into seventeenth century theater (\textit{Against} 116). What I believe Gila craves is the freedom that being a man would afford her. She admires to coveting Queen Isabella’s ability to do heroic deeds, command armies, and defend her people, yet she never fails to mention that Isabella does these things at the side of her admirable husband, “may God keep him a thousand years,”\textsuperscript{24} Fernando, King of Aragón. Isabella maintained an autonomous role as Queen of Castilla, retaining her independence but creating a unique bond with the King of Aragón in which they jointly ruled Spain. “Madalena, seeing women that way makes me crazy with pleasure.”\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, Ferdinand openly admires his wife, this “Catholic Diana and conqueror of so many bellicose enemy necks.”\textsuperscript{26} I do not see Gila’s amorous appeals to Queen Isabella as erotic in nature, but rather an attempt at self love and creation.

At the festival, we also meet perhaps the only character who can see Gila clearly, the \textit{gracioso} of the play, Mingo, pants around his ankles, running from the bull that Gila must

\textsuperscript{24} “que le guarde Dios mil años”
\textsuperscript{25} “Madalena, en viendo yo mugeres dêsta manera, me vuelvo de gusto loca.”
\textsuperscript{26} “Católica Dlana y venzedora de tanoto cuello alarbe belicoso”
subdue in order to save his hide, a provocative reversal of masculine symbols. He is unapologetic in his cowardice and lack of skill with a sword, and is equally unapologetic in his love for Gila Giralda. He sees a beautiful and fabulously athletic woman, a fearless soul who loves her people, and he does not need to shape nor dominate her. Neither does he need to become something he is not in order to please or win her. Later, while Gila is working in the fields, Mingo approaches and cries out, admiringly, that she is all fierceness and rigor, and hopes that she will love him in spite of his virginity and cowardice, having taken courage from a story he heard about a fiery queen who left her husband to make love to an ugly dwarf. Gila mischievously takes his hand and proceeds to squeeze until it feels to him that his bones have been crushed to flour. When she releases him and he sulkily blusters that she will one day hear he has hung himself, Gila gently responds, “Come back Mingo, I don’t want to see you die… I would do you favors so that you will see that, in such matters, I have the most human heart.”

Gila has never been given the space to reveal herself to anyone, as Levinas insists we allow for the Other, except by Mingo. Levinas explains that the revelation of the face of the Other, shocks us into considering Being and creates a moral summons which is based not on a prior knowledge, but on the primacy of the other’s right to exist (Hand 5). He describes the responsibility for the Other that arises from this revelation as ‘having-the-other-in-one’s skin’ (Hand 6). Mingo has gotten under Gila’s skin for she has been allowed her Otherness in his presence and has, in turn, allowed him to reveal himself to her.

Meanwhile Don Lucas has returned and is setting his trap, carefully deceiving Gila’s father, Giraldo. The captain praises his old christian blood, appeals to his paternal desire to see his daughter well married, and convinces him of his deepest love for Gila, and thus, overcomes Giraldo’s every doubt. Gila enters, stone in her raised slingshot, ready to end the captain but sees
them embracing in friendship. She turns to leave but her father stops her with the words, “Come back! Gila, look what is in store for you! The greatest joy any woman can have!” She reveals herself to her father again, however cynically, “What? Have they elected me a general or king or bishop or pope? … Have I been called to be the princess of Castilla and León,... or a great lady of Cairo or the emperor of Alimaña and Roma?” In response, Giraldo affirms our suspicion that he also will not allow Gila her otherness. He explains that what he is offering is “her cure.” Gila pleads with her father, signalling the problems of marrying above her station, spurning courtly dress and manners, and most movingly, “I don’t want to marry, father, because I believe / that as long as I don’t marry I am a man.” Some have argued this points to transsexualism (Mujica 230), but I instead see a woman, like Rosaura in La vida es sueño, whose only path to self determination is taking on the trappings of a man. Gila reveals, “I don’t want to see anyone subject me / I don’t want anyone to imagine / he is my master; I yearn for freedom.”

Don Lucas steps in and cunningly tells her the only thing that could convince her to marry him: that at his side she could follow in the footsteps of great women warriors: Semíramis, Evadnes, Palas, and especially, her revered Isabella. She acquiesces. As Melveena McKendrick observes, “Marriage was the passport to what freedom was available” (28). Bárbara Mujica states, “Gila’s betrothal represents a turning point… Once she has accepted her lot in life, Gila yields easily to Don Lucas’s sexual demands. She does not resist kicking and screaming, but submits… given Gila’s superior physical strength, it is clear that Don Lucas does not rape her” (229). I cannot agree with this last statement. Although it was a socially acceptable practice at the time for affianced couples to engage in sexual relations before the official marriage ceremony, it was the captain’s explicit intent to have sex with Gila without marrying her, soley for the purpose of revenge, to leave her at least socially destroyed. He used sex as a weapon. Knowing
he could never physically overpower Gila, his plan included careful trickery and seduction, something we now call grooming. This is a case of coercive rape. As a result, according to J.A. Drinkwater, Gila “becomes Freud’s classic hysteric, a violent, uncontrollable, social outcast” (80).

When Gila awakens to the absence of the captain in her bed, her screams of agony rend the very air. She is “on fire” with shame and fury. In her torment she vows to kill the captain, and, until she does, to not leave a single man who crosses her path alive. Unlike other females bandits, an iteration of the "masculine" woman popular with playwrights of the time, who seek to restore their tarnished honor by hunting down and forcing their seducer to marry them,27 thus restoring the understood natural order, Gila’s aim is sheer vengeance, and before she catches up with the captain, she has already hurled two thousand men off the cliffs to their death. Gila suffers an identity crisis of such magnitude that she must defeat the Captain over and over again symbolically until she annihilates both him and herself.

In the final act we observe Gila toss a lust-struck stranger to the river below. The next man on the scene is our dear Mingo, hopelessly lost and pretending to be a horse in case he runs into Gila. She spies the saddled man, bit in mouth, and laments that she must be absolutely faithful to her vow. Just then she hears male voices nearby and offers Mingo one mercy. She will leave him tied to an oak, and kill him upon her speedy return. Luckily for Mingo, King Ferdinand immediately enters with a boar-spear and unties the singular man. Gila reappears, rifle aimed at the king’s back. When he turns to face her she takes off her hat in reverence and states, “I believe that you are the only man my ferocity will pardon, but I don’t break my oath, because the king is God on earth, and in your place Ferdinand, you represent justice. Therefore you are

not a man.” Levinas employs the term “God” to represent irreducible otherness. God is the otherness behind the other that always reiterates my responsibility even as I try to evade or subvert it (Gschwandtner 54). This is not a moment of altruism in Gila, but her exquisite desire for freedom has only found incarnation in the example she sees in Ferdinand and Isabella, and that sense of peace side by side inspires a drive stronger than her thirst for revenge. She let’s go of herself, her vow only for this moment, and gun trained on the king, exits into the woods.

That night, Gila finds the Captain himself, completely disoriented and furious with how dark the night is and how steep the pathless hillside. After some brief and telling conversation he figures out who she is and offers to marry her to save his life. “It’s too late... You are going to fly from this spot, for, because of you, I have sinned so many times against heaven.” And she launches him into the air. She is suddenly surrounded by armed authorities and tells them that she will not put up a fight, she has been avenged. She delivers her weapons up only to her father, whose ear she bites off as punishment for his failure to see her clearly, and allows only Mingo to handcuff her. Her feet are fettered even though she repeats that she will go willingly. She is marched out of town and executed, filled with arrows, appearing for all the world, as one onlooker remarks, like a Saint Sebastian.

In *Ethics as First Philosophy* Levinas posits, “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place-in-the-sun’, my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other... are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing.” (Hand 82). Instead Levinas puts the Other as being the original site of the sensible. Prior to any attempt to place a mask on the face of the Other, there is a moment of extreme exposure, prior to any

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28 A reference to Pascal’s *Pensées* (Brunzschvicq 295/Lafune 112)

29 Alluding to Heidegger’s sense of *bei sich*, the real and originary sense in which the existent comes to exist ‘for itself’.
human aim, where the Other wounds my presence with its primordial vulnerability and mortality and pure otherness. Judith Butler, like Levinas, does not propose an ethics based on an empathy whose foundation is in what sameness we can find in the Other, but instead proposes an ethical system based on difference, on relationships with others unlike you. She reminds us, “Your story is never my story” (25).

The denouement of this work of theater is enigmatic. Rather than a didactic mood of warning, as argued by McKendrick for example (And 118), to those who defy the natural order of love and marriage, I, instead, sense a mood of regret. Since the face of the Other is time and again masked, assimilated and destroyed, the ethical relation thwarted, the end of the play is tragic yet contemplative. Gila accepts her execution as just. A little girl asks God to forgive her, “amén”. The queen feels a “tenderness in her soul” at the sight of Gila’s death. And the play concludes with the words, “Aquí acaba La Serrana de la Vera, que fue prodigio de España” (Here ends the serrana of la Vera, a Spanish marvel.)


