How to cook a cat: Marginal Space in 17th Century Spanish Short Theater

“One that is fat you will take, and slit its throat, and after it’s dead cut off its head and throw it in the trash because you can’t eat it. It’s said that if you eat the brains you will go mad. Put it on the grill, rub it with good garlic and oil, and when it’s cooked, cut it up as if it were a rabbit or goat and serve it on a big plate”.

This excerpt taken from the *Libre de Coch* or the *Book of Stews* by Ruperto de Nola wouldn’t be in any way special if it weren’t that it was describing how to cook a cat. First published in Catalan in 1525, this cookbook was translated and reprinted more than 15 times within a century. A similar diffusion, that not even Cervantes himself experienced with the first part the Quixote, can illustrate not only the popularity of cooking in Early Modern Spain, but also the scarcity of cats in the big cities where hunger was rampant.

The image of a courtly Madrid that enjoyed an intense cultural life where millions were spent on luxurious festivals that attracted famous artists and travelers who experienced a cosmopolitan city also contained a marginal space, where poor people, crippled, thieves, soldiers, gamblers, women of the night, slaves, Moors, gypsies, and black people lived and made a living. Where the long walks along the Prado at sunset lost their gallantry, and became spaces of the night where ruffians challenged each other to duels and ended up, in most cases, in the overpopulated jails of the kingdom. This was something quite normal, since even the barbers could be jailed for leaving a curl longer than a man’s ear, or a tailor for making a woman’s bodice too revealing. Where the domestic space was transformed into brothels and gambling dens, full of gamblers and on-lookers. Where in the streets, one didn’t only go out to shop but to beg for alms, to con people and steal, or where the Churches, a place of knowledge and shelter,
became places to hide amorous and clandestine meetings, and prostitutes, thieves, and murderers hid to escape the law.

In this paper I will examine the social meaning of this underworld in 17th century urban Madrid from a perspective of marginality that up until now has not had the critical attention it deserves. My interpretation of the urban centers explores baroque Madrid as space of conflict. From this conflict new ways of speaking, living, writing, and reinventing urban landscapes arise. Many of the textual narratives that were written in that time articulate their plots through the relationships between marginal society and the established power structures and exhibit social changes in light of the economic processes associated with the development of Madrid as the imperial capital. The topography of these urban settings has, as I will show, a symbolic meaning. The main locations (streets, plazas, markets, gossiping places, rivers) are connected to the goods purchased there, such as tobacco, playing cards, chocolate, jewelry, carriages, to the people that inhabit them (such as slaves, con-men, female chaperones, Genovese merchants), and some social topics (the expulsion of the Moorish people, life at court, fashion, and thievery).

The cities, with their mechanisms of integration, estrangement, mass consumption, and individuality became consolidated into a scene of cultural and general privilege in the 17th century. With the rural world continually becoming depopulated by the economic crisis and the attraction of city life, Madrid expanded demographically and its commercial activity transformed it into the most important commercial urban center of the 17th century.

After 1606, Madrid became the Imperial capital of the Hapsburgs after a brief period in Valladolid from 1601 to 1606. The relocation of the court from Valladolid is the most important occurrence for the Madrid of the future. King Philip the Third stayed there permanently and with him came all the authorities, officials of the kingdom, and all those attracted to the prosperity of
Madrid. A city, as a character in a play observes quote, “my vision is blinded in Madrid to see so many new buildings and full of people, new streets are born every year, and those of yesterday’s suburbs are today’s illustrious main streets”. This image opens a fundamental debate for the period, asking if Madrid made its citizens, or did those who lived in Madrid determine its profile? Either way, we find ourselves before the birth of the dynamic and problematic city, since the symbiosis of the two languages, the urban and the theatrical, allows a sense of permanent novelty that sculpts the identity of the citizen of Madrid.

Because of its conceptual richness and widespread popularity in Spain, by the 17th century, gambling had become one of the phenomena to be captured in every type of textual manifestation. Gambling became a vice in all social spheres and the gambling house became one of the most visited places in early modern Spanish fiction. Gamblers were seen as both unproductive and courageous, but the Crown wanted productive citizens. The biggest reproach was the lack of productivity of the leisure-seeking court member who was a victim of urban temptations.

According to Ludwig Pfandl, in the middle of the 17th century, The Crown was collecting an estimated 50,000 ducats annually in levies from licenses to widows and war veterans to manage gambling dens (259). Therefore, it’s not as though there was so much pressure to prohibit gambling, but as we will see with prostitution, they wanted to control it in order to obtain a profit. The well-known Calle del Lobo or Wolf Street, for example, was under the control of thieves and swindlers full of clandestine gambling dens that didn’t pay any contribution to the Court.

The officials tried to regulate the gambling houses from an ethic point of view in an attempt to implement a minimum of order and transparency in which, as Enrique García Santo
Tomás indicates, quote “honor rules over deceit”. The legal gambling house must be “de escaleras arriba” “going upstairs”, not “de escaleras abajo” or “going downstairs”, as it was depicted in texts like Navarrete y Ribera’s treatise The Gambling House. This is a necessary spatial arrangement, argues Navarrete y Ribera, where true gentleman meet, “where one plays more for entertainment than for winning” and where “very rarely is there disorderly conduct, commotions, and they are free of tyrannies and cruelties”. In turn, those going downstairs, “are the offices where gamblers execute their evils.”

The theme of cards is the preferred topic of Navarrete y Ribera and it is the main plot of many of his short plays, for example in the Interlude of the Jealous Gambler we see how the husband, a losing player sets aside his jealousies and sends his wife to his single friend’s house to ask him for money. When she returns with the money, he takes it all to go gambling. He’s not only a gambler, but he has lost all morality by sending his wife alone to ask for money in return for, what I speculate to be, sexual favors.

Along with the vice of gambling, prostitution is shown as the second social scourge, at times associated with gambling as we have seen before and by itself most of the time. It is not necessary to go back to the moral condemnation or the social rejection that prostitution has had. What’s interesting is that prostitution in the 17th century was not illegal, but regulated. For example, for the so-called “houses of the repentant” that were established as a method of control and surveillance by the court officials. Therefore, the law did not persecute women for prostituting themselves, but for doing it outside the margin of the regulations and thus, they searched for a way to identify the women and assign them a determined space in the city to ensure order in the city with them as well as those who suffered diseases after visiting them.
One example that illustrates this was the Monastery of Saint Magdalene, which started as a place of cloistered nuns, but became one of many places of shelter or a sisterhood of quote “mortal sin” and even had to be moved to another location to make more space for all of its occupants. The urban map, acts as a palimpsest, creating a new cartography where the spaces are superimposed and gain new meaning. Not only does the urban landscape change, but also new symbolic spaces are established and have to be assimilated by the citizen.

That said, and as Villalba Perez has shown, the efforts to assign a separate space for both the workspace for the prostitutes and for those ill with syphilis was never-ending during the 17th century. In fact, those with venereal diseases were treated in the suburban hospital of Anton Martin, which poets referred to as quote “the hospital of love”. The attempt by the authorities to group these women of the night together by institutionalizing the brothels failed as the ordinances in Baroque Spain show and I quote, “they mandated that they notify the women in love (another euphemism) that they return to the Lavapies suburb”.

What is true is that the prostitutes moved to the city centers because they could find clients and stay far from the outskirts. Well known are the brothels on commercial streets such as the Calle Mayor, important plazas like the Puerta del Sol or near the royal palace, the Prado de San Jerónimo where the aristocracy of the prostitutes, their social status, would be established.

Even with an effort to have greater vigilance, the inability to control their place in the urban environment, I speculate, they found regulation through their clothing. The Brothel Ordinances, released in 1621 state that the prostitutes wear half black veils, that is why they were call the ladies of the half veil, different than those, officially at least, who were virtuous and wore a full veil to clearly differentiate their public image. In that way, two years later, new ordinances summarize restrictions regarding accessories and luxurious materials: “We mandate that women
who are publicly bad cannot wear gold, or pearls, or silk.” This shows how those luxuries had a completely distinctive meaning.

In 1639, the Counsel prohibited the use of the farthingale – remember that the width of this dress made hiding unwanted pregnancies easier – but prostitutes were allowed to wear them: “The King our lord commands that no woman, in any state, whichever the quality, may not wear farthingales or similar clothing, except those women who are bad ones.” This constant pressure over the citizenry and the city can be seen, for example, in the short play by Quiñones de Benavente called the Entremés of the Veiled Women, where there is an interesting correspondence between clothing and the devaluation of currency.

On the one hand, it shows the rite of passage of a prostitute who is given an exemplary wool shawl called a “vellon” to wear. On the other hand, the alteration of coins that began with Philip the third, minting the “vellon”, the cheap copper coin instead of the expensive silver one, which created monetary inflation. High-ranking military men were called knights of the “tuson” which was an expensive material. Therefore, the high-ranking prostitutes were called “tusonas”. The “vellonas” or women of “vellon” that Benavente represents counteract the “tusonas” or women of tuson that made up the aristocracy of the profession. In this case, the opposite happens since placing the cheaper wool on the prostitute making her a “vellona”, her worth is reduced quote “lowering her value” admits a character in the play “that she is such poor quality she will end up like the cheap copper coin”. Benavente amplifies his criticism of finance that a city under pressure or crucible suffers comparing it with the cheap and damaged body of a prostitute.

New economic measures resulted in a significant increase in the crisis, and in the poverty of an already needy population. During the seventeenth century one of the most significant concerns in the metropolis was the supply of wheat for bread making. The demographic growth
and the bad harvests created an atmosphere of uncertainty facing the acquisition of an essential product that the society needed, a community located in the limit of subsistence and before a state of alienation. David Ringrose observes how this great mass of population was in need of “continuously, putting its acquisitive power back on an exclusive basis, towards the daily bread” (134). Alfredo Alvar Ezquerra has shown how due to the scarcity of bread, society spent “half a century preoccupied and in a situation similar to a perpetual crisis” (El nacimiento 119). Bread was undoubtedly the primary food of any poor European and, indisputably, the last sacrificed item in times of famine. Hungry people looked for cheaper substitutes when they could, as we saw in the quote that opens this paper on the consumption of cats in cities, but in the city, there were few alternatives. Therefore, it is not surprising that wheat is the most important expense of the urban economy and that its total consumption reflects the demographic changes. In fact, according to Caro López, the dynamics of the wheat price in Castilla la Nueva, has several points of contact with the price of rents (143). Thus, it can be considered the price of bread as a guiding element of the urban housing market.

According to Pellicer, people felt the shortage of foodstuffs on the leases in 1642. The same circumstances took place in the year 1699, when “the lack of bread and bread shortages reached so much” that popular tumults occurred; rents, like the price of wheat, continued to rise, and only recovered ten years after the end of these events (Caro 145). The consumption of wheat, together with the demographic increase, shows, therefore, the variation of wealth in the capital of Madrid at the beginning of the XVII century. It is not surprising, given the scenario, that the shortage of wheat was not only news but was part of the short comical theater.

Quiñones de Benavente echoes these issues in Entremés famoso de Turrada, where a
jealous husband promises to give the mayor a whole series of meats, including the much-desired bread if he accepts to dress as a woman to prove his wife's fidelity:

Turrada. Take it, mayor, take it; that I will give you if you do, flamenco wine and sausage, chicken and rabbit.
Mayor. It seems I'm getting touched. And will you also give me bread?
Turrada. And bread too.
Mayor. It is done. I become a woman, and my cape serve as a mantle. (Quiñones 336)

Wheat—or more accurately its high price—is thus a fundamental element in the imaginary of urban society of the seventeenth century. The scarcity of bread increased during the 1601-10 decade when city demand and rural difficulties culminated in “the most spectacular fluctuation of wheat prices in Castilla la Nueva between 1550 and 1650” (Ringrose 315). Only seven years later, in 1657, Benavente illustrated these facts in his Entremés de lo que pasa en una venta. The piece is based on the figure of the innkeeper, a comic type widely recognized in the Golden Age literature for his thefts and deceptions, and whose opinion, held at the time, was negative. In this entremés, we witness a conflict between a landlord and a funny man, where one has nothing to offer to eat, and the other nothing to pay, the problem of the lack of bread also appears next to the common place of the deceived mocker:

Tristán. They treat me in this inn like an Old Christian, but, Why have not they put bread? Bring bread.
Teresa. The bread is no longer used. (Madroñal Nuevos 120)

Tristan resigns and chooses to continue drinking wine in the absence of the much-desired bread, which barely appears on the tables due to the rapid urban growth, that brought with it serious city
supply problems for the Crown. Even Madame D’Aulnoy points in her *Relación de un viaje por España*:

> The innkeeper told us that we would be fine, but we would not have bread. It is a thing that we can hardly do without, I replied. In effect, this news bothered me. I checked out from where that shortage came. They told me that the mayor of the city had [...] ordered to confiscate the bread and flour from the bakeries, and had them sent home to make a distribution according to the needs of each person. (150)

Bread became an object of a tributary and social differentiation. According to Alvar Ezquerra, throughout the sixteenth century, in Madrid people consumed registered bread. It was baked by all those who wanted it with whole meal flour and who registered it when entering the city. However, there was another of lower quality made in Madrid, the bread from Villa, made by ordinary bakers. This bread was subject to the quality of flour fluctuations that arrived in Madrid. Finally, there was one of better quality, the milk bread or gifted, reserved for a few privileged, made of white flour and baked by the bakers of the Court (*El nacimiento* 313).

In the *Entremés de la Casa Holgona*, there is an interesting allusion to the flour that shows this dichotomy. At one point of the conversation between Anton and Aguilita, he tries to explain to the prostitute that he belongs to a higher class than his clothes and manners seem, he refers to two types of wheat:

| Aguilita. | You will never make good flour. |
| Antón.    | Yes, I will. I have put in the “tolva” (hopper) the “candeal” soul (hard white wheat) although the body is “trechel” (darker spring wheat). (Calderón 111) |

Antón defends his nobility using the term “candeal” –a certain kind of bread wheat that makes bread very white–, in spite of its careless appearance that expresses comically with the term “trechel” - a darker wheat. In the “tolva”, he says he has the best of himself, the candeal soul, to produce good flour, thus refuting Aguilita in his insinuations about the low social level that
Antón belongs. Consequently, through the manufacture and consumption of bread, differences in social status is established. There is in bread, as in other products, a conversion towards a luxury food, and since the decade of [15] 90 even the better bread becomes of optimum quality, and like the habit of gambling, it becomes aristocratic.

Its scarcity reveals a problem of the moment where even blood is spilled by its consumption, as indicated by a character in the *Famoso Entremés de Mazalquiví*:

Servant. For first having eaten the bread of your mercies, I come to warn you to be alert, that my master Mazalquiví comes with a great power of people and has sworn not to return until he makes a significant punishment in this house. (Cotarelo 67)

Mazalquiví feels dishonored by running out of his loaf and demands immediate reparation of the offense. The streets of the city thus become a dangerous place, where even by eating the bread of another was motive enough to challenge another to a duel to the death.

During the seventeenth century, the streets of the cities are filled with blood, and the *Avisos* and *Relaciones* of that time are responsible for revealing this abundant urban violence with great detail. According to Maravall, in a moment where, “the sensationalism, the violence and the cruelty [...] come from the root of that pessimistic conception of man” (*La cultura* 325), the urban space becomes the most dangerous place and the night its greatest ally. Daggers and swords are exceedingly popular in the theatrical praxis of the *comedias de capa y espada*. The audience came armed to the theaters, could admire a duel on the stage and later see themselves in a real one, down the street, in places far from the Plaza Mayor or Palacio, as the famous Barrio de Lavapiés in Madrid.

In this sense, it is important to emphasize that swords and daggers are a symbol of status, they are not weapons of war, and they adjust as an accessory part of clothing and a weapon to kill. Thus, they will form part of the essential set of the urbanite, next to the snuffbox and the
deck of playing cards, where the usual thing would be to leave the house armed: the wealthy people with a sword, and the bullies or ruffians with a dagger or a knife. Naturally, during the seventeenth century, due to their incidence and social repercussion, duels and challenges, became a problem for the Monarchy, and an additional concern in the urban environment. José Luis Bermejo Cabrero echoes these questions and points out that although prohibitive provisions against duels were issued, the regulations were easy to circumvent, and the authorities adopted in permissive positions or a certain inhibition towards duelists in their practice. Duels are linked to honor and prestige. The nobles descend from the medieval knights who went to wars with the king. This exercise of courage in combat produced the honor or the good opinion that others have of one, especially when they recognize the courage, honesty, intelligence, and other knightly virtues demonstrated over the years and contained in the lineage. In the fall of the Middle Ages, Huizinga reminds us, many nobles were related to Jewish families; then, the plebeians, who lacked honor because they had no noble surname, consoled themselves by thinking that at least they retained the honor, the purity of blood (The Waning 89). In the seventeenth century, valued above all things, honor has already been confused with prestige and commoners adopt aristocratic attitudes to keep it intact.

It is evident that in the society of the seventeenth century there is a mentality prone to resolve disputes and affronts—generally for questions of honor and revenge—, based on a socially admitted death struggle. Both the ecclesiastical authorities and the Count-Duke of Olivares will establish a series of prohibitions that can do little with this practice so ingrained. It will be reduced only with the arrival of the Bourbons, considering a death in duels as a homicide, with harsh punishments including the simple spectators (Bermejo 111).
There are many one-act pieces where duels and challenges are parodied, fundamentally through the cowardice of the affronted or through the mockery of the strict laws of fights between ruffians and bullies. Also, it is necessary to consider that courage constitutes one of the virtues associated with the nobility, for that reason it appears parodied in the short theater. This is the case of the *Segunda Parte del Hidalgo*, where Juan Rana, dressed, served and flattered as a distinguished gentleman, receives a challenge; he tries to refuse it, but his servants convince him to accept it. He goes with fear and finally falls awkwardly without even the opponent touches him (Cotarelo CXXX). This mockery of the practice of duels also appears in the *Entremés del Desafío*, by Matías Godoy, where the silly Toribio receives a paper in which is called to a challenge without any explanation of the reason. It is a trick of his wife’s lover to get him away from home so he can go in and have a good time with her. Another similar case appears in the *Entremés sin título*, whose interlocutors are a Sacristán, Filipina, Qurcio y Albertos. At the common place of the womanizer Sacristan, who sleeps with Dona Filipina, the husband finds out, and he exclaims on his way to kill them, “Here Honor goes, you honor go in there and take out my sword, helmet and shield” (Cotarelo 74). In the entremés of *El Cocinero del amor* (1622), by Alonso Jerónimo de Salas Barbadillo this show of apparent bravery is explained. It shows that to make a lady fall in love –adds a character– flattering, walks, music, portraits and “duels for her […] with friends who are already warned / that the dispute is only pompous, / Mars staying in appearance” (Cotarelo 274) are necessary. In effect, they are appearances of having the courage to make a lady fall in love, and also of being a bully. It also happens in El *Cortacaras*, by Agustín Moreto: if the value of the nobleman comes through blood, in lower classes it can be learned with a teacher. Consequently, he does not learn to be brave but to pretend, since courage is a virtue that cannot be learned.
Along with the parody of duel and bravado, the parody of honor and vengeance of honor is also united. In *Juan Rana’s Duel*, by Calderón, the cuckold character is forced by his wife to challenge his offending. It is important to note that it is his wife who teaches him the movements to carry out the duel. After revealing an exaggerated cowardice, he attacks the opponent, and after believing he has killed him, the justice comes and detains him for being “brave”:

Bernarda. Look, dear husband, firstly, you have to adjust the hat well, and then unsheathe your sword with noble disdain, put your right foot forward, stand erect, firm and tall.

Cosme. What does it matter if he pokes me where it hurts the most?

Bernarda. [...] Then throw him a stroke with the steady hand, take a deep breath, and with determination and skill, which in your case might be difficult, wham! [...] kill him by the nipple. (Lobato *Teatro* 204).

As we saw at the beginning, times were extremely tough for marginal people in Madrid. With a lack of steady income, people were forced to sell their bodies for money or risk what little they had on games of chance. Add that to the constant influx of people moving to the urban capital, there was even less food to go around as this piece of advice from a character in a one-act play shows, “Here” the character proclaims, “the quote “rabbit” on the rooftops is caught, and placed over the coals, and scares the mice away.” The absence of daily sustenance in the marginal spaces of the city is a constant in literary works and non-fictional documentation highlighting gambling and prostitution as social vices. The urban experience transmitted in Hapsburg Madrid reflects on its creators a desire for control, alienation, and a domination of its landscape whose physical and symbolic dimension fluctuates, opening a door to reflection regarding the practical capacity of the new urban trends. In the context of the above considerations, there is a constant in all the brief theater: the fascination with the worlds of the underworld and the slums. In short, as
Huerta Calvo has underlined, “short theater is, [...] an authentic theater of marginality” (History 24). However, this territory of social marginality is not only limited to the people from the underworld. It also includes those characters, such as beggars, gamblers, and prostitutes, who stand on the social margins since they do not necessarily live outside the law; we would then be talking about the short theater pieces as members of a liminal space.