PORTRAIT OF AN ACTRESS IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PERU

MARGARET E. BOYLE
Bowdoin College

The fourth volume of the Compendio Histórico del Perú includes likely the only extant contemporary portrait of Micaela Villegas (1748–1819), lauded by some as the most famous Peruvian actress of the eighteenth century. In a black-and-white circular portrait of unknown size by an anonymous painter, Micaela’s long dark hair is parted down the middle, gathered into two small sections and finished with a braid (Zanutelli Rosas and Milla Batres 14). She wears an ornate, ruffled, off-the-shoulder dress and displays a large flower with greenery on the right side of her hair. Her skin is smooth and even in tone, her eyes are large and expressive, her eyebrows architectural, her nose well defined, and her mouth reveals a very small gesture of a smile. Micaela’s gaze is averted from the viewer and her general expression conveys a kind of serenity. It is some of the only contemporary visual evidence of the actress, and yet it contains very few of the common referential gestures customary to an actress of her status and fame.

In many ways, trying to reconstruct the life story of Micaela Villegas is similar to decoding clues from this portrait copy. Deciphering the puzzle of Micaela’s personal and public life leads down a number of contradictory and fictional alleyways. This exploratory itinerary serves as a kind of well-worn rhetorical map for discussing Micaela’s life, as well as the lives of other Hispanic actresses, and her negotiation with the social and moral constraints of her period.

Why begin with a visual portrait? Throughout the eighteenth century, there was a growing demand for portraiture and a marked increase in the number of graphic images of dramatic players (including oil on canvas, etchings, engravings, and mezzotints). There was a veritable explosion too of print culture surrounding these actor-celebrities, and I argue throughout that these visual and literary portraits are intertwined in ways that merit further exploration, both in terms of content and circulation. Gill Perry’s 2011 exhibition dedicated to England’s first actresses (post-1660) at London’s National Portrait Gallery reaffirms the widely identified and compelling view of the eighteenth century as the birth of modern celebrity culture, where the growing circulation of printed images were coupled with the circulation of personal histories (Perry, The First Actresses 13). An actress’s onstage performance was often mistaken with the actress’s real life, and visual portraits were similarly confused with the “real” person. The struggle and desire to circumscribe an actress’s “true” identity or sexual status is enmeshed with the visual language of portraiture. These portraits frequently provided both visual and narrative “clues” about the lives of...
female stars through the inclusion of various objects — pieces of clothing, books, pens, perfumes — that would obscure or make visible issues of sex, class, rank, and race, frequently making or breaking a woman’s reputation. Visual and literary portraits function then as “cultural practice(s) that interpret and seductively tell tales, offering a feigned intimacy… seducing the reader into believing that he or she is being given access to the ‘real’ or private person described on page or the canvas” (Perry, *The First Actresses* 31).

Although the circumstances for actresses in the Hispanic world are significantly different than those in England, since women appeared on stage in Spain and Latin America throughout the early modern period, it holds true that their position was a continuously contested process, and the eighteenth century in particular represented a pivotal time for women. This essay builds on Mariselle Meléndez’s consideration of the female body as a profound site of cultural and social representation in eighteenth-century Peruvian society. It too follows Tamar Herzog and Karen Stolley’s models of transatlantic inquiry, where the study of Michaela’s life story benefits from current scholarship on counterparts in Spain. Because of the extreme yet archetypal kinds of portraiture — visual and literary — attached to Micaela, she is an ideal representative figure for exploring and modeling the contradictory roles of the eighteenth-century Peruvian actress, although it is also worthwhile investigating lesser-known actresses in Lima, for example, María de Torres Tamayo, whose reputation onstage was used against her in court.

**Constructing Literary Portraits?**

Various materials, both historical and fictional — letters, plays, novels, epitaphs, and legal documents — can be used to construct literary portraits of the actress, offering snippets of information about her personal likes and dislikes, as well as everyday actions. Some offer more concrete details,

1. As Tamar Herzog advises, “the colonial experience was instrumental to the understanding of Spain, and vice versa, in ways we have not yet sufficiently explored” (208) or more recently, Karen Stolley has argued “we must put instances of eighteenth-century enlightened thinking on both sides of the Atlantic and in both hemispheres in dialogue with each other again. Doing so will enable us to recognize the degree to which they have always been dependent on one another” (177–78). Consider for example, the cases of Spanish actresses María Ladvenant y Quirante (1741–1767) and María del Rosario Fernández (1755–1803). Emilio Cotarelo y Mori’s focus on just these two women indicates a shift in historiography that demonstrates the changing concentration and availability of archival materials. Only when discussing the history of eighteenth-century theater is Cotarelo y Mori first able to recover in such detail the lives of particular actresses.

2. For more material about this intriguing case, see Pilar Latasa.
others offer dubious eyewitness accounts, even others seem based on speculation, yet these literary portraits create a sense of intimacy with the subject, easily and frequently confusing fact and fiction. Oswaldo Estrada has argued how analyses of Micaela Villegas have confused myth and reality to such a degree that these myths continue to infiltrate and reinforce popular adaptations about the actress’s life, even in the present day.\(^3\) Micaela makes her first literary appearance in the anonymous *Drama de los palanganas Veterano y Bisoño*, likely performed in July of 1776 in Peru as a protest to the viceroy, Manuel de Amat (1707–1782). The play is important because of the voice it gives to the actress as a real figure during her own lifetime, characterizing her predominantly as self-assured and defiant within a particular personal and political context. The narrator Veterano describes how she rides on horseback dressed as a man in order to attend various functions along with her lover Amat, and even —publicly at these events— sing, dance, sit between his legs, and seductively share food with the Viceroy (“Mica cantaba, bailaba, se sentaba entre sus piernas, tomaba dulce en el plato, y con el tenedor que él sobraba, pasándolo de su mano el mismo al de ella” 62–63). Her appearance in this play of course is mediated by the play’s political objectives. The author crafted the production in order to criticize the excesses of Amat’s government, as well as the personal life of the Viceroy.

Still a number of more well known literary portraits of the actress comes from Ricardo Palma’s *Tradiciones* (1877, vol. 4), which brings to life a dramatic, retrospective account of Micaela and the importance of this love affair and the actress for eighteenth-century Peruvian cultural history.\(^4\) Although Palma is often questioned for the historical accuracy of the *tradiciones*, especially because of his signature literary style (use of dialogue, proverbs, oral tone), it is also important to recognize his deep familiarity and engagement with archival materials. Palma was librarian of Peru’s

\(^3\) Estrada calls attention to two contemporary historical novels that feature Michaela as a main character: Luis Alberto Sánchez’s *La Perricholi* (1936) and Jeanel María Flores Haboud’s *La rosa del virreinato* (2007). I would add to this list Eduardo Adrianzen’s television miniseries (1994) as another reimagining, and an example of continued fascination. Prosper Mérimée’s comic one-act *Le Carrousse du Saint-Sacrement* is also based on Michaela’s life story, along with Jean Renoir’s 1953 film *Le Carrosse d’or*. She and the Viceroy are also prominent characters in Thornton Wilder’s *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1927).

\(^4\) Palma makes reference to Michaela’s contemporary representation, accusing the author of a too “vulgar” characterization of the actress: “ni tan prosaica como la pintara su contemporáneo el autor anónimo del Drama de los palanganas, injurioso opúsculo de 100 páginas en 4,” que contra Amat se publicó en 1776.” Still, he offers the reader the reference and points to its present location in the National Library.
National Library, and Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela perhaps puts it best when she describes the author “as a key figure in this popularization of a historical mode of understanding” (xiii). Famous for its fusion of history and literature, the tradición itself was considered a new genre developed by Palma, where one of the conditions of a story’s publication was its popularity and narrative charm. It is precisely at this narrative intersection—between history and fiction or what Lynda M. Thompson has described as the eighteenth-century “interplay and divergence between fiction and ‘true Story’ ” (1)—where it is most meaningful to dwell in order to move forward and begin to reconstruct, yet again, some of Villegas’s biography. This provisional reconstruction is heavily influenced by the spirit of Palma’s own narrative project, in particular his fondness for storytelling. It is useful here to press on the many ways in which these narrative portraits serve an instructive function for their readers. Palma’s genre brings a number of interesting contradictions to the fore. In both moralizing and telling entertaining tales, Palma is not always successful in his overarching mission.

María Micaela Villegas Hurtado (1748–1819) was the sixth child born to Don José Villegas and Doña Teresa Hurtado de Mendoza. Her parents were married in 1745 and were in a difficult financial situation, as the 1746 earthquake greatly affected them. Micaela was born in Lima, although many biographers either allude to the myth or even state directly that she was born in the more rural Tomayquichua. This implication is a way to call attention to her criolla background and the kind of mythic isolation this birthplace could signify; the town’s heavy rain or the general sluggishness of the population are frequently emphasized, for example, as formative elements of her childhood. She debuted on the stage of the Coliseo de Comedias in 1763 and quickly became a popular star of romance and comedy. Although there are few formal details about her exposure to theater as a child, one of her biographers describes her abilities as an actress as inherent rather than cultivated:

At an early age she astonished her family and their friends by her natural aptitude for music and acting. She easily learnt whole scenes from Alarcón and Lope de Vega, which she recited immediately afterwards, without understanding a word of them. She played the harp. She was a good guitar player. She sang, she danced, she mimed. (Descola 248)

The fact that Descola casually writes about Michaela’s talents as a kind of “astonishment to family and their friends” only serves to characterize her abilities as “natural” rather than skillful or practiced. Although complimentary about her many talents on and off stage, this “naturalness” undercuts any sense of the actress as an active participant or agent of her own profession. Similarly, although she is complimented here for her quick ability to memorize scenes from important, contemporary dramatists, the
way that Descola claims that she does not understand even “a word of them” maintains Michaela’s inferior position and lack of substance.⁵

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the function of theater across Spain and Colonial Latin America was undergoing a series of contradictory changes. Women had been gradually increasing their participation in the theatrical world despite strong church disapproval, which took a series of unsuccessful measures to limit, regulate, or control their activities on stage and off.⁶ Yet the decency of public theater continued to be a major social and moral preoccupation, as it had been for nearly two centuries, first raised in heated conversation among sixteenth-century Spanish moralists and missionaries. As Ann Jefferson and Paul Lokken explain, advocates of eighteenth-century Enlightenment values “sought to transform the theater into a form of moral education for the common people. The emphasis of that education was shifted somewhat, however, from a focus on religious doctrine to principles associated by their advocates with reason and order.”⁷ These ongoing debates about the content of theater and the role of actresses on stage prove to provide a helpful context for analyzing Micaela’s visual and literary portraits, as well as the ways in which they were inflected by the changing social and moral climate of her time.

One of the most literal and physical narrative descriptions of the actress comes from Palma, who describes her in the following suggestive terms:

De cuerpo pequeño y algo grueso, sus movimientos eran llenos de vivacidad; su rostro oval y de un moreno pálido lucía no

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5. Descola’s description of the actress is clearly modeled on Palma’s language, although Palma takes a somewhat less paternalistic stance when describing her skills and talents: “Dotada de imaginación ardiente y de fácil memoria, recitaba con infantil gracejo romances caballerescos y escenas cómicas de Alarcón, Lope y Moreto: tañía con habilidad el arpa y cantaba con donaire al compás de la guitarra las tonadillas de moda” (351).

6. For example, several women were able to assume posts as directors in New Spain, but the last of them, María Ordóñez, was eventually locked up for years in a series of custodial institutions or *casas de recogimiento*.

7. To this effect, New Spain’s Theater Regulations of 1786 implemented by one noted proponent of these principles, Viceroy Bernardo de Gálvez, *strengthened* existing forms of censorship, sharply restricted the apparel and behavior that actresses in particular could exhibit on the stage, and prescribed a standardized set of penalties (up to and including eight days’ imprisonment) for audience members found guilty of creating “disorder.” Gálvez also had his perspective on the theater’s purpose inscribed on the curtains of the New Coliseum (Mexico: Drama is my name / and my duty is to correct mankind / in the exercise of my profession / friend of virtue / enemy of vice) (Jefferson and Lokken 145).
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pocas cacaránas u hoyitos de viruelas, que ella disimulaba diestramente con los primores del tocador; sus ojos eran pequeños, negros como el cromo y animadísimos; profusa su cabellera, y sus pies y manos microscópicos; su nariz nada tenía de bien formada, pues era de las que los criollos llamamos ñatas; un lunarcito sobre el labio superior hacía irresistible su boca, que era un poco abultada, en la que ostentaba dientes menudos y con el brillo y limpieza de marfil; cuello bien contorneado, hombros incitantes y seno turbante. (352)

In this verbal dissection of the body, Palma fluctuates from perfection to imperfection in a way that is both personal and tangible; she is praised for her energy and liveliness but chided for superficial and manipulative qualities. Attention to her face, neck, shoulders, and breasts invites the reader into an intimate and possessive experience of the actress as object of desire, yet her defects (pock marks, dark eyes and skin, pug-nose, and bulky mouth) warn of a scandalous life and a possibility of contagion.

Micaela, along with many actresses of her time, was frequently perceived as better positioned than other women to deceive men, especially men of a higher social class. Actresses were commonly criticized by moralists for their purposeful disregard of rank and class, and were notorious for their propensity for extramarital affairs. Micaela’s narrative of love affairs certainly reflects these wide-held beliefs, as one of her earliest romances is speculated to be with Maza, the impresario of Lima’s theater; according to Palma, he paid her a more-than-generous salary of 150 pesos a month. Even more recent historiography about the actress is telling, as Descola confirms, “This was all common behavior in the theatrical world and no one, not even honest women, found anything to take exception to in it” (249). Again Descola takes a paternalistic stance toward the actress, differentiating between “honest women” and those in “the theatrical world,” surely insinuating that the behavior of actresses was significantly less honest than the behavior of women outside the profession.

Certainly, Micaela’s most famous affair with the viceroy Manuel de Amat also confirms this view of actresses as dangerously manipulative and power-hungry. Palma corroborates this view of Micaela, whom he claims flaunted this scandalous affair publically. In Descola’s words:

8. Amat was Viceroy between 1761 and 1776. Their illegitimate son Manuel de Amat y Villegas, was one of the signers of Peru’s declaration of independence from Spain on July 28, 1821, and according to Blong he married seamstress Marianita de Vegara y Leiva to the outrage of Perricholi (47). As Viceroy, Amat had comprehensive powers — president of Real Audiencia, head of financial and revenue departments, commander-in-chief of armed forces.
Every Saturday at the end of the afternoon, Don Manuel could be seen leaving the palace in his heavy gilded carriage, followed by Micaela mounted on a horse bedecked with pompons and little bells. She dressed like a man, or else wore a long sky-blue skirt embroidered with gold fringes and a [feathered hat].

There are several aspects of this description worth highlighting: the public, parade-like display of an illicit affair. A “heavy gilded carriage” only further emphasizes excess. Likewise, Micaela ostentatiously rides a jeweled horse, plus she violates gender conventions with her clothing and with her behavior by either dressing “like a man” or by indulging in extravagance: “embroidered with gold fringes.” According to Palma, Michaela and Amat’s relationship began around 1766 and he was very involved with her career on stage, going so far as to attend rehearsals and give actors’ advice.

This view of Micaela as superficial and demanding has generated a series of other long-standing myths, even including the idea that their affair profoundly affected the architecture of colonial Lima. Palma credits her for inspiring the Viceroy to build a series of important structures, including El Paseo de Aguas, where she is rumored to have enticed and scandalized the public with daily public baths. The highly seductive nature of this ongoing ritual is worth considering in detail. Bathing rituals have long been associated with purification and sexuality. The fact that this bathing episode is said to have taken place both outdoors and in such a prominent location, newly visible and paid for by the public, only exacerbates these associations. Even more, by stretching out the rumor to its fullest, the idea exists that the Paseo could have been designed at Micaela’s request for the sole purpose of extravagantly displaying her bathing. This ongoing mythmaking and interpretation only reinforces the stereotype of Micaela, and actresses more broadly, as vain and sexualized. The truth of this rumor is of course difficult to prove; in fact some scholars including Ruth Hill have taken steps to disprove it, showing that Amat’s decisions were not based on Micaela’s demands or romantic whims but rather reflected his calculated political strategies and ambition. Yet, it is important to highlight these literary portraits of the actress —bathing nude in a public monument designed to showcase her body— and pause to consider the kind of status it attributed to Micaela. As an individual, and as a representative figure for the eighteenth-century actress, Micaela’s moral and sexual status wavered perilously and powerfully in public between seductress and whore.

In the tradiciones, Palma also recounts the first major quarrel between

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9. Hill argues that the fact that Amat dedicates a section of Memoria de gobierno to the public works undertaken during his reign offers proof “that his attention to Lima’s promenade was not paid on a whim [rather than the construction] was of paramount importance not only to Lima’s image as a modern urban center but also to his own image” (46).
Micaela and the Viceroy, which is so dramatic and personal it could be a play itself. While unlikely an authentic description of actual events, the way the story as dramatized by Palma is important because of its moralistic representation of Micaela and the lasting impact of this characterization in subsequent adaptations. According to Palma, the Viceroy temporarily ended the affair after Micaela slapped another actor on stage after he insulted her through a comparison to a rival actress. Palma plays on the base idea of women as more inclined than men to participate in superficial rivalries. The story goes that the actor shouted: “Inés would do better than that,” to which Micaela violently replied on stage with a slap. The audience was enraged by her reaction, and immediately started yelling, “A la cárcel la cómica” (“to prison with the actress”) (251). Afterward, perhaps out of shame or obligation, the Viceroy went to the actress’s home and said that the affair was over because of the public scandal. When Amat calls her “Perricholi,” this final insult becomes the most famous; according to Palma this was the origin of her popular nickname. The insult is a contraction of “perra” (slang for prostitute) and “chola,” (a derogatory term for someone of mixed-race in Peru), resulting in a one-word insult meaning “half-breed bitch.” There are a number of significant issues to consider when recounting the quarrel between Micaela and Amat: the overall emphasis on Micaela’s vanity, especially the idea that her reputation as leading actress was so tenuous and easily challenged; the fact that the actress would be so quickly moved to slap another in public, drawing attention to her hot temper and lack of regard for social norms; the outrage of the audience after they witnessed Michaela’s behavior and their quick willingness to imprison the actress for her public misstep; and finally, the origin story for Amat’s insult and Micaela’s enduring nickname “Perricholi,” which puts into words the denigrating interrelationship between sex and race that to date circumscribes her life story.

This same provocative axis between sex and race can also be marked in the way that Micaela is commonly referred to as one of the most renowned tapadas of the colonial period, although she certainly did not always dress in this style. The tapada as fashion —comprising a full skirt (saya) and two plain dark shawls (mantos) — was exported into the new world and “was most successful in Peru” (Vera Tudela, 79). The use of the fashion here as

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10. Palma describes a number of other rival actresses elsewhere, with special attention to Mariquita Castellanos, “La Castellanos.”

11. The tapadas were women from Peru’s criollo landholding and merchant classes. Until roughly the 1820s—or until Peruvian independence—the saya was gathered tightly above the knees to highlight the woman’s curves and restrict her movements. In Vera Tudela’s words, “The saya y manto allowed its wearer to insinuate their sexual charms while simultaneously disguising their identity: it both exposed and protected honor while giving play to desire” (84).
a kind of performance parallels in many ways the moral rhetoric concerning the role of actresses, where moralists were preoccupied with the way the *seya* and *mantos* could conceal a woman’s true identity; in this way, it is easy to appreciate why an artful actress would be especially suspect with her adept use of these garments. During the colonial period, the *tapada*’s costume was repeatedly and unsuccessfully prohibited over a nearly 400-year period, beginning in the early sixteenth century. Yet the anxiety surrounding the use and manipulation of the *tapada* was especially concerned with race and the way the garment could disguise it.

Finally, it is worth considering an alternately extreme yet surprisingly popular image of the actress, where she is presented as rehabilitated, redeemed, or converted from her former life of scandal. Frequently these images depict actresses in direct contact with the church, and prominently display religiosity as a kind of antidote to theatrical life. Of course this a trope not unique to Micaela but rather a prominent topic of concern for actresses throughout the period, where the fame and notoriety caused or sustained by public acts of transgression are equalized if not mutually sustained by public acts of penitence. Palma narrates two key visual scenes of conversion for Micaela that are worth exploring in detail, one during her mid-life and the second at the end of life.

This first scene, “the coach incident” is a tale in which Micaela is said to have jealously demanded her own coach for transportation behind Amat and then scandalously paraded behind him on a Franciscan feast day. In the middle of this scene, Palma tells his readers how remorse seized the actress. She got out of the coach, invited a priest to take her place, and then followed the carriage on foot. In Palma’s words: “Su corazón se desgarró al contraste de su esplendor de cortesana con la pobreza del Hombre-Dios, de su orgullo humano con la humildad divina” (306). The narrative style again dramatically emphasizes her wealth and excess as a point of contrast to solemn hardship, although here the emphasis is on Michaela’s emotions (her feeling heart) as an agent of positive transformation, unlike the earlier anecdote where her jealous insecurity motivated violence. At the end of the story, Palma describes how Micaela made a present of the coach to the parish of San Lazaro in recognition of her wrongdoings and as promise of her moral progress. This incident was, according to Palma, so well known

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12. According to Deborah Poole, there are orders about this fashion from the Spanish monarchs Felipe II, Felipe III, Felipe IV, and Carlos II, by the Third (ecclesiastical) Council of Lima (1583), and by the Peruvian vice-regal governments of Francisco de Toldeo (1571), the Marqués de Montesclaros (1609), and the Marqués de Guadalcazar (1624) (88).

13. Toward the end of the colonial period, Peru registered a population of more than one million inhabitants, of which 80 percent were classified as Indians and mestizo.
within Lima, that it is said to have become the subject of parody among the public—again reinforcing the topic of conversion as a prominent moral and social concern. According to Palma, another rival actress Mariquita Castellanos made a spectacle of Micaela’s generosity in a public scene at mass. It was her custom to attend church with her lapdog Cupidon. Only this time, her maid carried the dog behind her wearing a gold collar studded with diamonds. The actress then made a display of donating the dog and collar to a needy hospital in town, in a clear and derogatory allusion to Micaela’s act of charity.

At the end of her life, Palma offers one final literary portrait of Micaela when he describes how the actress left her career on stage in order to join the Carmelite order, where in his words, “la Perricholi se despidió para siempre del teatro, y vistiendo el hábito de las carmelitas hizo olvidar, con la austeridad de su vida y costumbres, los escándalos de su juventud” (359) again emphasizing conversion and redemption as a fitting end for the immoral actress. The insistence on end-of-life redemption impressed by this narrative resolution was an extremely compelling and surprisingly flexible response to a lifetime of transgressive public behavior. Across the ocean, consider how her well-known early predecessors La Calderona (1611–1646) or La Baltasara (b. 1550s) each are said to have famously concluded their lives as actresses by entering the convent, each absolving herself from crimes committed in the secular world and offering a kind of example to other women through their public conversions.14

Visual and narrative portraits of Micaela Villegas’s life communicate powerful and frequently changing ideas about fit conduct for actresses and their moral example and adaptation. This work also participates in an ongoing and critical conversation about the bounds of acceptable behavior for women on stage, both before and after Micaela’s life. Through a comparative analysis of these visual and literary portraits and the legal restrictions placed on actresses in eighteenth-century Peru and earlier, these images allow us to comment on the changing roles of women in increasingly urban spaces, and the impact of complex intersections between race, sex, and class. Moreover, the circulation and consumption of these visual and literary actress portraits participate in increasingly meaningful ways to the rise of celebrity culture and the creation of new kinds of control and visibility for the actress, both real and imagined.

14. Other early modern Spanish examples include Eufrasia María de Reina, Isabel Hernández, María Agueda, Josefina Lobaco, María de Riquelme, Mariana Romero, and Teresa Escudo. Provisional details about these actresses and others can be found in the Diccionario biográfico de actores del teatro clásico español (2008), a digital archive coordinated by Teresa Ferrer Valls.
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