Off With Her Head! An Analysis of Female Awakening Through Social Deviance in Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas*

Mavis Wolff

ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era brought the evolution of a distinctly feminine writing trope: the development of female characters' personal awakenings through acts of social deviance. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is a prime example of this phenomenon, wherein main character Edna Pontellier, disinterested in the expectations of upper-class French-Creole life, participates in an emotional affair to actualize her own autonomy. This essay seeks to determine the significance of this literary trope in contemporary playwright Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas*. The play follows the woes of French Queen Marie-Thérèse as she becomes dissatisfied with her position on the margins of French Courtly society and has an affair with another excluded person, Nabo, an African with dwarfism. Nottage's parallel to the writings of Victorian female authors, like Chopin herself, emphasizes a desire to advocate for the advancement of women through the lens of Early Modern society. Additionally, the parallel reveals the continuity of the tradition of representing women's recognition of their autonomy through deviant actions from nineteenth-century through twenty-first-century literature. The presence of this tradition in twenty-first-century literature demonstrates that women are seeking similar social advancement in the present day.

Contemporary playwright Lynn Nottage is known for her writing as a form of "political advocacy" with a wide focus on complex narratives that intersect multiple social spheres (Poll 81). Nottage's craftsmanship is enhanced by the historical research that enriches her stories and grounds them despite her frequent use of situational hyperbole (95). Her balance of creative elements and historical context is seen in the play *Las Meninas*, set in seventeenth-century France toward the end of King Louis XIV's rule (Mansfield 105). The play follows Queen Marie-Thérèse, wife of King Louis XIV, and Nabo, an African dwarf bestowed on the queen by her cousin, as they form a relationship that will threaten the sanctity of the royal court. *Las Meninas* premiered at San Jose Repertory Theatre in 2002 under the direction of Michael Donald Edward and stage manager Nina Iventosch (249). The play had a positive but not booming reception. Critics noted an air of burlesque sexuality in its expressionistic set and tongue-in-cheek dialogue—characteristics that, as it happens, convey the drama of the play's historical setting (Harvey).

In *Las Meninas*, Lynn Nottage harkens to a literary tradition of female personal awakening through social deviance. To understand this focus, it is necessary to define both "social deviance" and the literary tradition of female personal awakening. The former is any course of action that defies the social and moral norms imposed by a society through legislation or social pressure, and the latter is when female characters experience a sudden, greater sense of self-autonomy despite their preexisting social confines, usually through socially deviant means (Abdulhaq 12). Nottage utilizes these elements to develop her commentary in *Las Meninas* on how gender-based social confines negatively impact women.

The play itself primarily focuses on the course of Nabo and Queen Marie-Thérèse's relationship. At the beginning of the play, Queen Marie-Thérèse is deeply unsatisfied with her husband, feeling as though he held little, if any, respect for their union, especially considering the way in which she is excluded from the social experience of the French court. To regain control over her life, the queen decides to pursue a more intimate friendship with Nabo, an African dwarf sent as a gift to her from French Dahomey, a colony in Africa known today as the People's Republic of Benin (Nottage 248). This scandalous bond eventually transforms into an unwanted pregnancy; the tension of the story culminates in a strikingly courteous dispute between King Louis XIV and Nabo. The execution of Nabo and the erasure of this episode from the history of the king's reign forms the story's conclusion.

Like Toni Morrison, whom she cites as a central influence in her work, Nottage supplements her characters' narratives with ample historical context. This often becomes

the most salient element of her work due to the accuracy of detail (Allfey et al). *Las Meninas* is oriented in Early Modern France, where French Renaissance gender mores prioritized absolute control over submissive wives (Insdorf 21). Furthermore, it was common in contemporary French culture, especially among the aristocracy and royalty, for the core values of marriage to be property and social status; these unions were contracted and negotiated, serving a solely transactional purpose (Insdorf 20-22).These phenomena are exemplified in the barren connection between King Louis XIV and Queen Marie-Thérèse, whose marriage was tied to the Treaty of the Pyrenees that brought peace to France and Spain. The Treaty of Pyrenees marked the conclusion of the Franco-Spanish War. This conflict was complex from the beginning, as it occurred amidst both the Thirty Years' War and a period of strained international relations between France and the dominant Habsburg Dynasty, and thus can be considered a subtle advancement of French political interests (Lopez 1). Internal tension in France and Spain delayed the treaty, and there was heavy disagreement over the marriage of the infant queen, who was offered like a token of peace (Lopez 2). Given the rhetorical situation of the Treaty, which was rooted in geopolitics, one can see that this marriage was never born from love. The king and queen were placed together to be symbols of international unity—a fact that does not necessarily entice someone. The lack of intimacy between the king and queen, and the king's subsequent infidelity, becomes one of the queen's central motivations for her affair with Nabo.

Further historical context is present in the elements of the play's first production and its namesake. As Nottage notes of the premiere, a dramaturg, Nakissa Etemad, was present to maintain the piece's historical accuracy (249). To ensure linguistic integrity, specifically with Queen Marie-Thérèse who speaks poor French through a royal Spanish accent, dialect coach Lynne Soffer was on the production team (249). Royal Spanish influence is seen in the play's title, as it was named after the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velásquez (1656). The painting itself is a genre scene, a painting that captures a specific type of situation; here it would be a court painting of the Spanish royal family. The piece is significant because it includes a self-portrait of Velásquez himself in the process of painting the royalty, a different and more intimate approach than other works of the time. This painting depicts the social setting of a royal court like the one in which play's plot unfolds, albeit in Spain. It shows the queen's court of origin and even depicts her father, Philip IV of Spain. Nottage's linking of her play to Velásquez's painting through her title establishes the queen as a central character in the narrative.

Nottage's emphasis on Queen Marie-Thérèse's culture reveals that the play's events transpire under her veil of perception. The audience views the play through the queen's emotional lens, with an emphasis on her experience of being excluded from the French court's social fabric. Since the queen's exclusion appears to stem from the French value of nationality, it is apparent this cultural difference emphasizes Queen Marie-Thérèse's feeling like an outsider in the French Court. The racial viewpoints in seventeenth-century Europe lead to Nabo's social exclusion as well, as he is defined as nothing but a court fool. The queen and Nabo's ability to form a bond relates to this experience of social exclusion, which becomes a motivating factor for the queen's decisions.

The tradition of female awakening through social deviance was born out of the Victorian Cult of Domesticity. Nineteenth-century European society, which heavily influenced American literature, found the ideal woman to be feminine, submissive, and maternal in nature, and those who violated these tight boundaries were considered threats to civilized society. This conception is reflected in contemporary European and American literature, especially pieces written by men, where women holding traditionally male roles are often scrutinized and satirized (Green 28-29). However, the Victorian Era was a time of social transformation, which galvanized a general anxiety about the possibility of women attempting to break out of the domestic sphere and enter the public sphere. Within literature authored by women, there was a more consistent appearance of female characters challenging this status quo through social deviance, thus using these platforms to advocate for the overall advancement of women (Abdulhaq 10).

The Awakening, written and published by Kate Chopin in 1899, is the most notable of these narratives of female transgression to achieve autonomy, as it presented a high-class woman using deviance to escape her gender role. The novel follows French Creole aristocrat Edna Pontellier as she recognizes her own self autonomy (Chopin). The power of this work is corroborated by Elaine Showalter in "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book," wherein she describes how Chopin, referencing a "rich and complex tradition," is able to go "boldly beyond the work of her precursors in writing about women's longing for sexual and personal emancipation" (203). Showalter notes the impact of this text after it was published, highlighting how Chopin's work defined many new standards for the genre of the novel (203).

Through the novel's plot, Edna Pontellier's deviance manifests in her neglecting her "womanly duties," such as receiving social calls, passionately tending to the children, and cleaning the estate (29). Her deviance snowballs into an emotional affair, and her moving from her husband's house without prior consultation. Edna's flirtation with what brings her pleasure leads to her recognition of self-autonomy, or her awakening,

when she diverges from the standards of the Cult of Domesticity for the first time. She begins choosing to occupy each day as she pleases as opposed to prioritizing supervision of the servants, tending to her children, and hosting. Her husband finds this choice unacceptable. In a fit of worry, Mr. Pontellier complains to the couple's local doctor, "She's got some sort of notion in her head concerning the eternal rights of women...." (88). It is apparent that this situation perplexes Leonce Pontellier. Since his mind is entrenched with the standards of the Cult of Domesticity, he cannot comprehend his wife's desire to experience the autonomy that he is granted every day. On a larger scale, the conflict between these characters implies a social commentary from Chopin on the expectations of women during this time, as well as the general disregard for the desires of women. This tension between spouses is also apparent in *Las Meninas* through the king and queen's union.

Queen Marie-Thérèse's social deviance is exemplified through her relationship with King Louis XIV as well as through challenging the king's relationship with his mistress, La Valliere. The disconnected nature of Queen Marie-Thérèse and King Louis XIV's relationship is displayed in the very beginning of the novel upon the queen's reception of Nabo from her cousin. Throughout the entire interaction, the king's body language displays little regard for the conversation the queen engages him in. She implores him, "What is the best gift that you have ever received? Did it come in a box dis size or bigger," and his sole response is a shrug (253). Upon finally opening the box, the queen commands, "Look Louis, es fantastic," but "The King, disinterested, [cannot] be bothered to look" (253). Nottage references the contemporary trend of marrying for power or monetary gain, as was true of the relationship between the queen and king, who only married to prevent further discord between their respective countries of origin (Insdorf 20-22). The empty, transactional nature of their union provides the grounds for the king's infidelity and the queen's eventual discontent with their union and her own lack of autonomy.

The queen, brimming with the desire to feel seen in both the French Court and the eyes of the king, turns to deviance to advance her status. Queen Marie-Thérèse resorts to explosive tantrums to finally receive authentic emotional reactions from King Louis XIV. The most notable of these events is on the day of the king's and queen's supposed countryside holiday, a typical endeavor for the summer months. The queen is packed and ready, Nabo steadfast and commonplace at her side, but the king abruptly and unfeelingly declares, "I've decided that I won't go to the country this month . . . [.] La Valliere has persuaded me to stay" (282). This sparks a brief dispute between the royalties that escalates into the queen throwing a monumental tantrum, "stomping across the room

in an undignified manner" (284). Following a fiery curse catapulted at La Valliere, the queen reaches the climax of her fury. Louise, the play's narrator and the living result of the queen and Nabo's relationship, recalls how "[the] gentle Queen rampaged through the palace in a rage that's still legendary. Tearing portraits...and shredding tapestries with her bare hands" (284).

This event is the peak of a longstanding disagreement between the king and queen: the matter of La Valliere. In the play's beginning, this repeated tiff is portrayed as the queen feeling insecure and unloved in her marriage. However, across the play, La Valliere grows, in both the king and queen's eyes, to be representative of the ideals Queen Marie-Thérèse cannot seem to live up to. La Valliere speaks French, which had previously led the king to reject the queen for being unable to speak effectively (at one point, he mandates, "Speak French, for God's sake I do not know what you are saying)" (253). Additionally, the king often plainly demeans the queen through comparisons to La Valliere. For example, to conclude an argument over their lack of sexual intimacy, the king brusquely states, "La Valliere didn't eat sweets in bed. Good night, Marie," simultaneously disregarding the opinion of the queen and shaming her "unladylike" affinity for sweets in their bedroom chambers (269). In this way, the king renders Queen Marie-Thérèse inferior and establishes his mistress as the paragon of womanhood and demure femininity.

King Louis XIV's dismissive nature serves as a central motivation for the queen's ultimate act of deviance: her night of copulation with Nabo, following the events surrounding the lack of a countryside holiday (285-286). Across global history, the royal womb was the most powerful location in a monarch's palace—more so than the throne. Therefore, the son or daughter Queen Marie-Thérèse bore would not only be the heir to the throne but also a corporeal symbol of the success of the Treaty of the Pyrenees. Since the king and queen's relationship formed the content of the treaty itself, their child would be representative of the treaty's success over time.

To Queen Marie-Thérèse, a sexual relation with Nabo is the ultimate act of revenge. Nabo does not meet any of the French royal standards for proper breeding. His African descent and dwarfism automatically render him an outcast, inferior in the French Court. His marginalized placement through the label of "the fool" means any heir produced from the queen's and his relationship would have no rights to the throne and represent the royalty poorly (255). Additionally, this union forces King Louis XIV's adulterous behavior onto himself and ushers in the realization that Queen Marie-Thérèse's and his matrimony has no sincerity. Overall, the queen's social deviance is largely motivated by her flawed relationship with King Louis XIV and his infidelity with his mistress, La

Vallière. King Louis XIV's blatant disregard of the queen's opinions and emotional well-being, combined with his comparison of her to La Valliere, the supposed "ideal woman," ultimately leads to the queen's disastrous outbursts and her adultery with Nabo.

It is out of these acts of deviance that Queen Marie-Thérèse's personal awakening emerges. Her recognition of the political power of her womb and her dissatisfaction with King Louis XIV is actualized with her cry, "If Louis is not going to the country, I'm not going either. I defy you, Louis" (Nottage 284). Although this statement seems to stem from the tiff the king and queen are having over their dissolved vacation, it is also largely representative of the queen's acknowledgement of her autonomy. Additionally, Queen Marie-Thérèse's relationship with Nabo allows her to feel a long-lost sense of community, while King Louis XIV and his court work to ostracize her. The queen's and Nabo's eventual sexual encounter reveals this dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion. Louise, the daughter of the union, declares, "With one tender kiss she drew him in and they faced the possibility of freedom" (286). For Queen Marie-Thérèse, freedom is being harbored from judgement on how her heritage manifests in her personality. Nabo is afforded a similar freedom, as for the first time in this foreign land, he is accepted regardless of his body's form and complexion.

This mutual acceptance and the pair's delicate embrace symbolize the queen exercising her personal authority. This breath of freedom is comparable to Edna Pontellier's own path towards "the possibility of freedom" in Chopin's *The Awakening*, which also involves an affair being used as a tool for personal liberation (Nottage 286). In the final scenes of the novel, Edna, nude, walks into the open ocean while pondering her life. She feels new to her environment, as though she were "some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known." (139). Upon thinking of her husband, "Léonce[,] and the children," she concludes that although they "were a part of her life...they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul" (139). Here, Edna Pontellier realizes that her person is restrained only by herself; a conclusion in stark contrast to Mr. Pontellier's perspective in the opening chapter, where he observes her sunburn "as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage" (24). As a result, in the reader's eye, Edna transitions from a materialistic object to an individual with a soul that can operate of their own accord, as she ceases her complacency regarding the expectations placed on her. Edna Pontellier's power culminates as she disregards her "arms and legs [that] were growing tired," the exhaustion "pressing upon and overpowering her," continuing to swim as proof of her will (139). The vagueness of the novel's final scene, where the reader is unsure if Edna

Pontellier exits the ocean or falls victim to it, exposes the intensity with which Edna values her personal freedom: regardless of the looming risk of death, the feeling of autonomy remains too sweet (139).

Readers can draw a similar conclusion regarding the female body and personal autonomy by analyzing Queen Marie-Thérèse's actions in *Las Meninas*, the significance of which is compounded by her eventual pregnancy. Through the queen's and Nabo's intercourse, the former is able to recognize the innate power within her body, as Edna does when she continues to swim despite the twin threats of exhaustion and drowning. The recognition of the queen's body's autonomy is corroborated by her willingness to risk her royal livelihood for this act of social deviance, declaring to Nabo, "We pay the price for the things we desire" (Nottage 286). To further expose this motivation, Louise, the pregnancy's exiled result, enters the stage space to tell the audience: "With a kiss he [Nabo] now possessed the Kingly prize" (286). Nottage, in referring to the queen and her womb itself as a "prize," a material object, injects a sense of irony into this scene. Queen Marie-Thérèse had been regarded by the French Court only to serve the purpose of a political pawn, but her choice emphasizes that she is no longer going to be bound by these assumptions of her cooperation in such social and political contracts. Like Edna Pontellier, the queen steps out of the glass display case that the society's dominant members placed her in by means of acting on her own accord.

The similarity between Edna's and the queen's actions manifests once again amid a rant surrounding the latter's circumstances. The queen cries out to Nabo, "They think I can be treated like spoiled meat...I could pound my belly and let the King know that I HAVE SOME POWER TOO" (Nottage 312). Through an external conversation, as opposed to Edna Pontellier's internal conflict, the queen has the same recognition as Edna herself—the oppressive social constructs that emphasize motherhood, the status of the child, and prim behavior are responsible for the constraints on women's bodies and minds. However, both characters recognize, in the face of these strict parameters, that they can decide their own fate by taking control of their physical beings. There is the recognition that in the face of strict parameters, women can decide their own fate through corporeal transgressions.

The modes by which the queen and Edna Pontellier have their realizations are their acts of social deviance—most notably, their affairs—represent instances when Early Modern and Victorian women first took their own fate by the reins and disregarded rigid, contemporary gender norms. Queen Marie-Thérèse's and Edna Pontellier's pleasure-seeking affairs garner an understanding of their ability to choose their own directions

rather than letting these choices rest in the hands of their husbands or society. These realizations grant both Queen Marie-Thérèse and Edna Pontellier access to the experience of a personal awakening.

The similarities between these women's courses of action display Lynn Nottage's reclamation of the tradition of women engaging in socially deviant acts to augment their social statuses. Nottage's central commentary in *Las Meninas*, as shown by the plight of Queen Marie-Thérèse, is that rigid social confines around their bodies breed discontentment in women. The queen's presence, as a monarch in a society with unyielding gender norms, references the Cult of Domesticity that sought out well-bred and well-behaved women. Queen Marie-Thérèse is expected to behave with dignity and deference yet lacks the privilege of respect from her peers in the French Court. The only time the queen feels as though she is free from such expectations and disrespect is through her deviant affair with Nabo.

As a result, Nabo's character represents the queen's path toward self-autonomy, especially because he too is an outcast in this society due to his race and disability. When Nabo first appears, he is gift-wrapped in a box, sent as a gift from the queen's cousin. His first greetings from the French Court are demands to "Give us a dance then," rather than inquiry of his name (Nottage 254). However, Queen Marie-Thérèse later finds a purpose for him because she feels as though she can relate to his sense of otherness; as a result, Nabo becomes instrumental to Queen Marie-Thérèse. Although Nabo still experiences otherness in his "selection" by the queen, there is a shift within Nabo's characterization as an outsider. In the beginning, his race and his disability set him apart from all other characters' emotions, but once Queen Marie-Thérèse acknowledges their shared separation, he shifts from the role of a jester to that of an elected confidante.

Furthermore, as the queen is pushed further and further from the inner social circle of the French Court, Nabo and she begin spending increasingly longer durations of time together. Nabo becomes her confidant though her sexual quarrels with King Louis XIV, allowing Queen Marie-Thérèse to find solace when distraught (272-274). This connection provides the queen with the intimate emotional support she desires, which emboldens her to both start the monumental fight with the king over the countryside holiday and to have sexual intercourse with Nabo. Through this train of events, it is apparent that Queen Marie-Thérèse's relationship with Nabo is transformative for her view of her autonomy and will to execute the actions necessary to fulfill such freedom. Given the social exile both characters experience from the French Court, it is only natural that they seek community in one another.

Nottage focuses on the development of these characters' relationship to usher in commentary using the firm social expectations of Early Modern French high society. Since Queen Marie-Thérèse is the main character, Nottage hones this commentary to her lens, using hyperbolic social expectations and instances of rejection, such as her husband ridiculing her inabilities in French, to demonstrate the negative effects strict social norms have on women in general (Nottage 253). Although present-day Western society does not prioritize the exact same roles women were to fulfill in the Victorian or Renaissance Eras, Nottage's reference to the Victorian trope of female awakening and the placement of the setting within Renaissance France provides the foundation on which to convey this commentary. Nottage uses this foundation to draw the connection between present-day society and the discontent, and subsequent civil disobedience, of women seeking autonomy.

The Victorian tradition of the female novel often utilized transgressions of the female body to comment on the harshness of expectations of women in this era (Showalter 203). Within *Las Meninas*, Nottage creates a theatrical hyperbole of this tradition through the stark dichotomy between Queen Marie-Thérèse's desires for social freedom and her role within the French Court. Queen Marie-Therese's dissatisfaction culminates in the deviance of her intercourse with Nabo. One finds the critique in the emotional fallout and pregnancy she experiences from this event, as her deviance, although an attempt to define personal authority, still leads to her involvement in conflict. This domino effect is catalyzed by the social expectations placed on Queen Marie-Thérèse, for if she were afforded space to make her own decisions her deviance would not have seemed necessary. As a result, one can see that Nottage organizes the plot progression in a manner that is critical of how strict social norms regarding women lead not only to transgressive behavior, but also lead to damage in the psyche of the transgressive body itself.

This critique is furthered by *Las Meninas'* status as a work of the twenty-first century. First published in 2001, *Las Meninas* appeared at the turn of the century and the beginning of the War on Terror. The 90s and early 2000s saw the increasing dominance of the tabloids, where magazine covers were peppered with exhaustingly exaggerated popular culture events and scandals. The way the media of this era represented the experiences of female public figures was definitive of how these experiences were viewed by the general population. For example, popular culture was still experiencing the aftermath of the scandal between Monica Lewinsky and former President Bill Clinton. In a TED Talk, Lewinsky describes 1998 as though she bore her own "scarlet letter," as her intimate court documents were strewn across the rapidly growing World Wide Web (Schwartz). In her article "Monica Lewinsky and the Shame Game," Alexandra Schwartz

finds that the "worst abuse resulted from the widespread, and unprecedented, distribution of these materials." The tabloids gathered what was left of Lewinsky's reputation and socially buried it.

This sort of slanderous media representation served to redefine expectations for women in society as a more subversive evil. Women were no longer bound by four-burner stovetops but instead were bound by headlines—the same headlines that found the men involved in such scandals to be worthy of pardon. It is reasonable to conclude that the social confines born from the fear of public scorn bear similarity to the social hierarchy of the historical French Court. For example, this phenomenon is present in the scene when the king and his posse disregard the queen when she attempts to enter a conversation during the Court's afternoon stroll (Nottage 276). Her track record of what they perceive as outrageous behavior does not warrant her inclusion in their social sphere, just as Lewinsky was outcast both professionally and in the eyes of America in the years following the Clinton scandal.

Considering that *Las Meninas* was published in the aftermath of this national event, one can see parallels between the broader expectations of women in each era. In the seventeenth century, the woman's role was more explicitly stated, especially for Queen Marie-Thérèse; she must remain subservient to continue the longevity of the peace treaty that determines her marriage. In 2001, due to the tabloids' dominant social presence, female figures in popular culture were faced with the threat of news outlets that often shifted the blame on the woman. Both cultures, although the latter less visibly so, encouraged muted behavior from women for the sake of conformity. Thus, one can see that the themes Lynn Nottage explores in *Las Meninas*, all of which criticize women being placed under strict social norms, are *apropos* to the context the play was published under. Nottage's work serves as a reminder of the repetitive nature of history, and the play itself becomes a historical, exaggerated representation of a still-current phenomenon.

The events within *Las Meninas* occur from Queen Marie-Thérèse's perspective. Her situation as the main character is first established through the title, which is a reference to a painting by Diego Velásquez by the same name; the painting is a depiction of the queen as a child and her home in the Spanish royalty. Additionally, the queen's actions catalyze key plot events within the play. This is seen in both the exposition that establishes her as an outcast among the French Court, of which she is a member, and the climax, when she has an affair with Nabo.

Queen Marie-Thérèse's actions and their consequences strategically parallel the Victorian trope of female awakening through social deviance, thus demonstrating how this tradition is still relevant to the twentieth century. This tradition, established among

the grip of the Cult of Domesticity, often employs symbolism of the female body undergoing a transgression to express dissatisfaction with the contemporary expectations of women. Chopin's *The Awakening*, a breakthrough novel in this tradition, exemplifies these events through the plight of main character Edna Pontellier, who expresses her desire for social freedom through a romantic affair. Through this symbolism, one can see how Chopin utilized the genre as a platform to critique the predominant view that the ideal woman was a devoted homemaker. The tradition is employed similarly by Nottage to create a historical commentary on the societal role of women that equally pertains to the twenty-first century.

Lynn Nottage organizes the play within this tradition to develop a commentary on how Queen Marie-Thérèse's sexual transgressions occur due to the social pressure she is under. The queen is consistently rejected in her social endeavors: both politically and platonically by the members of the King's coterie, but also sexually by the King himself. Also, she is expected to remain faithful and peaceful so as not to disrupt the tenets established by the Treaty of the Pyrenees. In the depths of ostracization, the queen grows closer to Nabo, the only other outcast within her sphere. Within this relationship, the queen has the freedom to express her discontent, which leads to her and Nabo's intercourse.

However, through this bodily transgression Queen Marie-Thérèse achieves the first taste of personal autonomy. Her decision to have sexual relations with Nabo is the only time she has acted entirely on her own accord, without the approval or influence of outside parties or social expectations. As a result, she begins to acknowledge the validity of her own opinion and thus recognizes her own personal power. One can see the same pattern through Edna Pontellier, who begins her transgressions by neglecting her "womanly" duties and allows them to culminate in an emotional affair of her own. The novel's final scene of Edna waltzing nude into the open ocean symbolizes the personal freedom that she achieves through her neglect of social expectations.

Through this comparison, it is apparent that Nottage referenced this Victorian tradition of the female novel to convey a commentary comment on how strict social confines breed discontent within women overall. The rhetorical context under which this play was published, which found the nation under the grip of tabloids slanted towards a misogynistic opinion, furthers the significance of Nottage's reference to this tradition. On the cusp of the turn of the century, in 2001, *Las Meninas* broadly comments on the expectations of women within modern society. It questions how the tabloids placed pressure on female figures in popular culture to avoid perceived forms of social deviance

to prevent public scorn, and why the public scorn tended to focus on the role of the woman in the scandals dominating newsstands. Lynn Nottage's *Las Meninas*, through its harkening to longstanding advocacy for the advancement of women, effectively illustrates that the presence of rigid, gender-based expectations contributes to the social deviance of women as they look experience a personal awakening of their own autonomy.

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