Juan Ruiz de Alarcón: Impairment as Empowerment in Early Modern Spain

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Abstract: Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, a seventeenth-century writer and native of New Spain, so excelled at the craft of writing comedias that he is recognized as one of the great writers of early modern Spain. In his personal life Ruiz de Alarcón struggled with a significant bodily impairment, a large hump on both his back and front, which made him the target of much attention and scorn from his fellow writers and others in society. No journals or letters exist that document his personal life or attitudes toward his impairment. However, disability theory opens a way to explore the woven fabric of Ruiz de Alarcón’s life and works. Both the themes and the characters in his popular comedias trace how his embodiment and experiences influenced his depiction of imperfections. Three of his seventeenth-century comedias, Las paredes oyen, La prueba de las promesas, and Examen de maridos, address different aspects of imperfection in both direct and indirect ways.

Keywords: comedy/comedia, disability/disabilidad, Golden Age/siglo de Oro, Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Spain/España

Juan Ruiz de Alarcón came to the comedia with a keen and educated mind, the perspective of having been born and raised in New Spain, and a body with a serious and undeniable physical impairment. This unique combination of intellect, origin, and disability empowered him to complicate for his readers and audiences the idea of perfection, or lo ideal, in Peninsular Spanish society. The upper levels of Spanish society in early modern Spain were driven by the twin goals of bodily perfection and spiritual perfection, which affected the lives of both men and women. Ruiz de Alarcón assumed a rhetorical stance in his comedias that laid bare the foibles of Spanish society: he observed from his position of isolation, which was caused by not having a perfect body, not having an impressive lineage, and not being born in Spain. It will be the task of this article to explore the woven fabric of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón’s life and trace how his life and experiences influenced his depiction of defectos in three of his seventeenth century comedias: Las paredes oyen, La prueba de las promesas, and Examen de maridos. Examples from these three comedias will demonstrate the ways in which his own impairment and social standing empowered him to challenge the attitudes of his time about human imperfection.

The word “impairment” will be used in this article to refer to the bodily manifestation of Ruiz de Alarcón as a hunchback. On the other hand, “disability” will be used as a description of the ways in which society limits or restricts Ruiz de Alarcón’s activities (Albrecht 11). Use of these two terms will ensure a holistic approach, which will encompass his physical presence, his lineage, and his place in a stratified Spanish society.

The term “embodiment” infers that we are whole beings, with all of our differences; in other words, both our identity and our actions are enfolded within the concept of embodiment. Psychologists are beginning to explore just how our mind and body work together to combine our physical and mental perceptions, in a relatively new field called embodied cognition. Theorists note that studying embodiment leads to “understanding how our behavior emerges
from the real-time interplay of task-specific resources distributed across the brain, body, and environment, coupled together via our perceptual systems” (Wilson and Golonka 1). We will see that Ruiz de Alarcón’s own embodiment and life experiences had a direct and integral effect on his literary works because he lived with an imperfect body in a society that was constantly striving to achieve lo ideal.

The Spanish word defecto (or defeto) can be interpreted in several different ways. In the writing of early modern Spain, defecto was used to refer to either a physical or moral imperfection, as well as such imperfections as style or quality of writing. An example of the word defecto used for physical imperfection comes from a letter to Ruiz de Alarcón, dated 19 June 1625. By 1625, Ruiz de Alarcón had been a pretendiente, or government-office seeker, for twelve years. King Philip IV’s letter detailed the results of an investigation into Ruiz de Alarcón’s background and worthiness for a responsible position. While the king indicated satisfaction with Ruiz de Alarcón’s personal record, he refused to award him a major post, based on his bodily defects, offering instead, a minor post as interim court reporter:

Y el Conss. ° a tenido siempre satifazion de sus letras y conocido su talento, y aunque por sus partes era merezedor de que le propusiese á V .M. Para Una plaza de asiento de las Audiencias menores, lo a dexado de hazer, por el defeto Corporal que tiene el qual es grande para la autoridad que a menester representar en cosa semexante. (Fernández-Guerra y Orbe 523)

In another use of the word defecto, Lope de Vega apologizes for his defects in the prologue to “Los esclavos libres,” “Yo no pido a V.m. que dé luz en mi escurididad, sino que ampare en mi defecto, para decir con Eurípides: Jupiter mihi auxiliator, non metuo. Capitán de V . M. Lope de Vega Carpio” (397). This quote demonstrates that defecto could refer to a range of imperfections, large and small. The word defecto in this quote could be interpreted in two different ways, either as an expression of humility by Lope de Vega, or as a statement of frustration with not having achieved perfection in the art of writing.

Ruiz de Alarcón was a hunchback, whose spinal column was twisted in such a way as to create a hump on both his chest and his back. There are no verified portraits of him, but we do have descriptions from some of his fellow writers. Willard King includes this description of Ruiz de Alarcón, “Era pelirrojo y de baja estatura, aunque no tan baja que pareciera enano. Si hemos de dar fe a quienes lo conocieron, ya adulto, en Sevilla y en Madrid, tenía un temperamento extrovertido y vivaracho y era amigo de las fiestas” (61).

Francisco de Quevedo similarly provided a caricature of Ruiz de Alarcón in his extensive letrilla, “De D. Francisco de Quevedo contra D. Juan de Alarcón.”

¿Quién es don Tal Tolondrones, de paréntesis formado, un hombre en quien se ha juntado sembldea de burujones?
¿Quién tiene con lamparones pecho, lado y espaldilla?
Corcovilla. (King 250)

The example above is one of twenty-one stanzas, which all point out Ruiz de Alarcón’s numerous corporeal defects. Satirical works aimed at a fellow author were not unusual in the Golden Age; it is easy to find numerous examples of barbs aimed at other writers. King explains the literary atmosphere in Madrid, “La vida de los escritores en una capital tan chica, donde todo el mundo conocia a todo el mundo, era una red de enemistades y rivalidades” (167). Esther Bartolomé Pons remarks on Quevedo’s style: “Fue Quevedo el más duro, terrible y despiadado autor satírico de la España de su tiempo” (4). A further example of a Golden Age satirical writer is Cristóbal Suárez
de Figueroa, who launched many attacks on his fellow authors, including Cervantes, Lope de Vega, and Ruiz de Alarcón, finding fault with their physical bearing, writing, and lineage. Enrique Suárez Figaredo, in his edition of Suárez de Figueroa’s *Pasajero*, underscores “su espíritu crítico respecto a la sociedad de su tiempo, las nada cordiales relaciones que mantuvo con sus colegas (en particular con Alarcón) y la antipatía que sentía hacia Cervantes.” In addition, it should be noted that not all satirical pieces focused on Ruiz de Alarcón’s impairment; critics also found his personality and lineage lacking (Castro Leal 41; King 167).5

Ruiz de Alarcón refused to be a passive victim of satirical pieces, and his responses were both direct and indirect. For example, he replied to Quevedo with his own work, “Respuesta de D. Juan de Alarcón contra D. Francisco de Quevedo” in which he refers to Quevedo as *Pata Coja*, or lame foot (King 254). Castro Leal commented on Ruiz de Alarcón’s responses to the criticism, “La forma en que responde a algunos de los desenfadados ataques de los mejores ingenios del tiempo, revela nobleza de espíritu y aun cierta conmiseración por sus agresores” (18). One of his responses to the barrage of criticism his embodiment caused was to embed his perspective in the characters and plot of his comedias.

In addition to Ruiz de Alarcón’s physical impairment, which caused much of his disability in negotiating Spanish society, he also endured alienation because he was a criollo, a son born in the New World, of Spanish parents. Criollos were considered second to native-born Spaniards, in most instances, with regard to job-seeking or court positions. Also, Ruiz de Alarcón’s lineage was in question, as King explains, “con base en rumores insistentemente recogidos en varias pruebas de limpieza de sangre de comienzos del siglo XVII” (235). Rumors reported that the bones of one of his ancestors, Violante González, were disinterred and burned in 1491 as punishment for Judaizing. King disproved those rumors in 1970 (235). However, from the point of view of early modern Spanish society, Ruiz de Alarcón suffered from multiple imperfections, or defects: physical impairment, place of origin, and suspicious lineage, all of which created barriers for his acceptance and integration. He encountered all around him a society that was striving for physical and spiritual perfection. His very nature was in opposition to the concept of *lo ideal*.

Living in early modern Spanish society with such a visible deformity, he was regarded as grotesque and far from *lo ideal* demanded of upper class men and women. Henri Stiker explores human reactions to difference in *A History of Disability*. He notes that rejection of difference relates directly to our understanding of what is normal, and what relationship to the norm we have been culturally trained to accept. When someone does not fit into our concept of normal, it creates a disconnect, or, as Stiker phrases it, a “tear in our being. . . . The visceral nature of this ‘tear’ reveals the extent of our investment in the fantasy of the normal” (viii). Wherever Ruiz de Alarcón went, his impairment was so obvious that he challenged the early modern Spanish understanding of what a human body should look like. Elena Del Río Parra, in her examination of the representation of deformity in Golden Age Spain, highlights a connection between people’s fears and the sight of deformity, “La mirada del sujeto callejero sobre lo horrible del monstruo como objeto no solo deshumaniza y comercializa, sino que también confirma el peligro de lo natural, lo ignoto de la naturaleza, y los límites de lo humano” (127). Del Río Parra uses the term *monstruo* to cover many categories of deformity, including the hunchback. In addition, Otis Green suggests that people of early modern Spain recognized a connection between the bodily manifestation of impairment and lack of intelligence, or, even a soul (101–02). The more invested in *lo ideal* a person was, the less likely that person would accept Ruiz de Alarcón as a peer.

Early modern Spanish society was marked by constant monitoring and being monitored, by judging and being judged. People were analyzed and weighed for their performance of gender, wealth, bloodlines, relative attractiveness, adherence to the Catholic faith, honor, and position in society. Since literature often serves to reflect society, these themes can be found throughout the literary production of the era. According to Georgina Dopico Black, “It almost seems redundant now to point out that in early modern Spain bodies—and bloodlines—were
quite literally read for Otherness” (58). Fray Luis de León, in considering the vocation of the perfect married woman, reveals a bias about impairment, saying that often in nature, creatures born with significant disabilities do not live: “y como la naturaleza aborrece los monstruos, así Dios huye déstos y los abomina” (9). While Fray Luis was speaking about natural selection, analysis reveals an abhorrence for imperfection that could and did carry over into daily life in early modern Spain. J. H. Elliott echoes the same observation in “The Imposition of Orthodoxy,” “Suspicion of those who deviated from the common norm was deeply rooted in a country where deviation was itself more normal than elsewhere—and a man could be suspect for his race as well as his faith” (220).

Lennard Davis in “Constructing Normalcy,” notes that “literature does not require a theme of disability, or even disabled characters in order to make a statement about disability, even in texts that do not appear to be about disability, the issue of normalcy is fully deployed” (17). He traces the term norm from its beginnings in Europe during the 1800s (6–7). People in early modern Europe did not think in terms of average or normal, but in terms of the ideal, or lo ideal, comparing themselves and others to a social construction of perfection (4). Cristian Berco connects the Spanish goal of spiritual and bodily perfection in his discussion of the Virgin Mary, “After all, medieval and early modern notions of beauty intimately connected the state of the soul with outward appearance. Consider, for instance, the common insistence that the Virgin Mary lacked any physical imperfections” (231). Since she was both sinless and perfect, her ideal state both influenced and inspired her followers. Berco continues, “Such a premium placed on outward appearance and how it was read in social situations reflected broader trends in early modern society that conceptualised the visible body as central to status and reputation” (238). Ruiz de Alarcón, situated in a substantially tangential relationship to society in early modern Spain, used his considerable talent to criticize society’s constant search for lo ideal.

The three plays by Ruiz de Alarcón considered here call into question the relationship between imperfections and love, between imperfections and honor, and between imperfections and friendship. Juan Ruiz de Alarcón most certainly experienced all of the nuances of impairment: rejection, scorn, alienation, as well as acceptance, friendship, and love. Although he was, at some level, answering his critics through the power of his pen, it is evident that his intent went far beyond revenge. He was teaching a lesson in how to treat one another, in what is and is not important, and how to walk away from lo ideal.

Although we do not know his intentions for using defectos as a catalyst for action in some of his plays, we can hypothesize about his purpose and effect. His comedias do not feature characters with severe disabilities such as his own, but several are concerned with a variety of minor defectos, such as ugliness or bad breath. It is statistically certain that few people in the Golden Age audience of nobles and commoners were hunchbacks. However, many were aware of their own shortcomings as well as those of others in society. By emphasizing minor flaws instead of major physical disabilities, Ruiz de Alarcón fashioned characters who reflected the prevalent attitudes of the time and related to the audience by portraying lives affected in serious ways by minor flaws. A male hunchback onstage would not have had the same effect on the audience, for he would have elicited disgust, rejection, scorn, or scorn from an audience trained to be aware of such physical anomalies. This outright dismissal would have completely negated any mission on the part of Ruiz de Alarcón to enlighten his audience about the relative unimportance of defectos. Jules Whicker discusses the “persuasive medium” (38) of the comedia, noting its power to appeal to the senses and the imagination, and to lead the audience into such an altered state that their minds would be open for a moral lesson, or, as its detractors might say, that they might be mislead. In the plays of Ruiz de Alarcón considered here, the defectos function as metaphors, which teach about the qualities of human life that really matter. The characters in these comedias choose not to rely on defectos to determine their relationships, and this choice opens a fresh, new way of seeing the world for an audience that has relied on lo ideal as the measure.
The embodiment of impairment has taken innumerable forms through time. We have much to learn from narratives of people from the past who present the varied faces of impairment and disability. We can explore space and time through their stories, listening for ways in which they connect us to human experience. Philip Sandblom, a physician with a strong interest in the arts, completed a study of creativity and disease, looking at the connection between artists with impairments and their artistic production. He concluded that the connections are “close and common” (15), and that many artists have “been influenced by disease” (21). Sandblom discusses Thomas Mann’s theory of illness, for example. In “Dostoevsky in Moderation,” Thomas Mann suggests that illness is not necessarily a negative:

In other words, certain attainments of the soul and intellect are impossible without disease, without insanity, without spiritual crime, and the great invalids are crucified victims, sacrificed to humanity and its advancement, to the broadening of its feeling and knowledge—in short to its more sublime health. (xv)

Sandblom theorizes that impairment or illness can have a positive effect on creativity by providing unfettered time, or by offering a unique view on human interaction. For Ruiz de Alarcón, it seems the combination of his natural impairment and the social milieu that caused his disability provided him with a unique perspective on artificiality and artifice, or lo ideal in Spanish society.

Tobin Siebers discusses personal identity in Disability Theory and problematizes the ways in which society and identity commingle and co-create:

Thus, identity is not the structure that creates a person’s pristine individuality or inner essence but the structure by which that person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social narratives, ideas, myths, values, and types of knowledge of varying reliability, usefulness, and verifiability. (15)

This view of identity encourages acceptance of individuals as not only a body and a mind, but also a body and a mindset within a culture or society. Jack Reynolds, in Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity notes that Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes that a balance must be achieved and emphasizes the need to establish equilibrium between body, mind, and society (Reynolds 89). Gareth Williams, in “Theorizing Disability,” stresses the importance of the interplay between impairment and the social environment: “Theorizing disability is not merely about abstractly conceptualizing the relationships between impairment and situations—it is about how those relationships work for people in dynamic and complex personal and social processes” (132). In Handbook of Disability Studies, Gary Albrecht accentuates the importance of context: “In fact, we cannot fully understand the place of disability in society unless we analyze images across time, space, and context” (4). Thus, understanding the context is crucial; a person exists in the parameters of his or her own special experience and time. The approaches are many, as Albrecht notes, “Disability is both a private and public experience. For some, disability represents a personal catastrophe to be avoided if at all possible, a shameful condition to be denied or hidden if present and negotiated within the sanctuary of one’s family and personal space” (1–2). Ruiz de Alarcón could not enter a room without immediate recognition of his impairment; his body was unmistakably public. But at the same time, he was a part of the social process. His special challenge was to use his intellect and his context to confront the attitudes of early modern Spain, and to contrast lo ideal with the virtues of human existence in their varied forms.

In Ruiz de Alarcón’s literary production, there is a search to achieve some sort of equilibrium between his experience of the world and his intellect. Mansoor Fahim, in an overview of the concept of embodiment, points to the connection between embodiment, perception, and cognition: “Each individual explores the world and internalizes the experiences through
perception and formulates the cognition. This can be the fundamental basis for the variety of
the perception of . . . [an] external reality by different individuals” (75). Ruiz de Alarcón identified
his perceptions of rejection and scorn through his cognition, and applied them to his characters
on stage. We find that his comedias, although entertaining, at the same time direct us toward a
higher moral sense, and especially hold up imperfection as a prism for us to see its many sides.
Rodolfo Usigli, in his study of Ruiz de Alarcón, for example, highlighted five moral lessons in
his plays: pardon of injuries, charity for imperfections, virtue of the promise, spiritual action
above physical, and punishment of the lie and disloyalty (11). Out of the five lessons mentioned
by Usigli, it is notable that three involve the physical in some way. Lola Josa notes that Ruiz de
Alarcón’s intention for his plays went beyond entertainment, to reveal a moral sense, “Y más
siendo como es un autor dramático interesado en ofrecer con su arte una propuesta de reforma
social, no institucionalmente hablando, sino en el plano de una moral individual” (216). There-
fore, the comedia, in Ruiz de Alarcón’s capable hands, became an instrument that could not only
amuse but also instruct his audiences and his peers.

At the same time, Ruiz de Alarcón problematizes the idea of defects or faults and the impor-
tance they should play in society’s vision of lo ideal. We will see in the discussion below that a
disability reading of three of Ruiz de Alarcón’s comedias will yield some different perspectives
on defects in early modern Spain. Ruiz de Alarcón only wrote one play, Las paredes oyen, in
which a central character is impaired or deformed. He wrote this comedia in 1617, partially as a
reply to his critics. The central figure, Don Juan de Mendoza, describes himself in the first scene:

DON JUAN: ¿cómo podrán
dar esperanza al deseo
de un hombre tan pobre y feo
y de mal talle, Beltrán? (1.1.9–12)

In Ruiz de Alarcón’s comedias the characters strive to both present and challenge lo ideal. Michael
Bérubé, in “Disability and Narrative,” calls our attention to the special relationship between dis-
bility and literature, noting that literature does not have to be about disability itself, but can bring
to light new perceptions when viewed through the lens of disability studies: “Rereading narrative
from the perspective of disability studies, then, leads us to reread the role of temporality, causal-
ity, and self-reflexivity in narrative, and to reread the implications of characters’ self-awareness”
(576). In the quotation from Las paredes oyen, Don Juan both demonstrates awareness of and
criticizes his own embodiment as pobre, feo, and mal talle. He links his outward appearance to
lack of hope for love, intimating that only fine-looking men are lucky in love. Don Juan’s words
echo the Spanish societal standard, which gave more worth to men who were handsome.

Ruiz de Alarcón used part of his own full name, Don Juan Ruiz de Alarcón y Mendoza, for
his main character, which leads the reader to suppose that the character of Don Juan might be
autobiographical. Eugenia Revueltas also proposes that Ruiz de Alarcón’s unusual choice for a
galán shows a certain amount of rebellion against the status quo of his time, “lo extraordinario
de la empresa de don Juan; crear un personaje así, es expresión de una rebelión alarcioniana, una
sublimación estética de sus más recónditos” (204). Don Juan de Mendoza furthers the connection
with Ruiz de Alarcón with those descriptive words, pobre, feo, and de mal talle. Each of the words
is evocative of Ruiz de Alarcón’s own human experience of poverty and being called ugly and
deformed by a number of his contemporaries. Ruiz de Alarcón used the gracioso figure, Beltrán,
to reassure Don Juan by saying, “Sin riqueza ni hermosura pudieras lograr tu intento” (1.1.53–4).
Although Don Juan continues to argue with Beltrán in the same vein, Beltrán steadfastly supports
and encourages him, in this case, to pursue Doña Ana, the object of his affection. At the same
time, Beltrán both acknowledges Don Juan’s poverty and lack of good looks. His character steps
out of the social expectation of lo ideal and encourages his master to persevere.
In this play Doña Ana de Contreras, a young widow, is the object of Don Juan’s affections. Doña Ana, however, loves Don Mendo, a handsome young man who proves to be of suspicious moral character. Don Mendo has a habit of lying about people and ends up telling lies about Doña Ana, saying for example, that he does not really know her and that she is ugly anyway, “la viuda no es tan bella. Ella tiene el cerca feo” (1.18.977–8). Walter Poesse, in Juan Ruiz de Alarcón remarks that some scholars believe Don Mendo was based on some of Ruiz de Alarcón’s harshest critics (42). In time, Doña Ana learns of Don Juan’s love and contemplates loving someone ugly:

**DOÑA ANA:** Celia, ¿si don Juan tuviera mejor talle y mejor cara! . . . (2.4.1540–1)

Her maid, Celia, advises her that beauty is not everything in life, saying:

**CELIA:** ¡Pues cómo! ¿En eso repara una tan cuerda mujer? En el hombre no has de ver la hermosura o gentileza; su hermosura es la nobleza, su gentileza el saber. Lo visible es el tesoro de mozás faltas de seso, y las más veces por eso topán con un asno de oro. (2.4.1542–51)

The character of Doña Ana’s maid, Celia, much like Beltrán, is the voice of wisdom here, urging Doña Ana to look for nobility and intellect over good looks and refinement. She warns that a good-looking, refined person might still be an ass underneath. In other words, a gilded ass is still an ass, and lo ideal could be a lie. Celia’s words interrogate society’s standard of lo ideal, and lead Doña Ana toward a new perspective on relationships, one that is based on integrity. Ruiz de Alarcón often used references to classical works, and this line is a clear reference to *The Golden Ass* by Lucius Apuleius. In Apuleius’s story, a character named Lucius accidentally turns himself into an ass and has adventures in animal form. When in animal form, Lucius was not what he seemed to be, and Celia believed Don Mendo was not either.

At the end of *Las paredes oyen*, Don Juan de Mendoza wins over Doña Ana. This is one of Ruiz de Alarcón’s early comedias, and the one that confronts the reader most directly about the folly of using imperfections as a measure of character. The characters of Don Juan, Don Mendo, and Doña Ana clearly reveal their attitudes and biases about perfection. The concept of lo ideal in early modern Spanish society was a measure of the human body, an ideal that could not exist, but nevertheless controlled the perceptions of the general population. In *Las paredes oyen*, Don Juan’s body does not meet the ideal of perfection; however, the steadfastness of Don Juan’s love and his moral uprightness cause Doña Ana to think beyond her concept of lo ideal in order to choose him. This early *comedia* openly challenged the audience to consider its own biases and also highlighted what would become a consistent thread in Ruiz de Alarcón’s literary production.

In *La prueba de las promesas*, which some scholars date to about 1618, Ruiz de Alarcón confronts lo ideal with an underlying theme of defectos that move the action. The use of defectos as a literary device is not a technique that originated with Ruiz de Alarcón, but was present in other comedias of the time. However, because his characters’ defectos often match the very defects he was accused of by his peers, his use of autobiographical elements contrasts his personal reality with the constant striving for perfection that marked the seventeenth-century social landscape.

In *La prueba de las promesas*, Blanca, daughter of Don Illán de Toledo, is in love with Don Juan. Her father wishes her to marry Don Enrique de Vargas to end a long-term feud between
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the two families. To deter her interest in Don Juan, he pays her maid, Lucía, to tell Blanca that Don Juan has some serious defectos, which Blanca should consider before marrying him. She mentions that he has three false teeth, bad breath, and badly shaped calves. Here are Lucía’s words concerning his teeth:

LUCÍA: ¿ves aquel hilo de sus dientes tan blancos y transparentes? ¡Pues son postizos los tres! (1.5.431–4)

In general, Blanca’s reaction to Don Juan’s supposed defects, is strong. Blanca replies, “¡Jesús!” (1.5.435) to his false teeth. To the fault of “mal olor” she says, “¡Qué gran falta!” (1.5.439–41). Lucía continues by describing his legs:

BLANCA: Dí
LUCÍA: Dice—¡Extrañas maravillas!—que cañas las conoció,
y sin milagro les dio San Felipe pantorrillas. (1.5.445–50)

This reference to San Felipe Neri is meant to be humorous. According to Catholic Online, “Philip was known to be spontaneous and unpredictable, charming and humorous” (“St. Philip Neri”). He was known for practical jokes and a comical view of life. Ruiz de Alarcón would have known about Felipe Neri because he was beatified in 1615, shortly before this play was written. The allusion is that if San Felipe had given Don Juan his legs, they would have had an unusual shape. Blanca is shocked to find this about her intended. She comments, “¡Grandes engaños se ven!” (1.5.444).

However, at first, Blanca cannot see beyond these imperfections to the true character of Don Juan. She echoes her society’s yearning for lo ideal, in this case a handsome lover. In Act Two, Scene Four, Blanca has a long speech in which she muses on her mixed feelings, which she likens to having a counterweight. She uses examples of the good and bad sides of things, like a ship on a clear day contrasted with a night of shadows and terror, or whether a peacock hides deformities under the splendor of its plumage. She then contemplates the defectos she has been told that Don Juan has.

si en medio destas glorias,
importunas memorias
de las deformes faltas que imagino
en mi esposo esperado
mezclan acíbar al mejor bocado?” (2.4.1299–303)

Blanca is torn between her love and striving for lo ideal, between her emotions and her societal training. Her serious deliberations about Don Juan’s defectos show that she believes worth and good looks are related, and that perfection should be pursued above all else.

In La prueba de las promesas, Ruiz de Alarcón reaches beyond the direct approach he used in Las paredes oyen, where the ugly man wins the woman. Here he uses the defects as a literary device to complicate and further the action of the comedia. Don Juan’s defectos give Blanca pause, and complicate her feelings of love. It is Tristán who reveals that they are contrived (3.11.2356–58). The defectos recede into the background as Don Illán, Blanca’s father, a magician, initiates a spell to make Don Juan and Don Enrique believe that Don Juan has become a Marqués. It is a test to see which man will stay true to his own values, even when tempted with
power and position. The action of the play turns toward a test of integrity, which Don Juan fails when he becomes arrogant and haughty. So, Don Juan loses Blanca in the end, not on account of his supposed physical defects, but because of his own arrogance, pride, and general lack of integrity, as pointed out by Don Illán when the spell is broken (3.19.2696–700). Blanca’s struggle over accepting the defectos serves as a counterpoint to the more important struggle, that of moral and ethical conviction. From his position on the margins of society, Ruiz de Alarcón was criticizing the nobility for pursuing false values, and for believing that worth lies in physicality, possessions, or power.

Don Enrique, on the other hand, wins Blanca, not because he embodies lo ideal, or the perfect masculine figure, but because he consistently takes the higher moral ground. Lucía, Blanca’s maid, compares the two lovers. First of all, Don Enrique:

LUCÍA: Dijo que si tu mano no alcanzaba,  
ni hábitos no encomiendas estimaba.  
Mientras más sube, más humilde adora; (3.10.2259–61)

And then, Don Juan:

LUCÍA: bien otro que el Marqués desvanecido  
en quien con el honor crece el olvido. (3.10.2262–63)

In agreement with Don Illán’s analysis, Lucia points out that Don Enrique does not value possessions and cultivates humility, where Don Juan has allowed vanity to cloud his vision. From his position outside of lo ideal, Ruiz de Alarcón weighs for his audience what is really important in life, in contrast to vain pursuits.

In the interim between Las paredes oyen and La prueba de las promesas, it is clear that Ruiz de Alarcón refined his art to make his moral points in subtler and more artful ways. His disability perspective in La prueba de las promesas leads the audience to conclude that physical defects, real or not real as in this case, are miniscule in comparison with the true virtues of constancy, stability and truthfulness.

Ruiz de Alarcón continued the thread of using false defects in Examen de maridos, a delightful comedia with a strong female character, Doña Inés, who is looking for a husband. Castro Leal describes Examen de Maridos as “Una de las mejores comedias de Alarcón y una de las más ingeniosas y perfectas del teatro clásico español” (182). Examen de maridos is possibly the last play that Ruiz de Alarcón wrote; it is dated 1622–3 (Castro Leal 181).Briefly, the play entails an agreement that Doña Inés will marry the winner of a debate between her suitors. A friend, Doña Blanca, spreads the news of false defects to Doña Inés in order to sway Doña Inés’s opinion about the Marqués, Don Fadrique. According to Doña Blanca, Don Fadrique has the following indecent faults: he is stupid, but takes a tonic to make himself appear smarter; he has bad breath; he is boastful; and he tells lies. Doña Blanca lets Doña Inés know that the only reason she is telling her this is “el deseo de serviros” (2.3.1136). Inés is then confronted with a struggle similar to Blanca in La prueba de las promesas: Should she marry someone she loves even though he has certain defects, or marry someone who is lo ideal? She confesses that she loves Don Fadrique, even with all of his supposed faults, “padece algunos defectos / tan graves, aunque secretos” (3.16.2643–4). However, because she cannot solve her dilemma, she agrees to marry the suitor who wins a debate on the topic of marrying someone with or without faults.

The gracioso of the play, Ochavo, shares with Doña Inés information he gleaned from some of the suitors, “me han dicho que examenáis / lo visible, y no tratáis / de las partes interiores,” (1.11.476–8). Ochavo, wisely, advises Doña Inés to look beyond the physical in order to find the more important and perhaps hidden qualities of the suitors.

In the debate, Don Fadrique argues strongly and eloquently for marrying the ideal man:
MARQUÉS: El amor es quien conserva
el gusto del casamiento;
amor nace de hermosura,
y es hermoso lo perfeto;
luego debe la Marquesa
dar la mano a aquel que, siendo
más perfeto, es más hermoso
pues haber de amarlo es cierto. (3.16.2702–09)

In his turn, Don Carlos argues that she should marry a suitor, faults and all:

CONDE: Y no importa que el querido
padexeza algunos defetos,
pues nos advierte el refrán
castellano que lo feo
amado parece hermoso,
y es bastante paracello,
pues nunca amor se aconseja
sino con su gusto mismo. (3.16.2778–85)

Don Carlos wins the debate, but in a last minute plot twist he yields to Don Fadrique. Doña Inés ends up marrying the Marqués Don Fadrique, even with all of his imagined faults.

This play shows a further development in Ruiz de Alarcón’s presentation of defectos. In Las paredes oyen, he draws a strong and clear line; the suitor with defectos wins the hand of Doña Ana. This play is a direct challenge to the idea of the importance of lo ideal in Spanish thought. There is a subtle shift in La prueba de las promesas to show that even perceived faults should not be a deciding factor in whom to marry. Here we are not talking about a truly impaired character, but one who might have faults. In the end, the faults do not come into play at all because the matter is decided on the basis of moral integrity. The idea is that a society, which is focused on lo ideal is missing the important virtues of life such as honesty, integrity, and dependability.

Finally, Examen de maridos complicates the view of imperfection even further. The question becomes: Should a woman choose to marry a suitor even with all of his faults, or choose an ideal one? The fact is, the faults are not true, which Inés never finds out, but it doesn’t actually matter to the action of the play. In Examen de maridos, the faults loom large, so large that they become the center of a debate between suitors and become, supposedly, the deciding factor in Inés’ choice. Ruiz de Alarcón, however, keeps the suspense of who will marry Inés until the very end, embedding a double twist in the plot. Inés chooses Don Carlos’ moral argument as the strongest, that a person’s defects should not matter. However, Don Carlos is actually arguing in favor of his friend, Don Fadrique, who has the supposed defects, as he says:

CONDE: Yo, con licencia
vuestra, en esta diferencia
defiendo el que es amado
debes ser el escogido. (3.16.2670–74)

Don Fadrique argues that a person’s defects do matter, and that a woman should choose perfection. Don Fadrique, out of friendship, is actually arguing in favor of Don Carlos, who does not have defects:

MARQUÉS: Pues yo soy
de contrario parecer,
y defiendo que es más justo
no seguir el propio gusto,
y al más perfeto escoger. (3.16.2681–5)
Both men demonstrate strong moral character in making their arguments in favor of each other. In the end, Don Carlos proves his friendship by yielding Doña Inés’ hand to Don Fadrique. Here Doña Inés ends up with the suitor who supposedly has defects, but she does not choose directly like Doña Ana in Las paredes oyen. Interestingly, however, she does choose the winner of the debate whose argument supports the fact that defects should not matter.

In the comedias above, characters such as Doña Ana, Doña Inés, Doña Lucía, and their servants function as witnesses whose testimonies challenge the audience’s generally held beliefs and preconceived notions about imperfections and lo ideal. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note the intertwined relationship between literary narrative and disability: “representations of disability, then, allow an interrogation of static beliefs about the body while also erupting as the unseemly matter of narrative that cannot be textually contained” (49). In Ruiz de Alarcón’s comedias, his characters, as witnesses, refuse to be contained by the framework of drama, and step forward to address misconceptions of embodiment, relationships and lo ideal.

As a writer, Ruiz de Alarcón embodied his physical challenges, substantial intellect and societal position whenever he set pen to paper. His very act of writing was a demonstration of his empowerment in early modern Spanish society, a statement that his persona was more than an impaired body. Ruiz de Alarcón did not leave us with journals, personal papers, or reflections on his life. The few extant documents relating to him are academic records, business letters, a will, and several professional resumes, titled Memorial de servicios. It is the characters he left behind, however, who bear witness to the possibilities of a society where persons are accepted and loved for reasons beyond the superficial. Audiences who really listened to their testimonies within the poetic lines of these comedias, in addition to being entertained, learned ways in which a society obsessed with lo ideal could be transformed. It is also the story of how one man in early modern Spain turned his impairment into empowerment for himself and others.

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NOTES

1 All quotes from Las paredes oyen, La prueba de las promesas, and Examen de maridos are taken from the Obras completas of Juan Ruiz de Alarcón.

2 “Jupiter mihi auxiliator, non metuo” means “Jupiter help me, I have no fear.”

3 King transcribed this extensive letrilla from the Hispanic Society of New York, manuscrito B2492, “poesías de Fermín de Sarasa y Arce,” fol. 95r–96r (250–54).

4 Quevedo also satirized Luis de Góngora y Argote, for the quality of his writing, his lifestyle, his interest in gambling, and even his large nose. This excerpt from “Otra contra el dicho” contrasts Góngora’s priesthood with his gambling habit: “¿Tan años y tantos todo el día; / menos hombre, más Dios, Góngora hermano. / No altar, garito, sí; poco cristiano, / mucho tahúr; no clérigo, sí arpía” (551).

5 Castro Leal likewise lists numerous authors who criticized Ruiz de Alarcón: “Quevedo, Góngora, Mira de Amescua, Castillo y Solórzano, Vélez de Guevara, Pérez de Montalbán, y Salas Barbadillo” (40). Schons cites his likeness to one of the court “enanos,” or little people, as one possibility for the reactions he endured from his peers: “Cuando se considera que era muy bajo de estatura y que se parecía mucho a Soplillo, enano de la Reina, no es sorprendente que despertara la risa de sus contemporáneos” (46). Castro Leal notes that much of the satire about Ruiz de Alarcón centered on his spinal disfigurement: “Las sátiras y epigramas contra Alarcón son, generalmente, ingeniosas variaciones sobre el tema de sus corcovas” (40).

6 Apuleius (c. 125 CE) lived at the height of the Roman Empire in Northern Africa. The Golden Ass, also known as Metamorphoses, is a novel based on a Greek fable of a man who becomes an ass through a mistaken magical spell. Apuleius’ work, Metamorphoses, caught the attention of St. Augustine, who reportedly named the work The Golden Ass. St. Augustine reacted strongly to the role of magic in the text.
This text, which is the only extant novel in Latin, greatly influenced the development of subsequent fiction, such as the picaresque and magical realism (Hunink; Harrison).

Examples of Golden Age plays that incorporate the term defectos are: *Amar por burla* (Lope de Vega), *El Rey por trueque* (Lope de Vega), and *La santa Juana* (Tirso de Molina).

Several scholars have catalogued documents relating to Ruiz de Alarcón. For examples, see the work of Castro Leal, Peña, and Schons.

WORKS CITED


