STAGING FEMINISM: THEATRE AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN ARGENTINA
(1914-1950)

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ABSTRACT
MAY SUMMER FARNSWORTH: Staging Feminism: Theatre and Women’s Rights in Argentina (1914-1950)
(Under the direction of María A. Salgado)

In this dissertation I discuss the ways in which socially conscious playwrights in early-twentieth century Argentina used and adapted theatre genres to advance women’s rights and project the feminist imagination. I also analyze how theatre critics and spectators reacted to these early feminist spectacles. In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the repression of women that was dictated by the Argentine Civil Code and the efforts of feminist activists to make reforms. I also describe how various playwrights (Salvadora Medina Onrubia, José González Castillo, César Iglesias Paz, Alfonsoina Storni, and Malena Sándor) used the genre of thesis drama to support social and legislative progress from 1914 to 1937. I explain, in Chapter 2, how marginalized female playwrights (Lola Pita Martínez, Alcira Olivé, Carolina Alió, Salvadorina Medina Onrubia and Alfonsoina Storni) cultivated the unique strategy of “feminist melodrama,” which allowed them to endorse feminism from within an accepted “feminine” genre. Conventional comedy used strategically--by female playwright Malena Sándor and the male collaborators Camilo Darthés and Carlos Damel--to criticize the treatment of women in the 1930s and 40s is the subject of Chapter 3. I conclude my study, in Chapter 4, with an analysis of myth-based works (by Alfonsoina Storni, Conrado Nalé Roxlo, Malena Sándor and Josefina Marpóns) that debunk patriarchal legends through radical dramatic techniques from 1931 to 1950.
To my husband Jim, a constant source of encouragement and inspiration.
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PREFACE

This study addresses the large number of feminist plays (by both men and women) that were written and performed in Argentina in the first half of the twentieth century. The fact that these plays have been largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship has inhibited the field of feminist theatre studies from understanding its own history and progress. It has also prevented contemporary literary critics from recognizing how these alternative discourses affected the formation of popular culture in the River Plate area in particular and in Latin America in general. I have chosen to focus specifically on Argentina because of its long history of women’s rights activism and its established theatre tradition. Feminism and feminist theatre originated at a time in which Argentina was consciously forming its own cultural character. As Benedict Anderson has suggested, independence authors (in Latin America and elsewhere) formed a national identity by representing and perpetuating an “imagined community” in the proliferating print media of the nineteenth century “which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways” (36). The nation’s gender roles were also often discussed and debated in early twentieth century literary culture: in magazines; in newspaper columns; and in theatre pieces. Feminist authors at this time promoted the idea of “female emancipation,” which, like national independence, began as an imagined concept that was disseminated through print culture and performance. Women’s rights advocates used
the term feminismo to imagine, among other things, women’s pursuit of financial independence, suffrage, Civil Code reform (including the right to obtain a divorce) and intellectual recognition. My work explores the reciprocal relationship between theatre, newspaper reviews, and public feminist discourses.

In 1920 a female journalist, Jules de Bois, wrote a definition of the term feminismo that illustrates additional aspirations of the women’s rights activists of her day:

Yo entiendo por “feminismo” la libertad económica de la mujer, su derecho a la independencia por su trabajo, su derecho a ser una persona moral, a elegir su amor y no su imposición. . . . (qtd. in Celso Tíndaro 1537)1

(I understand “feminism” to mean woman’s economic liberty, her right to professional independence, her right to be a moral person, to chose her love rather than having it imposed upon her. . . .)2

The women’s movement had gained visibility in 1910, when the first women’s rights conference took place in Buenos Aires (Seibel 449). Some of the topics discussed at that meeting--prostitution, divorce, illegitimate children, sex education--reappeared on the Buenos Aires stage in the form of thesis dramas, marking the beginning of a long and varied relationship between feminism and theatre in Argentina. Theatre continued to be an important and fascinating part of the gender negotiations taking place on the national stage from 1914 to 1950, after women were finally granted suffrage (1947) and just before divorce was first made legal (1954). Plays, along with their corresponding newspaper reviews, assisted the struggle for women’s rights by allowing the public to

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1 This is part of an editorial that Bois published in La Mujer y la Casa in February 1920. This passage of the essay was quoted by Jorge Celso Tíndaro in La Nota later that same year.

2 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
preview and debate possible reforms to their current gender codes. In addition, feminist ideology succeeded in altering traditional theatre practices and significantly impacted the development of dramatic aesthetics in Argentina. As the women’s rights movement progressed over the decades, feminist dramatists experimented with more radical theatrical techniques. In the 1910s and 20s, female victims were seen timidly reacting to repressive social forces that remained beyond their control but, by the 1940s, it became more common to see women characters taking charge of their lives and denouncing social conventions through witty dialog and role-play.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, many of the early thesis dramatists sent messages that may appear contradictory from a contemporary feminist perspective by exalting woman’s “feminine” qualities on the one hand while denouncing gender discrimination on the other. Chapter 1 also examines how the subtle reforms of early thesis dramatists--Salvadora Medina Onrubia, José González Castillo, and César Iglesias Paz--led to the more subversive innovations of Alfonsina Storni and Malena Sándor. Since female playwrights working within the male-dominated theatre industry had frequently to contend with prejudice, many of them devised unique ways of placing ideological messages within those theatrical forms accepted for women, particularly domestic melodrama, as I discuss in Chapter 2.

The women’s movement had made significant progress in Argentine society and politics by the 1930s and 40s. Nonetheless, mainstream theatre productions became increasingly sanitized due to government censorship. This resulted in some feminist playwrights’ placing social commentary in entertaining commercial comedies, which I analyze in Chapter 3. Camilo Darthés’s and Carlos Damel’s collaboratively written
romantic comedies, along with Malena Sándor’s plays about the trials and tribulations of recent divorcees, use humor and metatheatrical elements as vehicles for cleverly transmitting feminist messages. In Chapter 4, I examine the revised role of mythical heroines in plays by Alfonsina Storni, Conrado Nalé Roxlo, Malena Sándor, and Josefina Marpóns. These works also break open many of the guiding aesthetic traditions that had dominated the theatre industry in the preceding decades: realism, temporal unity, and traditional uses of theatrical space. By combining and contrasting different time periods and political perspectives, and by defying formerly rigid spatial parameters, this last group of plays radically challenges theatre tradition and constitutes a creative new model of feminist drama.

Although only a few of the plays that I analyze in this study have previously received scholarly attention, some progress has already been made in the field of early feminist theatre in Argentina. In Behind Spanish American Footlights (1966), Willis Knapp Jones acknowledges a few early female playwrights in Argentina (and other Latin American countries). He also observes a tendency for female and male playwrights to attack divorce laws in the first decades of the twentieth century. Beatriz Seibel’s recent Historia del teatro argentino (2002) records the debuts of female playwrights from the turn of the twentieth century to 1930, as part of her general study of the development of national theatre trends. Seibel also provides information on the ways in which plays by men and women portray women’s role in society over the centuries. Both Women, Feminism and Social Change (1995) by Asunción Lavrin and ¡Feminismo! (1988) by Marifran Carlson offer further information on the history of women’s rights in Argentina. Additionally, Doris Sommer’s Foundational Fictions (1991) and Francine Masiello’s
Between Civilization and Barbarism (1992) have illustrated the influential roles that women and other marginalized authors had on the formation of national literary culture in Argentina. My work expands upon some of their arguments by providing insight into the particular areas of feminist playwriting and early feminist performance techniques. For example, in Chapter 2, I cover the various strategies used by female feminist playwrights in the 1920s--Lola Pita Martínez, Alcira Olivé, Carolina Alió, Salvadora Medina Onrubia, and Alfonsina Storni--to advocate for women’s rights through allegory and the “feminine” genre of domestic melodrama. I draw a parallel between the frequently-dramatized dysfunctional marriages and the feminist playwrights’ distrust of state power, in opposition to the “passionate patriotism” that Doris Sommer ascribes to mainstream national romances. Equally relevant is Josefina Ludmer’s essay “Tricks of the Weak” (1991), which reveals how female authors in repressive societies transform formerly “quotidian” and “personal” literary genres (such as domestic melodrama) into politically subversive discourses. Two other essays have directly influenced my research: María A. Salgado’s article “Reflejos de espejos cóncavos” (1996), which examines connections between Alfonsina Storni’s avant-garde farces and contemporary feminist literary theory, including Judith Fetterley’s notion of the “resisting reader”; and Evelia Romano’s paper “Política, sociedad y mujeres” (2005), which discusses how early female playwrights in Argentina, including Salvadora Medina Onrubia and Alfonsina Storni, deconstructed binary oppositions in the theatre aesthetics of their time.

My investigation of early feminist theatre aesthetics has also been informed by a number of contemporary feminist studies that expose the tendency of Western theatre to echo sexist attitudes. Women’s Theatrical Space (1994) by Hanna Scolnicov reveals how,
over the course of history, conventional plays have relegated female characters to interior private spaces while allowing male characters to dominate the outer public arena; Vimala Herman’s book *Dramatic Discourse* (1995) describes how conventional theatrical dialogue represses the voices of female characters; Laura Mulvey’s theory of the “Male Gaze” and Judith Fetterley’s concept of “immasculation,” refer to the processes that lead female readers and spectators to identify with the “male” perspective.

Theatrical genres were appropriated and adapted by early feminist playwrights in Argentina, even if antifeminism has traditionally dictated theatrical aesthetics. As Sheila Stowell argues, theatre conventions are not inherently antifeminist despite their traditional uses in gender-biased productions: “While dramatic and theatrical styles may be developed or adopted to naturalise or challenge particular positions, dramatic forms are not in themselves narrowly partisan. They may be inhabited from a variety of ideologies” (101). Indeed, as the following chapters illustrate, feminists restructured various genres (thesis drama, domestic melodrama, comedy and mythic theatre) to allow women characters further access to the areas in which theatre often silences them. Early feminist dramatists resisted the marginalization of women in theatre and society by increasing the presence of women on stage, by giving them more speaking time and by allowing them more control over the action. The experimental myth-based plays of the 1930s and 40s also refute “immasculation” by offering spectators a radically new, and profoundly feminist, perspective from which to evaluate the performances. Finally, I refer to Judith Butler’s groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble* (1990) at several points during this investigation because early feminist performances occasionally question the “naturalness” of gender norms and the very category of “woman.”
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a. Feminist Theatre in the Making

The origins of feminist theatre in Argentina may be found in the “thesis dramas” that became popular in Buenos Aires in the first decades of the twentieth century. Myriad legal and social issues disenfranchised women from national culture and were of concern to feminist advocates and socially conscious playwrights. Women were denied voting privileges and the legal system permanently deemed them as minors in need of male protection (Lavrin 194). Accordingly, the Civil Code prohibited divorce and authorized men to supervise the labor, property, and finances of their wives and daughters (194-96, 228). Doctors and moralists accused workingwomen, unwed mothers, and prostitutes of jeopardizing the health of the family and the nation but they rarely denounced male.

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3 According to Asunción Lavrin, the early twentieth-century concept of feminismo in Argentina was “the acknowledgement of women’s intellectual capacity, their right to work in an occupation for which they had the ability, and their right to participate in civic life and politics.” Some activists used the term while others preferred the less-stigmatized terms “feminine” and “female emancipation” (Lavrin 29, 367).
sexual promiscuity (Guy 209; Nari, “Del conventillo a la casa propia” 37-41).

Additionally, schools excluded sex education from the curriculum and abortion was banned (Lavrin 125, 175).

4 When dramatists finally began denouncing these and other gender inequalities, they scandalized critics, stimulated spectators, and inspired ongoing public debates. Over time, feminist ideology also altered traditional theatre practices and had a significant impact on the development of dramatic conventions in Argentina.

Feminist-inspired dramas and their corresponding newspaper reviews assisted the feminist project by allowing the public to preview and debate possible reforms to their current gender-codes. As a result theatre production became an important and fascinating part of the gender negotiations taking place on the national stage. In this chapter, I examine how thesis dramas publicized feminist objectives, anticipated social change, and helped to inscribe women’s rights into the popular imagination in the first decades of the twentieth century. In addition, I discuss the ways in which feminism, in turn, altered dramatic tendencies and eventually transformed the thesis drama into an early form of feminist theatre. I begin my analysis with the study of four thesis dramas from the 1910s that address women’s rights: Almafuerte (1914) by Salvadora Medina Onrubia; El hijo de Agar (1915) and La mujer de Ulises (1918) by José González Castillo; and El complot del silencio (1917) by César Iglesias Paz. I continue with a discussion of two pieces from later in the century, El amo del mundo (1927) by Alfonsina Storni and Yo me divorcio, papá (1937) by Malena Sándor, which criticize society’s gender codes and allow female characters further access to dramatic space, dialogue, and action through a feminist restructuring of the thesis drama.

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4 Whether or not to legalize abortion is an issue of ongoing national debate that appears regularly in the Argentine press. Abortion is still illegal as of this writing.
b. Thesis Drama

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Argentina experienced a marked increase in immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and economic development (Romero 23). The population of Buenos Aires rose to 1.5 million inhabitants by 1914, about half of whom were European immigrants (23). As Buenos Aires became a modern metropolis, theatre houses cropped up all over the city (Suriano 161). The sainete and the tango delighted and titillated mainstream audiences while thesis dramas encouraged them to critically evaluate their moral values. Circus theatre had been popular in the late-nineteenth century but, by the turn of twentieth century, thesis drama became more prevalent. Thesis plays may be defined as naturalistic-realistic dramas that present a political or social argument through debate-style dialogue, archetypical characters, and straightforward plots. Most of them tackled controversial topics and upset the status quo, according to Alberto P. Cortazzo:

El circo perdió su faz estática y afluían nuevas ideas y nuevas técnicas. Por ello la hora se hizo propicia para el nacimiento del llamado teatro de ideas, de tesis, de características tendenciosas. . . . Lo cierto es que en aquel comienzo del siglo la idea se manifestó con un fondo claro, revolucionario, reformador y temido por una sociedad que la acusaba de “peligrosa,” puesto que atacaba su vida anquilosada y conservadora. (26)

(The circus lost its frenzied appeal and new ideas arrived. Thus the time was ripe for the birth of the so-called theatre of ideas, of theses, with radical themes. . . . The ideas manifested at the start of the century were

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5 Donald S. Castro offers a concise definition of the Argentine sainete in an article about the works of Alberto Vacarezza: “The sainete was a short jocular popular theatre play often associated with the cityscape of Buenos Aires and containing musical interludes of tangos and tango dancing. . . . Its heyday was in the late teens and 1920s, entering into decline by the mid-1930s. For much of its history, the sainete was a reflection of urban life and porteño social mores. The most favored setting for the sainetes porteños were the patios of slum tenement houses in Buenos Aires (conventillos or casas de inquilinato) because they brought together all of the porteño ethnic types and also cut along class lines.” (127)

6 Arturo Berenguer Carisomo considers naturalism the prevailing theatre aesthetic in turn-of-the-century Argentina. He also mentions the influence of European naturalist playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen from Norway, Hermann Sudermann from Germany, and Jacinto Benavente from Spain (368).
Anarchism, socialism, and feminism were prominent among the newly arrived ideas that challenged elite lifestyles and that became central topics in the theatre (Nari 28; Bellucci 58).

The public played an influential role at each performance, since authors catered to popular tastes more than to theatre reviewers. As French critic Pierre-Aimé Tauchard argues, audience acceptance is traditionally the most prized of goals in the theatre industry: “Veréis autores y comediantes rebelarse contra algunos veredictos de la crítica, aunque los encontraréis siempre sumisos y sin reticencias para con el veredicto del público . . . es siempre verdadero el público y a él hay que agradarle. . . . Esta necesidad de agradar es la ley de todo director escénico como lo es de todo escritor” (qtd. in Castagnino 150; You might see authors and comedy writers protest against some of the verdicts of critics but you will always find them submissive and accommodating towards the verdicts of the public . . . the public is always real and it must be pleased. . . . The need to please is the law of all theatre directors and authors). Perhaps this need to please the public explains why thesis dramas paradoxically tended to confine female characters to traditional feminine roles and domestic spaces even when criticizing the treatment of women in Argentine law and society. Actresses renowned for their grace and beauty played the leading roles, while dramatists and theatre companies exalted femininity and assured skeptical playgoers that female emancipation did not entail the masculinization of women.7 Hence the dramatic scripts that purported to support, liberate, and protect

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7 Both Asunción Lavrin and Dora Barrancos also note the tendency of early feminist activists to emphasize femininity and maternity in their public speeches and writings.
women initially constrained female voices and bodies on stage in accordance with perceived audience preference. Nonetheless, despite the concessions made to the public, it is important to keep in mind that these plays were progressive, innovative, and even scandalous at the time in which they were written and performed. Even if early attempts to dramatize women’s rights appear flawed from today’s perspective, thesis dramatists broke new ground and began a tradition of using theatre to promote women’s rights that could be revised and adapted by successive generations of feminist theatre practitioners to engage the evolving sensibilities of future audiences.

c. Anarcho-Feminism and Prostitution

Prior to the 1910s, Juana Manso (1819-1875), Matilde Cuyás (1859-1909), Eduarda Mansilla (1838-1892), Carolina Muzilli (1889-1917), and Juana María Beggino (18??-19??) were among the few women who had written for the Argentine stage. Some of these early authors even dared to include social commentary in their works. Beatriz Seibel has noted that Mansilla’s plays, La marquesa de Altamiranda (1881) and Los Carpani (1883), criticize the hypocrisy of the upper classes and reveal the author’s compassion for the poor (205-07). Seibel also notes that Muzilli’s play, El bautizo (1907, not performed) advocates for education reform and improved working conditions for women and children (417). In 1914 a former schoolteacher and journalist from the province of Entre Ríos, Salvadora Medina Onrubia (1894-1972), moved to Buenos Aires and inserted herself into the theatre community and the anarchist movement (Sosa de Newton 403). She composed Almafuerte (Strongsoul, 1914) at age sixteen while raising her first child as a single mother (Seibel 506). The play examines the economic difficulties and living conditions that caused poor workingwomen to become prostitutes
in the early 1900s. For that reason, Medina Onrubia originally called her piece “Una más” (Another Girl), but, as she remembered in a 1927 interview, the artistic directors imposed a title change (Fernández Curra 22). The protagonist, Elisa, is a poor seamstress living and working in a conventillo (tenement housing) with her family. She has plans to marry Arturo, who shares her concern for women’s rights and anarchism. The wedding never materializes, however, because Arturo is exiled for his involvement in union organizing. This coincides with other hardships for Elisa and her family. One of Elisa’s sisters suffers from tuberculosis but the family cannot afford to pay the medical bills. The landlady, Doña Braulia, pressures Elisa to have sex with her sister’s doctor for money. At first Elisa refuses but eventually she decides that prostituting herself is the only possible way for her to help her family and save her sister’s life. The play ends as Elisa prepares to visit the doctor.

In the first act of the play, Elisa sews her wedding dress while her sisters and the conventillo owner, Doña Braulia, iron clothes left by bourgeois clients. Elisa and Doña Braulia’s physical appearances illustrate their incompatible ideologies. Elisa is well dressed and pretty while Doña Braulia, “debe tener un poco de bigote” (Almafuerte 3; should have a little moustache), according to the character descriptions. Elisa speaks eloquently and enthusiastically in favor of anarchism as she prepares for her marriage to the union organizer Arturo. Doña Braulia spits chewing tobacco all over the floor and expresses her disapproval of the wedding (4-5). The landlady’s masculinized vulgar presence conflicts with the heroine’s femininity and left-leaning politics. The feminine delineation of Elisa’s behavior and appearance mixed with her left-leaning politics make her appealing to the shared gender sensibilities of anarchists, feminists, and even
conventional playgoers. Perhaps Medina Onrubia used these gendered details to make audiences more sympathetic toward the main character and her ideological point of view. The dramatist may have also been concerned with how the public would react to a political and socially subversive play written by a female author. As Sarah C. Chambers explains, fin de siècle women writers in Latin America “were under ever greater pressure to uphold strict notions of female domesticity” and they also had to contend with the fact that “[m]ale politicians and intellectuals considered it acceptable for ladies to write about ‘women’s issues’ for a female audience but fewer were willing to welcome these authors as full participants in the formation of national literature” (82-83).

Elisa and Arturo’s impending union provides the opportunity to place feminism within the context of the anarchist movement, to which Elisa alludes in a monologue: “Para que fuera bueno el mundo y felices las mujeres, debían ser anarquistas todos los hombres” (Almafuerte 6; For the world to be good, and for women to be happy, all men would have to be anarchists). Likewise, Arturo lauds the appeal of anarchism as beneficial to women by defining it as “querer libertar esclavos, querer que no haya llagas, que no haya angustias, que no tengan que venderse las mujeres por un pedazo de pan” (18; the desire to liberate slaves, for there to be no wounds, no anguish, so that women will not have to sell themselves for a piece of bread). The issue of prostitution resurfaces in the third and final act. Elisa and her family face increasing hardships after Arturo is fired from his job and forced into exile. Elisa’s father, Don Mauricio, is also

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8 The importance Medina Onrubia places on the wedding and her characters’ fidelity with one another appears incongruent with anarchist discourse, which tended to denounce the institution of marriage in favor of free love. This may be either an indication that the author did not share the anarchist perspective of romantic relationships or a tactic for gaining audiences’ sympathies. No doubt the mainstream public was more likely to feel compassion for a “pure” woman forced into prostitution than a promiscuous one.
fired for union organizing. Her youngest sister, Julia, is sexually accosted by her employer and her oldest sister, Gurisa, continues to suffer from tuberculosis. To make matters worse, the family can no longer support itself on the small amount of money the women make sewing and ironing. Potential customers fear contracting Gurisa’s illness and stop coming to the home. This contributes to the further deterioration of Gurisa’s health, since the family lacks the money to pay for medical treatment. Seeing the family’s desperation, Doña Braulia pressures Elisa to have sex with her sister’s doctor for money: “No seas loca, halece caso… la suerte no se encuentra dos veces. ¿Y qué otra cosa podés esperar vos?” (22; Don’t be silly, listen to him… opportunity doesn’t knock twice. And what else can you hope for?). At the time of Almafuerte’s debut (1914), poorly paid seamstresses like Elisa were particularly likely to turn to prostitution (Guy 139). It would appear that Medina Onrubia’s dramatic dilemma is designed to draw in the spectators and invite them to empathize with the woman’s plight even as she accepts the doctor’s proposition. Elisa begins to see her entry into prostitution as the only way to cure Gurisa’s tuberculosis and for the family to survive economically. The spectators had been encouraged to appreciate the protagonist’s superb display of feminine grace and virtue in the first two acts of the play and they are urged to continue empathizing now, even as she considers prostitution. An internal monologue reveals Elisa’s justification of her decision based on her family’s need and her desire to help:

Tres mil pesos… una hora… (mira a su alrededor la horrible miseria). Tres mil pesos (ríe amargamente). Trabajando un año hasta de noche, no gano para comer… con ser mala una hora… (vuelve a reír). ¡La vida! (26)

(Three thousand pesos… one hour… (she looks at the horrible misery that surrounds her). Three thousand pesos (she laughs bitterly). Working year-

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9 In *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires*, Donna J. Guy observes: “needlework was one of the many poorly paid sources of women’s income--and one that often drove them to become prostitutes” (39).
round, even nights, I don’t make enough to feed myself… but by being bad for one hour… (she laughs again). What a world!

She imagines that Arturo would not only forgive her behavior, but also admire her fortitude: “Debo, es mi obligación… no te falto Arturo… no te falto… Te quiero más que antes… más que nunca, si soy más digna de vos… Si vos sufieras me abrirías los brazos y me dirías bendita” (26; I have to, it’s my obligation… I’m not untrue Arturo… I’m not untrue… I love you more than before… more than before, since I am more worthy of you… Even if you were to suffer you would open your arms to me and give me your blessing). By envisioning Arturo’s acceptance and even respect for Elisa’s decision, Medina Onrubia’s play promotes a radical value system in which a woman’s virtue is independent of her sexual purity.

The setting for all three acts, the conventillo, reflects the play’s ideological message. While popular culture sometimes romanticized conventillo life, physicians and moralists regarded tenement housing as axes of contagion that threatened the health of the middle and upper classes (Nari, “Del conventillo a la casa propia” 37; Guy 141). 10 Medina Onrubia inverts this conventional portrayal of poor women and conventillos by highlighting the virtuousness of her female characters and depicting the privileged classes as immoral and harmful. The female characters “parecen no tener otra alternativa que la de entregarse, en cuerpo y espíritu, a las clases dominantes” (6; seem to have no other alternative than to surrender themselves, in body and soul, to the dominant classes) according to Evelia Romano in her unpublished essay “Política, sociedad y mujeres.”

Romano argues that Medina Onrubia’s anarchist-influenced view of women’s rights

10 In Between Civilization and Barbarism, Francine Masiello analyses the role of the prostitute as object of exchange in early twentieth-century literary culture (111-36). Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires by Donna J. Guy observes male authors of the tango and sainete depicting prostitutes as either “dangerous vectors of disease” or weak victims (141).
combats class hierarchies and binary oppositions by demonstrating the need for “una reestructuración que acabe con las divisiones entre privilegiados y marginados, entre opresores y oprimidos” (6; a restructuring that would end the divisions between the privileged and the marginalized, between the oppressors and the oppressed). The mood created by the setting transforms from act one to act three and reflects the female characters’ suffering. Paintings and flower bouquets gave Elisa’s home an atmosphere of “paz y alegría” (Almafuerte 3; peace and happiness) in the first act but disheveled furniture and drab décor fill the room with “una sensación fuerte de angustia y miseria” (19; a strong sensation of anguish and misery) by the third act when the exile of Arturo, the illness of Gurisa, and the marginalization of the family force Elisa into prostitution. Although Medina Onrubia’s poor female characters are still associated with the conventillo, a series of incidents reveal the role that the dominant culture plays in the spread of disease and prostitution: The middle-class clients underpay and later avoid the female laborers in the family; the government persecutes and exiles the anarchists (including Arturo); the doctor sexually propositions Elisa; and Julia’s rich boss attempts to rape her. Thus, in contrast to prevailing theatre practices and medical discourses, Medina Onrubia depicts the corruption of the lower-class home and the female body as the result of political repression, capitalism, social prejudice, and moral double standards rather than the fault of the poor people themselves.

Although critics from the mainstream press disapproved of Medina Onrubia’s play, many of them admitted that it was popular with audiences. The anonymous reviewer for El Diario objected to the playwright’s suppression of action in favor of

\[11\] The following reviews noted audience enthusiasm: “Almafuerte.” (El Diario 12 Jan 1914); and “Estreno de Almafuerte” by Sergio Starko (La Mañana 12 Jan 1914).
discussion and suggested that the audience’s enjoyment of the play was due only to the popularity of the actress who played Elisa, María Gámez (5). The review also insinuated that Medina Onrubia’s work was not true theatre: “[C]reyó haber hecho un drama” (“Almafuerte” 5; She thought she had written a play). The columnist for La Mañana had similar complaints. He remarked that thesis dramas, particularly about anarchism, were rarely authored by women and he advised Medina Onrubia to write in a way that would be “de acuerdo con su sexo y de su alma de mujer” (Starko 5; more in keeping with her sex and female soul), since he perceived social commentary as a man’s job. These reviewers indicate that most male intellectuals considered it inappropriate and unladylike for women to write ideological theatre. While the anarchist paper, La Protesta, did come out in favor of Almafuerte, the full-page review avoided the theme of prostitution, focusing almost exclusively on the exile of the male character, Arturo (González 5).

The dismissive and condescending attitudes of these critics, particularly those from the mainstream press, may have discouraged other female playwrights in the 1910s from writing thesis dramas. Although Medina Onrubia did not produce another play until 1921, she explained in an interview that this was not because of inhibitions but because she was occupied with raising her children (Fernández Curra 23). A few years after the debut of Almafuerte, she married the owner of the prominent newspaper Crítica, Natalio Botana, with whom she had three children (Abos 20).\(^\text{12}\) Medina Onrubia’s comments on how marriage and motherhood delayed her literary production brings to light another factor contributing to the scarcity of women writers at the turn of the century. Even in revolutionary circles, women stayed home and took on the majority of work involved in

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\(^\text{12}\) After her husband’s death in 1941, Medina Onrubia retained ownership of the newspaper until pressure from the Peronist government caused her to sell it in 1951 (Abos 27).
childrearing, allowing their male partners more freedom to realize their political, professional, and artistic aspirations (Bellucci 64).

d. Illegitimacy, Divorce, and Sexuality in Male-Authorized Thesis Plays

José González Castillo (1885-1937), a contemporary of Medina Onrubia’s and a fellow anarchist (Ford 77), wrote two pieces in order to draw attention to specific legal issues affecting the female population: El hijo de Agar (Hagar’s Child, 1915) and La mujer de Ulises (Ulysses’ Wife, 1918).13 Both starred Camila Quiroga, tragic heroine of the Buenos Aires stage par excellence.14 González Castillo’s successful dramatic career began when he moved to Buenos Aires from Rosario, where he had worked as a journalist.15 In addition to the feminist works, he authored over eighty plays in his lifetime, most of which were sainetes (Ordaz, “José González Castillo” 8). Some of González Castillo’s provocative thesis dramas on contemporary legal and social issues resulted in his arrest and censorship.16

El hijo de Agar debuted in 1915 and was performed again in 1918 at the Teatro Liceo by the Quiroga-Rosich theatre company. During both seasons, the play was well

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13 Gonzalez Castillo stated that El hijo de Agar and La mujer de Ulises were written “a favor de este movimiento de opinión pro-derechos de la mujer” (La Razón, 7 de Jul 1918; in support of this ideological pro-women’s rights movement).

14 Camila Quiroga became famous in 1917 for her role as a desperate mother in the dramatic hit Con las alas rotas by Emilio Berisso. Decades later she remembered having herself cried real tears during the performance of that play (Muñoz 88).

15 González Castillo was orphaned as a child in Rosario. He moved to Salta as a young man to join a seminary under the guidance of a Catholic priest but eventually abandoned his religious studies, returned to his native Rosario, and became a journalist (Ordaz, “José González Castillo” 7-8).

16 González Castillo was jailed for a pro-union play, Los rebeldes, along with the actors (Ford 77). Government officials banned another piece, Los invertidos (1914), because it depicted homosexuality in a public arena (Seibel 507). David William Foster analyzes the play in “José González Castillo’s Los invertidos and the Vampire Theory of Homosexuality.”
attended and received positive reviews. *El hijo de Agar* examines the life of Agar, a poor young secretary in the law offices of Julián, Dr. Benítez, and Picapleitos (the ambulance-chaser). Julián and Dr. Benítez offer free legal council to unwed mothers but their ability to help is restricted by the existing Civil Code, which relieves men of any responsibility toward children they father outside of marriage. One of Agar’s friends, Margarita, seeks legal advice after she gets pregnant with her boss’s child. Yet when she discovers that her employer is already married, and that her child will be illegitimate, she decides to have an illegal abortion instead. Eventually Agar finds herself in a similar situation. She has an affair with Julián and becomes pregnant only to discover later that he is married to another woman. In the last act of the play, Agar considers her options from the privacy of her bedroom. She receives several visitors including Julián’s wife, Sara, and his uncle, the priest Padre Alberto. Sara offers to adopt the baby if Agar promises to disappear from the child’s life. This proposal recalls the biblical origins of the names Agar (Hagar) and Sara (Sarah), which Padre Alberto explains earlier in the play: Hagar was a slave who had an illegitimate child with her master, the patriarch Abraham. Later Abraham and his wife Sarah accepted the baby, Ismael, and raised him along with their own (legitimate) children (*El hijo de Agar* 7). In this updated version, however, a very distraught Agar rejects Sara’s offer and declares that she will have an abortion.

In act one, when Margarita and her mother, Petrona, learn from Dr. Benítez that they have no legal authority to force Margarita’s boss to marry her, Petrona questions the fairness of the Civil Code: “De modo que es caso perdido... Doctor... Que no hay más remedio que esto... Y que los hombres pueden seguir engañando mujeres y llenando el...”

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17 Hagar’s son, Ishmael, eventually marries and fathers twelve sons of his own who become the chiefs of twelve tribes that bear their names. (Genesis 25:12).
mundo de espurios y de desgraciados, impunemente, sin que la ley, ni la moral, ni nada les castigue y los condene” (El hijo de Agar 4; So it’s a lost cause… Doctor…There’s no other way. . . . And men can go on tricking women and filling the world with bastards and neglected children… with impunity… without punishment or condemnation from laws or morality or anything). Dr. Benítez is of the same opinion and continues Petrona’s argument:

La mujer está sola frente a la sociedad… y más de uno, y de ciento son los problemas a resolverse en esta situación desventajosa de la mujer en la vida… Llena de deberes y falta de derechos…Víctima de todos los prejuicios e inhabilitada para toda libertad. . . . Hoy es necesario educar a la mujer antes de lanzarla a la vida, ya que no se pueden crear leyes que la ampren y la defiendan, ni impedir que haya morales estrechas y conciencias criminales. (4)

(Woman faces society alone… and there is not just one but hundreds of problems that have to be resolved in the harsh lives of women… Full of responsibilities and devoid of rights…Victims of prejudice, denied all liberty. . . . Today we need to educate women before sending them out into the world since we can’t make laws that protect and defend them or avoid strict morals and criminal minds.)

These lines correspond with feminist strategies for combating the growing rates of illegitimacy at the beginning of the twentieth century in Argentina. Activists at that time denounced the sexist double standards that harshly judged “fallen women” but allowed men to have sexual relations outside of marriage free from accountability (Lavrin 133-34).

As the feminist discourse continues in the first act of El hijo de Agar, Julián ushers the women into a separate room, out of the spectator’s field of view, for further consultation. Thus the women disappear just as Dr. Benítez begins to discuss the viewpoints of women’s rights activists with his colleagues: Picapleitos and Padre Alberto. Agar remains on stage and stays close to her typewriter, quietly listening. Sadly
and ironically, within the context of the play, Julián succeeds in seducing Agar while she is still seated at her typewriter, just moments after the men conclude their conversation and make their exit. The stage directions immobilize Agar: “[p]resa de la emoción se irá sintiéndose poseída por el dominio espiritual del varón que secretamente respeta y ama” (10; an emotional prisoner, she begins to feel possessed by the spiritual domination of the man that she secretly loves and respects). Thus, in act one of El hijo de Agar, González Castillo contradictorily espouses a current feminist argument while still depicting women as submissive, naïve, and dependent on men (though he partially blames the Argentine education system for this). Female characters fall for the seductive powers of men like Julián and seek the protection and advice of men like Dr. Benítez. The voices and opinions of the victims, Agar and Margarita, are conspicuously eliminated from the discussion of their own marginalization.

Agar takes a slightly more active role in the play’s second act. She asks Dr. Benítez to explain the Civil Code with regard to children of adultery. This indicates the author’s intent to persuade spectators to oppose, and work to change, the current legislation, an explanation of which he includes in the dialogue:

AGAR. Dígame, doctor… Tengo una curiosidad. . . . ¿Los hijos adulterinos son excluidos por la ley de la sociedad? ¿No?

BENÍTEZ. En el código argentino, sí, como en casi todos los demás códigos en las naciones latinas, que yo sepa. El artículo trescientos cuarenta y dos, un artículo tan bárbaro como viejo, lo establece terminantemente: “Los hijos adulterinos no tienen por las leyes ni padre o madre, ni pariente alguno por parte de padre o madre. No tienen derecho a hacer investigaciones judiciales sobre la paternidad o la maternidad.” (15)

(AGAR. Tell me, doctor… I have a question. . . . Children of adultery are excluded from the law of society. Is that so?
BENÍTEZ. In the Argentine Code, yes, as in all the codes of Latin American nations that I know of. Article three hundred and forty two, an article as old as it is barbaric, is definitive: “Children of adultery have, according to the law, no mother or father nor any maternal or paternal relative. They have no right to conduct judicial investigations about their paternity or maternity.”

Dr. Benítez applauds Agar for her interest in learning the law and remarks that other women would do well to do the same. Perhaps this comment is directed at the female audience members who, like the protagonist, just received a brief legal lesson. However, Agar is more concerned with her current situation, her pregnancy, than with expanding her knowledge of the Civil Code. When Julián brings his wife, Sara, to the office Agar explodes: “¡Canalla!... ¡Canalla! (Va a su máquina y se echa a llorar a gritos). ¡Me ha engañado!... ¡Me ha engañado!” (18; Liar!... Liar! (she goes to her typewriter and starts to cry loudly). He tricked me!... He tricked me!). Agar’s movements and actions on the stage are indicative of her social marginalization. Just as society relegates workingwomen and poor unwed mothers to the fringes of society, Agar is limited to the area of the stage allotted to her gender and class: the typing table.

Agar’s bedroom is the setting for act three. Almost all of the characters from acts one and two invade her privacy and offer her options for dealing with the pregnancy. Petrona recommends an illegal abortion; Julián’s wife arrives accompanied by Padre Alberto and offers to adopt the baby if Agar “se elimina” (eliminates herself) from the child’s life (like Hagar in the Bible); and Picapleitos suggests that Agar become his mistress. Surrounded by this conflicting advice, Agar astutely analyses her situation:

[Y]a no soy sólo la víctima de un infame, la cómplice de un adúltero, la pecadora despreciable, la madre que infama a su propio hijo... ahora también soy el fruto de la codicia y el deseo de todo el mundo...ahora soy la desgraciada a quien se ofrece protección en cambio de su... de su
belleza… El instrumento de placer que todo el mundo busca, gratuito y sin consecuencias… (27)

(Now I’m not just the victim of a scoundrel, the accomplice of an adulterer, the depreciable sinner, the mother that ruins her own child’s life… Now I am also the product of lust and the desire of all… Now I’m the disgraced one who can be offered protection in exchange for… for her beauty… the instrument of pleasure that everyone looks for freely and without consequences…)

Agar explains that she is unwilling to accept a man’s “protection” or to provide Julián’s legitimate wife with a baby and, though her mother pleads with her to have the child, she insists on having an abortion.18 “No… mamá, no… ¡No quiero a mi hijo!... No lo quiero!...” (27; No… mama, no… I don’t want my child!... I don’t want it!). When the priest recites lines from the Hail Mary, “bendito sea el fruto de tu vientre” (28; blessed will be the fruit of your womb), Agar screams “¡Mentira!... ¡Mentira!” (Lies! Lies!).

Thus, in the last scene, Agar develops a defiant attitude toward conventional morality, patriarchal conventions, and the Church. Her performance finally begins to overshadow the other characters but her current surroundings reveal her powerlessness. Agar, like Elisa in Almafuerte, is a defeated and desperate heroine. She no longer shares a part, however marginalized, of the public sphere with men but instead endures society’s invasion of her private living space, under the guise of Christian charity. While Agar slowly develops a strong stage presence during the course of the play (transforming from a naïve and submissive girl to an astute and rebellious woman) she is also paradoxically seen retreating further and further into the “feminine” private sphere. González Castillo, like Medina Onrubia before him, invites the spectators to witness the ways in which the Church, social conventions, and sexist laws harm the private lives of poor women and

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18 Asunción Lavrin discusses the nuances of the turn-of-the-century anti-abortion laws in Chapter 5 of Women, Feminism and Social Change in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay (159-93).
contribute to their social marginalization. He also infuses many parts of his dramatic dialogue with feminist discourse, albeit mostly articulated by male characters, and presents Agar’s tragic story as an example of the unfairness of the current Civil Code.

The second play in González Castillo’s pro-woman series, La mujer de Ulises (Ulysses’ Wife) caused more of a controversy at its opening in 1918. The play protested anti-divorce legislation and attempted to “convencer más que de emocionar, resultando quizás un ‘alegato’ más que un ‘drama’” (“Palabras del autor” 7; convince rather than inspire emotion, making it more an ‘accusation’ than a ‘drama’), according to the author’s own announcement in La Razón. The performance was only one part of González Castillo’s multi-layered public rally against indissoluble marriage. The debut also featured speeches by socialist politicians such as Mario Bravo, Antonio De Tomasio and Alfredo Palacios, each of whom had authored or co-authored divorce bills. Bravo’s bill had already been proposed in 1917 and was scheduled to be reintroduced in the Chamber of Deputies soon after the debut of La mujer de Ulises.19

The drama focuses on a sympathetic female character, Rosario, who has been abandoned by her husband and forced to raise their daughter alone. Rosario’s situation is clearly similar to Penelope’s in The Odyssey but instead of waiting around for her husband to return, she leaves home in order to make a living. Because of social stigmas, Rosario lies to her potential employers about her missing spouse, passing herself off as a widow. An anti-divorce politician, Dr. Ortiz, hires Rosario as a headmistress for his

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19 La Nación (8 Jun 1918) and El Diario (8 de Jun 1918) record the speeches of Bravo and De Tomaso. La Idea Nacional (8 Jul 1918) mentions Alfredo Palacios’s lecture. Mario Bravo proposed several justifications for divorce. Asunció Lavrin offers the following brief summary of Bravo’s proposal, underlining his three main points: “His 1917 bill ranked mutual consent as the first grounds for divorce. The sole wish of the woman, if she was of age and a mother, and the adultery of either the husband or wife ranked second and third” (238).
youngest children. Soon afterwards, Dr. Ortiz’s adult son, Fernando, falls in love with Rosario and learns of her marital status. Fernando attempts to convince his father to vote in favor of divorce in the next congressional session so that he and Rosario can be married, but his efforts appear unsuccessful. Meanwhile Rosario’s husband returns and demands that she move back in with him. Rosario and Fernando fear that they will be separated but, in a surprise ending, Dr. Ortiz has a change of heart and casts the deciding vote in favor of the proposed divorce bill; the couple rejoices when they hear the news.

The setting for La mujer de Ulises is reminiscent of nineteenth-century drawing-room dramas. As Hanna Scolnicov points out, the drawing-room becomes a public forum in bourgeois domestic dramas and parallels the demarcations of gendered spaces in society:

The formal drawing-room was the only room into which a nineteenth-century guest would be invited, and therefore the only part of the house which the audience is allowed to see by theatrical convention. To a degree, the drawing-room shares the public aspect of the outdoor space of earlier plays. (93)

Similarly, each time the male characters enter into political debates in La mujer de Ulises, the living room becomes a male-dominated debate platform and the female characters disappear further into the house.

When Fernando falls in love with Rosario, and learns the truth of her marital predicament, he takes a boldly defiant stance toward his father. Thesis plays frequently depicted intergenerational clashes of this kind, which Berenguer Carisomo explains as “ese eterno drama de progreso a saltos” (372; That eternal struggle for progress in leaps and bounds). A debate between Fernando, Dr. Ortiz, and a few other politicians follows. One character emphasizes female sexual desire, a subject rarely discussed in public
debates: “La mujer es como el hombre... tiene todos sus instintos y necesidades”

(González Castillo, *La mujer de Ulises* 22; A woman is like a man... she has all of the same instincts and needs).  

Fernando champions feminism when he declares that divorce is essential to women’s emancipation, “el divorcio es la más grande conquista de la mujer, porque es su libertad” (divorce is the greatest conquest for a woman because it is her liberty), and calls indissoluble marriage “esclavitud estúpida” (19; stupid slavery).  

In *La mujer de Ulises*, as in *El hijo de Agar*, the feminist ideas are almost exclusively voiced by male characters, since the women leave the stage to the men during most of the debates. Also, the prospect of divorce as envisioned by González Castillo’s hero does not subvert the woman’s traditional role as a virtuous wife and mother. In fact, Fernando tells Rosario that divorce will allow her to better fulfill her womanly duties:

> El divorcio debe existir… La ley no puede cometer la injusticia, la terrible injusticia de sacrificar su juventud, su vida, su belleza, su admirable condición de esposa y de madre en aras de una estúpida fidelidad a un hombre que no ha de volver más, a un hombre que usted no ama más, a un hombre que no ha sido digno de su amor jamás. (La mujer de Ulises 18)

(Divorce must exist… The law cannot commit the injustice, the terrible injustice of sacrificing your youth, your life, your beauty, your commendable qualities as wife and mother in favor of a stupid fidelity to a man who will not return, who you no longer love, who has never been worthy of your love.)

Rosario permits Fernando to speak on her behalf and agrees that her place is in the house. She simply calls for subtle modifications to the typical association of woman with the home: “¡Dicen que la mujer ha nacido para el hogar, que esa es su santa misión… pero se...

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20 While both supporters and opponents of divorce made frequent references to the male sex drive, official debates avoided the subject of women’s sexuality. Some anarchists and feminist “free thinkers,” like María Abella Ramírez however, did bring female sexual desire into the discussion (Lavrin 250).

21 Feminist freethinker María Abella Ramírez likened indissoluble marriage to slavery in a 1902 article (Lavrin 243).
equivocan en formarlo… y le impiden rehacerlo… le impiden renovarlo!” (28; They say that woman was born to stay in the home, that it is her saintly mission… but they made a mistake in building it… and they do not let her remake it… they do not let her renovate it!). This acceptance of the status quo may be a tactic designed to reassure skeptical audience members that legalizing divorce will not threaten the stability of gender roles within the home.

The ending in La mujer de Ulises is more optimistic than those of either Almafuerte or El hijo de Agar. Divorce is legalized in this play (decades before it would actually be legalized in the Argentine Civil Code) and Rosario and Fernando are allowed to marry. However, Rosario, like Agar, fails to become a model for female liberation. On the contrary, she continues to be situated within the domestic sphere while the men around her obscure her voice and stage presence. That being said, González Castillo’s work was radical for its time and succeeded in publicizing some feminist arguments, which is especially noteworthy since the writings of female divorce advocates were rarely featured in the mainstream press (Lavrin 245). According to Asunción Lavrin, “legislation alone could not accelerate the desired change in values and personal attitudes” that feminist progress required (256). González Castillo and the socialist deputies who spoke at his play’s performance must have believed that theatre was an effective method for influencing public opinion. In this vein, La mujer de Ulises offered feminist arguments to numerous spectators and inspired an outpouring of emotion and opinions during the nightly performances and within the review sections of Buenos Aires’s major newspapers afterwards. Mainstream critics celebrated Camila Quiroga for her portrayal of Rosario but objected to the playwright’s use of didactic dialogue.
Nonetheless, even reviewers who disapproved of the play’s message had to admit that it captured the attention of spectators. *El Diario* dismissed the play as propaganda but admitted that the audience “estalló en una larga ovación” (Raberg 5; erupted in a long ovation). According to *La Idea Nacional*, women expressed their approval of the drama through their long applause "tomaron abundante parte las damas [en el aplauso] y lo que prueba la unidad de opinión con respecto a esa tesis, así como también la pericia del autor” (“Interesar a un público” 6; the ladies played a large role [in the applause], which indicates the unity of opinion regarding the topic, along with the author’s skill).

According to *Crítica*, the auditorium was filled with “partidarios del divorcio” (supporters of divorce) in favor of “la emancipación femenina” (‘La mujer de Ulises’; female emancipation). Despite the contradictory critical reaction, or perhaps because of it, the play proved to be a success. Night after night, spectators came together to witness a dramatized legislative victory and the mixed-gender public showed their support through their patronage and ovation.

A similar performance took place in 1925 when Mario Bravo spoke again on behalf of “los derechos civiles de la mujer” (women’s civil rights) at the opening of another pro-divorce play, *La ley del corazón* (The Law of the Heart) by Francisco Collazo and Folco Testena (Seibel 659). This event anticipated the 1926 reform of the Civil Code that gave women full adult status (Jeffers Little 248). The *Unión Feminista Nacional* sponsored the event, a sign that women’s rights activists endorsed theatre as a method for attracting popular support. The newspaper records of spectator enthusiasm at both *La mujer de Ulises* and *La ley del corazón* seem to depict a society with changing

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22 I am not able to offer an analysis of the plot because the script for *La ley del corazón* was never published.
values in reference to the role women played in daily life. Increasing numbers of spectators confirmed their support for modifications to laws and customs that improved the lot of women even though they continued to associate them with domesticity and inferiority.

Typically, in mainstream plays, happy endings were reserved for chaste heroines while tragedy befell women who committed the “error” of disobeying moral codes. Within this context, César Iglesias Paz (1848-1929) was criticized for imagining a positive outcome for a dishonored woman in his 1917 play El complot del silencio (The Conspiracy of Silence). Iglesias Paz was a wealthy lawyer and writer who often used theatre to moralize. In this play, he criticizes society for keeping young women ignorant about sex and suggests a reconsideration of the condemnation of “fallen” women. The main character, Mecha, played by the prominent actress Blanca Podestá, agrees to sneak away from home one afternoon for a romantic meeting with the seductive Roberto.23 By the time the family discovers that the protagonist has become a “fallen woman” Roberto is long gone. Only Mecha’s uncle, Damián, defends her by arguing that girls go astray because their education system fails to teach them about sex. Eventually, the family attempts to restore their reputation by encouraging an unsuspecting groom, Rafael, to marry Mecha. She defies her family’s wishes, however, by telling Rafael the truth of her transgression. Remarkably, Rafael decides to forgive his fiancé’s past “sins” and the wedding continues as planned.

Feminists of Iglesias Paz’s time such as the Argentine Alicia Moreau de Justo and the Uruguayan Paulina Luisi, shared his opinion that girls would benefit from sex.

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23 The Podestá family was a famous acting troupe at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Willis Knapp Jones, Blanca Podestá went on to become the biggest star (Behind Spanish American Footlights 191).
education (Lavrin 140). However, in *El complot del silencio*, as in González Castillo’s plays, it is the men who defend the “fallen women.” Damián is outspoken in his attacks on society’s silence about sex: “Todos . . . se complotaron con su silencio para que ese miserable realizara su crimen” (14; Everyone . . . conspired in silence to allow this degenerate to commit his crime). Rafael delivers the most controversial lines when he suggests to his fiancé that it is possible for a man to put aside romantic notions of female chastity and forgive a woman’s mistake: “Te hubiera querido pura como la luz de tus ojos; inmaculada como te evocaba en mis sueños… Pero, ¡que sueños! Para mí ya estás purificada por tu dolor y por la lealtad que acabas de darme prueba” (32; I would have liked you pure like the light in your eyes; immaculate the way I imagined you in my dreams… But, what dreams! As I see it, you have already been purified through your pain and through your loyalty, which you have just proven to me).

Rafael’s matter-of-fact acceptance of an “impure” bride provoked anxiety in the critics of the play. Most reviews ranged from apprehensive to censorious. *La Prensa* called the plot “bastante peligrosa para ser llevada a la escena” (“El complot del silencio”; too dangerous to be staged) and deemed the play “condenable” (condemnable). The critic for *El Diario Español* related the heroine’s “pardon” at the end of the play to current trends in society’s treatment of women but doubted that Hispanic culture was ready for such a shift in the honor code:

Esta tendencia de perdonar las faltas cometidas por una mujer, parece marcar una revolución en la conciencia humana, que se refleja en las novelas y en el teatro. Quizás sea superior a la manera como hasta ahora se han juzgado las cuestiones de honra que con la mujer se relacionan. Pero convengamos que hasta ahora el alma latina no está moldeada para esta clase de transacciones. Aquel hombre que sabe que su esposa se ha entregado sin grandes resistencias, y que lo sabe por la boca misma del
seductor, es verdaderamente superhombre, cuyos nervios no son de nuestra raza. (“El complot del silencio” 5)

(This tendency to forgive a woman’s mistake seems to mark a revolution in human consciousness, which can be seen reflected in novels and in the theatre. Maybe it is better than the way that up to now women have been judged in questions of honor. But, let’s be fair, the Latin soul is still not equipped for this type of transaction. A man who knows that his wife has surrendered herself without much resistance, and learns it from the seducer himself, is truly a superman, whose nerves are not from our race.)

La Argentina’s review was somewhat more encouraging, lauding the play’s “noble propósito” (“El complot del silencio” 6; noble purpose).

As in the case of La mujer de Ulises and El hijo de Agar, the critics’ apprehensions did not reflect the public’s reaction, since the majority of male and female spectators did not seem troubled by the drama. Some reviewers dismissed the audience’s applause but still admitted that the public sympathized with the heroine’s plight during the performance (“El complot del silencio,” La Prensa). This is similar to the contrast between the reviewers’ criticisms and the public’s approval observed at the openings of La mujer de Ulises and La ley del corazón. Despite the fact that audiences applauded the portrayal of women as innocent victims, however, this type of characterization appears by today’s standards paternalistic and conformist. Dora Barrancos has referred to it as “la ficción de la expectativa de respetabilidad que despertaban los atributos femeninos” (25; the fiction of respectability that feminine attributes were expected to awaken). César Iglesias Paz himself best exemplified the theatre industry’s patronizing views of Argentine women in a column for La Época about El complot del silencio in which he emphasizes female “virtuousness”:

No es de cuenta mía juzgar hasta qué punto ha sido eficaz mi buen propósito. Pero sí me pertenece, y puedo declararlo, lo ha inspirado el
convencimiento de que la mujer argentina, la mujer nuestra, es la más virtuosa, es la más dócil, es la más buena de las mujeres del mundo, como lo he sostenido en mis comedias, donde si alguna cayó fue por ignorancia jamás por perversidad, como lo habéis visto en la pieza que acaba de representarse. (9)

(It is not my place to judge whether or not my good intentions have been effective. But I can and will declare that it was inspired by my belief that Argentine women, our women, are the most virtuous, the most docile, the best of all the women of the world, as I have sustained in my comedies, where if one fell it was out of ignorance never perversity, as you can see from the play that was just performed.)

Obviously plays were being written in the early decades of the twentieth century that concerned the marginalized status of women and even included some feminist arguments but, as I have demonstrated, many of the playwrights’ attitudes were still conservative and traditional in many ways. Several of them reinforced women’s second-class social status and continued to limit women’s experiences to the categories of “shame,” “forgiveness,” and “error,” to borrow Storni’s words. Some of the plays that advocated for reforms to the role of women in civil society depicted women’s rights as a struggle for power in which the male characters were the power brokers and took the lead roles. Women and women’s rights often resembled objects of exchange that could be passed from one man to another: In El complot del silencio, one man preys upon Mecha while another offers her respectability; in La mujer de Ulises, one man abandons Rosario and another marries her; in Almafuerte, Elisa is offered liberation and equality from one man, degradation and prostitution from another. On stage, male characters tended to dominate discussions, control dramatic space, appropriate feminist discourses, and reenact patriarchal values. Off stage, male reviewers and directors were critical of male dramatists’ feminist-leaning arguments and were altogether dismissive of female authors. Yet, the theatre industry was beginning to show subtle signs of potential for feminist
enterprises. Some critics and dramatists had started to pay attention to the reactions of female spectators, question the fairness of the honor code, and explore possible social and legal changes. Playhouses offered a place for an audience made up of men and women from different political affiliations and social classes to reexamine women’s role in society and even to consider sensitive subjects like sexuality and abortion. Progressive politicians and women’s rights advocates took advantage of the growing popularity of theatre to stage plays that would draw attention to impending legislation and reflect the feminist debates already taking place in feminine magazines, socialist and anarchist circles, and women’s conferences. Newspaper reviews gave the discussion even further exposure, recording the divergent viewpoints of critics and the popular reception of audiences. In this way, feminism began a slow integration into wider public discourses.

e. New Female Authors and an Emerging Feminist Thesis

In the 1920s and 1930s, Salvadora Medina Onrubia resumed her playwriting and was joined by other female dramatists. In general, this group of women preferred to write domestic melodramas (the subject of chapter 2). Considering the criticism launched at Medina Onrubia after the debut of *Almafuerte*, other aspiring female playwrights may have been apprehensive about writing overtly political theatre. Thus it is noteworthy that the first play by the poet Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938), *El amo del mundo* (The Master of The World, 1927), and the later debut of *Yo me divorcio, papá* (Daddy, I’m Getting a Divorce, 1937) by Malena Sándor (1913-1968) resemble the male-dominated genre of thesis drama. Storni and Sándor adapt the thesis drama to make room for female protagonists that do not hesitate to question femininity, occupy center stage, assert their
voices, and demand more than mere modifications to their society’s gender codes and laws. Through their innovative uses of dialogue, metatheatre, and theatrical space, Storni and Sándor expanded and transformed the thesis theatre genre and created an early feminist performance aesthetic.

Alfonsina Storni (1892-1938) was born in Switzerland during a trip her parents took to their homeland (Nalé Roxlo, Genio y figura de Alfonsina Storni 6). Her family later moved to Rosario (5-6). The once successful business ventures of Storni’s father ultimately proved unprofitable and the family faced financial ruin after his death in 1906 (7-8). At age fifteen, after a series of odd jobs, Storni became a traveling actress for the José Tallavi theatre company (6). Shortly afterward, she settled in Coronda and, in 1910, she earned a teaching degree from the Escuela Normal (9). Three years later, after having become pregnant with her married lover’s baby, she moved to Buenos Aires where she gave birth to her son Alejandro (10). While raising him as a single mother she began pursuing a career as a journalist and poet (10). In 1916, Storni published La inquietud del rosal, the first of several volumes of poetry that would secure her place in Southern Cone literary culture as a modernist poet (11). Though she is remembered more for her verse, Storni also wrote and published a wide variety of essays on feminist issues, short stories, and several theatre pieces. She taught at a dramatic school for children and participated actively in elite literary circles, maintaining friendships with other respected authors from the region including Horacio Quiroga, Leopoldo Lugones, and fellow dramatist Salvador Medina Onrubia (18-19). In addition to her numerous plays for children, Storni’s dramatic works for adults include two realistic dramas, El amo del
mundo (1927) and La debilidad de Mister Dougall (1927); and two avant garde farces, Cimbelina en el 1900 y pico (1931) and Polixena y la cocinerita (1931).

Only one of these plays, El amo del mundo, was performed in Storni’s lifetime. It debuted at the Teatro Nacional Cervantes in 1927, to an illustrious audience that included then president Marcelo T. de Alvear and several famous literary personalities (Nalé Roxlo 115). In the year prior to the play’s opening, the groundbreaking “Law of Women’s Civil Rights” (1926) was passed. This landmark reform to the Civil Code had given female citizens full adult status, allowed married women to govern their own incomes, and freed wives from their husband’s debts (Jeffers Little 248). It also granted married women the right to participate in business and public life and officially recognized the unwed mother’s authority over her children (Jeffers Little 248; Lavrin 210). Nonetheless, full legal and social equality between the genders remained out of reach, as female Argentines still lacked basic civil liberties such as the right to vote and to obtain a divorce and most middle-class women depended financially on men. The dominant culture continued to judge women more harshly than men for sex outside of marriage and stigmatized single mothers. Storni, who was an acute observer of gender relations, often denounced these social inequalities in her writing. Nalé Roxlo notes a connection between El amo del mundo and Storni’s poem “Tú me quieres blanca,” which criticizes society’s double standards regarding sexual conduct for men and women (115). The play also dramatizes many theories that Storni had put forth in her newspaper and magazine essays about women’s social position, legal rights, and psychology.

24 Previously, unwed mothers exercised parental authority in the absence of the father but the law never officially “recognized women’s ability to carry out such tasks” (Lavrin 196).
The play’s original title, Dos mujeres (Two Women), draws attention to the two contrasting female characters. However, Storni recalled that because a similar piece existed with the same name, the male director changed the title to “El amo del mundo” (The Master of the World), shifting the emphasis from the play’s true focus (the women), to the male character (Storni, “Entretelones de un estreno” 53). The two women, Márgara and Zarcillo, live together in Márgara’s house. Zarcillo is a young woman of limited financial means who was offered lodging by Márgara’s father before he died. Márgara’s illegitimate son, Carlitos, also lives with them in the house. He does not know that Márgara is his mother because she has kept this fact a secret in accordance with her father’s wishes. The play’s action unfolds sometime after the death of Márgara’s father. Zarcillo has decided to look for a wealthy husband and Márgara has become determined to live her life sincerely and unashamedly. The rich bachelor, Claudio, first courts Márgara but when she tells him the truth about her son, he shifts his attention to the seemingly innocent Zarcillo. Aware that that Claudio seeks a “pure” bride, Zarcillo hides the fact that she has also had previous lovers. This deceit brings about the desired result as Claudio and Zarcillo get married in the last act of the play. After the wedding, Márgara finally tells Carlitos that she is his mother and the two of them decide to travel to Europe together.

The character descriptions in the script draw a parallel between each woman’s appearance and personality and her attitude about woman’s role in society. The intellectual and analytical Márgara wears no jewelry, ties her hair back and dresses in simple gowns. Clever Zarcillo leaves her hair down, “finje una debilidad que no posee” (feigns a weakness she does not possess), and uses jewelry and coquettish outfits to
enhance her beauty (El amo del mundo 2). Zarcillo, whose name means “earring” or “tendril,” acts like a climbing flower, “penetra su ambiente, se amolda a él y lo usufructúa” (penetrates her environment, adheres to it, and reaps the benefits) while Márgara (whose name is a variant of Margarita, a daisy), “escapa a su ambiente y lo supera” (2; escapes her environment and transcends it). The key to the differences between the two women lays in their access to money and property. On the one hand, Zarcillo, who is poor and has been estranged from her family, seeks financial security and social respectability through marriage. On the other hand, Márgara, who lives comfortably thanks to an inheritance left by her father, does not feel the same pressure to conform to social conventions or to look for a husband. These circumstances recall an article in La Nación that Storni wrote in 1920 in which she pointed out that access to money allowed women greater freedom:

La mujer libre, económicamente, adquiere mucho de la manera de ser masculina. Su independencia fundamental la hace prescindir del hombre, y sus ideas frente a aquél son más libres, más claras.
Más dueña de su verdad interior, por lo mismo que está más cerca de la libertad, sus propósitos no girarán exclusivamente alrededor de la conquista masculina.
Pero en la mujer sin más dotes que ella misma, su condición de sometida, económicamente, también aumentará su complejidad [femenina]” (“La complejidad femenina” 967).

(An economically independent woman acquires many masculine traits. Her fundamental independence keeps her from needing men and, when confronting them, her ideas are freer and clearer. She is more in control of her inner self, and because of this, she is closer to liberty and her aspirations do not revolve exclusively around the conquest of men.
But for the woman who has no other attributes than her own self, her subservient economic condition adds to her [feminine] complex.)

For similar financial reasons, Márgara and Zarcillo have different motives and strategies for interacting with the rich bachelor Claudio.
Though Zarcillo is not a virgin, she pretends to be innocent and chaste so that she will be more attractive to Claudio. She claims sexual inexperience: “nunca me han besado” (Storni, “El amo del mundo” 6; I’ve never been kissed) and stresses Claudio’s role as an authority figure by addressing him with the formal usted even though he uses the familiar tú with her. Zarcillo pays compliment to Claudio on his manly strength and his power over her. When he threatens to hit her, she provocatively cries “¡Ay qué lindo! ¡Pero fuerte, fuerte, hasta que salte sangre!” (5; Oh how wonderful! But hard, hard, so that blood will spurt out!). She also pretends to be dumb, “[n]o comprendo la mitad de las cosas que leo” (I don’t understand half of what I read), and flatters Claudio’s ego by praising his intelligence and comparing him to King Solomon (5-6). Nonetheless, Zarcillo makes it clear that the performance in which she is engaged is a method of economic and social survival, even though Claudio pays no attention: “Si yo me he dejado besar por usted, oiga, sepa, es porque no valgo nada” (7; If I let you kiss me, you should know it is because I’m worth nothing). Later on, Zarcillo confesses to Márgara that she has had sexual relations with another man. She also admits that she plans to convince Claudio to marry her by pretending to be sexually inexperienced. Moreover she implies that all relations between men and women involve deceit:

MÁRGARA. ¿De modo que tu propósito es ocultarlo todo?

ZARCILLO. (muy vivo). ¡A sí, sí; todo a todos, menos a tí! (recobrándose). ¿Crees que no soy capaz de engañar a un hombre? ¿Crees por otra parte que los hombres no deben ser engañados? Todas los engañan, un poco, todas. (16)

(MÁRGARA. So you are going to hide everything from him?

ZARCILLO. (Very animated). Oh yes, everything from everyone except from you! (regaining her composure). Do you think I’m incapable of fooling a man? Or else do you think that men shouldn’t be fooled? All women fool men, a little bit, all of them.)
Zarcillo attempts to justify her actions by pointing out that, when the tables are turned, men never bother to confess their past sexual experiences to their wives (17). “Es un favor engañar” (17; It is a favor to deceive) she claims. This view of femininity as a false social performance clearly contradicts and challenges the patriarchal value system prevalent among spectators, playwrights, and critics of the thesis drama genre. Today, Storni’s deconstruction of woman’s femininity may even be seen as a precursor to the ideas of later feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler in that it exposes “womanliness” as a socially constructed behavior.  

Márgara, who is more economically independent than Zarcillo, refuses to perform society’s ideal of feminine behavior. Instead, she questions Claudio’s fascination with female chastity. After referring to her own supposed “pureza de cuerpo y alma” (13; purity of body and soul) in an ironic tone, Márgara destroys Claudio’s image of her by revealing that she is an unwed mother. Rather than try to appeal to her suitor’s paternalistic sympathies by pretending that she was an ignorant victim of a male seducer (like the heroines in the dramas of Iglesias Paz and González Castillo), Márgara takes full responsibility for her actions: “No he sido una chiquilina engañada; he obrado por elección, por decisión, por voluntad, como un ser libre” (13; I was not a tricked little girl; I acted willingly, it was my decision, my choice, like the actions of a free person). She tells Claudio that she does not want or need his forgiveness and that she is morally opposed to play-acting for men: “No quiero hacer la menor comedia ante el hombre.

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25 In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking book The Second Sex suggested that the category of “woman” was more a social construct than a biological essence. Judith Butler went further to suggest that males and females sustain rigidly defined gender “performances” throughout their lives in Gender Trouble.
destinado a amarme; me repugnaría aprovecharme de sus debilidades.” (22; I don’t want to perform the slightest charade for the man destined to love me, it would repulse me to take advantage of his weaknesses). Clearly Márgara’s behavior is radically different from Zarcillo’s. Both women are equally aware of the injustice of moral double standards and the power of money, however, as Zarcillo explains in an earlier act, Márgara’s money enables her to defy social conventions: “Yo sé que no serías capaz de hacer lo que hago pero tú eres rica, dueña de tu vida y yo estoy sola; no tengo nada” (17; I know that you wouldn’t be able to do what I’m doing but you are rich, in control of your own life, and I’m alone, I have nothing).

After evaluating the performances of both women, Claudio ignorantly prefers the one who fakes innocence in order to have access to his wealth and social standing over the honest and sincere one who loves him but does not require his financial support. As Storni explained in a letter to La Nación after the play’s controversial opening, Zarcillo uses the man’s own arrogance against him: “[Claudio] se deja vencer con las mismas armas que su vanidad y presunción ponen en manos de su astuta enemiga” (“Aclaraciones sobre ‘El amo del mundo” 6; [Claudio] lets himself be defeated with the very same arms that his vanity and presumption put into the hands of his astute enemy). Thus, the play exposes the faulty and hypocritical patriarchal logic that causes men to prefer dishonest feminine performances to the honest actions of women who refuse to participate in feminine charades. Instead of exalting womanliness the way that earlier thesis dramas had, Storni demonstrates the performative and economic underpinnings of gender construction and denounces the irrationality of sexist double standards.
While the depiction of relations between men and women is negative in acts one and two, Storni’s play ends with an idealistic vision of the future through a final conversation between Márgara and her son Carlitos. Márgara finds in her son a future man who is willing to reject his society’s values and forge new ones with her:

MÁRGARA. (Resplandeciente). Oye, criatura mía: el camino más áspero que podemos tomar en la vida, pero el más ancho, es vivir para hacer la felicidad de los demás; es aprender a matar lo más feo que tiene el hombre: su brutal egoísmo, su voracidad, su terrible amor propio.

CARLITOS. Quiero aprender contigo: ¡Llévame! ¡Llévame! (Sale abrazados). (39)

(MÁRGARA. (Radiantly). Listen, my child, the toughest road that we can take in life, but the most rewarding, is to live to make others happy; it is learning to kill man’s ugliness: his brutal egoism, his greed, his horrible self-importance.

CARLITOS. I want to learn from you: Take me with you! Take me! (They leave together in an embrace.)

This exchange evokes a comment Storni made in a 1919 article titled “Un tema viejo” (An Old Story) in which she offers a feminist’s view of men and the nation: “[La mujer feminista] no va contra el hombre: al luchar piensa en su hijo, que es hombre, pero desconfía de la protección del estado, desconfía de la justicia del hombre, tiende . . . a ejercitar su responsabilidad” ([The feminist woman] doesn’t turn against man, for, as she struggles, she thinks about her son, a man. But she distrusts the state’s protection, she distrusts man’s justice, and she tends . . . to exercise her responsibility” (“An Old Story” 254-59). In El amo del mundo Storni continues to reject the male-dominated state of the nation, preferring instead to envision a utopian future in which feminists educate their sons and both work together to re-create their society. Contrary to the fates of earlier

26 Translation by Patricia Owen Steiner.
thesis-drama heroines, Márgara does not retreat further into the domestic sphere as the play unfolds nor is she silenced. In fact it is the “master of the world,” Claudio, who becomes entrapped in domesticity as he blindly marries Zarcillo. Márgara’s domestic living space transforms into the locus of a mother-son feminist discussion as the two choose to leave in search of a better environment and perhaps a more equal nation. Thus, she goes out into public spaces, which her financial independence allows her to do, rather than retreating further indoors like the heroines of earlier thesis dramas.

Reports on the public’s reaction to the play varied. La Prensa’s reviewer stated that the audience reacted to the play with “aplausos expresivos” (18; expressive applause). Likewise, Storni said that the performance was “un éxito leal y cálido” (“Aclaraciones”; a true and sincere success). Her son, Alejandro, also remembered a warm reception from the audience on opening night (Romano, “El amo del mundo” 185). However, disapproving critics like the columnists for Comoedia and El Pueblo downplayed the applause (“El ‘Azorín’ Argentino” 1; Niger 6). The negative attention from critics may explain why the play closed just three days after its debut. A columnist for Crítica complained that the characters talked too much (“Alfonsina Storni” 4) and the commentator from La Prensa found fault with the unnatural and intellectual language used by the young boy (“Presentación de la compañía Fanny Brena” 18). Comoedia’s reviewer claimed that the script would be good for reading but lacked dramatic potential (“El ‘Azorín’ Argentino” 1). Others objected to the drama’s social commentary. Henri Niger of El Pueblo, one of the harshest of Storni’s critics, referred to El amo del mundo’s message as “pedantería femenina” (6; Feminine pedantry). Edmundo Guibourg posited that critics disapproved of the play because it “denigra al hombre” (qtd. in Storni,
“Entretelones” 53; denigrates men). But as Storni herself argued in her letter to La Nación, the reviewers probably attacked the play for its autobiographical elements (“Aclaraciones” 7). Storni later admitted having been displeased with the performance herself but for different reasons than those mentioned by her critics. In an article in Nosotros in April of 1927, she claimed that El amo del mundo’s lead actress, Fanny Brena, undermined her vision of Márgara as a self-assured character by “adoptando un tono sentencioso de víctima” (“Entretelones de un estreno” 51; adopting the affected tone of a victim). She also explained that the theatre company chose an actor for the role of Carlitos who was too young for the part and that the artistic director and the supporting actress repeatedly ignored her suggestions (51). Storni’s experience demonstrates the difficulties facing female dramatists in Argentina, particularly those who dared criticize their society. It also indicates the extent to which authors and reviewers believed that theatre had the potential to influence public opinion. Although Storni had written extensively about feminism and criticized society’s double standards in essays and poetry, it was the public dramatization of her subversive ideas and her personal life that most profoundly disturbed critics. Their efforts to dissuade Storni from playwriting may indicate that they in fact considered feminist theatre a real and powerful threat to their society’s gender codes. Similarly, Storni’s own disappointment with the actress’s weak performance and the theatre company’s disregard for her theatrical vision demonstrates her concern that a poor performance would dilute her ideological message. This negative experience with theatre critics is probably what prevented her other play (written at the same time), La debilidad de Mister Dougall, which I analyze in Chapter 2, from being produced and performed.
Despite her problematic entry into the theatre industry, Storni continued to write plays. She composed seven works for children, which she directed herself and had performed in plazas and parks with child actors (Nalé Roxlo 126). In 1938, more than ten years after the performance of *El amo*, and after the poet had made two trips to Europe that heavily influenced her style of writing, Storni decided to have another of her more recently written adult plays performed. She began rehearsals for *Cimbelina en el 1900 y pico* with her students at the Conservatorio de Música y Declamación but she died before the play was ready to open (126). Storni had been suffering from breast cancer during the past few years and committed suicide by drowning on 25 October 1938. Her *farsas* debuted posthumously. The literary club La Peña, to which Storni had belonged, staged *Polixena y la cocinerita* on 10 November 1938. Storni’s students performed *Cimbelina en el 1900 y pico* on 6 December 1938 at the Teatro Cervantes (126).

Storni’s successor, Malena Sándor (1913-1968), debuted her one-act play *Yo me divorcio, papá* in 1937, ten years after the controversial staging of *El amo del mundo*. In addition to her playwriting, Sándor worked as a reporter for Mexican and Argentine newspapers, authored short stories, and modified scripts for radio and later for television (Jones, *Behind Spanish American Footlights* 612; Sosa de Newton 579). According to Asunción Lavrin, feminists in the 1930s and 1940s were seen as “‘new women’ no longer oddities, much less vilified, and at times even eulogized,” thanks to the efforts of previous activists (17). Very little progress had been made on the issue of indissoluble marriage, however; In 1932 a divorce bill passed in the Chamber of Deputies but was defeated in the Senate (Lavrin 237). Perhaps for this reason Sándor’s first play focuses on the efforts of a feminist to change the mind of an anti-divorce senator. In *Yo me divorcio*
papá Andrea, played by Luisa Vehil, visits her father (the anti-divorce senator) in his office and tells him that she has some important news to share with him. First, however, Andrea engages Aguirre in a lengthy debate about divorce laws in a fruitless effort to convince him to change his position on the subject. Finally, Aguirre asks Andrea to tell him the real reason for her visit, so she confesses that she has decided to get a divorce from her husband. Eventually, out of concern for his daughter’s wellbeing, Aguirre decides to support divorce legislation. In the end, however, it is revealed that Andrea is happily married and that she simply made up the story of her desire for a divorce so that he would personally experience the injustice of anti-divorce laws and change his vote in congress.

This plot brings González Castillo’s La mujer de Ulises to mind. In this case, however, the father is faced with his daughter’s commitment to women’s liberation, rather than his son’s desire for a virtuous spouse. True to the thesis drama formula, father and daughter spend the bulk of the play debating opposing viewpoints. Yet Sándor’s use of language, role-play and dramatic space can be seen as a revision of the original thesis drama formula that builds upon some of Storni’s innovations.27 Vimala Herman suggests that in Western theatre and in society at large, men’s use of conversational turn-taking “can be deeply manipulated in sexual terms, especially where the (targeted) hearer is a woman and the speaker is a man” (256). After analyzing a study of men and women in conversation, Don H. Zimmerman and Candace West drew parallels between male dominance in cross-gender discussion and society at large:

27 A preliminary analysis of Sándor’s feminist dramatic techniques can be found in my article “The Well-Made (Feminist) Play: Malena Sándor’s Challenge to Theatrical Conventions.”
We are led to the conclusion that, at least in our transcripts, men deny equal status to women as conversational partners with respect to rights to the full utilization of their turns and support for the development of topics. Thus we speculate that just as male dominance is exhibited through male control of macro-institutions in society, it is also exhibited through control of at least part of one micro-institution. (125)²⁸

This is evident in the cross-gender discourse of the previously discussed González Castillo and Iglesias Paz plays, where the female characters are seen yielding the debate floor to the male heroes, even when discussing their own civil rights. Later on, Storni showed male-female communication to be a struggle for equality within her dramatic script as well as through her personal battle with the critics and the theatre company. In Sándor’s play the protagonists remain calm and sustain a mutually respectful dialogue with one another, despite the explosive power relationship that could result from an older conservative man being challenged by his young, candid, feminist daughter. The senator listens attentively to Andrea even when he disagrees with her position. When he asks her to be more respectful, she asks “¿respeto es callar?” (21; to be respectful is to keep quiet?), and later complains “es como si habláramos en dos idiomas distintos” (22; it is as if we were speaking two different languages). Aguirre prefers not to debate divorce laws with his daughter but he is anxious to hear about her life and insists that she talk openly about her personal troubles: “Te exijo que hables. Quiero saber. ¿Qué te pasa Andrea?” (22; I demand that you speak. I want to know. What is bothering you, Andrea?).

Although Storni’s character, Zarcillo, uses role-play to construct a feminine personality that conforms to machista ideals, Sándor’s main character stages a performance in order to promote feminism. Through role-play, Andrea engages her father surreptitiously in a political discussion without allowing him to become emotionally

²⁸ The study Zimmerman and West refer to was conducted in 1973 by Sacks and Schegloff. Vimala Herman discusses the same findings in Dramatic Discourse.
detached from the subject at hand. When she confesses that she herself has decided to get a divorce, she forces Aguirre to choose between his conflicting desires to be a supportive father and to maintain his reputation as a conservative statesman who opposes divorce. When Aguirre recognizes Andrea’s marital disillusionment and her desire to be free of her husband he becomes aware of the needs of other women: “Tú sangras y recién advierto la sangre de las otras mujeres. Es horrible, es horrible” (26; You suffer and now I see the suffering of other women. It’s terrible, terrible). “Me vences, hija, pero no se si es con tu dolor o el de otros” (27; You win, daughter, but I don’t know if it is because of your pain or the pain of others) he finally admits. In a subsequent scene, Andrea talks to her husband on the telephone and it becomes apparent to Aguirre and to the public that they are still happily married. Unlike the lachrymose and pitiful protagonists of earlier decades, it turns out that Sándor’s heroine does not actually need saving. Through her words and actions, she asks the lawmaker to consider how divorce may affect his immediate loved ones and then to channel that emotion into the promotion of a feminist outlook in congress. She calls her father’s ideological transformation “la liberación de tu conciencia, papá” (27; the liberation of your consciousness, daddy). The protagonist’s role-play demonstrates how performances may be used to advance women’s rights instead of reproducing gender conformity. Andrea urges Aguirre to use her personal example, albeit fictional, to understand other women, “piensa en mí, y recuerda a todas” (25; think of me and remember all women). In so doing she shows the audience that this discussion is not just about her but about the plight of all female citizens in Argentina. This attitude distinguishes Sándor’s work from the thesis dramas of her predecessors, who focused more on the individual female heroine than on women as a group.
Sándor’s mixture of role-play and dramatic discussion succeeds in converting the public space of the legislator’s office into an area for private confession and feminist political action, which follows a pattern started by her predecessors. In a recent paper on Argentine female dramatists, Evelia Romano posits that the tendency of turn-of-the-century women playwrights to blend together the discourses of the interior domestic sphere and the exterior public realm represents their desire for social equality: “En ese borramiento late la esperanza de una ciudadanía plena, tanto para las mujeres como para los hombres al hacer posible que ambos compartan y negocien sus posiciones en ambas esferas.” (3; In this blurring lay the hope of full citizenship, making it possible for women as well as men to share and negotiate their positions within both spheres). Sándor, like Storni, demonstrates how the gender equality exhibited by some male and female characters in the micro-institution of the family may serve as a model for a proposed renovation of the male-dominated macro-institution of Argentine law and society. Perhaps because women were still denied participation in the electoral process and divorce remained illegal in the extra-textual space, these feminist dramatists preferred to imagine future social change instead of acknowledging the existing state of the nation.

Due to a conflict with the actors’ availability, the debut of Yo me divorcio, papá was moved from a Saturday to a Monday (“Estreno en ALBA” 13). Consequently, newspaper critics overlooked the play (13). Still and overall, Sándor received a positive reception from critics. In 1938, she won an official national theatre prize, the “Premio Nacional de Comedia,” for Una mujer libre, a play that examined the social stigmas associated with divorced women. Sándor went on to write nine more plays, all but one of which were performed before her untimely death in 1968 of an asthma attack (Bullrich
7). 29 Her success with audiences and critics may be attributed to a change in Argentine society that earlier women’s rights activists and feminist playwrights had helped to initiate.

f. The Changing Feminist Imagination

Many thesis dramas by authors of both genders proposed modifications to traditional dramatic practice that led to greater possibilities for feminism in Argentine society. Politicians, theatre critics, feminist activists, and spectators seized the opportunity to share their opinions about women’s rights with their fellow citizens in the public forum of the theatre. Accompanying this open questioning of gender roles was a subtle reevaluation of the female characters’ access to theatrical spaces and discourses and her participation in the development of dramatic action. Despite their adherence to some socially constructed ideas about women and womanhood, González Castillo, Iglesias Paz, and Medina Onrubia advocated for subtle reforms to traditional feminine roles and women’s dramatic space while also proposing renovations to the machista honor code and imagining heroines that anticipated the more fully developed protagonists of later feminist dramas. A few decades later, Alfonsina Storni and Malena Sándor drew from the efforts of their predecessors and developed techniques that allowed women characters greater power and that are still relevant to present-day feminist scholarship. Their texts envision gender equality, legislative reform, and feminist progress through a

29 The following is a list of Sándor’s dramatic works from 1937-1966: Yo me divorcio, papá (1937), Una mujer libre (1938), Yo soy la más fuerte (1942), Tu vida y la mía (1945), Penélope ya no teje (1946), El hombre de los pájaros (1947, never performed), Ella y satán (1948), Y la respuesta fue dada (1956), Los dioses vuelven (1958), Un muchacho llamado Daniel (1961), and Una historia casi verosímil (1966). Una mujer libre was translated to Portuguese and opened in Rio de Janeiro in 1939.
revised version of the thesis drama that recognized the female protagonist’s ability to speak about public life, denounce social conventions, influence others, and reevaluate her place within the domestic sphere. By using the power of theater to dramatize and broadcast their evolving “imagined feminist communities,” thesis dramatists in the first decades of the twentieth century laid the foundation for future feminist progress in the theatre industry and in national culture.
Chapter 2

Sleeping with the Enemy: Feminist Melodrama in the 1920s

En realidad, el hogar es la comodidad del hombre. Cualquier señora de la clase media está dispuesta a declarar: El hogar es la esclavitud femenina.

In reality, the home is a man’s commodity. Any middle-class wife will tell you: The home is feminine slavery.

--Josefina Marpóns  (La mujer y su lucha 1947)

a. Melodrama, Feminism, and Female Authors

From 1919 to 1929 over twenty-five female-authored plays were performed in Buenos Aires. Most of these playwrights chose the genre of domestic melodrama and their portrayal of matrimony anticipates and illustrates Marpóns’s dismal view of the middle-class household, as quoted in the epigraph. As I discussed in chapter 1, the female playwright’s preference for domestic melodrama may be due to mainstream theatre critics who dissuaded them from examining politics and the other so-called “masculine” affairs associated with thesis dramas. Commentators commonly encouraged female authors to write about domestic duties, romance, and femininity. Nevertheless, many female authors managed to weave feminist discourses into plays about marriage and family life; a logical tactic since public gender policy had a direct impact on the private sphere. By writing melodramatic plays about marital conflicts and family disputes, female feminist playwrights could still denounce anti-divorce laws, marital inequity, and women’s lack of economic independence.
Several plays by these early female dramatists portray domestic conflicts as larger than life and their works encourage spectators to identify with sympathetic and strong-willed heroines as they try to escape their repressive home lives and seek personal fulfillment. These plots can also be read as allegorical because the female heroine’s struggle against her husband/lover represents the struggle of all women against patriarchal society. By depicting marriage and family life as systems of domination rather than as symbols of national unity, feminist “melodramatists” also contradict prevailing national discourses. In this chapter, I discuss how playwrights Lola Pita Martínez (19??-1976), Alcira Olivé (1889-1975), Carolina Adelia Alió (1888-1945), Salvadora Medina Onrubia (1894-1972), and Alfonsina Storni (1892-1978) created a version of melodrama that subverted patriarchal values and promoted female emancipation while still working within the parameters of “feminine” theatre conventions.

b. Feminist Melodrama vs. National Allegory

Female dramatists had something in common with patriotic authors, since both invoked the domestic realm in their discussions of national culture. In 1853, when Juan Bautista Alberdi wrote the bases for the modern Argentine constitution, he coined the term “gobernar es poblar” (to govern is to populate) and argued that national progress depended upon the incorporation of European immigrants into the population (95). The massive wave of immigration that followed influenced the national theatre industry. According to Willis Knapp Jones, playwrights often staged marriages between gringo and criollo citizens in the late 1800s and early 1900s in order to illustrate the coming together
of tradition and progress (Behind Spanish American Footlights 123). This is perhaps best exemplified, as Jones points out, in Horacio’s famous line at the ending of La gringa (1904) by Florencio Sánchez: “¡Mire qué linda pareja!... Hija de gringos pu... hijo de criollos pu... De ahí va a salir la raza fuerte del porvenir.” (66; Look! What a beautiful couple!... The daughter of pure gringos... the son of pure criollos... They will give birth to the race of the future). Jones suggests that these types of gringo-criollo romances consistently drive home the message that national progress depends more on European influences than “outmoded” local traditions: “Each of these plays makes concrete the idea that gringos are better matrimonial timber than would be any shiftless gaucho or Creole and that gaucho blood needs to be revitalized by gringo corpuscles” (Behind Spanish American Footlights 123). Similarly, pro-independence Latin American novelists used love stories between members of differing social factions and racial groups to represent the merging of “legitimacy and power,” as Doris Sommer has argued in Foundational Fictions (24). She calls this mixture of erotic love and nationalism “passionate patriotism” (33), a term that seems equally applicable to turn-of-the-century gringo-themed plays in Argentina and Uruguay.

European melodrama also reached Argentina in the nineteenth century and dramatists embraced it as a way to enhance the cultural and social messages of the new

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30 In Argentina the term gringo is used to refer to immigrants from a variety of European nations. The word criollo technically describes all individuals born in Latin America but in these plays it refers to native-born citizens of the River Plate region. The most famous of the “gringa theme” plays that Jones examines is La gringa by Florencio Sánchez but many others exist including El gringo by Otto Miguel Cione, La gringada by Enrique Queirolo and La gaucha by Alberto Novión (Jones, Behind Spanish American Footlights 124).

31 The term Gaucho refers to the nomadic horsemen of the Argentine pampas. In the nineteenth century, authors like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento associated gauchos with backwardness and “barbarism” while authors such as José Hernández lauded them as symbols of cultural autonomy.
national theatre. Melodrama depicts the clash between good and evil and has a profound emotional impact on the public, according to Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray:

Its heroes and heroines were inevitably completely moral and upright but terrorized, harassed, or otherwise troubled by thoroughly despicable villains. No matter what the ostensible subject matter, the chief concern of melodrama was to elicit the desired emotional response from the audience. To this end, writers frequently employed improbable situations, malevolent intrigue, and stock elements to produce feelings in the audience ranging from pity to terror to joy to moral indignation. Romantic plots twisted by a scheming villain were typical, as were ultimately unbelievable happy endings in which poetic justice required that evil be punished and good rewarded. (256)

Theatre theorist Eric Bentley considers fear to be the most important element of melodrama and remarks that authors are evaluated by their “ability to feel and project fear” (37). He explains that the viewer of a melodrama empathizes with the protagonist’s emotions: “we are identified with those others who are threatened; the pity we feel for them is pity for ourselves; and by the same token we share their fears” (37). Similarly, In The Melodramatic Imagination Peter Brooks argues that melodrama motivates spectators to resist injustice: “The polarization of good and evil works toward revealing their presence and operation as real forces in the world. Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order” (13).

Argentine critic Osvaldo Pellettieri describes “melodrama social” (social melodrama) as Argentina’s answer to melodrama in the 1880s (164). He characterizes the genre as including social commentaries, avoiding “local color,” denouncing class prejudice, and promoting conventional notions of virtue, domesticity, and family bonds: “Lo desaforado, amplificado y lacrimoso, es decir, ‘la poesía del exceso’ del melodrama tradicional, se enseñoreaba en estos textos, a los que se sumaban limitadas marcas de carácter social que se traducían en la exaltación del culto a la honradez ‘sin tacha’ y la
familia: la apoteosis de los valores familiares y tradicionales.” (166; Amplified and tear-jerking turmoil, in other words, melodrama’s ‘poetics of excess,’ abounded in these texts, which integrated some social customs that may be understood as the cult of ‘flawless honor’ and the family: the apotheosis of traditional and accepted values). Pellettieri also points out that the female characters in these works typified “virtudes domésticas” (166; domestic virtues).

Most histories of Argentine theatre, including Pellettieri’s multi-volume Historia del teatro argentino en Buenos Aires, make scant mention of early female playwrights and fail to recognize the prevalence of female-authored domestic melodrama at the turn of the century.32 This is a common occurrence in theatre criticism; it is not limited to the case of Argentina. Though dozens of women in Mexico also wrote successful plays in the 1920s, theatre critics have consistently ignored them over the years, which, according to Kirsten Nigro is partially due to the fact that they wrote in the “feminine” style of melodrama:

Much of the little that has been written tends to dismiss [early twentieth-century female playwrights] as melodramatic, as forerunners to today’s soap opera writers. Thus they are more often than not considered negative influences on the Mexican theatre, present but transparent, too feminine for the good taste of critics and other cultural arbiters. (56)

This could also explain why critics have tended to overlook early twentieth-century Argentine women dramatists. Thus, ironically, the very strategies that early female theatre practitioners used to gain wider acceptance in the theatre of their time have caused them to be discarded by contemporary critics as “too conventional.”

32 Historia del teatro argentino by Beatriz Seibel and Behind Latin American Footlights by Willis Knapp Jones are among the few theatre histories to acknowledge the contributions of early twentieth-century female playwrights in Argentina.
c. “Feminine” Feminist Playwrights: Pita Martínez, Olivé, Alió, and Medina

Onrubia

While nation-building playwrights used allegorical romances and melodrama to promote patriotic desire, endorse social mores, and underscore conventional family values, feminist melodramatists used similar techniques to send radically different messages. Since women’s rights activists denounced the repressive structure of marriage laws, feminist playwrights were unlikely to use matrimony and family life to symbolize national unity. Instead, as my analysis of select plays by female melodramatists will illustrate, they use disillusioned brides in repressive marriages to represent women’s marginalization in Argentine society.

A native of Buenos Aires, Lola Pita Martínez (19??-1976) authored two full-length, dramas, Muñecas de lujo (1919) and Marcela (1922), along with a one-act play Por onda corta (published in the women’s magazine El hogar in 1932). In addition to her playwriting, Pita Martínez wrote for magazines and newspapers on topics related to women’s rights. In 1920 she declared herself a “feminista sincera” (sincere feminist) and published an open letter to fellow playwright and women’s rights activist, Herminia Brumana, in which she criticized the inequality of Argentine marriage laws and applauded the efforts of local feminists to change them.33

Supóngase usted casada, mal casada. Su inteligencia no le permitirá a usted hacer una mala elección pero usted sabe que muchas veces el

33 Though Herminia Brumana often defended some areas of women’s rights, she opposed the suffrage movement and feminism’s goal of full social equality. Here Lola Pita Martínez reacts to Brumana’s case against feminism and suffrage: “Contra el feminismo y para las mujeres.” A summary of Brumana’s essay by Celso Tindaro was published in La Nota on 9 January 1920 (1370-71). This explains the title of Pita Martínez’s essay “Por el feminismo y para la mujer,” which appeared in a subsequent issue of La Nota.
corazón nos traiciona y sobre todo, que el gato sabe esconder las uñas...
Bien: al casarse, es usted dueña de varias propiedades, pero desde ese momento ha quedado usted cesante en sus derechos de propietaria--ya no puede usted vender nada de lo suyo sin la “venia” de su marido. (Mire usted que cosa tan prosaica). En cambio él puede hacer juegos malabares con su fortuna, en su calidad de “único administrador” de los bienes del matrimonio. . . . La mujer casada “regresa” según nuestras leyes a la categoría de menor de edad. (1455)

(Imagine yourself married, unhappily married. You are too intelligent to make a bad choice but you know that often our hearts betray us and that, above all, the cat knows how to hide it’s claws… Fine, at the time of your wedding you are the owner of various properties, but from this moment on you have been stripped of your property rights--now you can’t sell anything without your husband’s “approval.” (Imagine how dull that must be). Yet, he can do all the juggling he wants with your fortune in his capacity of “sole administrator” of the marital assets. . . . A married woman “regresses,” according to our laws, to the category of minor.)

Two years later, Pita Martínez offered the public a melodramatic play, Marcela, which dramatizes some of the issues she outlines in the passage above. Marcela was produced by the Pagano-Ducasse theatre company (run by actress Angelina Pagano and her husband Francisco Ducasse) and featured Angelina Pagano in the lead role.

The heroine, Marcela, has been abandoned by her bankrupt husband. She is unable to regain her property, obtain a divorce, or even the custody of her children. Out of desperation, she makes money by cheating at cards alongside her husband’s former mistress (now that both women have been deserted by the same man). Then, Marcela moves in with a new lover named Carlos. Although she benefits from Carlos’s financial support, her social standing improves very little, since the relationship is adulterous according to Argentine law. Eventually, Carlos bows to social pressures and abandons Marcela in order to pursue a career in politics. This further demoralizes Marcela and finally leads her to consider only two courses of action: becoming another man’s mistress
or committing suicide. Finally, she chooses the latter and tragically shoots herself in the heart.

Marcela plays the part of the “femme fatale” whose wicked husband ruined her life and sent her down an immoral path: “traía en las entrañas más veneno que una víbora” (Pita Martínez, Marcela 11; he carried more venom inside him than a snake). Carlos “rescues” Marcela from depravity and defies conservative moral conventions by living with her as if she were his legitimate wife. However, when he later becomes concerned with social respectability, Marcela recognizes some familiar behavior: “Comienzan a asaltarte las cobardías del hombre maduro” (15; The grown man’s cowardice has begun to show on you). The protagonist uses her relationship with Carlos to make generalizations about socially constructed roles for men and women. From her point of view, Carlos, like all men, is free to revise his value system while Marcela, like all women, is expected to quietly accept the changes and adapt accordingly:

CARLOS. Te suplico que trates de comprenderme…
MARCELA. ¡Sí! Nosotras siempre tenemos que comprender... hemos nacido para eso! Para comprender, para conciliar, para amoldarnos, y sin embargo ustedes cambian. . . . Perdóname, la vida es tan cruel que al más humilde y sufrido arranca alguna vez un grito de rebelión. (15)

(CARLOS. I’m begging you to try and understand me…
MARCELA. Yes! We always have to understand… This is what we were born to do! To understand, to console, to adjust ourselves, but you men change. . . . Forgive me, life is so cruel that even the humblest and most dejected of us will sometimes blurt out a cry of rebellion.)

The couple’s friends, on the one hand, believe that Carlos owes Marcela loyalty, despite the fact that the law does not sanction their relationship. Carlos’s ruthless political associates, on the other hand, convince him that social standing is more important than love and devotion. The more Carlos yields to his political ambitions, the more heartless
he becomes. As he tells a friend: “No he tomado esa resolución a base de corazón, sino a base de pensamiento” (23; I didn’t make this decision from the heart but by thinking it over). Marcela’s heart, in contrast, still governs her actions. When Carlos tells her that he is leaving, the stage directions emphasize her emotional reaction in typical melodramatic fashion, “[s]ufre Marcela torturas espantosas. Su corazón se desgarra. Un temblor convulsivo la agita.” (28; Marcela suffers frightening torments. Her heart breaks. A trembling convulsion overtakes her). Indissoluble marriage left Marcela a marked woman with no property, few means for economic survival, and no social respectability. Now that Carlos is gone, sexuality becomes Marcela’s most valuable asset once again: “Prefiero vender mi cuerpo, ya que no tengo otro capital, pero conservar intacta el alma.” (32; I’d rather sell my body, since I have no other capital, but keep my soul intact.). Throughout the play, spectators watch as their heroine is mistreated by a series of villains: callous and ambitious men who abandon her (first her husband, then her lover), a conservative and unjust society that stigmatizes her, and a restrictive legal system that deprives her of divorce, property rights and custody of her children. In this way, Pita Martínez translates some key feminist issues into a melodrama that invites spectators to empathize with the perspective of a woman suffering within a sexist society.

Pita Martínez’s chosen genre appealed to conventional tastes even if her message was subversive. “Su fondo romántico responde a la sensibilidad de nuestro público…” (“‘Marcela,’ en el Smart” 7; Her romantic background responds to the sensibilities of our public”) observed the commentator from La Razón. Audiences applauded Pita Martínez’s play even though critics disagreed about its literary value.34 A few reviewers, such as the

34 Marcela’s success with audiences was noted in reviews from 21 October 1922 in La Época, La Nación, and El Diario.
one from Crítica, faulted the play for its lack of realism and exaggerated dialogue (‘‘Marcela’ de Lola Pita Martínez’’ 7). While not entirely impressed with Marcela, other critics, such as the one from La Nación, saw Pita Martínez as a promising young author (‘‘Marcela ’ fue muy aplaudida en el Smart’’ 10). Several reviewers agreed that the fact that the play was written by a woman was particularly remarkable. According to the columnist for La Nación, the playwright was a brave and independent thinker, which he considered uncommon characteristics for women: “…cosas doblemente raras por tratarse de una mujer” (10; …things that are doubly rare when it comes to women). José Ojeda from Caras y Caretas voiced a similarly sexist perspective when he suggested that women were naturally deficient at playwriting because it was a genre more suited to “masculine” talents. He based his arguments on age-old stereotypes that cast women as passive and men as active: “No es frecuente, por cierto, la producción femenina. Género en que predomina la acción sobre el pensamiento, la caracterización de seres humanos sobre la construcción poética, parece corresponder a las calidades viriles más que a las facultades de una mujer” (n. p.; Feminine productions are definitely uncommon. A genre that favors action over thoughts and character development over poetic constructions seems to correspond more with virile qualities than women’s skills).35 Ojeda acknowledged the fact that George Sand and other female authors had proven their ability to write outside of the genre of theatre but he maintained that drama was primarily a masculine domain, ignoring the contributions of earlier female playwrights in Argentina. For this reason, he labeled Marcela “una verdadera curiosidad literaria” (a true literary curiosity); a prejudice that female dramatists had to continue to contend with for decades to come.

35 Caras y Caretas did not use page numbers in the 1920s.
As if to challenge Ojeda’s claims, however, several more female playwrights surfaced a few years after the opening of *Marcela*. Many of these women also examined marriage, adultery, and feminism through the genre of melodrama. One such author, Alcira Olivé, wrote a number of theatre pieces commenting on women’s roles in Argentine society. Olivé spent most of her life in her native city of Rosario where she began her career as a playwright and eventually established a dramatic arts school (Foppa 485). Her works include *La única verdad* (1920), *Ana María* (1922), *El mordisco* (192?), *La salvación* (1923), *Más que la honra* (1927), *Máscaras y corazones* (192?), *Somos los dueños del mundo* (1939), ¡Tres maridos, mucho amor… y nada más! (1945), and ¿Por qué te casaste conmigo? (1953).³⁶ *La salvación* is similar to *Marcela* in that it urges spectators to empathize with a woman who finds herself trapped in a repressive marriage and, like *Marcela*, sees only two options for escape: suicide or adultery. *La salvación* debuted in 1923 in Rosario and was performed in Buenos Aires the following year. Pagano-Ducasse financed both productions and Angelina Pagano played the part of Cristina.

In Olivé’s introduction to the script, she vacillates between expressing professional modesty and speaking out against the unjust treatment of women in the theatre industry and society. She claims “pequeñez” (smallness) as a dramatic writer and laments that her first works suffered from “dificultades de forma” (formal difficulties) but she also lashes out at reviewers, accusing them of arrogance and condescension:

La crítica me molestó con no pocas injusticias: la mayor de todas, el tono de protección blanda y azucarada con que han pretendido ampararme--limosna que agradezco--pero que estoy muy lejos de necesitar--y no

³⁶ These plays opened in Rosario and were later performed in Buenos Aires, with the exception of *Más que la honra* (1927), which debuted in Montevideo and later traveled to Madrid.
acepto--por venir de personas que hasta hoy no han probado superarme en capacidad intelectual, moral o artística. (Olivé 5-6)

(The critics upset me with more than a few injustices: the greatest of which offered to help me in a nice and sugary protective tone--charity that I appreciate--but I am very far from needing--and I will not accept--since it comes from persons who so far have not proven their mental, intellectual, moral or artistic superiority over me.)

At another point in the introduction, Olivé suggests that female playwrights have an obligation to promote feminism: “A la responsabilidad del dramaturgo se añadía la responsabilidad del sexo. Sería necesario el esfuerzo constante y tenaz de muchos millones de mujeres para destruir esta montaña de prejuicios que pesa sobre la humanidad con una tradición de siglos: la inferioridad mental de la mujer” (5; To the responsibilities of dramatists had to be added a responsibility to her sex. The constant and persistent efforts of many millions of women will be necessary to destroy the mountain of prejudices that has weighed upon humanity for centuries: women’s mental inferiority).

Later Olivé claims that her intent is not to overtly challenge the Civil Code but to offer subtle recommendations for social change instead:

Pude a base de este argumento hacer polémica divorcista; se me ha señalado como un error el haber renunciado a ella. Entiendo que para discutir leyes están los parlamentos, al teatro le incumbe labor más delicada: reflejar la sociedad con sus defectos y señalar el remedio con que han de corregirse. (6)

(I could have, based on my plot, created a divorce debate; my having renounced it has been pointed out as an error. I understand that parliament is for discussing laws and that theatre’s role is much more tactful: to reflect on society’s defects and suggest how they might be remedied.)

Through this carefully-worded introduction, Olivé speaks out against sexism while at the same time she emphasizes her humility and “feminine” decorum. Her use of the genre of melodrama may be seen as an extension of this subversive dual strategy. By confining
their social commentary to the realm of the emotional, the familial, and the melodramatic, Olivé and her contemporaries denounce sexism without challenging the gender-coded theatre conventions that associated the more political dramatic genres with “masculine” concerns. This is akin to the “tricks of the weak” that Josefina Ludmer has attributed to colonial women writers, such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who used intimate literary genres, “the letter, the autobiography, the diary,” for examining topics that were otherwise inaccessible to women: “politics, science, philosophy” (93). In doing so, women writers force us to reexamine “lesser” literary genres, according to Ludmer: “if the personal, private, and quotidian are included as points of departure and perspectives in other discourses and practices, they cease to be merely personal, private, and quotidian” (93). Similarly, domestic melodramas that explore gender politics and feminist ideology are much more subversive than they first appear.

As in most melodramas, La salvación’s characters belong either to the side of virtue or to the side of vice. The heroine, Cristina, reluctantly marries a rich Spaniard named Tomás. She would have married her previous boyfriend, a poor artist named Germán, if her mother Matilde had not intercepted their correspondence. On the one hand, Matilde and Lola (Cristina’s sister) try to force Cristina to please her husband so that they can live comfortably off of his income. On the other hand, Jaime (Cristina’s uncle) tries to educate Cristina and protect her from her boorish husband and greedy family. When Lola and Matilde stop Cristina from finally running away from her marriage with Germán she finds another method of escape: suicide.

The play’s virtuous characters (Cristina, Jaime, and Germán) prioritize art, literature, and emotions over money and conventional social mores. The villains (Tomás,
Matilde, and Lola), choose capitalism, positivism, and social obligations over art and sentimentality. On the surface, Cristina’s love for Germán is central to the plot, but the majority of the conflicts between the characters reflect differences of opinion regarding woman’s role in society. Reading the script as allegory reveals the romance as a vehicle for feminist social commentary that goes against official discourses about the role of women and marriage in the new nation. Cristina’s opposition to Tomás reflects the feminist movement’s opposition to patriarchal legislation and prioritizes Argentine culture over foreign industry. A passage in the first act, after Tomás blames Jaime for his wife’s disinterest in children, illustrates the viewpoints that are at odds in the play:

JAIME. Of course. It’s my fault that your wife doesn’t have children.
TOMÁS. I didn’t say that. I’m talking about other things. The conversations, the books, all of the mountains of rubbish that you pay attention to that manage to attract her attention. . . . I’ve had it up to hear with theatre and poetry and I’m fed up with music too. My wife doesn’t talk about anything else.
JAIME. Proof that she understands it, which isn’t true for everyone.
TOMÁS. Thank god. One has to be more positivist, more practical…And that’s precisely what I can’t seem to get from my wife.)

Tomás’s positivist and machista reasoning appears again in several other lines. He refers to Cristina’s dissatisfaction with their marriage as a nervous medical condition, “neurastenia” (neurasthenia) (11, 13). Also, although he realizes that his mother-in-law...
forced Cristina to marry him, he considers the ability to purchase a wife, even against her 
wishes, to be the right of a rich man: “¿Para qué trabaja un hombre y se hace fortuna si 
no ha de casarse con la mujer que le gusta?” (14; Why does a man work and make a 
fortune if not to marry the woman he likes?).

Cristina also battles with the hypocritical morality of her female family members 
who reinforce her husband’s patriarchal authority. When Matilde scolds her daughter for 
withholding affection from Tomás, Cristina likens the marriage to prostitution through 
her sarcastic response: “Sí, tenés razón, mamá. Hay que procurar que Tomás esté muy 
contento, muy contento… Y eso debo procurarlo yo a fuerza de cariño, aunque sea farsa, 
pero cariño de cualquier precio” (Olivé 23; Yes mama, you are right. I have to make sure 
that Tomás is very happy, very happy… And I must make sure of it through my affection, 
even if it is a charade, affection, whatever the cost). She repeats these sentiments with 
more vigor to her sister, Lola, towards the end of act one: “Para salvarse todos de la 
pobreza me vendieron a un hombre rico, hundiéndome en la desesperación de un hombre 
que me repugna! . . . Ahora quiero yo mi parte de la felicidad en la vida!” (24; All of you 
sold me to a rich man to save yourselves from poverty, lowering me into the desperation 
of a man who repulses me). Additionally, Cristina’s attachment to her violin, which so 
aggravates Tomás, represents her love for Germán as well as her self-respect: “Mi violín 
le exaspera!… Hasta celos le tiene. Y con razón, lo comprendo, porque yo quiero a mi 
violín como a un novio cuando la familia se opone” (21; My violin exasperates him!...
He’s even jealous of it. And for good reason, I understand, because I love my violin like 
one loves a boyfriend when the family disapproves).
In acts two and three, Tomás’s obsession with patriarchal power and his disdain for his wife’s intellectual development make him more and more aggressive. He explodes angrily and violently when he catches his wife with books. Cristina acts as though Tomás is destroying a part of herself when he destroys her reading material:

**TOMÁS.** (Quitándoselos) No he prohibido que leas?... Volvemos a las andadas?... Cuando aprenderás a obedecerme!... No sabes que aquí mando yo?... Dame esos libros!... Ya verás que pronto termino con ellos. (Los rompe) Así, así, ahora al río, al agua!... (Los tira hacia afuera).

**CRISTINA.** No los rompas, no los tire, yo los quiero, son míos...

**TOMÁS.** Que no los tire?... Y otra vez te los tiraré por la cabeza... Para que aprendas que aquí mando yo... para que aprendas! Te imaginas que yo soy in monigote!(40)

(TOMÁS. (Taking them away from her) Haven’t I forbidden you to read?... Are you going back to your bad habits?... When will you learn to obey me!... Don’t you know that I’m in charge here?... Give me those books!... You’ll see how quickly I dispose of them. (He rips them) Like this, like this, now, to the river!... (He throws them outside).

**CRISTINA.** Don’t rip them, don’t throw them away, I want them, they belong to me...

**TOMÁS.** Don’t throw them out? Next time I’ll throw them at your head... So that you learn that I am in charge here... so that you learn! You must think I’m an idiot!)

In act three, Tomás continues to disapprove of Cristina’s literary interests, as he equates her education with disobedience: “Una mujer casada no necesita versos: Debe bastarle con el marido” (46; A married woman doesn’t need verses: Her husband should be enough for her). He admits to Cristina that he feels threatened by her literary pursuits and her independence: “Tengo celos de tus amigas, de los libros, de tu violín, de las estrellas, de todo!” (47; I am jealous of your girlfriends, of your books, of your violin, of the stars, of everything). Though Tomás never suspects Cristina of loving another man, he believes in the patriarchal honor code; he tells her that he would kill her and her lover...
if she were unfaithful: “Si yo tuviera razón para sentir celos de un hombre lo mataría!... Si sospechara de ti te mataría también como a una serpiente venenosa” (47; If I had a reason to be jealous of a man I’d kill him!... If I doubted you I’d kill you like a venomous serpent!). In a subsequent scene Cristina tells her mother that she plans to run away with Germán. As she elaborates on her reasons, she makes it clear that it is personal freedom that she is really seeking. Above all, she recriminates her mother for having sacrificed her intellectual talents and her independence:

Me has esclavizado mamá, me has esclavizado! ...Y eso soy yo, un espíritu encarcelado, una mentalidad anulada, un corazón deprimido!...Yo tenía inteligencia y brazos y fuerzas de voluntad para ganarme honradamente la vida, yo no necesitaba dinero para ser feliz... mamá, ¿por qué hiciste que me casara? (llorando). (48)

(You enslaved me mama, you enslaved me!... And that’s what I am, a jailed spirit, an annulled mind, a depressed heart!... I had my intelligence and strength and motivation for earning a living honorably, I didn’t need money to be happy... mama why did you make me get married? (crying).)

Thus, though Cristina is ostensibly motivated to leave her husband for her lover, it seems that her true motivation is her own feeling of self-worth, her desire for independence, her aversion to staying in a repressive marriage for money, and her vision of the patriarchal household as a dehumanizing environment. Each man represents a different choice for the protagonist. Tomás epitomizes foreign capitalism, anti-intellectualism, and machismo while Germán represents the poor but intellectual local artist community, more willing to pay attention to women’s perspectives. Rather than allowing herself to be passively led by the men, however, Cristina assesses her own situation and pressures a fearful Germán to run away with her. She only chooses suicide after Matilde and Lola thwart her plans for escape.
Three years after the opening of La salvación, Carolina Adelia Alió (1888-1945) continued the tradition of depicting marital strife through melodrama in her play Pobres almas (Poor Souls, 1926). This was one of four plays by Alió; She also wrote En la paz del campo (1924), El adolescente (19??), Las mariposas (19??), and El genio (1928) (Sosa de Newton 22). Pobres almas first debuted in Mar del Plata in 1926 with Olga C. Pearson in the lead role. Later, in March of 1927, Pobres almas opened in Buenos Aires with Mercedes Vilches as first actress, just a few days after Storni’s controversial debut of El amo del mundo. Pobres almas is primarily the story of deceit, drug addition, and infidelity with a few significant feminist departures. Another unhappy bride, Esther, has an affair with one of her husband’s patients, a cocaine addict named Romero. Esther becomes pregnant and has Romero’s baby, all the while hiding the truth from her husband Alberto. She looks for signs of cocaine-related illness in her son but he appears perfectly healthy. Unbeknownst to Esther, Alberto knew about her infidelity all along while he was having an affair of his own. Coincidentally, Alberto’s mistress died in childbirth while delivering his son at the same time that Esther gave birth to hers. Alberto then surreptitiously swapped the two infants so that Esther would raise his son in the house while her own son would suffer out of sight in the care of a hired wet nurse. At the end of the play, however, Esther finally learns the truth and is reunited with her sickly child just moments before he dies.

Beneath this overwrought, melodramatic tale of betrayal, drug addiction, and disease lies a sophisticated feminist commentary. Alió infuses her dialog with discourses about women’s rights, particularly in the exchanges between the feminist-leaning Esther

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37 Alió also wrote two novels, Margot and El capitán y el faro, and a few short stories that were published in La Nota in the 1920s (Sosa de Newton 22).
and the conservative aunt who raised her. While discussing a friend’s drug overdose,

Esther expresses her outrage at the way society teaches women to behave:

ESTHER. La debilidad de carácter no es un pecado. Si nos conduce a situaciones difíciles, culpa de eso a nuestros mayores, a los que estaban en el deber de darnos una educación adecuada que exaltara la consecuencia de nuestros propios actos, que vigorizara nuestra voluntad, nuestra visión de la vida, en lugar de mantenernos hundidas en la pasividad malsana…

TÍA. ¿Te refieres al caso de Julieta, no es así?
ESTHER. ¡De ella…y de tantas otras pobres inconscientes que hacen tan bien su papel de muñecas sociales, mimadas y despreciadas a un tiempo por los hombres! (Alió 11)

(AESTHER. Weakness of character is no sin. If it leads us to difficult situations, blame our elders, who were supposed to give us an adequate education that would emphasize the consequences of our own actions, strengthen our wills and our vision of life, instead of keeping us buried in an unhealthy passivity…

AUNT. You are referring to Julieta, right?
ESTHER. To her, and to a lot of poor innocent girls, who play their role of social dolls well, adored and distained by men at one and the same time!)

Alió’s script also takes issue with the hypocritical morality of those supposedly upright bourgeois families that pressure young girls into marrying men for financial gain.

Like Olivé’s heroine, Alió’s protagonist equates arranged weddings with prostitution. She accuses her aunt of having profited economically from her marriage to Alberto, “únicamente por convenencia me casó usted” (13; you only married me off for your own benefit”), and of leading her into a life of sexual servitude by neglecting to educate her about her rights:

TIA. . . . [B]astante he tratado de inculcarme la noción de tus deberes.
ESTHER. Pero no de mis derechos, y de los derechos que nos dicen claramente cuáles son nuestros deberes. ¡Y ese fue mi mal! Usted me enseñó a obedecer no a discernir. Por obediencia me casé sin saber nada de la vida. Alberto me idolatraba. Yo…¡no lo quería! Vivía sacrificándole mi más íntimo decoro, porque la mujer que se casa sin amor se prostituye. . . . (13)
(AUNT. . . . I have tried hard to teach you about your obligations. 
ESTHER. But not about my rights and those rights that tell me clearly 
what my obligations are. That was my downfall! You taught me to 
obey, not to discern. I married out of obligation without knowing 
anything about life. Alberto idealized me. I… I didn’t love him! I 
lived sacrificing my most intimate decorum to him, because a 
woman who marries without love prostitutes herself. . . .)

While Esther uses her passionless marriage to justify her infidelity, she blames 
her decision to stay with her husband on her lack of job skills and inadequate schooling:

“¿Qué podía hacer yo con una instrucción tan superficial como la que se da comúnmente 
a las mujeres, para privarlas de los medios con que pudieran dignificar sus errores?...
¡Ninguna profesión, ninguna arma para luchar sola!...” (13; What could I have done with the kind of superficial education commonly given to women in order to deny them the means to correct their errors?… No occupation, not one tool for making it on my own!).

What Esther does not realize, and what makes her situation even more tragic, is that her husband is taking full advantage of the only skill that society has taught her to master: mothering. Alberto is proud of the fact that he has manipulated Ester into thinking that his son is really hers, and he feels no shame in exploiting her maternal instincts as she raises his child; he even boasts about it to the doorman, “es una madre perfecta para mi hijo…” (9: She’s a perfect mother for my child). As in the plays by Olivé and Pita Martínez, the dysfunctional family in Pobres almas may be viewed as a microcosm for society. Esther, representative of all women, is the victim of an unequal and inadequate educational system. As a result, men can exploit her as either a sexual object (Romero) or as a mother for their own children (Alberto).

Las decentradas (Misaligned Women, 1929) by Salvadora Medina Onrubia shares some themes and techniques with the preceding feminist melodramas. As I mentioned in
Chapter 1 Medina Onrubia’s life changed drastically after her 1914 theatrical debut, *Almafuerte*, when she was a teenage single mother just starting out in Buenos Aires. In fact, by 1929, she was married to the owner of one of Buenos Aires’s leading newspapers (*Crítica*), and was among the city’s wealthiest and most influential intellectuals. *Las decentradas* was directed by the acclaimed playwright Francisco Deffilipis Novoa and it starred top actress Gloria Ferrandiz.

Like the three preceding female-authored melodramas, *Las decentradas* focuses on a sympathetic heroine in a frustrating marriage. Elvira’s husband is a powerful government minister named López Torres and his political beliefs offend her. She finds comfort in an illicit, though platonic, relationship with Juan Carlos, a reporter from an opposition newspaper. When their alliance is discovered, López Torres uses it as a pretense to “divorce” his wife in Montevideo. He later tries to minimize public scandal by withholding alimony payments unless his ex-wife agrees to move to Europe. In the end, Elvira leaves Juan Carlos and moves to Europe with her best-friend Gloria, claiming, among other things, that she does not want a new husband.

Elvira loves *mate* (the national “tea”) and treats the ritual of drinking it as a way to rebel against her husband. This is reminiscent of Cristina in *La salvación*, since her private activities (reading and playing the violin) also become acts of resistance within the marriage. Here, Elvira equates her appreciation for *mate* with national pride and equates her husband’s distain for it with a distain for the traditional Argentine way of life:

> Ay mate… traé, mi’hijita… Qué delicia es el mate… Hace meses que no tomo más que té… ¡púa! . . . (Hablando al mate.) Negrito querido.

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38 Divorces in Montevideo, Uruguay, were a common way for Argentine couples to separate and later remarry. However Argentine law considered these divorces illegitimate and deemed any subsequent marriage adulterous (Lavrin 239).
Criollito de mi tierra… Eres lo que más me gusta en el mundo… será porque mi marido te odia. (4-5)

(Oh mate… Bring it here, my dear… How delicious it is… For months I have only been drinking tea… yuck! . . . (Speaking to the mate.) My little black friend. Criollito of my land…You are what I most love in the world… it must be because my husband hates you.)

Elvira also refuses to accept her role of “wife” and “high-society lady” at several other points in the first act of the play. When describing herself, she admits “soy una mujer casada…y cansada…” (2; I am a married woman… and a tired woman…). She resents the fact that she has not been able to have children, which she claims would have made her marriage more bearable (6). She also declares that she loathes elite social gatherings: “ . . . soy un bicho antisociable y salvaje, que tiene la desgracia de ver cosas raras que nadie más ve. Cuando estoy con toda esa gente tan bien educada, siento impulsos de decir malas palabras, de tirar sillas por el aire, de escandalizarlas . . .” (13; . . . I am a wild and antisocial animal with the unfortunate ability to see things that nobody else does. When I am around all of these people who are so well-educated, I feel the urge to say bad words, to throw chairs into the air, to scandalize them . . .).

Like the wives in previous feminist works, Elvira finds her husband intolerable. In the second act, her husband and his lawyer discover her dining alone with Juan Carlos. López Torres accuses Elvira of committing adultery and declares his intent to divorce her. Recognizing this as an opportunity to free herself from him, she does not protest. Instead, she tells her husband that she has deceived him during their entire marriage by pretending to be a dutiful wife:

ELVIRA. Déjalo. Que escriban lo que quieran. Yo firmaré. Firmaré todo… ¿Qué lo engañó? Bueno que lo escriban. No me importa gritarlo a los cuatro vientos si eso me libra de él.
LOPEZ. Señora...
ELVIRA. Sí. ¡Porque lo odio... lo odio! ¿Engañarlo?... como usted me engañó a mí, no... Todavía no... Pero, escriba, sí... Escriba que lo engañó, que toda yo soy una mentira para él. Que toda yo soy odio y mentira. Que mis palabras, mis gestos, mi vida... Todo, todo es una mentira... Oh, le engañó, sí... Lo engañó con el alma, con el pensamiento, con el deseo, que es como engañamos las pobres, las desgraciadas mujeres honradas que no tenemos en la vida ni siquiera el valor de nuestros pecados!...

JUAN CARLOS. Serénese, Elvira, Cálmese...

ELVIRA. Oh, amigo mío... Si estoy muy serena... Si casi me siento feliz... Si la tortura de todos los días tenía que terminar de cualquier modo... No lo veré más. Podré ser “yo”... ¿qué me importa lo otro?

(ELVIRA. Leave it alone. Let them write what ever they want. I’ll sign. I’ll sign it all... That I am cheating on him? Fine, let them write it. I’d shout it to the four winds if it could liberate me from him.

LOPEZ. Madam...

ELVIRA. Yes, because I hate you... I hate you! Cheat on you!?... The way you cheat on me, no... Not yet... But write down that I do... Write down that I cheat on him, that I am a complete lie for him. That I am filled with hatred and lies. That my words, my gestures, my life... All of it is a lie... Oh, I’ve been making a fool of him... I cheat on him with my soul, with my thoughts, with my desires, because that’s how poor, disgraced women like me cheat, those of us who don’t have anything to our names, not even the value of our own sins!...

JUAN CARLOS. Calm down, Elvira, calm yourself...

ELVIRA. Oh, my friend... I am very calm... I am even almost happy... Since the daily torture had to stop somehow... I won’t see him any more. I will be able to be “me”... What does the rest matter?)

Medina Onrubia compares coerced brides to trained actresses performing a humiliating role. Earlier feminist melodramas also suggest that society forces women into semi-prostitution/servitude. Protagonists in these plays are repeatedly required to yield to the wishes of their husbands even when they find the task revolting. Pita Martínez, Olivé, Alió, and Medina Onrubia appear to exaggerate marital dysfunction in order to inspire emotional reactions from the spectators. As Eric Bentley explains, the paradigm of good versus evil makes a great impression on the viewer of a melodrama: “something has been
gained when a person who has seen the world in monochrome and in miniature suddenly glimpses the lurid and the gigantic. His imagination has been reawakened” (40). In the case of feminist melodramas, as spectators are drawn into the action, they are encouraged to adopt the protagonist’s perspective and to perceive the role that women are forced to perform in society as unappealing, unfair and immoral.

For the most part critics and audiences expressed their approval of Olivé, Alió, and Medina Onrubia, although many did so in the same patronizing tone used by the reviewers of Marcela by Pita Martínez. Olivé and Medina Onrubia were commended for their “feminine” sensibilities. A critic from La Época applauded Olivé for advocating for feminism without compromising her “femininity”: “La señorita Olivé al defender a la mujer no hace feminismo masculino, sino feminismo y esto no es poco decir” (“‘La salvación’ estrenóse” 7; In defending women, Miss Olivé doesn’t engage in masculine feminism but feminism and that’s no small feat). Similarly, Ruy Sloy of Comoedia called Medina Onrubia “exquisitamente feminine” (44; exquisitely feminine), and El Diario’s reviewer proclaimed Las decentradas a celebration of woman’s maternal qualities as well as female emancipation: “Es un canto a la maternidad, a la libertad de la mujer, a la altivez de los propios ideales y al valor de saber vivir una vida independiente del prejuicio y la hipocresía” (8; It’s a tribute to maternity, to women’s liberty, to one’s highest ideals and the strength to know how to live life independently). This is a much warmer reception than the one Medina Onrubia received after Alamfuerte, at which time she was advised by at least one critic to write in a more “womanly” fashion (see chapter 1).
Pobres almas also met with critical approval after it opened in Buenos Aires. Alió’s treatment of drug addiction may have even helped her win over reviewers. La Prensa’s columnists saw Pobres almas as an effective warning against cocaine abuse and a criticism of women’s lack of education (“¡Pobres almas!’ de Carolina Adelia Alió” 18). La Época’s reviewer claimed that scandalous themes had become commonplace in the works of women dramatists, including Alfonsina Storni:

También la señorita Alió ha abordado en su trabajo un tema un poco escabroso. Predilección que parece generalizarse cada vez más entre las mujeres que dedican sus actividades de pluma a la obra escénica. Sin duda las representantes del bello sexo, observando que la trascendencia de los problemas que abordan en sus trabajos los autores nuestros es casi nula, han querido lanzarse ellas a decir cosas audaces para ver qué se decía luego de éstas. (“José Gómez y Mercedes Vilches” 7)

(Miss Alió has also touched on a difficult theme in her work. This is a predisposition that seems to be more and more widespread among the women who dedicate the work of their pens to the stage. Without a doubt the representatives of the beautiful sex, seeing that our [male] authors offer almost no transcendence of problems in their works, have wanted to come forward and say audacious things in order to see what will be said about them later.)

The critic went on to proclaim Pobres almas a success and to call Alió a promising author (7). El Telegrafo’s reviewer saw past the play’s sensationalist plot devices and acknowledged the playwright’s underlying feminist agenda:

Fuera de lo que “Pobres almas” puede representar como expresión netamente teatral, cumple señalar en ella la exteriorización de una definida tendencia de la autora a abogar por la independencia de la mujer. La educación de ésta en nuestro medio social, es deficiente. No se le dota de armas dignas para arrostrar los embates de la vida, y su incapacidad cultural le depara constantemente desvíos que no reconocen sino la suprema necesidad de vivir: los matrimonios basados en el cálculo y la conveniencia, por ejemplo, suelen ser soluciones a su inhabilitación. (7)

(Beyond what “Pobres almas” may represent as a purely theatrical expression, it is worth noting the clear tendency of the author to advocate for women’s independence. A woman receives a deficient education in our
society. She is not provided the proper weapons with which to combat life’s hardships and as a result of her cultural incapacity she is forced to merely survive: marriages based on money and convenience, for example, are the usual solutions for her powerlessness.

Clearly Pita Martínez, Olivé, Alió, and Medina Onrubia met with less resistance from critics than Storni had in the same decade of the debut of her thesis drama, _El amo del mundo_, in 1927, which I discuss in Chapter 1. Unlike Storni, these women managed to gain the approval of critics while promoting feminist ideas. They accomplished this end by encasing their subversive discourses in captivating, sensationalist, and emotional plots--and by avoiding direct autobiographical references. Their melodramatic theatrical formula better conformed to those literary conventions thought of as “feminine” than the thesis drama, which was thought of as more “masculine.” Thus, the works of these four feminist melodramatists were more acceptable to conventional cultural arbiters than those of the more confrontational Alfonsina Storni. Also, rather than merely debating and analyzing women’s rights issues, like the characters in _El amo del mundo_, the female protagonists in feminist melodramas personified differing philosophical ideals. Spectators were not asked to take sides in an intellectual debate so much as they were expected to identify emotionally with heroic feminist protagonists and to empathize with the indignation they feel toward anti-feminist scoundrels.

d. Storni’s Contribution to Feminist Melodrama

Storni may have been inspired by the works of her female contemporaries when she wrote _La debilidad de Mister Dougall_ (Mister Dougall’s Weakness) in 1927. In fact, this play appears to follow the pattern of other 1920s feminist melodramas though, perhaps because of the way critics denounced her thesis drama, it was never published or
performed in Storni’s lifetime. The vilification of foreign ideals and capitalism along with the celebration of cultural autonomy, working class values, and women’s rights reoccur in the works of Olívé and Medina Onrubia as well as in numerous other plays by women in the 1920s. Accordingly, La debilidad de Mister Dougall dramatizes an inequitable marriage between a wealthy and powerful foreigner and a poor but morally-upright criolla. The two main characters, Carmen and Dougall, are also archetypes of turn-of-the-century nationalist theatre. Carmen is a hardworking and dark-skinned criolla, unimpressed by money and power. Dougall is a rich Englishman who earns his money by testing and selling whisky. Like the patriotic gringo-themed dramas of the same time period, Carmen represents the traditional Argentine way of life while Dougall represents foreign capital, industry, and progress. Unlike patriotic playwrights, however, Storni focuses on the characters’ incompatibility and uses their marital strife to denounce the racial and sexual chauvinism of national discourses.

At the start of the play, Dougall persuades the criolla nightclub singer, Carmen, to marry him. When Carmen realizes that her husband is an alcoholic, she demands that he stop drinking and look for a different job, even if it means making less money. Rather than changing his behavior, however, Dougall changes his wife. He leaves Carmen for his blonde secretary, who shares his taste for whiskey, money, and all things European. Consequently, Carmen decides to move out and look for a job, refusing to take any of Dougall’s money or their shared belongings with her.

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39 Many female-authored plays from 1919 to 1929 show righteous and poor heroines caught in unequal relationships with corrupt elites and/or rich foreigners. In Mi pobre muñeca (1921) by Julia de Burgos a rich, jealous German torments his unhappy bride for three acts until he finally strangles her to death. In Por plata baila el mono (1923) by Dina A. Torrá, a mother attempts to sell her two adolescent daughters to a rich Italian immigrant. In Cantares y lágrimas (1923) by Alcira Obligado an orphan is taken in by a well-to-do family but her social position worsens when their son compromises her honor. Instead of accepting a marriage proposal by a rich older Frenchman, she ends up poor and alone.
Storni’s description of her heroine as a morena (dark skinned woman) is a significant departure from the typical allegories of the period (including those by feminist playwrights). According to Francine Masiello:

Storni thus explodes a national myth, dating back from the time of Sarmiento, which sustains the whiteness of Argentina while suppressing the indigenous masses. Her heroine is decidedly marked as a person of color, estranged from the European values recommended for the nation. (188-89)

It is clear by the close of the first act that Dougall considers himself racially superior to Carmen and that he finds her supposed “inferiority” sexually exciting: “las razas inferiores son muy sabrosas” (Storni, La debilidad de Mister Dougall 1377; The inferior races are quite delicious).

By act two, Carmen has become disillusioned with marriage and warns her sister against it: “Más vale que no te quieran. Mejor sola que mal acompañada” (1379; It’s better if they don’t desire you. You are better off alone than in bad company.” Carmen uses the familiar vos with her sister, her brother, and good friend Gutiérrez, whom she invites over for mate. But, when her husband arrives, she hides the mate and addresses him with the formal usted. This linguistic shift highlights the contrast between the comfort and familiarity Carmen feels toward her fellow criollos and the uneasiness and insecurity she feels towards her wealthy European husband.

Carmen’s primary complaint is that Dougall drinks too much. She is particularly sensitive to alcoholism because her brother Miguel is also an excessive drinker. Dougall’s racism and classism resurfaces when he hypocritically proclaims that he is a professional alcohol connoisseur while Carmen’s poor brother is merely a common borracho (drunk) (1402). Though they consume the same amount of alcohol, Dougall
demands that Carmen applaud his drinking as a talent and disapprove of her brother’s as a vice (1404). Carmen, however, sees through Dougall’s double-standards and declares both men equally worthless: “Yo entiendo poco de todo lo que usted me dice y de sus filosofías, pero sé una cosa: que usted y mi hermano apestan lo mismo; y que a usted y a mi hermano se le inyectan lo mismo los ojos de sangre; que usted y mi hermano cuando han bebido acaban por hacer barbaridades de cualquier clase” (1404; I don’t really understand your ideas and the things you say but I do know one thing: that you and my brother both stink the same; that you and my brother both have bloodshot eyes; that you and my brother do all kinds of stupid things when you drink”). Thus, she criticizes the behavior of her European husband without excusing that of her criollo brother. She also tells Dougall that he physically repulses her: “¡Y oídlo bien, yo no vuelvo a acostarme con usted si se emborracha porque usted me repugna!” (1404; Listen here, I won’t sleep with you again if you drink because you repulse me!).

In act three, Dougall meets his new love interest and declares his latest sexual preference for white women, whom he considers racially superior: “Las razas superiores son muy sabrosas” (1408: The superior races are quite delicious). Miss Mary is an Argentine of Norwegian ancestry. In contrast to Carmen, she plays the part of the submissive female, always willing to defer to Dougall’s authority. She even compares their romance to the conquest and colonization of America, casting herself in the passive role of the land awaiting “discovery” and casting Dougall in the active role of the European explorer coming to conquer her: “Yo soy una América que usted ha descubierto” (1411; I am an America that you have discovered). When Carmen realizes that Dougall is leaving her for a more submissive and whiter Argentine she declares that
the two deserve each other. She also celebrates her own freedom and renounces any claim to her husband’s possessions:

No volveré ya a casa. ¡Y te largo con todo! ¡Ni una hilacha me voy a llevar; nada; ni un pañuelo, ni un alfiler, ni siquiera una camisa! … Pero no te creas que te voy a dar el gusto de que me veas perdida por ahí. Trabajaré. ¡A esta Carmen no la pierde un inglés cualquiera! . . . Y oílo bien, no no me casé con vos por el confort y por los trapos… me casé porque me gustabas; ¡mamarracho! Pero ahora, ni regalado… saldré de su casa. ¡Desnuda! (1423)

(I won’t go back home. I’ll leave you with everything! I won’t take anything; not one thread, not one handkerchief, not one pin, not even a shirt!... But don’t think that I’m going to give you the satisfaction of seeing me wandering around lost. I will work. This Carmen won’t let any old Englishman get the better of her. . . . And listen to me, I didn’t marry you for the comfort or for the clothes… I married you because I liked you, you idiot! But there is nothing that could make me go back now…I’ll leave your house. Naked!)

By switching to the informal address (vos), Carmen also makes it clear that she no longer sees the European as authoritative or worthy of respect. Her parting remarks suggest that her personal independence and, by extension, Argentina’s cultural autonomy, depends upon the rejection of foreign capitalism and the racist, sexist, and classist double-standards underpinning nationalist rhetoric.

e. Dramatizing Disgust

Carmen restates her disgust with Dougall before making her final exit. She tells him that she could no longer tolerate living with him: “Ya no te podía aguantar más” (1422; I couldn’t stand you anymore). She repeats her earlier opinion of him when she calls him “repugnante” (1422: repugnant). Carmen’s attitude bears striking resemblance to that of heroines of other feminist melodramas. Cristina in La salvación complains about Tomás by saying “me repugna” (he repulses me) and by declaring that his embrace
makes her “temblar de asco” (55; tremble with disgust). Medina Onrubia’s protagonist, as I quoted earlier, tells her husband that she hates him (“lo odio”) and calls their marriage a “daily torture” (21). In each play, the woman’s feeling of disgust intensifies with every act, as spectators are prompted to identify with her desire to get away from the man she abhors. Thus, a dramatic emphasis on repugnance and anger may be characteristic of early feminist melodrama in Argentina. These feminist playwrights replace “fear,” the emotion typically exploited in melodrama, with “disgust,” an emotion that indicates that the protagonist is not passive, powerless, and afraid of her adversary but actually revolted by him. This is a logical tactic since feminist dramatists sought to persuade audiences to actively reject patriarchal values rather than to fearfully obey them.

As Doris Sommer has pointed out, nineteenth-century Latin American romance novels persuade readers to conflate romantic love with nationalism:

[O]ne libidinal investment ups the other. And every obstacle that the lovers encounter heightens more than their mutual desire to (be a) couple, more than our voyeuristic but keenly felt passion; it also heightens their/our love for the possible nation in which the affair could be consummated. (48)

In feminist melodramas, however, precisely the opposite occurs. Each time the protagonist faces the object of her disgust, usually her husband, her hatred for him intensifies. As the heroine’s desire for independence strengthens so do her negative feelings toward the repressive nation her husband represents. Rather than resolving national conflicts through romances, these works criticize the nation’s fascination with Europe and refuse to use female bodies in service of official national interests. Spectators viewing the performance, in turn, are urged to reject the patriarchal villain/authoritative
state and identify with the woman’s desire to free herself from the man/society that holds her back.
a. A New Strategy: Comedy

Although there were thesis dramas and melodramas that endorsed feminism in the first decades of the twentieth century, most of them confirmed traditional notions about gender roles. Playwrights of both genders associated women with the home, despite the fact that some female protagonists perceived it as a form of imprisonment. Many early feminist playwrights also, paradoxically, perpetuated stereotypes of women as naturally weak and men as naturally aggressive even while denouncing sexism. Very few authors proposed that men and women might actually be capable of working together to change their society. Fewer still found room for humor in their pursuit of social reform. In the 1930s and 1940s, however, as the nation’s leadership turned toward the right and became more repressive, both the campaign for women’s rights and the mainstream theatre industry went through some major transformations. Since the government prohibited overtly social critiques in the theatre, feminist-leaning authors began using humor and metatheatrical means to subtly and light-heartedly criticize patriarchal values without risking censorship. This chapter will examine how the comedies of two male collaborators, Camilo Darthes and Carlos Damel, and one female playwright, Malena Sándor, lampoon
conventional morality, challenge customary conceptions of theatrical space, and propose reforms to gender roles.

b. Women’s Rights, Conservative Times and Conventional Comedy

In the late 1930s and early 40s, women entered the labor force in greater numbers than ever before. By 1943 they comprised one quarter of the country’s workforce (Carlson 186). Meanwhile, the Argentine government became increasingly more conservative and pro-Nazi, and hostile toward women’s rights. Government spokespeople directed anti-Semitic remarks at activists and equated feminism with anti-nationalism (185). President Agustín P. Justo tried, though unsuccessfully, to convince Congress to reverse the 1926 “Law of Women’s Civil Rights” (Nari, “Maternidad, política y feminismo” 214). This law, as I discussed in Chapter 1, had among other things given women full adult status and the right to work without asking their husbands for permission (Jeffers Little 248). Opposition to Justo’s proposal came from feminist activists and magazine editors as well as from comedy writers like Sándor and Darthés and Damel. In 1943 a military regime called the United Officers Group took the presidency through a coup and continued to undercut feminist progress, as Marifran Carlson explains:

The nationalist government, strongly biased toward the Axis side of the second World War . . . carried on a campaign of “moral purity” involving the censorship even of radio soap operas and tango lyrics, and the banning of the sales of contraceptives and of newspaper advertisements for

40 Justo’s presidency lasted from 1932 to 1938.

41 Victoria Ocampo, Alicia Moreau de Justo, and other prominent feminists joined together to prevent the overturning of this legislation and to fight for woman’s suffrage (Carlson 178). Victoria Ocampo founded the literary magazine Sur and Alicia Moreau de Justo established the socialist-feminist magazine Vida Femenina.
Uruguayan divorce lawyers. Catholic religious instruction was made mandatory in all schools. (184)

Even after the 1946 democratic election of populist leader Juan Perón (a cabinet member in the former military regime), the government continued to censor theatre and the arts. Perón appointed a series of political supporters to head the Comisión Nacional de Cultura and to make sure that national theatre promoted populist, Peronist viewpoints (Mogliani 78-79). 42

Perón and his wife Eva also took over the campaign for women’s suffrage (to the annoyance of many feminists who saw it as a purely political move) and Argentina finally granted women the right to vote on 27 September 1947, after several other Latin American countries had already done so (Carlson 189). 43 Eva Perón promoted women’s participation in politics and in public life but she never publicly endorsed feminism. On the contrary, she maintained that women had an obligation to remain “feminine” and to follow the advice of the (Peronist) men in their lives, just as she followed the advice of her husband Perón (189). In their public speeches, both Eva and Juan Perón stated that they considered women’s role in society to be, above all, that of a mother and nurturer, as Mirta Zink explains:

> En todo momento desde el discurso estatal [Perón] se dejó en claro que los derechos sociales o políticos que ahora tenían [las mujeres] se debía a su función maternal y a sus cualidades ‘femeninas’ --abnegación,

42 Outside of the “official” theatres, the anti-peronist group, Teatro independiente, resisted prescribed forms of theatre (Mogliani 79).

43 According to Marcela María Alejandra Nari, by 1946 several Latin American countries had already recognized women’s right to vote including Uruguay (1932); Brazil and Cuba (1934); the Dominican Republic (1942); Guatemala (1945); Panamá and Trinidad and Tobago (1946) (“Maternidad, política y feminismo” 204).
sacrificio, amor, desinterés, etc. y no a su condición de mujeres como sujetos políticos libres e independientes. (18)

([Perón] continually made it clear in his state addresses that the social and political rights that [women] now enjoyed were due to their maternal functions and their ‘feminine’ qualities--self-sacrifice, altruism, love, unselfishness, etc. and not their condition as politically independent and free women).

Although most prominent feminists opposed peronismo in the 1940s, they too celebrated women’s maternal qualities when soliciting public support for their cause. In the 1910s and 1920s activists like Ernestina López, Alicia Moreau de Justo, and Paulina Luisi upheld a vision of feminism in harmony with the family by exalting motherhood (Lavrin 34-35). The ending of El amo del mundo (1927) by Alfonsina Storni reflected this cult of motherhood, as I mentioned in Chapter 1. In the 1930s Victoria Ocampo also lauded maternity in her feminist essays. She argued that young mothers could shape the mentality of the future nation, and of the “hombre futuro” (future man), since “el niño, sobre el cual se ejerce su poder, consciente o inconscientemente, es ese hombre” (260; the boy over whom she has power is, consciously or unconsciously, that man). Thus the image of woman as nurturer was a point of contact between feminists, Peronists, and conservatives. This is evident not only in public speeches and essays but in the representation of the Argentine “modern women” in the conventional comedy of the 1930s and 1940s.

Since the government censored theatre before and after Perón came to power, it is not surprising that the stages of Buenos Aires were filled with conventional, optimistic, and entertaining comedies during the decades of the 30s and 40s. Willis Knapp Jones labeled this genre “The Buenos Aires Play,” and defined it as “a light, humorous, sure-
fire hit with amusing dialogue, some slight attempts at characterization, and a happy
ending, but brittle and built on formula” (“Introduction” xlv). Spectators may identify
with the characters on stage but they also ridicule them through their group laughter.

According to French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941), laughter is a manifestation
of the “social, collective, and popular imagination” (2). Group laughter serves as an
indication of shared cultural values that are specific to each society and, by joining in,
each individual “laugher” demonstrates his or her willingness to conform to those values:

However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of
freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.
How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more
uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! On the other hand, how often
has the remark been made that many comic effects are incapable of
translation from one language to another, because they refer to the
customs and ideas of a particular social group! (Bergson 6)

Bergson also argues that, unlike tragedy, comedy aims to “correct” deviant behavior
through laughter: “A character in a tragedy will make no change in his conduct because
he will know how it is judged by us. . . . But a defect that is ridiculous, as soon as it feels
itself to be so, endeavors to modify itself, or at least appear as though it did” (17).

Feminists have long been suspicious of comedy, since so much laughter is
directed at women. In 1908, Uruguayan feminist Abella Ramírez accused comedy of
undermining women’s progress:

En lo que más fuerza se ha hecho para abatir, humillar y ridiculizar a
nuestro sexo es, en las comedias y sainetes: Estos últimos, sobre todo,
siempre están constituidos por un matrimonio que batalla, en el que la
ridícula es la mujer, y el hombre razonable, por lo que se podría decir:
“Bien se ve que es pintar como querer”… y que el autor no es mujer. (75)

(The most forceful in abating, humiliating and ridiculing our sex have
been the comedies and the sainetes; The latter, above all, always consist of
a troubled marriage in which the woman is ridiculous and the man is
rational, for which one could say: “Clearly they paint the way they feel”… and the author is not a woman.)

Today, nearly a century after Abella made this observation, critics continue to perceive conventional comedy as conflicting with the goals of feminism. Laura Mulvey, Jill Dolan, and Sue-Ellen Case have argued that the female spectator is either ignored or forced to adopt the “male gaze” while watching realistic plays, including conventional comedies. Dolan describes the experience of a female spectator who identifies with the male hero as degrading and emotionally self destructive: “She empathizes with his romantic exploits, or his activities in a more public sphere, but has a nagging suspicion that she has become complicit in the objectification or erasure of her own gender class” (289). Frances Gray adds that laughter can also be gendered: “Comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of the male laugh—not just to-be-looked-at but to-be-laughed-at—doubly removed from creativity” (9). Nonetheless Gray recognizes and applauds the efforts of women to create “alternative comedy, alternative laughter” (15).

An alternative, “feminist laugh” can be found emerging in Argentina in the 1930s and 40s. More and more comedies dramatized women’s changing role in society, showing female characters leaving the home and entering the workforce. Some of these plays even portray male characters rejecting machismo and accepting feminist ideas. This is an indication that the genre of comedy or “The Buenos Aires Play,” like thesis drama and melodrama before it, could be adapted to support the women’s movement. If we agree with Bergson that laughter in comedy can “correct men’s manners” (17), we may also agree that feminist comedy “laughs at,” and thus “corrects,” sexist behavior. But humor is just one of the ways that feminist comedies modify machismo. Some comedies
also correct sexism through role-reversals and by revising conventional uses of dramatic space. As spectators identify with the characters on stage who are challenging sexism, they may find themselves questioning conventional comedy as well. Additionally, dramatists who use comic techniques to advance the feminist cause may reach precisely those audiences who are, as feminist theatre critic Sally Burke argues, “most in need of exposure to feminism’s many perspectives and possibilities” (210). Subversive comic strategies like these are particularly necessary during periods of political repression and artistic censorship, since they avoid censorship and laugh at the status quo. In fact two of the feminist comedies that I will analyze in this chapter, La hermana Josefina and Una mujer libre, were both produced in 1938 by the very government agency in charge of funding and monitoring artistic production: La Comisión Nacional de Cultura.

c. Feminism Meets Romance: The Comedies of Darthés and Damel

Camilo Darthés and Carlos Damel defended women and criticized machismo in La hermana Josefina (Sister Josefina, 1938) and Manuel García (1946). Both are entertaining romantic comedies that illustrate the difficulty facing “emancipated” women in a society that sends them mixed messages about their social role. As the essayist and playwright Josefina Marpóns observed in 1947, even as women achieved more professional opportunities in the pre-suffrage era, gender coded divisions of labor continued:

[L]a línea imaginaria que separó a los seres de distinto sexo en la sociedad que hemos conocido, mantiene su trazo limítrofe con rigor inalterable. De este lado los hombres con acceso a los cargos de gobierno, de dirección, 

44 Willis Knapp Jones translated the play La hermana Josefina under the title The Quack Doctor in his anthology of Latin American theatre Men and Angels (1970). However, the translations that appear in this chapter are my own.
de jefatura . . . del otro las mujeres en los puestos mal retribuidos, subordinados, desaprovechadas en su real valer. (La mujer y su lucha con el ambiente 52)

(That familiar invisible line that separated individuals of different sexes in the society that we have known, maintains its delineation with an unalterable rigor. On this side, the men with access to government posts, to management, to executive positions . . . on the other side, the women subordinated in poorly-paid jobs where their real potential is wasted.)

La hermana Josefina, in particular, deals with women in the medical field as well as with the negative treatment of curanderas (folk healers) in rural Argentina. Mónica Adriana Morales explains that folk medicine was widely practiced in the provinces of Argentina (where licensed medical doctors were scarce) until the government began a program to eradicate it in the 1940s (127). She asserts that the attack on curanderismo indicates the dominant culture’s disregard for female labor since the majority of folk healers were women (133, 137). Additionally, curanderas were persecuted for illegally performing abortions (140). Female medical doctors were not treated much better. One of Argentina’s first female doctors, Dr. Julieta Lanteri (1873-1932), was discriminated against while in medical school and also afterwards when she looked for a job (Carlson 114).\footnote{The Medical School of Buenos Aires used the fact that Lanteri was foreign born (she moved to Argentina with her family at age six) as a pretext to deny her employment (Carlson 114). Though she applied for citizenship on her own, it was only granted to her after she married an Argentine man (114).} She went on to create the Partido Feminista Nacional (National Feminist Party), where she employed some theatrical methods for attracting attention for women’s rights: In 1920 she organized a mock election for women as a rally for women’s suffrage (Sosa de Newton 344).

Carlos Damel (1890-1959) probably knew something about the persecution of curanderas and the discrimination of female doctors. He was, after all, an esteemed ophthalmologist and the author of several scientific articles (Zayas 87). He teamed up
with the businessman Camilo Darthés (1889-1974) in 1911 and the pair wrote plays together for over forty years. They repeatedly won over audiences and critics, as Perla Zayas explains “casi todos los críticos los consideran el binomio nacional más popular y de mayor calidad dentro de la comedia costumbrista” (87; practically all of the critics consider them to be the best and most popular collaborators of popular comedy in the country). Zayas also credits the collaborators with skillfully combining social criticism and humor (89).

La hermana Josefina debuted at the Teatro Nacional de Comedias (Teatro Cervantes) in July of 1938 and it starred Luisa Vehil (who, incidentally, also played the lead role in Yo me divorcio, papá by Malena Sándor). After having been rejected by almost all of the commercial theatre companies, the play was finally produced by the Comisión Nacional de Cultura (Linares, “Actualidades” 61). La hermana Josefina is set in a small town in the province of Buenos Aires where the citizens have forsaken conventional medicine and replaced it with the advice of “la hermana Josefina,” a typical curandera who prescribes outlandish cures for her patients such as moon-lit baths and ointments made from the livers of fat white hens. A medical doctor, Armando Zubiaga, moves to town and attempts to set up a practice. He soon realizes that his greatest professional competition comes from Josefina who not only treats all of the townspeople but also controls the political arena (despite her own inability to vote) by telling her patients who to vote for. Zubiaga eventually befriends the curandera but he looks down at her eccentricity and envies her financial success. This dynamic continues until the end of the play when Zubiaga discovers that Josefina is not actually a curandera but, in fact, a highly trained physician in disguise.
In one of the opening scenes, Zubiaga visits Josefina’s clinic and asks her to treat one of his patients; he is certain that the patient’s condition is terminal. During their conversation, Zubiaga shows off his medical knowledge in a self-aggrandizing way while Josefina pretends not to understand him:

**JOSEFI.** ¿Qué tiene?
**ZUBIAG.** (Con intención.) Parece que es un neoplasm de estómago con metástasis de hígado. Se palpa un hígado hipertrófico, que llega a cuatro traveses de dedo debajo de la línea umbilical.
**JOSEFI.** No siga doctor. ¿Está muy flaco?
**ZUBIAG.** Está en un período caquético.
**JOSEFI.** (Sonriendo.) Usted me confunde, doctor, con estos términos que usa. Si usted me dijese que tiene un hígado grande o chico . . . nos entenderíamos mejor. Yo soy profana. ¡Usted no guarda conmigo ninguna consideración!
**ZUBIAG.** Discúlpeme. Tiene Razón. La costumbre. Olvidé que no hablaba con un colega. En una palabra. Tiene un tumor malo. Un cáncer.

**JOSEFI.** ¿Usted cree?
**ZUBIAG.** No creo. Estoy seguro.

(Después de la conversación, la narración continúa en un tono más formal.)

The dialog is humorous because Josefina appears dumb (which we find out later is an act) but also because Zubiaga relies excessively on medical terminology even though he is

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46 The names are abbreviated in the original text.
explaining something relatively simple, replacing common words with more scientific
(and more pretentious) sounding ones.

In a subsequent scene, a radio program announces that local officials have
intensified their campaign against curanderismo. In an attempt to raise Josefina’s spirits,
her male assistant (Manuel) tells her that the townspeople are celebrating her
“miraculous” cure of Zubiaga’s former patient. He also jokes about Zubiaga’s ruined
reputation in the community saying “¡No lo van a buscar ni para curar un resfrío!” (La
hermana Josefina 11; They won’t even go to him to cure a cold!). Therefore, moments
later, when Zubiaga arrives, the audience is already prepared to laugh at the doctor’s
arrogance. This time Zubiaga’s behavior borders on hysteria when he demands to know
how Josefina healed the man. He cannot comprehend how a female folk healer, whom he
holds in such low esteem, could cure a patient that he and his male colleagues deemed
incurable. Josefina punctuates the irony of the situation by repeating Zubiaga’s title,
doctor, throughout the conversation:

(ZUBIAG. (Levantando la voz.) ¿Qué tenía, entonces? ¡Usted tiene que
decirme lo que tenía!
JOSEFI. ¿Cómo “tiene”?  
ZUBIAG. (Desinflado) Disculpe.
JOSEFI. Cálmese, doctor. ¡Usted está muy excitado! Yo voy a ser
condescendiente con usted, voy a informarle todo lo que quiera, pero
no grite así, doctor. Se lo ruego.
ZUBIAG. Estoy muy nervioso.
JOSEFI. Comprendo. (Un silencio.) Entonces, ¿Usted quiere saber lo que
tenía?
ZUBIAG. Si usted no tiene inconveniente.
JOSEFI. Ninguno, doctor. Tenía hambre.
ZUBIAG. ¿Hambre?

JOSEFI. Hambre. Sin sospechar, ustedes lo estaban matando con la dieta.
ZUBIAG. ¡Usted se burla! (12)

(ZUBIAG. (Raising his voice.) So, what did he have? You have to tell me
what he had!
JOSEFI. What do you mean, “I have to”?  
ZUBIAG. (Deflated) I’m sorry.  
JOSEFI. Calm down doctor. You’re very excited! I’ll accommodate you.  
I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but don’t yell at me, doctor.  
I beg you.  
ZUBIAG. I’m very nervous.  
JOSEFI. I understand. (A silence.) So, you want to know what he had?  
ZUBIAG. If you don’t mind.  
JOSEFI. Not at all, doctor. He was hungry.  
ZUBIAG. Hungry?  
JOSEFI. Hungry. Without realizing it you all were killing him with your diet.  
ZUBIAG. You’re joking!)

Later on, Zubiaga admits that he is embarrassed to be the laughing stock of the community: “¡Se me ríen en la cara! En el club, en la calle. ¡No puedo más!” (13; They laugh at me to my face! In the club, on the street. I can’t take it anymore!). The townspeople, and the spectators in the audience, laugh at his narrow-mindedness, his arrogance, and is unwillingness to accept Josefina as an equal, despite the fact that she has proven her ability to treat patients. Thus, the collective laughter exposes chauvinistic behavior as a defect and makes the doctor feel vulnerable and self-conscious.

In act three, before Zubiaga discovers Josefina’s true identity, he is horrified to see her take a choking baby into the operating room, convinced that she will use a penknife as a surgical tool. Afterwards he sees the child cured, discovers Josefina’s arsenal of medical supplies (oxygen, a tracheotomy canula, scalpel, forceps, etc.), and demands explanations. When the police arrive to investigate charges of illegal medical practice, Josefina hands the investigators a cobwebbed diploma that reveals that she is actually a certified medical doctor whose real name is Sara García. The chief investigator recognizes her immediately and announces that she was “[l]a segunda alumna de 1929” (the second-highest graduate of 1929) and that she won the “Wilde Prize” (La Hermana
Josefina 31). When the men ask why she adopted the personae of “la hermana Josefina,” Dr. García explains that she decided to practice medicine under the guise of a curandera because she was unable to convince any community to accept her as their physician. Curanderismo brought her success and the freedom that “independencia económica” (financial independence) allows women. Zubiaga, laments his formerly sexist attitude and apologizes profusely: “Perdón. ¡Estoy como avergonzado! ¡He sido un imbécil!” (Forgive me. I’m so ashamed! I’ve been an imbecile!). Predictably, the doctors’ story ends in romance.

Josefina may represent the emerging female presence in the professional world but her chosen profession conforms to traditional notions about men and women. As a gifted doctor pretending to be a down-to-earth folk healer, she fulfills traditional and feminist expectations of women as nurturers and educators. Still it is significant that Zubiaga recognizes his partner’s superior accomplishment and that he regrets his earlier prejudicial thinking. According to Willis Knapp Jones, La hermana Josefina reached “114 performances with frequent revivals” (“Introduction” xlvi), but not all critics appreciated the jokes. Joaquín Linares of El Hogar accused Darthés and Damel of undermining national interests by failing to sufficiently denounce curanderas (“La hermana Josefina en el scenario official” 32). Linares was unwilling to laugh at the male-dominated medical field or to entertain the notion that a female doctor could be more capable than one of her male counterparts:

[El] prestigio de los médicos queda por los suelos. . . . Equivocan los diagnósticos y se les mueren todos los enfermos. En cambio, la sabiduría médica sería un don privativo de la mujeres, como la doctora Josefina . . . la teoría resulta bastante chusca. (32)
(The prestige of doctors has been trampled upon. . . . They make mistaken diagnoses and the patients die. In contrast, it would seem that medical wisdom is the private domain of women, like Doctor Josefina . . . the theory is rather droll.)

The critic for Noticias Gráficas agreed with Linares that the play failed to denounce curanderismo (“La hermana Josefina” 10) but most of the critics from other papers approved of the piece and noted the audiences’s positive reactions to it. El Mundo stated “[i]nteresó vivamente al público la comedia estrenada en el Teatro Cervantes” (6; The public was keenly interested in the comedy performed at the Cervantes Theatre); La Nación called it “un estreno bien recibido” (13; a well-received debut); Última Edición called the audience’s ovation “justos aplausos” (“La hermana Josefina” 6; righteous applause). Finally, La Razón’s columnist commended Darthés and Damel for their “sátira social” (“Una comedia” 10; social satire).

Years later, Darthés and Damel wrote another social satire, Manuel García. The Luis Arata theatre company produced it; Luis Arata and Maruja Gil Quesada played the lead roles. By paying a stage actor to pretend to be her husband, the wealthy female lead, Claudia, fakes a marriage in order to avoid both her repressive home life and the prospect of an equally restrictive husband. Thus she obtains the freedom to venture outside by creating an interior domestic front that allows her to move between the traditional interior female space and the masculine exterior realm at her discretion. The inner comedy, however, becomes awkward when the actor discovers that he can no longer distinguish his own identity from the part he plays as Manuel García (Claudia’s husband). Finally, they fake the husband’s death, leaving Claudia with the freedom of widowhood.

In the beginning of Manuel García, the thirty-three year-old Claudia is already planning to fool her parents. She complains that she has tired of living by their rules: “¡Es
que me asfixia tu custodia! ¡Quiero ser dueña de mi tiempo! ¡Decidir una vez algo y hacerlo!” (Manuel García 3; It’s just that your custody asphyxiates me! I want to be in charge of my own life! Decide something once and a while and do it!). Claudia’s overprotective parents refuse to recognize the fact that unmarried women are no longer considered minors in the Civil Code. They expect her to live up to their antiquated concept of propriety: “Mientras te proteja nuestro cariño tendrás que vivir de acuerdo a nuestro modo de ser . . . por arbitrarios y anacrónicos que parezcan” (4; As long as we care for you, you will have to live according to our way of life . . . no matter how arbitrary and anachronistic it may seem to you). In a typically patriarchal paradox, her father suggests that her only possibility for independence is marriage: “Tendrás libertad cuando te cases” (4; You will be free when you marry).

Darthés and Damel’s comedy immediately draws attention to conventional within/without theatrical boundaries by mixing elements of the play with real life, encouraging spectators to think about the play as a comment on the theatre industry and society. When the lead actor appears on stage he uses his real name, Luis Arata, and mentions that he works with Darthés and Damel. Arata was already famous in the 1940s and so were the authors (6). Additionally, the lead actress, Maruja Gil Quesada was also a playwright in real life. In the play, Arata admits that he has become weary of life in the spotlight and would probably benefit by taking refuge in a simulated marriage. Assuming the identity of Manuel García (with a new name and prosthetic beard) will allow him to retreat indoors. The suggestion appears to be that, because both characters

47 Throughout the performance, the male protagonist was referred to as “Luis Arata” when playing the part of the actor; he was referred to as Manuel García when playing the part of Claudia’s husband.
are associated with, and feel trapped by, the spaces society typically reserves for their
genders, they are each drawn to experience the realm of the other.

Claudia instructs the actor (Arata) that playing the part of Manuel García means
respecting her independence and constantly protecting her from societal scorn: “Yo
quiero un marido que sepa encontrar siempre el pretexto razonable para no
acompañarme, y justifique en parte la nueva vida que voy a llevar” (7; I want a husband
who will always find a pretext for not going out with me, one who will partially justify
the new life style I will be leading). She hopes to impress upon him the attributes she
fears she will not find in a real husband. This is clearly a reversal of traditional depictions
of matrimony in comedy where men jealously guard their wives’ honor. Claudia Cecilia
Alatorre observes that modern comedies, like their classical antecedents, continue to
defend monogamy against its “enemies,” mainly divorce and sexual impurity (73).

In the beginning of the second act, the couple has settled into a semblance of
married life and both Claudia and the actor appear comfortable with their new roles. In
their intimate comedy, Manuel García stays home most nights while his wife frequents
casinos and dance clubs with a group of friends. This role reversal prompts one friend of
Claudia’s to comment “¡siempre casero usted!” (you are always housebound!) and
another to tease him: “Y esperando a su mujercita” (18; And waiting for your little wife).
Role reversals of this kind, according to feminist humor critic Gail Finney are “[o]ne of
the most effective means of mocking gender stereotypes in comedy by both men and
women” (8). The actor playing Manuel García remains true to his original promise and
makes excuses for his wife when the servants begin to gossip about her relationship with
the single engineer, Miria. Though García consistently ignores his wife’s
“transgressions,” the police are not so forgiving. The chauffer informs both García and Claudia’s parents that Claudia and Miria were charged with an infraction when found together in a car after dark with the lights off. Now that the illicit affair is out in the open, Arata begins to play a more jealous version of Manuel García, attempting to keep Claudia inside the next time she tries to go out with her suitor. He physically blocks Claudia’s exit until she calls him by his real name, reminding him of his true identity (23).

Horrified at his temporary loss of judgment, Arata apologizes and allows the woman to leave. Since the inner drama has become inconvenient for both players, for Claudia because she has fallen in love with another man, and for the actor because he has been stigmatized as a cuckold, they decide to “kill” García. Arata is Manuel García’s best friend and he arrives in the last act (without beard) to tell Claudia and family the news of his death. When Miria makes it clear that he is no longer interested in pursuing Claudia romantically, she wonders if she made a mistake in removing Manuel García from her life.

Each of the main characters in Manuel García gains insight into the other’s world through their dramatic experiment and, when it ends, neither is ready to allow things to return to the way they were before. Claudia misses the devoted husband she imagined; Arata misses playing the part of the quiet and sensitive Manuel García. They both mourn the “loss” of a unique male protagonist:

ACTOR. Hay que resignarse, Claudia.
CLAUDIA. Será difícil. Si por lo menos me quedara el consuelo de frecuentarlo, como se frecuenta un héroe de una novela, releyendo sus páginas, o al protagonista de una comedia, viéndolo representar en escena, mi dolor sería más llevadero... Pero García no está en ninguna parte. . . .

ACTOR. . . . Yo sufriré tanto como usted. Yo quiero a mis creaciones, y tanto, que mi mayor júbilo es volver a ellas aunque sea solo,
abriendo los armarios que guardan mis trajes y pelucas, para mirarlos, acariciarlos, hundir las manos en los bolsillos llenos de naftalina, mientras por lo bajo recito las réplicas más felices de alguno de ellos. Es desconsolador que Manuel García sea la única interpretación que no podré volver a animar. Es triste pensar que en la galería de mis tipos faltará ese rostro barbado que sólo he creado para usted y que sólo a usted pertenece. (Manuel García 32)

(Actor. We have to accept it, Claudia.
Claudia. It will be difficult. If only I had the comfort of knowing that I could revisit him, the way one revisits the hero of a novel, rereading the pages, or like the protagonist of a comedy, watching him on stage, my pain would be more bearable… But García is nowhere to be found. . . .
Actor. . . . I will suffer just as much as you. I love my creations so much that my greatest joy is going back to them even by myself, opening the closets that contain my suits and wigs, to look at them, caress them, sink my hands in the pockets filled with mothballs, while I whisper the happy phrases of some of them. It is disturbing to think that that bearded face, which I created for you and which belongs only to you, will be absent from the gallery of my favorite character-types.)

They both search for ways to see each other again, continue their courtship and play with gender roles together. Suddenly, the actor realizes that the perfect solution is for them to turn their idea into a theatre performance. He calls Dartés and Damel who consent to write the script. Therefore the man and the woman agree to continue to play with gender codes by displaying their intimate drama in a public forum, benefiting from the role-play permitted in the theatre. In this way, they avoid being limited by the spaces assigned to them by theatre and society. Through metatheatre, Dartés and Damel expose gender roles in marriage and society as constructed performances that can be modified to suit each couple’s needs. The comedy ends with the suggestion that the concept of the home can expand to accommodate the changing roles of women and men and that the theatre is the ideal place to start. Indeed, Manuel García pleased critics and audiences, as noted by the reviewers in La Nación, La Prensa, and Crítica. The commentator from
Crítica, in particular, acknowledged the play’s feminist subtext when he described it as a “farsa familiar imaginada por una muchacha que se considera con derechos” (9; a farce about a family conceived by a girl who believes she has rights).

d. Malena Sándor’s Frustrated Romances

Like her male contemporaries, Malena Sándor creates social critiques through comedy and metatheatre. Both Una mujer libre (1938; A Free Woman) and Tu vida y la mía (1945; Your Life and My Life) depict modern, “emancipated” women struggling against the old patriarchal values that continue to hold them back. Una mujer libre debuted in November of 1938, about three months after La hermana Josefina; Tu vida y la mía opened in July of 1945, almost a year before Manuel García. Sándor’s plays are similar to Darthés and Damel’s in that they mock sexist double standards, but, unlike the male collaborators, she avoids romantic endings.

Una mujer libre, produced by the Comisión Nacional de Cultura, starred Iris Marga and was performed at the Teatro Nacional de Comedia (Teatro Cervantes). The play’s protagonist, Liana, returns home after a divorce in Uruguay with the hopes of pursuing a life as a sculptor and an emancipated woman with the support of her loved ones. To her surprise, however, her parents expect her to move back into their house and live under their supervision. They, like the parents in Manuel García, ignore the fact that the Civil Code recognizes unmarried women as capable adults. Liana’s male friends also alternate between offering her their “protection” or treating her as an easy sexual conquest. She, however, refuses to live up to the expectations of her friends and family, insisting that she does not need a romantic relationship to be happy. Nonetheless, by the
end of the play she admits to her best friend, Zulema, that she is afraid of growing old alone and that she hides her fears so that she will be taken seriously as a “free woman.”

Liana’s brother, Leonardo, reveals his old-fashioned notions about honor when he announces that he will challenge her ex-husband to a duel, presumably to restore the family’s reputation, a plan Liana persuades him to abandon. Liana’s male friends also take it upon themselves to “protect” her now that she is unmarried, but Liana tells them that as a divorcée she will no longer allow men to control her life:

CÉSAR. (Dirigiendo la palabra a todos.) Volvemos a ser dueños de Liana. Y esta vez, antes de entregarla a alguien, formaremos entre todos un juncal de juicio.
LIANA. Te equivocas. No vuelvo a ser de nadie. Al contrario. Mía como nunca. (Sándor 53)

(CÉSAR. (Speaking to everyone.) We will be her guardians once again. And this time, before we let anyone else have her, we will form our own tribunal.
LIANA. You’re mistaken. I haven’t gone back to belonging to anybody. On the contrary, I belong to myself like never before.)

Two scenes in act two offer a feminist perspective of typical machista humor. In the first one, a group of male tennis players gossip about Liana when she is not around. The players also lewdly comment on her physical appearance. One of them, Dr. Ordóñez, boasts that he has a plan to “buy” the divorcée by offering her a position teaching sculpture or drawing (Sándor 61). These conspiring men are marginal characters whose discussion is portrayed as deviant, negative behavior. In the stage directions, Sándor compares the men to “four modern beasts preying upon a woman’s reputation” (cuatro faunos modernos sobre la reputación de una mujer) and their laughter to “a chorus of malignant cackling” (un coro de carcajadas malignas) (62). In another scene, the feminist journalist Zulema (Liana’s best friend) accuses Liana’s brother and a male friend of
plotting against a woman. She also declares that women can be equally cruel towards members of their own sex:

ZULEMA. Juraría que están tramando algo grave. Tienen cara de conspiradores.
ESTEBAN. ¿Contra quién van a conspirar dos hombres solos?
ZULEMA. ¿Contra una mujer.
ESTEBAN. (Riendo) ¿Cómo adivinó?
ZULEMA. No hay error posible.
ESTEBAN. ¿Y tratándose de dos mujeres?
ZULEMA. Tampoco hay error. La conspiración es... contra una tercera.
      La mujer es el mejor blanco.
ESTEBAN. ¿De las miradas?
ZULEMA. Y de las peores intenciones. (66)

(ZULEMA. I bet you are planning something serious. You look like conspirators.
ESTEBAN. Who would two men be conspiring against alone?
ZULEMA. Against a woman.
ESTEBAN. (Laughing) How did you guess?
ZULEMA. There is no mistaking it.
ESTEBAN. And in the case of two women?
ZULEMA. There is still no mistaking it. The conspiring would be…
      against a third woman. Women are the best targets.
ESTEBAN. For glances?
ZULEMA. And for bad intentions.)

Thus the comedy offers the audience a feminist analysis of sexist humor: members of both genders continually ridicule women. After learning Zulema’s perspective, however, the spectators are encouraged to “laugh at” rather than to “laugh with” chauvinistic humor. In this way, Sándor imagines an alternative “feminist laugh” that distances itself from typically sexist jokes.

In the last act of the play Liana is finally able to correct the macho behavior that so irritates her. She is working in her sculpture studio when Ordóñez arrives with his intent to “buy” her affection. Ordóñez makes himself appear ridiculous when he literally begs Liana to sculpt a bust of himself. She firmly refuses and forces him to leave,
destroying his fantasy that a “free woman” is an easy sexual conquest. When her friend César arrives, Ordóñez leaves feeling he has been rejected. César, meanwhile, has come with his own ulterior motives. Like many of the other men in the play, he too is obsessed with Liana as a sexual object, even though he is married to one of her friends. Unaware of his intentions, Liana agrees to sculpt a bust of César. Later, he reveals his true feelings by describing her sculpting in erotic language: “Quiero sentirme acariciado por tus dedos en la arcilla, tomar forma y quedarme vivo para siempre en la expresión que tú me prestas” (Sándor 73; I want to feel myself caressed by your fingers in the clay, to take shape and to live forever with the expression you give me). Liana decides to continue her sculpture, but she has become suspicious. Instead of yielding to César’s fantasy, she uses her artwork as a way to reshape his misguided morality. The stage directions clearly indicate that Liana does not once interrupt her work and that César remains motionless in his seat during their ensuing dialog (74). After César confesses his attraction for Liana, she accuses him of monstrous egotism, ridicules his naïve assumption that she would accept his advances, and chastises his indecency by telling him exactly what he has inspired in her: “Desprecio. Te quería como a un hermano y me has golpeado con tu deseo” (76; I’ve lost respect for you. I cared about you like a brother and you have hurt me with your desire). Because César is not permitted to move during this scene, the spectators are invited to scrutinize him critically and to look at him through Liana’s eyes.

Liana later turns César into a spectator by making him watch and listen as she receives a telephone call from another unwanted male admirer. First, she tells César what she is about to do: “A ti a quien ya deprecio como todos, a ti te voy a mostrar mis luchas de mujer sola, de mujer libre, de mujer emancipada.” (Sándor 76; I’m going to show
you, now that you disappoint me like the rest, what it is like for me to be an independent woman, a free woman, an emancipated woman). César observes as Liana answers the telephone and reacts, with cutting sarcasm, to the caller’s sexually charged comments:

¡Aló. Sí. Bien. Trabajando. . . . No, no; yo quiero trabajar tranquila. No lo rechazo, Fernando, pero sea comprensivo. En este momento no es posible . . . (Escucha y hace señas a César como diciéndole que las palabras que escucha son una afirmación de las que pronunció momentos antes). Es cierto, Fernando. Soy una mujer que ha nacido para los grandes amores. . . . Tiene Razón, Fernando. Las otras son unas pobrecitas burguesas. . . . Por qué repito? No; no me burlo. Es para darle más fuerza a sus palabras (76-77)

(Hello! Good. Working. . . . No, no; I want to work in private. No, I’m not rejecting you, Fernando, but please try to understand. It is not possible at this time . . . (She listens and makes gestures to César as if to say that the words she hears are an example of what she explained earlier). It’s true, Fernando. I am a woman destined for great romances. . . . You’re right, Fernando. The others are poor little bourgeois women. . . . Why am I repeating? No; I’m not making fun of you. I do it to give your words more power.)

Soon, César realizes that Fernando also torments Liana with his erotic misinterpretation of what it means to be a “una mujer libre.” After watching her performance, he regrets his former conduct and sincerely apologizes before making his exit. Similarly, spectators watching _Una mujer libre_ may also begin to view the sexual objectification of “free women” as unacceptable, shameful and irrational. Thus Sándor, like Darthés and Damél, mixes metatheatre with humor in order to address and repair sexist behavior and to encourage the public to empathize with the predicament of a “modern woman” in an old-fashioned, patriarchal society.

The women in Sándor’s comedy are fully-developed, diverse characters; they are not defined or limited by the men in their lives. Each one represents a different attitude toward love and matrimony. Ana María, César’s wife, believes strongly in marriage;
Zulema has renounced love in order to write; Liana finds herself struggling with her conflicting desires for companionship and professional independence. She hates the way the men around her treat her but that does not mean that she wants to live alone forever. In fact, she admits to Zulema that she secretly longs for a child and a family. By adding this detail Sándor appeals to conservatives as well as feminists, since both held maternity in the highest regard. Public concern over the declining population may have also persuaded Sándor to add a maternal longing to Liana’s character. Just five days before the government-sponsored debut of Una mujer libre, El Hogar published a three-part plan for augmenting the population written by Alejandro E. Bunge (the former director of statistics): first, raising the number of marriages celebrated every year; second, lowering the age at which women marry; third, and most important, increasing the number of babies born every year (Oliver 9). Bunge blamed “modern ideas” on the nation’s low birth rate and accused families with little or no children of lacking national pride and Christian faith (9). El Hogar reproduced his pitch to young would-be mothers (the magazine’s readership) in bold oversized print: “Los hijos son de Dios y de la patria y Dios y la patria los reclaman” (8-9; Children belong to God and the nation and God and the nation demand them).

Sándor’s later comedy, Tu vida y la mía, opened at the Teatro Ateneo in 1945, eight years after the debut of Una mujer libre. The Compañía Argentina de Comedia produced the play and María Luisa Robledo and Nélida Franco played the lead roles. Tu vida y la mía focuses primarily on female-centered topics and perspectives and continues to examine the experiences of “emancipated” women in a society slow to change. The two female protagonists lead different lives: Marcela is a wealthy thirty-year-old divorcee
who lives alone in her elegant Buenos Aires home; Martha, her younger sister, is a twenty-year-old bride. On the one hand Martha, envious of her older sister’s independence, is reluctant to settle down with her husband, Juan José. On the other hand Marcela believes that her younger sister has an opportunity that she herself was denied: to be a liberated woman and still enjoy a loving marriage. When Martha says that she wants to have an affair Guillermo, a married man and a womanizer, Marcela dissuades her by falsely claiming that she is already romantically involved with him. In reality, Marcela is having an affair with a different married man, Osvaldo, but she keeps this a secret until the end of the play. Despite Marcela’s best efforts, Martha jeopardizes her marriage by avoiding Juan José, drinking heavily, and staying away from home as much as possible. At the end of the play, however, it becomes clear that Martha’s rebellion is not the result of her dissatisfaction with Juan José but rather the result of the pain she feels at having a strained relationship with her older sister. When Marcela finally comprehends her sister’s pain, she terminates her affair with Osvaldo and resolves to work on building a stronger emotional bond with her.

In this play, as in Una mujer libre, Sándor picks up where feminist melodramas and thesis dramas left off by offering a glimpse of life after divorce. She also offers an alternative to the solutions that Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) offered for his repressed female characters. As Hanna Scolnicov has observed, Ibsen’s female characters seek refuge further into the house, away from the spectator’s field of view: “Hedda into the inner room to which she moves her few personal belongings and to which she retires to kill herself, and Nora to her bedroom, where she shuts herself up to work” (93). When Nora realizes by the end of A Doll’s House (1879) that her marriage and her home are a
façade, she rejects her traditional role of wife and mother by leaving home. Scolnicov views this rebellious act as an important step in the progression of women’s theatrical space: “The reversal of outdoors and indoors in the theatre thus reached its logical conclusion with the heroine’s voluntary exit from the home which had for so long been her prison” (100). Yet Sándor’s heroines’ have a very different reaction to traditional female space. While the main character, Marcela, is very much associated with her home, it is clear from the beginning that her experience differs greatly those of earlier heroines. As a wealthy, independent divorcee living under the reformed Civil Code, Marcela answers to neither a father nor a husband. In keeping with the settings popular at the turn-of-the twentieth century, all of the comedy’s action takes place within an elegant drawing room, which contains one door leading directly outside and two others leading further inside the house. Marcela is the only character who remains on stage throughout all three acts and she strategically manipulates the passing of the other characters through the doors to and from her drawing room. She invites her sister, and her male guests (and, by extension, the spectator) into this space yet, like a director or choreographer, she exercises exclusive control over the play’s action.

Unlike Marcela, Martha longs to break out of the house, which she does by resisting married life. The contrast between the women is reflected in their respective outfits: Martha who comes to visit wears street clothes while Marcela who is at home wears a stylish housedress. Marcela entertains two guests, Alberto and Osvaldo (her actual lover), after she tricks her sister into believing that she is having an affair with Guillermo. When Guillermo arrives, Marcela vacillates about whether or not to receive him, aware that she must enlist his support in fooling her sister. This hesitation prompts
Osvaldo to joke: “¿otro aspirante más? Pero Marcela... Aquí dos y otro que llega... ¿Qué piensas hacer con todos nosotros?” (145; Another aspiring lover? But Marcela... Here there are two and another is on the way... What are you planning to do with all of us?). She quickly decides on her next move, invents a pretext, and ushers the two men further into the house, into the “otro salón” (145; other living room) while she talks to Guillermo and persuades him to play along with her story. Though at first they are reluctant to leave, the two men graciously follow instructions, confirming Marcela’s authority over the drawing room and the comedy’s action (145).

In the play’s last act, Osvaldo is removed from the drawing room once again. This time, he waits in the bedroom while Marcela visits with her brother-in-law, Juan José. This comes after Martha, having figured out that Marcela lied about Guillermo, has a terrible fight with her sister. Marcela learns from her conversation with Juan José, however, that Martha misses her deeply and fears that they will be forever estranged from one another. As a result, Marcela decides to terminate her relationship with Osvaldo in order to repair her bond with Martha. When Osvaldo emerges from his hiding place, she informs him of her decision to send him away from her home forever. As he exits, a saddened Marcela attempts to rid herself of feelings for him: “Osvaldo… Osvaldo… Osvaldo… Es como si mis labios se quedaran desnudos de tu nombre” (169; Osvaldo… Osvaldo… Osvaldo… It seems like my lips are stripping themselves of your name).

Martha arrives soon after Marcela’s lover slips out the back door, and later, as they speak privately, Guillermo arrives. Marcela receives him but allows Martha to hide in the bedroom, her lover’s former refuge. Martha does this voluntarily, proving that she, like Marcela, has chosen to concentrate on her relationship with her sister rather than explore
an extramarital affair. When Guillermo discovers that Martha refuses to come out of the bedroom to greet him, he, like Osvaldo before, realizes that he is no longer welcome in the space controlled by these two women.

Over the course of the play it becomes apparent that the attention from the men that the women seek is disrupting their relationship as sisters and is making them both miserable. The extramarital affairs that make each protagonist feel rebellious and independent are really traps in which the women allow their identities to be dictated by men in their lives. Marcela explains to Osvaldo that guiding her younger sister’s life has caused her to reexamine her own: “Me hacía asistir a mi propia vida como una espectadora. Como había asistido a la de ella. Y comprendía que acaso yo misma no sabía elegir mi camino” (150; It made me look at my own life as if I were a spectator, the way I watched her life. And I realized that maybe I didn’t know how to choose my own destiny). This look at one’s life can be seen as a cue to the female spectators in the audience who may see a little of themselves in the lives of the women on stage. Later, after the two sisters agree to rebuild their relationship, Marcela invites Martha to take a trip with her for some further soul-searching: “Solas las dos frente a nosotras mismas. Como si hubiéramos vuelto a nacer” (176; The two of us facing each other alone. It will be as if we were to be reborn). By rejecting Osvaldo and Guillermo, the protagonists begin to redefine themselves as sisters and as individuals. In this way, Sándor reflects the feminist philosophies of Victoria Ocampo, who argued that the women’s revolution required men to recognize and value women and their “feminine” realm: “[El feminismo] no se hace absolutamente, para que la mujer invada el terreno del hombre, sino para que el hombre deje por fin de invadir el terreno de la mujer, lo que es muy distinto” (259;
[Feminism] is certainly not for women to invade men’s territory but for men to stop invading women’s territory, which is very different). Although both sisters are connected to their respective homes by the end of the play, they also have found a way to liberate themselves from male domination without being forced to abandon the traditionally female space, commit suicide, or go insane (as was the case for the melodramatic heroines in the early part of the century).

For the most part Sándor received laudatory newspaper reviews and audiences enjoyed her comedies. She was applauded for her efforts to reflect real life and to capture the attention of the spectators, as indicated in this review of Tu vida y la mía: “. . . [C]omo los personajes tienen calor humano, realidad de vida, la obra encuentra eco en el ánimo del espectador, que sigue con interés y atención las incidencias de la pieza. (“Tu vida y la mía’ se estrenó” 12; . . . Since her characters are human and true to life, the play inspires the spectator, who follows the incidents in the play with interest and attention). Still, some critics had a hard time understanding why Sándor neglected to create romantic outcomes for her heroines, since this went against the typical endings for conventional comedies. La Prensa’s reviewer called Una mujer libre an “esfuerzo estimable” (admirable effort) and considered Sándor a promising young author (“Una mujer libre’ se estrenó” 17), but argued that she failed to follow through on two possibilities for romance: “Plantea conflictos que parece que van a tener resonancia dentro de la obra y que luego se apagan y desaparecen como esa sugestión de intriga amorosa entre Liana y [Fernando] Lagos . . . [E]se otro amor que . . . falta firmeza, concreción, definición dentro de la contextura general de la obra” (17; She plants situations that seem as if they are going to have resonance in the play, but end up fading away and disappearing, such as

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48 These reviews appeared in 1938 and 1945 in La Nación, La Prensa, and Crítica.
the suggestion of an amorous intrigue between Liana and [Fernando] Lagos . . . The other love . . . lacks strength, form, definition within the general context of the piece). Years later, commentators voiced similar complaints about Tu vida y la mía. A critic from Noticias Gráficas considered Marcela’s separation from Osvaldo inexcusable: “[N]o nos parece lógico y de manera alguna aceptable puesto que las razones que invoca resultan confusas y se pierden en una dialéctica exuberante” (“Tu vida y la mía” 8; We consider it neither logical nor acceptable since the reasons that she gives are confusing and lost in an exuberant dialectic). La Razón’s columnist added that the reckless Martha “no merece el sacrificio de su hermana” (9; does not deserve her sister’s sacrifice). Clearly these critics fail to comprehend the importance Sándor places on female relationships. Their impassioned complaints indicate that they feel somehow betrayed; they protest the fact that the author borrowed elements typical to romantic comedy but denied them tidy romantic conclusions. What these comments implicitly reveal is that, Sándor not only revised sexist behavior within her comedies, but that she also subverted comic conventions in the theatre industry by refusing to “marry off” her heroines and by prioritizing a sisterly relationship over a romantic one.

e. The Last Laugh

Despite their different endings, the works of Darthés and Damel and Sándor demonstrate how comedies conventionally used for entertainment can be adapted to illustrate feminist ideals. Their feminist-leaning comedy may be viewed as a form of “flexible realism,” which Patricia Schroeder defines as an altered form of realism that can become a vehicle for social criticism: “[Flexible realism] can depict the values encoded
and disseminated by a patriarchal culture, assess the consequences of oppression by powerful cultural agents, and simultaneously support the alternative values--such as autonomy and female community--that feminism espouses” (161). Sándor and Darthés and Damel similarly portray and correct patriarchal values or “correct men’s manners” through alternative uses of popular theatrical techniques such as humor and metatheatre. In doing so they create new opportunities for female characters to interact with men on equal footing (with or without romance). Each of their plays also shows how stage space can be used to empower the female protagonist: Josefina meets Zubiaga in her successful clinic in _La hermana Josefina_; Claudia uses a fake marriage as way to get out of the house in _Manuel García_; Liana uses her sculpture studio as a refuge in _Una mujer libre_; and the two sisters banish suitors from Marcela’s drawing room in _Tu vida y la mía_. Each of these feminist comedies seems to prove precisely what the actor and Claudia discover through their invention of “Manuel García”: where society is unwilling to bend, theatre provides a necessary outlet for experimentation and role-reversals.
Chapter 4

The Stuff of Legends: Myth in Feminist Theatre (1931-1950)

Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling caste than the myth of women: it justifies all privileges and even authorizes their abuse.

-- Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex 1949)

It is not the myth that must be destroyed; it is the mystification. It is not the hero who must be belittled; it is the struggle that must be magnified.

-- Augusto Boal (Theatre of the Oppressed 1974)

a. Feminism and Myth

The two passages quoted in the epigraph above represent opposing viewpoints regarding the role of myth in society and in social activism. On the one hand, Beauvoir expresses a commonly held feminist opinion by arguing that mythology validates the subjugation of women in patriarchal culture. On the other hand, Boal defends historical heroes and claims that they can be used to inspire social revolution (though he is not speaking specifically about the women’s movement) when they are humanized. While Beauvoir rejects myth altogether, Boal implies that a positive reconstruction of it may incite the spectator into revolutionary action. This represents a familiar difficulty facing feminist activists: bold mythical icons may allow activists to better reach the general public and gain their political support; yet, when feminist turn to ancient legends they find that most “heroines” are often not rebellious figures but, rather, larger-than-life symbols of obedience, submissiveness, and/or male sexual fantasy. As Nadya Aisenberg explains, the designation “heroine” implies a certain inferiority in relation to the “hero”:
“The suffix ‘-ine’ denotes the diminutive, the very term in wrung on the masculine noun. The dictionary defines a heroine as a ‘woman of qualities like that of a hero,’ she is at best a simulacrum of someone male. By this definition the heroine can never be the hero’s equal” (15). Additionally, as readers, women are encouraged to identify with the hero and adopt his point of view rather than that of the heroine. Judith Fetterley has argued that in this way the dominant literary culture “immasculates” female readers: “as readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” (567). This is similar to what Mulvey calls the “male gaze” in narrative cinema (589). Recent theories by Judith Butler and other materialist feminists may persuade us to expand upon Fetterly’s and Mulvey’s arguments; After all, society also teaches men to “think as men,” to “accept as normal a male system of values,” and to identify with the “male gaze.” Immasculination and the male gaze thus viewed are the processes through which mainstream hero-centered literature and myth normalize contemporary patriarchal cultural values. It is precisely this process that feminist myth revision seeks to overcome. This chapter will discuss how, through radical dramatic techniques, several early feminist plays deconstruct the immasculating structures of ancient legends and criticize the feminine myths still operating in Argentine society. The four works covered in this chapter are Polixena y la cocinerita (Polixena and the Little Cook, 1931) by Alfonina Storni; La cola de la sirena (The Siren’s Tail, 1941) by Conrado Nalé Roxlo; Penélope ya no teje (Penelope No Longer Knits, 1946) by Malena Sándor; and Mamá Noé (Mama Noah, 1950) by Josefina
Marpóns. Each of the plays not only debunks classical myth but also creates new feminist readings of formerly patriarchal legends.

b. Myth and Innovation in Modern Argentine Drama

Perhaps because Greek mythology and Biblical legends are so recognizable to the average Western spectator, despite the narrow roles for women they usually offer, feminist dramatists found them useful for capturing audiences’ attention and, indirectly, altering their view of women. An added advantage to myth is that playwrights could use it to allude to the contemporary political situation without making themselves the targets of censorship. Dramatists in the 1910s and 20s, as I mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, had already begun reassessing and criticizing women’s role in society by reviewing ancient and contemporary myths. In the 1910s, José González Castillo suggested that if mythical heroines were to live in modern society they would no longer surrender to patriarchal control: Hagar would refuse to have her master’s child (El hijo de Agar, 1914) and Ulysses’ wife would file for divorce (La mujer de Ulises, 1917). In the 1920s, feminist melodramatists subverted contemporary myths of matrimonial and national harmony by showing modern wives disgusted by both their authoritative husbands and the nation’s they represent. The heroines in both cases reject the reductive roles typically offered to them by patriarchal tradition and set the stage for the more comprehensive, and more dramatically experimental, renovations of myth that appeared in later decades.

A recent essay by feminist theatre critic Jane de Gay provides insight into the ways in which international feminist playwrights currently rework ancient legends: “This approach involves deconstructing the original stories in some way: drawing attention to
the constructed nature of narrative, the fabricated nature of performance, to deny that such narratives have any relationship to reality, thus paving the way for radical re-writings” (15). While de Gay refers only to present-day spectacles, the origins of the deconstructionist/anti-realist theatre techniques to which she refers may be traced back to the European avant-garde movement. As this chapter will reveal, early Argentine feminist dramatists also used a variety of avant-garde techniques to deconstruct ancient patriarchal legends. In Historia multicultural del teatro, Juan Villegas links the emergence of metatheatre, surrealism, myth, and fantasy in 1930s and 40s in Argentina to European influences (156-68). Because of Argentina’s long history of immigration, it should come as no surprise that European artistic trends influenced local authors. Four authors in particular significantly impacted national dramatic production from the 1920s to the 1940s: Ramón del Valle-Inclán (Spain, 1866-1936), Luigi Pirandello (Italy, 1867-1936), José Ortega y Gasset (Spain, 1883-1955), and Bertold Brecht (Germany, 1898-1956). Pirandello toured several Argentine cities in 1927 and, in addition to presenting the public with his metatheatrical masterpiece Six Characters in Search of an Author, he participated in various conferences and published articles in La Nación and La Prensa (Seibel 689). Valle-Inclán also wrote in the 1920s and strove to replace conventional realism with a technique for grotesque distortion that he called el esperpento (Pedraza 489). Ortega y Gasset, who visited Argentina in the 1940s, praised Valle-Inclán and his contemporaries for their non-representational distancing techniques, which he referred to as “the dehumanization of art” (Villegas 166); Finally, Brecht designed a series of

49 Valle-Inclán had visited Buenos Aires and participated in theatre conferences in 1910 (Seibel 444).

50 Ortega y Gasset’s theories regarding non-mimetic art can be found in La deshumanización del arte (1925).
techniques, or “A-effects” (alienation effects), in order to ensure the maintenance of a critical distance between the spectator and the performance. In “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1948) Brecht proposes a method of dramatizing different historical periods, which can be easily applied to the task of deconstructing myth. According to Brecht, theatre should represent the past and the present in such a way so as to reveal their inherent instability:

[W]e must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different. . . . Instead we must leave them their distinguishing marks and keep their impermanence always before our eyes, so that our own period can be made to seem impermanent too. . . . If we ensure that our characters on the stage are moved by social impulses and that these differ according to the period, then we make it harder for our spectator to identify with them. . . . And if we play works dealing with our own time as though they were historical, then perhaps the circumstances under which he himself acts will strike him as equally odd; and this is where the critical attitude begins.

(190)

Many of the myth-based plays of the 1930s and 40s use tactics similar to those of the playwrights and theorists mentioned above to engage the critical minds of the spectators and to discourage them from identifying emotionally with the action. Regardless of the corollaries that exist, however, most of them comment specifically on the political and social climate in Argentina, particularly with regards to women, before and after Juan Perón’s presidency.

c. Storni’s Appropriation of Euripides

Storni’s one-act farce Polixena y la cocinerita (Polixena and the Little Cook, 1931) debuted at the Café Tortoni fifteen days after her death in November 1938. It was performed in homage by Storni’s friends from La Peña (the literary group to which she belonged) and featured a little-known actress, Olga Hidalgo, as the little cook (Nalé
Roxlo, *Genio y Figura de Alfonsina Storni* 16). The play was published in 1931 along with another farce, *Cimbelina en el 1900 y pico*, in a volume titled *Dos farsas pirotécnicas* (Two Pyrotechnic Farces). Both pieces are unconventional in form and content, which is probably the result of Storni’s exposure to the European avant-garde movement; she had become acquainted with Valle-Inclán’s *esperpento* and the theories of Ortega y Gasset when she traveled to Europe in 1930 (Phillips 66). Storni had, in fact, envisioned Berta Singerman, in the lead role of *Polixena y la cocinerita*, which she mentioned in her published script (*Polixena y la cocinerita* 1329). Singerman was well known for her avant-garde poetry recitals in Buenos Aires and Madrid, and she knew both Storni and Valle Inclán personally (Moscato Rey 73-75). Each of Storni’s “pyrotechnic farces” constitutes a revision of an illustrious literary work: *Cimbelina en 1900 y pico* revisits *Cymbeline*, a romance by Shakespeare; and the play that I will analyze here, *Polixena y la cocinerita*, reworks the classic Euripides tragedy *Hecuba*. As María A. Salgado has pointed out, Storni indicates her intention to break with conventions by applying the term “pyrotechnic” to her farces: “Pirotécnicas remite al arte de la invención de explosivos y fuegos artificiales, lo que subraya implícitamente tanto la extrema artificiocidad del género ‘farsa’ como la desfamiliarización a la que Storni somete a su público” (23; Pyrotechnic refers to the art of manufacturing explosives and fireworks displays, which underlines the extremely artificial nature of ‘farce’ as well as the de-familiarization to which she subjects the public). Salgado draws a parallel between Storni’s reading of classical literature and Fetterly’s concept of the “resisting reader”; Storni maintains a feminist perspective while reading the classics and thus refuses to give into the process of immasculation (Salgado 23, 25).
Euripides’ play takes place after the fall of Troy. Polixena, the Trojan princess, has been sentenced to death at Achilles’ tomb. Rather than lamenting her misfortune, she tells her mother, Hecuba, that she would prefer to die a free woman than to endure the humiliation of serving a brutal master as a slave or a concubine (which was to be the fate of her female relatives). It is later reported that Polixena went willingly to her execution and that she impressed the Greek army with her display of courage at the moment of her death (Lefkowitz 99-100). In Polixena y la cocinerita, Storni borrows precisely those elements from Euripides’ play that delve into women’s psychology and she endows her heroine with an up-to-date feminist point of view. The protagonist is not only a reader of tragedy but also an author in her own right. She stages her adaptation of Hecuba in the kitchen where she works in front of an audience of one: her friend, the maid. Both women are well educated and come from middle-class families but they are trying to make a living without help form their parents. At first, the little cook tells her friend about Polixena’s heroic death as is described in Euripides’ play. Soon afterward she announces her plan to dramatize the event. In reality, the little cook has invented a new scene, since the sacrifice of Polixena takes place off stage in Hecuba. The protagonist mixes events from Euripides’ tragedy with events from her own life as a mistreated domestic servant when she finally plays the part of Polixena. At the end of the inner drama she reenacts the heroine’s death while in the outer drama she commits suicide. News of Storni’s farce reaches Hell and causes Euripides much anxiety in the epilogue. Eventually Euripides commits suicide too, even though he is already dead, by jumping into a giant fish’s mouth.
Storni’s bold staging contrasts masculine theatrical aesthetics from classical Greece to modern Argentina. She specifically highlights the kitchen, a distinctly “feminine” space, which was rarely represented in the theatre of her day and was certainly never used as a setting in Euripides’ time. In ancient Greece the plays were performed in the “masculine” space of the outdoors while the “feminine” space of the home remained hidden from view (Scolnicov 6). Storni’s little cook rearranges her surroundings to suit her purposes. As she does this, she assigns new symbolic meanings to the objects she encounters, moving them from the logical realm to the emotional. The cook invites the spectator to imagine the kitchen transformed into a forest as she invokes the goddess Diana: “Ojalá esto fuera un bosque y mis cacerolas hombres. ¡Dame el arco! ¡Dame las flechas!” (Polixena y la cocinerita 1339; Oh, if only this were a forest and my pans were men. Give me the bow! Give me the arrows!). She continues to combine her feminine (inside) space with a masculine (outside) space by using the “feminine” tools of the kitchen: “Mira, mira, arreglemos la escena; quiero una luna roja, una luna de tragedia. . . . Esta cacerola de bronce... aquí; la colgaremos de la lamparilla” (1349; Look, look, let’s set up the scene; I want a red moon, a tragic moon. . . . This bronze pan… here; we’ll hang it from the lamp). Storni’s stage notes indicate that a red light will reflect off of the pan and draw attention to crater-like stains on its surface. The additional stage lighting is also made brighter in order to simulate the outdoors (1349). The deeper the spectators peer into the proscenium, the more clearly they see an outside space coming forward.

The cook constructs Achilles’ tomb by covering a ladder with crockery, brooms, and other culinary utensils. The tomb is completed with a long bench, placed at the base of the ladder, and piled high with bright and reflective cookware. In an effort to represent
the Achaean soldiers, Storni’s heroine surrounds the newly constructed tomb with numerous heads of cabbage (Polixena y la cocinerita 1350). As the protagonist mixes her life story with the mythical story of Polixena, she treats her props in a similar manner, whimsically shifting them between both the inner and outer dramas and the their respective exterior and interior spaces. When the cook, acting as Polixena, confronts the soldiers she recognizes them from the kitchen:

¡Ea, repollos, arriba las cabezas!
Ya comienza espectáculo sabroso:
¡Abrid las bocas que manará sangre!
Soy Polixena, ved y me adelanto:
cogo un aqueo y le hablo cara a cara:
(Levanta un repollo). (1355)

(Hey cabbages, lift up your heads!
A delicious spectacle starts right now
Open your mouths for there will be bloodshed!
I am Polixena, watch me come:
I grab an Achaean and I talk to him face to face:
(She lifts up a head of cabbage).)

Proceeding forward in her monologue, the cook continues to highlight the double identity of the cabbages as both vegetables and soldiers. But, after the cook kills herself, the lights dim and the moon disappears, returning the performance space from the exterior to the interior realm and from the inner drama back to the outer drama.

In the epilogue Euripides uses a flute to call upon the giant musical fish and ask him for news of the outside world. This esperpentic messenger is reminiscent of the angelos of ancient Greek comedy, whose role it was to relate the events that took place off stage (Scolnicov 4). The creature talks about Argentina and its “plague” of female poets, referred to with the pejorative title “poetisas” (276). Then, he tells Euripides that
his celebrated play *Hecuba* has been re-written and performed by a woman inside of a kitchen:

Y tiembla Eurípides; la escena pasa en una cocina. Una indigna esclava moderna, una maloliente fregona de estos despreciables demagogos del siglo XX ha levantado con cacerolas, fuentones y plumeros, el túmulo de Aquiles, e intercalado en su relato algunas de tus célebres palabras, ante espectadores tranquilos, y entre olores de repollos y ajos! (276)

(And you will tremble, Euripides; the scene takes place in a kitchen. An undignified modern slave, a stinking dishwasher of one of these depreciable twentieth-century demagogues, has built the tomb of Achilles with pans, serving platters and feather-dusters and has intertwined her story with some of your celebrated phrases, in front of quiet spectators, and amongst the smells of cabbages and garlic!)

When the fish whispers the name of the play’s author, “Alfonsina Storni,” into Euripides’s ear, he begs the creature to open its mouth wide and swallow him whole. Thus, just as Storni consumed his original play, the fish consumes Euripides.

Throughout *Polixena y la cocinerita*, Storni picks apart the theatrical frame of reference familiar to the bourgeois public. She presents the spectator with several significant oppositional pairings: classic/modern, past/present, inside/outside, male/female, performance/reality. Yet, the boundaries that keep these polarities separate are blurred through an innovative use of metatheatre and the *esperpento* technique. By representing classic, exterior, spaces associated with the masculine realm through an early twentieth-century, feminine, interior framework, Storni deconstructs the traditional compartmentalization of gender in Western theatre; the same female character literally bleeds through both spheres. Although the figure of Polixena may be useful for depicting the plight of the exploited domestic workers of her time, Storni’s farce is not actually about the conquered princess or her death. Rather, it is about the process of feminist
playwriting itself. Storni’s constant references to dramaturgy speak to future feminist dramatists about the art of adapting “great works” into modern feminist spectacles. She additionally subverts male-dominated theatre’s exclusion of women by revealing Euripides’s initial rejection of, and later surrender to, the appropriation of his play by a female playwright. Therefore, the true heroine of Polixena y la cocinerita is not the sacrificial princess of Euripides’ play but Alfonsina Storni herself, as revealed in the epilogue. Storni’s heroism consists in deconstructing a male-authored myth and haunting its author in the afterlife, using her farcical “pyrotechnics” to explode gender-based theatrical hierarchies along the way.

d. Nalé Roxlo’s Modernized Siren Legend

Storni’s future biographer, Conrado Nalé Roxlo (1898-1971), debuted his first play, La cola de la sirena (The Siren’s Tail) at the Teatro Marconi in Buenos Aires on 20 May 1941, three years after Polixena y la cocinerita appeared at the Café Tortoni. With Delfina Jauffret in the lead role, Nalé Roxlo’s play, which also revisits a feminine myth, was an immediate hit and it launched him into a successful career as a dramatist. Nalé Roxlo had previously made a name for himself as a poet and a humorist. Following La cola de la sirena, Nalé Roxlo wrote three other plays that also featured strong female protagonist: Una viuda difícil (1944); El pacto de Cristina (1945); and Judith y las rosas (1956). The latter two are reinterpretations of Faust and the Biblical story of Judith respectively. The promoters of La cola de la sirena, the Enrique Gustavino theatre company, were cognizant of its appeal to women, as indicated by the descriptions of the play in the “teatros” section of the daily newspaper La Prensa. The opening-night announcement billed it as: “una comedia amable y graciosa que interesa a todas las
“damas.” (20; A cute and appealing play that interests all women). Six days later, the announcement had evolved from “interesting” women to “elevating” them: “Un romance de amor que eleva a las mujeres.” (18; A romantic love story that elevates women).

Women in Argentina had made major progress in the professional world but they did not yet have the right to vote and divorce was still illegal. The theatre industry recognized women as an important consumer market and apparently thought that the play’s feminism was a selling point, which indicated a positive change in social attitudes toward women’s rights. In reality, Nalé Roxlo’s play is not about a woman but about a siren becoming a woman.

By the twentieth century it was more common to imagine sirens as mermaids (part women, part fish) than as the bird-women that Homer describes in the Odyssey. Despite this change in physical appearance, however, their behavior remains consistent: sirens tempt sailors at sea. In Nalé Roxlo’s play, however, the Siren allows herself to be caught in the fisherman’s net. Once on land, Alga’s fishtail is problematic: it limits her ability to move around and causes the priest to deny her the privilege of getting married in the Catholic Church on the grounds that Alga is not a real “woman.” For this reason the protagonist undergoes a surgical procedure that transforms her fishtail into a pair of legs. After the operation, she embraces her new-found “womanliness,” and her freedom of movement. Patricio, however, falls out of love with Alga once her mythical enchantment is gone. Finally, he leaves her for a female airline pilot, Gloria, whom he expects to give up flying and stay by his side. The scorned Siren tells Gloria her story and

51 As Siegfried Rachewiltz has pointed out, some early representations of the siren paint her as half woman and half bird but, by the middle-ages, sirens were more commonly represented as double-tailed fish-women, or mermaids (Rachewiltz 89). Nalé Roxlo’s protagonist has a single tail, which coincides with other nineteenth and twentieth-century portrayals of the siren.
warns her against making any sacrifices for Patricio. Then, she tragically throws herself back into the sea.

After the play’s debut, reviewers applauded Nalé Roxlo for breaking with dominant aesthetic of realism, which he also did in his subsequent works (Zayas de Lima 193; Villegas 165). Contemporary critics, however, differ as to why Nalé Roxlo’s characters live in a world of perpetual fantasy. On the one hand, Perla Zayas de Lima affirms that Nalé Roxlo “propuso al hombre de su tiempo la posibilidad de creer en los milagros, en el misterio y en la poesía” (193; offered to the man of his day the ability to believe in miracles, in mysteries and in poetry). On the other hand, according to Juan Villegas’s reading of *El pacto de Cristina* (1945), fantasy represents narrow political ideology in Nalé Roxlo’s theatre:

[H]uman beings are willing to sell their “souls” for an illusion and this compromise leads unswervingly to the failure of the illusion. If one accepts this last hypothesis, the text acquires a historical significance. In that case, the illusion of Peronism as well as Marxism, are fantastic projections that finally destroy the utopia’s own creators and believers. In this way the texts of Nalé Roxlo become anti-utopian, comprising an allegory, in which images from the dominant Western culture and from Christian tradition are used to represent the Social imaginary.

I find Villegas’s analysis useful for understanding how *La cola de la sirena* also functions as an allegory of gender ideology and “the myth of women.” As one reviewer interprets it, Nalé Roxlo’s play is not so much about women but about what they represent to men:
“[Es] un canto de amor. Pero no del amor a la mujer, sino a la ilusión que nos da” (qtd. in La cola de la sirena 168; It is an ode to love. Not love for a woman, but rather, the illusion that she gives us). Patricio falls in love with a fantastic and idealized version of femininity, which is sustained only by his own imagination. Like all false illusions, the siren of his dreams looses her mystique when she becomes a common, flesh-and-blood woman. Patricio’s belief in mythological femininity causes him to disregard the real-world women he encounters. Meanwhile Alga pursues a myth of her own: the myth of gender essentialism. As Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble, gender is also a sort of idealized fantasy that individuals “perform” in order to create the illusion of an essential identity (173). Thus Alga and Patricio both pursue equally artificial myths of womanliness, one based on ancient legends, the other rooted in social gender codes.

In the first act of the play, Alga admits that she allowed herself to be caught in order to get closer to Patricio (La cola de la sirena 49). Alga insists that she is not a fish but rather a woman following her instincts: “No debe tratárseme como a un pez, sino como a una mujer. Y cuando una mujer cae, ya sea en un lecho o en una red, es porque quiso caer” (47; You shouldn’t treat me like a fish but like a woman. And when a woman falls, either in a bed of in a net, it is because she wants to fall). Once on land, however, Patricio has trouble passing his new partner off as a “woman.” Instead, Alga is treated as a sea creature devoid of gender. Langarone, the president of the fishing association comes to congratulate Patricio on his impressive “catch,” insisting that Patricio’s “love” for Alga is nothing more than “entusiasmo deportivo!” (68; Sporting enthusiasm). To make matters worse, the priest, Father Custodio, announces that a Church wedding is unlikely for the unusual couple: “El Obispo piensa que es un caso demasiado delicado para
resolverlo él. ¡Bautizar y casar a una sirena!” (76; The Bishop thinks this is too delicate of a subject for him to authorize. To baptize and marry a siren!). Alga seeks a medical solution to her “problem” in order to become accepted by her new community. Patricio’s cousin, Margarita, understands her anguish: “¡Da tanta pena verla desear ser una mujer como todas!” (73; It is so sad to see her wishing she could be a woman like the rest of us).

Unfortunately, surgery is presented as the couple’s last resort and Dr. Núñez is convinced that he will be able to transform Alga’s fishtail into legs. Patricio prefers to see Alga as a fantasy, “Un sueño que es realidad” (69; A dream come true), but he agrees to the operation so that he can marry the siren. Afterwards, Alga is happy to be a “real woman” rather than an impossible myth. She even demonstrates her “womanliness” in a disturbingly masochistic fashion; she implores the shoemaker to make a pair of pumps out of her discarded mermaid tail (84). While this disturbs Patricio, who laments the destruction of his fantasy, Alga feels that the operation has liberated her from her former life and allowed her greater freedom and independence on land. Before the procedure she was confined to a chair and now she has the ability to move around and do things for herself: “No puedes imaginarte tú que los tienes desde que naciste, lo que significa para mí tener pies, poder caminar, subir escaleras, correr, bailar” (87; You, who have had them ever since you were little, cannot understand what it means to me to have legs, to be able to walk, climb stairs, run, dance). She has also gained acceptance in the community. Nonetheless, Alga’s transformation from siren to woman is only successful so long as Patricio pays attention to her. His lack of interest makes her feel like a failure: “¿No comprendes qué humillante era para mí que me amaras por unas escamas de plata y no
por mi alma de mujer?” (135; Don’t you understand how humiliating it is for me that you love me for my silvery fish scales rather than for my woman’s soul?). When Alga finds Patricio pursuing another feminine curiosity, the airline pilot Gloria, it dawns on her that she naively surrendered herself body and soul to a man who only loved her for the erotic myth she represented:

Yo abandoné mi mundo por el tuyo, renuncié a ser una sirena por ti; a un ser extraordinario y brillante que te deslumbraba preferí ser a tu lado una pequeña sombra amante, una sombra que crecía o se achicaba según la luz que tú le prestases… y no debo quejarme de lo que hoy me pasa; nadie se cuida de no pisotear su sombra… Tarde he comprendido que lo que amabas en mí era mi cauda de plata, mi prestigio de mito marino. (La cola de la sirena 135)

(I left my world for yours, I gave up being a siren for you; Instead of the extraordinary and brilliant being that mesmerized you, I preferred to be to a small loving shadow by your side, a shadow that became bigger or smaller according to the light you gave it… and I can’t complain about what is happening to me now; Nobody takes care not to step on their own shadow… I realized too late that what you loved about me was my silvery fishtail, my prestige as a marine myth.)

Thus both parties are at fault for what has happened: Alga, for being too femininely self-sacrificing and submissive and Patricio for living in a fantasy world. Obviously, Patricio is interested in Gloria for the same reasons he was once interested in Alga; she represents a novelty. Patricio also expects Gloria to give up flying and devote herself solely to their new romance, lowering her too to a self-sacrificing and submissive role. For that reason history seems doomed to repeat itself, as Alga tells her rival: “Y tú, no llores, que ya tendrás que llorar después, cuando te hayas cortado las alas para estar a su altura, como hice yo con mi cauda, y entonces le des tanta lástima porque seas tan pequeña como él” (135; And you, don’t cry, because you will have a reason to cry later, when you have cut your wings to go down to his level, like I did with my fishtail, and
then he will think you are pathetic because you will be as small as him). The play ends on this ironic note, the more accommodating women are to men, the less likely men are to respect and value them. Additionally, Patricio is destined to bring about the destruction of each of his fantasies; He destroys the mermaid by taking her out of the sea and he will soon destroy the pilot by taking her out of the air. He insists on holding these women to impossible mythical standards while also expecting them to live in his world and to play the part of his submissive companion. Alga’s obsession with performing the fantasy of “normal woman” and her need for approval is equally absurd and yields equally disastrous results.

e. Sándor’s Feminist Epic: Penélope ya no teje

Malena Sándor wrote Penélope ya no teje (Penelope No Longer Knits) while living in Spain (Jones, Behind Spanish American 226). The original script was adapted into a musical and it debuted in Buenos Aires at the Teatro Astral on 27 Sept 1946 starring Elena Lucena as Penélope. Comparing Sándor’s single-authored text to the review of the adapted musical version in Clarín reveals that they are, in fact, two radically different works sending radically different messages about women’s role in myth and society. I will first analyze Sándor’s play as it appears in her Teatro completo and later comment on the musical version as it is described in the theatre program and in Clarín’s review after it opened in Buenos Aires.

Sándor’s play, which she described as “casi una farsa” (180; almost a farce), is a humorous re-interpretation of Homer’s odyssey in which Penélope embarks on a journey

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52 The program states that the text was co-authored by “Gurruchaga y Porter,” which could be one name or two. While no first names are given, Clarín refers to the author(s) as masculine (“los autores”) (“Penélope ya no teje” 8). George Andriani and Daniel French composed the music.
of her own. The prologue takes place in heaven where Penélope talks with legendary female figures from other historical contexts: Helen of Troy; Juliet (of Romeo and Juliet); La Dama de las Camelias (Alexander Dumas’s tragic heroine); Mata Hari; and George Sand. The women discuss the importance of their lives and the impact that each one of them has had on subsequent generations. Penélope’s friends all accuse her of having wasted her life by knitting alone in her youth while her husband pursued glorious adventures. What is more, they resent Penélope for having created an ideal of womanhood that consists of blind loyalty and passivity. Eventually, Gloria Warren, a twentieth-century actress from Hollywood, reaches Heaven (after dying in a traffic accident in Argentina) and announces that modern women no longer subscribe to Penélope’s antiquated notions of feminine virtue and fidelity. As a result, the women dare Penélope to return to Earth to preach loyalty and devotion. Accepting the challenge, she travels to Argentina where she moves into Gloria’s hotel room and passes herself off as one of her friends (using the name Penélope García). Soon her plan begins to unravel. She falls in love with a handsome airline pilot, Arturo Ulises Aldana, and gives herself permission to marry him (despite the fact that her first husband waits for her in heaven), claiming that by getting married she can teach fidelity through her own example. History repeats itself when Arturo’s boss sends him away on a mission to a foreign country. His absence is prolonged and, as in the original Odyssey, Penélope’s numerous suitors presume her husband dead. When Penélope grows tired of knitting, she takes up embroidery. When she tires of embroidery, she entertains her male guests. Eventually, she falls for one of the men but, just as she is about to kiss him, Arturo returns home demanding explanations for his wife’s adulterous behavior. Before Penélope can resolve
her conflict with Arturo, her son, Telémaco, summons her back to heaven. Arturo regrets having fought with Penélope and he even attempts to follow her into the afterlife by crashing his airplane but is forced to return to Earth on a technicality (he survives the accident). When Penélope tries to go back to knitting, she is distracted by the memory of Arturo.

Sándor’s revised *Odyssey* replaces the original phallocentric narrative with a woman-centered one that asks spectators to reread the epic through the lens of feminism. According to classicist Lillian Eileen Doherty, the original story is emblematic of immasculation, since readers tend to identify with the active male hero, Ulysses, rather than the passive female characters like Penélope. Doherty posits that “the narrative process of focalization allows, indeed requires, a female reader of the *Odyssey* to see the world of the epic from the vantage point of its hero, with the same sense of privilege and the satisfaction in achievement that that view implies” and “the female reader . . . is offered subject positions that are at least implicitly subordinate to those available to males” (26, 27). Sándor’s farce, however, allows Homer’s female “readers” to respond to the original epic and to create their own counter-narrative. Helen of Troy tells Penélope that the story is nothing more than a ploy to get women to believe in a false ideal of fidelity: “Cuando Ulises te dejó eras muy joven. Es verdad que lo esperaste. También es verdad que la historia necesitaba un símbolo para la fidelidad. Te encontró a ti.” (Sándor 190; When Ulysses left you were very young. It’s true that you waited. It’s also true that history needed a symbol of fidelity. It found you). George Sand blames the myth of Penélope for causing some of society’s harsh judgments of women: “Eres odiosa. Si tú no hubieras inventado la fidelidad, a nadie se le hubiera ocurrido pensar mal de las mujeres
infieles." (194; You are detestable. If you hadn’t invented fidelity, nobody would think badly of unfaithful women). At first Penélope defends the master narrative against these criticisms, claiming that women have a responsibility to be unwaveringly faithful to their husbands; but when she returns to earth she finds this task increasingly more difficult.

Once in Argentina, Penélope encounters a modern woman’s reading of the Odyssey. Her neighbor Suzy criticizes Homer’s heroine for denying herself happiness while her husband committed adultery. Suzy’s reading causes Penélope to question her original values:

SUZY. . . . ¿Quién le consta que la conducta de [Ulises] fue igualmente irreprochable?
PENÉLOPE. (Reaccionando.) ¡Ay, Ulises…!
SUZY. (Quién no ha oído.) Porque no me hará creer usted que el hombre sabe esperar. Y si él no desespera en la espera, ¿Por qué la mujer va a dejar que lleguen las canas y las arrugas sin brindarse algunos gustos que hacen la vida mas agradable?
PENÉLOPE. (Un poco perturbada.) Naturalmente… Hay algo de cierto… (En seguida, asustada.) Pero no… No puede tener nada de cierto… La fidelidad… (207).

(SUZY. . . . ¿Who’s to say that [Ulysses’] conduct was equally irreproachable? 
PENÉLOPE. (Reacting.) Oh, Ulysses!
SUZY. (Who has not heard.) Because you can’t make me believe that a man knows how to wait. And if he doesn’t desperately wait around, why should a woman allow herself to grow old and grey without enjoying some of life’s little pleasures?
PENÉLOPE. (A little perturbed.) Naturally… There is some truth to that… (Later, frightened.) But no… There can’t be any truth to it! Fidelity…)

In a subsequent scene, Penélope entertains her male suitors (after her new husband leaves) and Suzy announces to the caller that “Penélope ya no teje” (Penelope no longer knits). When Arturo returns home and accuses his wife of adultery she does not beg for forgiveness. Instead, she argues that under the circumstances it was only natural for her to
try to start a new life. After Penélope returns to heaven, the other mythical heroines treat her differently, now that they have witnessed her human side. Mata Hari warns that Penélope’s legacy is falling apart, “están destruyendo tu mito” (they are destroying your myth). George Sand, however, contradicts her, arguing that a new story is only just beginning: “Al contrario. Ulises tuvo su Odisea. No faltaba más que la tuya, Penélope. Ya pueden empezar a escribirla” (229; On the contrary. Ulysses had his Odyssey. The only thing missing was yours, Penélope. Now they can begin to write it).

Despite Sándor’s best efforts to to create a feminist revision of the Odyssey, the opening-night performance of Penélope ya no teje communicated a very conventional message to spectators about love, devotion and the role of “the Penélope myth” in the Argentine cultural imagination. The program for the musical shows Penélope poised confidently on Earth, her knitting abandoned on the ground, while an angry Ulysses peers down from heaven (see Appendix B). In the commercial musical version, Penelope’s “adultery” takes place in Hollywood, not Argentina. Perhaps this is because the script’s adapters thought it more appropriate to stage sexual transgressions in Hollywood, which already had a reputation for loose moral behavior, than in Buenos Aires, where divorce was still illegal and Catholicism governed social mores. Additionally, in the musical version, Ulysses secretly follows his wife to Earth and spies on her, disguised as a suitor. Penélope attempts to maintain her fidelity, but she is constantly wooed by attractive Hollywood actors. Eventually, she is seduced by one of the men but he turns out to be her husband in disguise. Thus Penélope never actually commits adultery “maintaining in this way Penélope’s virtue and respecting the symbol that she represent” (“quedando así a salvo la virtud de Penélope y respetado el símbolo que ella representa”), according to the
review in Clarín (“Penélope ya no teje” 8). Clarín also called Penélope a “perennial symbol of conjugal fidelity” (8; símbolo perenne de fidelidad conyugal).

Apparently, the makers of the musical were concerned that Sándor’s script carried with it a pro-divorce message, which was probably the author’s intention, so they changed significant portions of the story and reversed the ending.\textsuperscript{53} Instead of destroying the myth, they maintained it, eliminating the heroine’s self-determination in the process. In Sándor’s play Penélope goes through an ideological transformation and decides to take charge of her life and determine her own destiny. Yet in the musical version, Penélope is a femme-fatal who falls victim to the powers of male seduction until she is finally “saved” by her husband; her destiny thus determined by her husband. Thus a female-authored play that offers a female-centered reading of Penélope is replaced with a male-authored one that upholds the original male-centered myth; a feminist work is “re-immasculated.”

f. \textit{Mamá Noé} by Josefina Marpóns

Josefina Marpóns (dates unknown) moved to Argentina from Uruguay with her family as a baby. She became a prolific journalist and an active supporter of feminism and socialism. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s Marpóns contributed to women’s magazines like \textit{El Hogar}, \textit{Vida Femenina}, and \textit{La Mujer y el Niño} (which she directed). She also wrote for newspapers such as \textit{Crítica}, \textit{Noticias Gráficas}, and the socialist daily \textit{La Vanguardia}. Her books include a novel, \textit{44 horas semanales} (1936); two feminist studies \textit{La mujer en el trabajo} (1937) and \textit{La mujer y sus lucha con el ambiente} (1947); two collections of short stories (written in dramatic dialog), \textit{Satantás y otros cuentos}.

\textsuperscript{53} As I noted earlier, divorce was still illegal in Argentina in 1946. Juan Perón finally legalized it in 1954 (Lavrin 241).
(1933) and Rouge (1934); and a full-length play Mamá Noé (Mama Noah, 1950). As I pointed out in Chapter 3, Catholic education was mandatory in Argentine schools from the early 1940s through Perón’s first presidency (Carlson 184). Thus, the Biblical story of Noah, which Marpóns’ rewrites in Mamá Noé was, no doubt, well known to the Argentine public of her day. Her anticlerical, socialist and feminist interpretation of the legend was, however, exceptional--and may also account for the fact that Mamá Noé was never performed.

Marpóns endows several of her characters with a twentieth-century socialist-feminist perspective of civil rights that goes against the authorized Christian account of Noah and his Ark. A team of workers hired to build the vessel form a labor union and demand better pay and improved working conditions but Noah ignores their request, stating that they will all perish in the coming flood. He persuaded his family--his wife, his sons, and his daughters-in-law--to board the Ark (along with the animals), but he firmly refuses to save the lives of the workers and their families. The union organizer, however, sneaks onto the ark where he is protected by the three daughters-in-law, who all disagree with Noah’s elitist attitude. The most vocal of Noah’s critics, and the most feminist, is Margot, the wife of Cam (Ham).\footnote{According to the bible, Noah condemns Ham and his descendents to be the servants of his two other sons Japheth and Shem (Genesis 9:25).} Noah’s wife, called Mamá Noé (Mama Noah), also disapproves of her husband’s behavior but she withholds criticism of him until they reach dry land. At the end of the play, after Noah condemns Ham to eternal servitude, Mama Noah defends her son and launches into a lengthy attack of Noah’s and God’s hierarchical and violent formation of the world.
Marpón’s treatment of historical periods correlates with Brechtian historicism because she distances the public from the events portrayed. Dressed in biblical robes, Noah repeats God’s decree and imposes his staunchly patriarchal view of the world upon his skeptical daughters-in-law and disgruntled workers: “Dios me mandó construir el Arca. Repito: como jefe de la familia haré cumplir a todos la divina palabra” (Mamá Noé 57; God commanded me to build the ark. I repeat: as head of the family I will make everyone follow the divine word). In contrast, the younger generation--Noah’s sons and their wives--appear out of place on the Ark with their modern-day travel clothes and their touristy suitcases (adorned with international hotel stickers). Margot, in particular, epitomizes the twentieth-century political perspective and likens Noah to current modern paternalistic rulers like Perón: “Mi querido suegro habla como un dictador: priva de la independencia a sus súbditos por inspiración divina” (68; My dear father-in-law talks like a dictator: he deprives his subjects of rights because of divine inspiration). Towards the end of the play, when Noah prohibits newspapers on the Ark, Ham begs him to leave some forms of repression for future societies to invent, which appears to be another reference to Peronism: “No inventes tú la censura Noé; deja algo novedoso para las futuras generaciones, más cultas y progresistas” (128; Don’t invent censorship Noah; Leave something new for the more sophisticated and progressive generations of the future). This encourages the spectator to disengage emotionally from the story and to view both the past and the present from critical distances. Audiences should view Noah’s worldview, as well as the dictatorial rhetoric of their own time, with skepticism.

Mama Noah and her daughters-in-law insist on inscribing themselves into the historical record as self-determined individuals instead of accepting the Bible’s portrayal
of them as nothing more than appendages to their husbands. When Noah comments that
his sons have come home, one of the women corrects him: “Y sus respectivas esposas,
suegro Noé, no nos olvides” (Mamá Noé 54; and their respective wives, father-in-law
Noah, don’t forget about us). When Noah tells his wife that history will overlook her, she
is reminded of women’s marginalization in other areas of society: “Creí que eso no
ocurría sino en el mundo artístico, en el diplomático y en el de la burocracía” (64; I
thought this only happened in the worlds of art, in diplomacy, and in bureaucracy).
Margot is more optimistic. At one point she predicts that “¡el feminismo triunfará en el
mundo entero!” (77; feminism will triumph the world over!). But when Ham reads a draft
of the Bible and reports that there will be no mention of the women in the official account
of the flood she declares: “El Señor será antifeminista, lo temo” (142; I’m afraid the Lord
must be an antifeminist).

Margot also questions God’s motives for creating the flood in the first place,
pointing out that, if the Lord is indeed all powerful, He could have chosen a less violent
method for inspiring goodness in man. Mama Noah tries to defend Him by humorously
saying “[s]erá que el pobrecito Dios no tiene imaginación” (Mamá Noé 114; it must be
that poor little God lacks imagination). She believes that she owes Noah loyalty and she
reproaches her children for complaining about him. Mama Noah does, however, admit
that she disapproves of her husband’s behavior to the union organizer (112). By the end
of the last act, Mama Noah gains the courage to finally confront her husband and even to
boldly disobey him. After they reach dry land and the children go their separate ways,
Mama Noah declares that she will follow them because she wants to repair the damage
Noah has done: “Saldré tras mis hijos a corregir tu lección” (155; I’ll go after my children
to correct your lesson). She criticizes Noah for blindly obeying God’s orders while ignoring her advice: “¿Y a mí qué me importa tu Creación? … ¿Qué tengo que ver con tu Creación? Ése es asunto tuyo y de Dios, tu socio y amo” (What do I care about your Creation? … What do I have to do with it? This is your business, yours and God’s, your associate and boss). She contrasts her maternal love with his lust for power: “[M]i egoísmo lo dicta el amor y el tuyo la ambición. Quiero a mis hijos y tú las abstracciones” (158; My egoism is dictated by love and yours is dictated by ambition. I love my children and you love abstractions). Through this interaction, Marpóns revises the Biblical story of Creation and offers a feminist and socialist vision of the future. Over the course of the play the once heroic patriarch Noah slowly loses all respectability and is eventually abandoned by his family. Meanwhile, his submissive wife eventually rejects his ideology and becomes a strong matriarchal heroine in her own right. As a result, Mama Noah emerges as an alternative symbol to replace Noah in the social imagination. Mamá Noé may be seen as a pre-cursor to liberation theology and “liberation theatre,” a strategy for supporting the oppressed masses through theatre that gained prominence in the 1960s and 1970s (Versényi 159-91). According to Adam Versényi, the proponents of liberation theology, including Augusto Boal (quoted in the epigram), believed that “theatre should become another force for liberation from certain inherited structures, whether societal, political, or aesthetic, that have been externally imposed” (159). In Marpóns’ play Mama Noah’s rejection of God and her husband supports an ideology of liberation that goes beyond women’s rights by including the rights of other oppressed classes as represented by the characters of Ham and the Union organizer.
g. Subverted Myths and the Social Imagination

Each of the plays analyzed in this chapter attempt to plant a seed of doubt in the popular imagination regarding the authority of ancient myth. Storni, Sándor and Marpóns attack very specific texts—Hecuba, the Odyssey and the Bible—while Nalé Roxlo ridicules the loyal readers of such texts whose faith in myth, both ancient and contemporary, obscures their vision of reality. In each case, the authors employ innovative dramatic techniques in order to encourage the reader/spectator to view myth objectively rather than emotionally and to view contemporary social injustices from an equally critical distance. The fact that Sándor’s play was altered and Marpón’s play was never performed further suggests that these feminist manipulations of myth disturbed the mainstream theatre industry. Perhaps this is because, as a result of these radical re-writings, readers and spectators may no longer look at ancient heroines the same way again: Polixena, the siren, Penélope, and Noah’s wife become complex and multidimensional heroines rather than mythological side-notes.
CONCLUSION

Feminist theatre was both a product of its environment and an agent of change throughout the first half of the twentieth century in Argentina. A number of plays promoted Civil Code reform, the legalization of divorce, and women’s intellectual and professional development along with other issues central to the feminist imagination. Yet dramatists found that if they did not conform to accepted theatre conventions they risked the public’s rejection. This resulted in the development of myriad strategies for craftily inserting feminist messages into established theatrical genres: thesis drama; domestic melodrama; conventional comedy; and myth-based modern theatre. The methods behind these dramatic alterations include idealized dialogues, innovative uses of space, role-play, and critical distancing techniques. Some authors attracted mainstream spectators by making only subtle modifications to established dramatic formulas while others radically broke with convention and boldly confronted the prejudices of audiences and critics.

At the turn of the century, feminist-leaning dramatists promoted women’s rights while catering to popular aesthetics and conventional genres; but they also challenged spectators to examine the injustices of the Civil Code and to reexamine women’s role in society. A few authors garnered the public’s sympathy by highlighting their heroines’ femininity or using allegorical plots to illustrate their ideology. Didactic male thesis dramatists like José González Castillo, and César Iglesias Paz captured the public’s attention while emphasizing the debates about feminism and legislative reform taking
place in the Congress and at women’s conferences--even if the male characters occupied center stage. Salvadora Medina Onrubia, Alfonsina Storni, and Malena Sándor used and adapted the thesis drama in order to give more power, and more stage presence, to female characters, despite the fact that most reviewers objected to “political” women playwrights. Female dramatists also found another strategy. When they were discouraged from writing didactic thesis dramas they cultivated “safer” methods for publicizing their ideas: domestic melodrama and allegory. The resulting feminist melodramas consisted of radically subversive messages embedded in exaggerated and emotional (“feminine”) plots. In plays by Lola Pita Martínez, Alcira Olivé, Carolina Alió, Salvadora Medina Onrubia, and Alfonsina Storni, feminist victims struggled against the sexist victimizers that repulsed them, just as feminist activists struggled against a patriarchal culture that repressed them.

As the feminist movement gained momentum and made progress toward full social equality, dramatists responded accordingly. In the 1930s and 40s women enjoyed greater professional and civil freedom but they were still subjected to their society’s residual prejudices about women. Even women’s suffrage was touted by Eva Perón as a way for women to better serve their husbands and their country, rather than a way for women to assert their autonomy. Additionally, the government pressured dramatists to uphold the dominant culture’s values and gender codes. Still, some feminist dramatists responded to these enduring sexist attitudes through light-hearted comedies that poked-fun at antiquated machismo. Camilo Darthés and Carlos Damel’s female protagonists outsmart their friends and family members by pretending to go along with social conventions when in reality they lead modern, “emancipated” lives. Malena Sándor’s
heroines outwardly defy social expectations but the truly ridiculous characters in each of
her plays are the ones that fail to recognize the changing role of women in society.
Instead of ending up as brides, Sándor’s heroines stay single and resolve their problems
by looking inward and by consulting other women—to the consternation of critics
unaccustomed to such female-centered endings. But by far the boldest, and least likely to
be staged, feminist challenges in the theatre industry were the myth-based dramas of the
1930s and 40s, thanks to a world-wide shift away from conventional realism. Feminist
dramatists took advantage of non-mimetic distancing techniques in order to deconstruct
some of the ancient myths underlying contemporary gender conformity. On the one hand,
Conrado Nalé Roxlo’s tragic siren (Alga) and pathetic male dreamer (Patricio) illustrate
the damage that too much faith in feminine myths, both ancient and contemporary, can
have on male and female relationships. On the other hand, Alfonsina Storni, Malena
Sándor and Josefina Marpóns explode patriarchal mythology and create more positive
female symbols out of the rubble of ancient legends. As they encourage the spectators to
critically examine the sexism of the past they also challenge them to reevaluate the
situation of women in the present. The shift away from conventional realism in the
Argentine theatre industry of this period also allowed feminist dramatists more flexibility
with which to challenge society’s faith in the “reality” of womanliness and gender. Each
myth-based play replaces the narrow view of femininity in the collective imagination
with stronger and truer-to-life feminist heroines.

Thanks to the efforts of playwrights and women’s rights activists, critics became
more accustomed to feminist themes over the decades. Not only were they more accepted
in the 30s and 40s than they had been in the first decades of the twentieth century, they
were sometimes even used as a selling point for plays (as evidenced by the
advertisements of La cola de la sirena). Still, despite the progress of the women’s rights
movement, female playwrights at that time ran into more difficulties having their works
performed than did their male counterparts: Storni’s Polixena y la cocinerita was only
performed after her death in a short commemorative presentation; Sándor’s Penélope ya
no teje was rewritten and stripped of its original feminist message; and Marpóns’ Mamá
Noé was never performed. However, if one compares the first wave (1914 to 1930) of
Argentine feminist theatre to the second wave (1930 to 1950), one may see a clear
progression in feminist drama that paralleled, and may have even influenced, the social
change happening in the society at large. The typical victimized female protagonist and
femme fatale of the 10s and 20s was replaced with a more self-assured and powerful
heroine in the 30s and 40s. This updated heroine gave her opinions more freely and
guided the dramatic plots through role play. Additional progress was made in the area of
theatrical space. Heroines of thesis dramas and melodramas were often restricted to the
domestic sphere and excluded from political discussions while the female protagonists of
later genres demonstrated more control over their surroundings; Storni’s little cook even
turned her kitchen inside out.

Argentina is a country with a rich feminist theatre tradition dating from the turn of
the twentieth century to the present day. Although early-twentieth-century feminist plays
vary in format, aesthetics, and commercial appeal, each one carries with it a burgeoning
feminist imagination that seeks to alter the prevailing discourse of the period. These
scripts reveal the role that feminism played in the development of national culture in
Argentina as well as the role that theatre played in the advancement of feminist social change.
APPENDIX A

Lists of Feminist Debuts by Genre

Table 1: Debuts of Feminist Thesis Dramas in Buenos Aires from 1914 to 1937 (Selection)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Theatre House</th>
<th>Theatre House</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>10-Jan</td>
<td>Almafuerte</td>
<td>Salvadora Medina Onrubia</td>
<td>Gamez-Rosich</td>
<td>Teatro Apolo</td>
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<td>1915</td>
<td>26-Mar</td>
<td>El hijo de Agar</td>
<td>José González Castillo</td>
<td>Alberto Ghiraldo</td>
<td>Teatro Nacional de Comedia</td>
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<td>1917</td>
<td>4-May</td>
<td>El complot del silencio</td>
<td>César Iglesias Paz</td>
<td>Rosich-Ballerini</td>
<td>Teatro San Martín</td>
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<td>1918</td>
<td>7-Jun</td>
<td>La mujer de Ulises</td>
<td>José González Castillo</td>
<td>Quiroga-Rosich</td>
<td>Teatro Liceo</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>10-Mar</td>
<td>El Amo del mundo</td>
<td>Alfonzina Storni</td>
<td>Fanny Brena</td>
<td>Teatro Cervantes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>9-Nov</td>
<td>Yo me divorcio, papá</td>
<td>Malena Sándor</td>
<td>(unknown)</td>
<td>Teatro Alba</td>
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Table 2: Debuts of Feminist Melodramas From 1922-1929 (Selection)

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<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>20-Oct</td>
<td>Marcela</td>
<td>Lola Pita Martínez</td>
<td>Pagano-Ducasse</td>
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<td>1923</td>
<td>27-Jul</td>
<td>La salvación</td>
<td>Alcira Olivé</td>
<td>Pagano-Ducasse</td>
<td>Teatro Olimpo, Rosario</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>18-Dec</td>
<td>Pobres almas</td>
<td>Carolina Alió</td>
<td>José Gómez</td>
<td>Teatro Odeon, Mar del Plata</td>
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<td>1927</td>
<td>Not Performed</td>
<td>La debilidad de Mister Dougall</td>
<td>Alfonsina Storni</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>10-Mar</td>
<td>Las Decentradas</td>
<td>Salvadora Medina Onrubia</td>
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Table 3: Debuts of Feminist Comedy from 1938 to 1946 (Selection)

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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>21-Jul</td>
<td>La hermana Josefina</td>
<td>Camilo Darthés and Carlos Damel</td>
<td>Comisión Nacional de Cultura</td>
<td>Teatro Cervantes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>10-Nov</td>
<td>Una mujer libre</td>
<td>Malena Sándor</td>
<td>Comisión Nacional de Cultura</td>
<td>Teatro Cervantes</td>
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<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>6-Jul</td>
<td>Tu vida y la mía</td>
<td>Malena Sándor</td>
<td>Compañía Argentina de Comedia</td>
<td>Teatro Ateneo</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>26-Mar</td>
<td>Manuel García</td>
<td>Camilo Darthés and Carlos Damel</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teatro Buenos Aires</td>
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Table 4: Debuts of Myth-Based Feminist Plays from 1931 to 1950 (Selection)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Theatre House</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9-Nov</td>
<td>Polixena y la cocinerita</td>
<td>Alfonsina Storni</td>
<td>“La Peña” (Literary group)</td>
<td>Café Tortoni</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>20-May</td>
<td>La cola de la sirena</td>
<td>Conrado Nalé Roxlo</td>
<td>Enrique Gustavino</td>
<td>Teatro Marconi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>27-Sept</td>
<td>Penélope ya no teje</td>
<td>Malena Sándor</td>
<td>Teatro Astral</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Not Performed</td>
<td>Mamá Noé</td>
<td>Josefina Marpóns</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not Performed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Program for Penélope ya no teje (excerpt)

PENÉLOPE

Mujer de Ulises. Éste se fué a la guerra y tardó veinte años en volver. Ella lo aguardó tejiendo de día y des-tejiendo de noche la tela que al quedar terminada la obligaría a elegir nuevo marido entre sus pretendientes. Símbolo de la fidelidad.
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