

CHAPTER 1

Reclaiming the Home

“The images of married life that are formed in childhood remain unwavering even when actual experience might betray them as false.”

—Regina Barreca, *Perfect Husbands & Other Fairy Tales*

In her commentary on the status of marriage in the 1990s, Regina Barreca posits that Western culture teaches women that their natural state is within marriage, that Mr. Right is anyone who will wed them, and that they should marry as soon and as well as possible (1993, 6–34). This message encourages husband hunters to contort themselves physically, emotionally, or spiritually in order to make a match (8). Yet, once safely protected within marriage, wives often discover that they are disillusioned rather than elated by their accomplishment. The romantic notions of living happily ever after are replaced by feelings of suffocation and entrapment, as newlyweds determine that they have lost control over their lives. In exchange for the safety and security of home and husband, women are offered passivity. When feelings of emptiness, longing, and loneliness bubble to the surface, women are encouraged to fill the void with children. Rather than engaging in a search within the self, wives move forward to answer the social and biological call to reproduce. Yet while child raising and domestic duties are important, they do not necessarily lead to development of the self or one’s gifts (Suplicy 1985, 235). Thus, in the rush to join hearts and lives, women abandon parts of themselves that are difficult to recover and they assume disguises that betray their real needs and desires.

Staging women caught in this socially constructed trap of romance and marriage was the specialty of theater practitioners of the naturalist/realist aesthetic in the late nineteenth century. Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), one of the best known members of this school, transformed the staging of marriage by moving dramatic action into the

drawing room of the bourgeois family (Scolnicov 1994, 99). In *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890) the Norwegian dramatist illustrated how the bourgeois ideology of marriage, portrayed in the elegant and detailed drawing rooms, was blindly internalized by his protagonists Nora and Hedda. Behind the apparent beauty and security of married life and family, each woman discovers the suffocating rules governing wives. Ibsen's psychological analysis and realistic treatment of his protagonists' conflicts within the economic, sexual, and even emotional constraints of marriage make manifest each protagonists' resolve to escape her fate. Nora refuses to accept her inferior and dependent status, especially once she learns that her husband values money not love. Hedda cannot find any allowable form of self-expression, including motherhood, that meets her personal needs. While Nora walks out of her "doll house," leaving behind the status of marriage and access to her children, Hedda takes her own life and that of the baby she is carrying. In these two plays and others, Ibsen employed the scenery inside the house to elaborate a portrait of women as socially confined and personally stunted. Rather than fulfill its ideological purpose as a refuge, the drawing room provided yet another stage on which women were required to perform their feminine roles (94, 96).

In this chapter, I will discuss plays by Spanish American and Brazilian dramatists that examine male-female relations within romance and marriage. This is the theme that appeared in almost one third of the plays in my sample and that engaged the largest number of dramatists representing the greatest number of countries. In these dramas, the playwrights address romantic love, the gendered division of labor, relations of power and dependence, and sexuality and infidelity in marriage. I will argue that the protagonists in these plays attempt to redefine their traditional inferior status by reclaiming domestic theatrical space. In provocative words and actions, the female characters endeavor to assert themselves as individuals, achieve an equitable relationship, and question the reigning model of patriarchal marriage.

While many of the plays begin with a realistic setting reminiscent of Ibsen's time, they differ from that tradition by offering a feminine perspective that involves both theatrical and thematic variations. From a theatrical standpoint, these plays venture into comedy, parody, the symbolic, and abstract treatments of women's lives. Most of the protagonists have a greater variety of choices than the self-destructive

ones exercised by Ibsen's protagonists. In order to achieve their personal goals, the protagonists in these plays destabilize the traditional components of romance and matrimony and the social and religious norms that underwrite them. That is, they build on Ibsen's concerns about patriarchy by engaging with rather than escaping from the intricate network of social and cultural practices that operate within Latin America today.

The eight plays that serve as examples for this analysis are divided into three thematic sections: romantic love, sexual politics, and gender bending. The first group of plays composed of Ana Istarú's *El vuelo de la grulla* (Costa Rica, 1984), and Inés Margarita Stranger's *Cariño malo* (Chile 1990), explores the ways in which romantic love and marriage can lead to the loss of self.¹ These two plays communicate the deception of women when they discover the unequal exchange they have made for love. The second group of plays about sexual politics treats the imbalance of power in relations between the sexes and the role of political activism in raising awareness about that inequity.² The settings re-create two key moments in the history of Latin America: the politically contentious period of the 1960s–1970s and the fall out from those movements twenty years later in the late 1980s and 1990s. The two plays in this second section are *À prova de fogo* (Brazil, 1977) by Consuelo de Castro and *Boca molhada de paixão calada* (Brazil, 1988) by Leilah Assunção. The last group of four plays questions traditional sex roles and gender divisions in marriage through role reversal, parody, and ambiguity.³ In these plays, Latin American women characters demonstrate “unseemly” behavior when they transgress the rules of femininity within romantic relationships. The first two plays in which protagonists outmaneuver their partners by becoming dynamic defenders of their right to enact “masculine” privileges are *Casa llena* (Mexico, 1986) by Estela Leñero and *Whiskey & Cocaína* (Venezuela, 1984) by Thais Erminy. The final two plays of the chapter, *Roda cor de roda* (Brazil, 1977) by Leilah Assunção and *Uno/El bigote* (Mexico, 1985) by Sabina Berman, venture even further into unstable gender terrain by presenting characters who appear to fuse, exchange, and/or parody each other's sex roles, but from within the confines of the traditional romantic triangle.

In order to analyze these eight plays on romance and marriage, I will employ both social science research on women and family in Latin America and a critical framework on the gendered meaning of

theatrical space. Social science research provides insights into the division of power and responsibilities in the family, the separation of worlds into the masculine public and the feminine private, and the social and religious norms that cooperate to enforce gender difference. In addition, an understanding of the relationship between the space portrayed on stage (mimetic) and that referred to beyond the stage (diegetic) is particularly useful for treating relations between the sexes, since society and the theater alike associate each gender with a separate domain.

All but two of the eight plays focus on a couple or couples, while the remaining two place a group of students and a trio of women on center stage. Unlike Ibsen's homemaker protagonists, here the majority of the main characters are educated, professional women who participate in the work-world outside the home. Most of these characters, who could be alter egos of the dramatists, are strong, independent women rather than passive, long-suffering and dependent wives commonly held as the stereotypical image of married women in Latin America. Moreover, these protagonists, who aren't afraid to challenge the rules of traditional male-female relations, are seen as threatening equals to the men in their lives. In their conflicts they attempt to rewrite the rules that have governed male-female relations and thus to make their homes more nurturing for themselves.

A quick review of the keyword *matrimonio* (marriage) in Spanish language reference sources *Libros en venta* and the *Hispanic American Periodicals Index (HAPI)* confirms the popularity of this topic in scholarly and journalistic writing in Latin America. *Libros en venta* reported over seven hundred citations of books with sociological, economic, and religious themes. *HAPI* listed ninety-five records of articles with similar approaches to the topic. Both databases registered the ubiquitous presence of the Roman Catholic Church whose numerous publications serve to advise and prescribe about matrimony and family life.

The church began its role as moral educator in the earliest days of the colonization, and it continues to exercise this function more than five hundred years later. Patriarchal marriage came to the New World with the Spanish and Portuguese religious and civil authorities who imposed it as a method for policing the sexual relations of a heterogeneous racial population. Elizabeth Dore defines this marriage relationship as, "the particular family/household type in which the senior male controls and protects everyone in the household—male

and female” (1997, 105). Virginia Wright Wexman adds to the definition that patriarchal marriage rests on the idea of separate spheres for each of the sexes (1993, 13). Marriage was a colonizing vehicle for imposing European concepts of lineage, social class, and social order and for establishing the family as an important unit for transmitting customs, norms, and traditions (Lavrin 1989, 13–24). Laws governing marriage made women and children property of husbands. In addition, legal inferiority for wives was buttressed by a network of moral injunctions that divided and separated human behavior by gender. Men were placed in a privileged position and women were further regulated by equating their virginity or chastity with their moral virtue, a concept expressed with the terms “honor” and “honesty.” Catholic religious doctrine has justified the suppression of women since the sixteenth century with its three precepts of “matrimonial morality”—monogamy, exogamy, and the repression of pleasure (Cicerchia 1997, 123). These European rules for marriage and for the moral behavior of each sex were never equally enforced, however, leading to the development of the double standard, as Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Cecilia Rabell have observed (1994, 13).

The current popular image of marriage in Latin America was shaped by romanticism, civil legislation, and secularization during the nineteenth century. European romanticism with its emphasis on individualism and its idealization of romance as a key to domestic harmony, changed the nature of relations between the sexes. Romanticism influenced marriage in North America by turning it into an environment for personal fulfillment, rather than an extension of family needs or religious dictates (Wexman 1993, 12). Similar changes occurred in Latin America when, for example, the Portuguese court arrived in Rio de Janeiro in the early 1800s bringing along new values, such as romantic love as the means to and reason for marrying (Núcleo de Estudos Sobre a Mulher 1984, 32). Romanticism also helped advance the myth of complementary relations: that each partner was incomplete before finding the other and that the two together made one whole being (Vaitsman 1994, 160). Romantic love also obscured the fact that women had few alternatives but to marry if they were not self-supporting (Barreca 1993, 231). In its promise of fulfilling individual emotional aspirations, romantic love seemed to provide the answers to many problems—loneliness, poverty, fear, and the need for sexual expression (Núcleo de Estudos Sobre a Mulher, 35).

Laws governing the family were altered during the nineteenth century to grant individual freedom from parental authority to grown children, although wives remained subordinated to their spouses and daughters transferred guardianship from father to husband when they married (Dore 1997, 108). The church lost most of its legal control over the family to the state as civil society established its own rules during the years of independence, according to Ricardo Cicerchia (1997, 122). During this slowly evolving but consolidating practice of married life, the division of the world into private feminine spaces and public masculine spaces was reinforced by the transition from rural to urban life. Farm life had required involvement of family members in the production and consumption of essential goods. However, the move into the city where industrial jobs prevailed eventually took women and children out of the labor force. Children went to school and women went home to the isolation of the domestic terrain where their labor was seen as an individualized expression of affection and nurture rather than as an economic contribution to society (Bonaparte 1997, 55; Durham 1991, 58).

The first half of the twentieth century saw suffragette movements in the United States and Great Britain marking the beginning of the great struggle for civil rights. However, only in the last half of the twentieth century did the model of patriarchal marriage, that had survived with some modifications since colonization, begin to be seriously questioned in Latin America. It was socioeconomic, political, and educational changes instigated by governments, international organizations, and women themselves that initiated this process. The Cuban Revolution (1958), the declaration of the International Decade of the Woman (1975–1985), and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (1980s) contributed to a re-evaluation of the status of women in marriage and in the work force. Fidel Castro began a movement for greater human rights for women by introducing a restructuring of society that valued women and their work outside the home and supported them with social services, reforms, and efforts to create equality in their home lives. The United Nations drew attention to and thus legitimized the idea of equality between men and women with its initiative “Equality, Development and Peace” (Schutte 1993, 211, 223–24). The Sandinistas adopted a liberating stance toward women in their revolutionary theory and practice in which women were active inside and outside the party (Bose and Acosta-Belén 1995, 7).

In addition, conditions in Latin America following World War II encouraged economic expansion and the establishment of postsecondary institutions forever changing the landscape of opportunities for women. In Brazil, for example, educational reforms set up separate but equal facilities for men and women in 1943 and then later, in 1961, gave women the same access to a college education as men. According to June E. Hahner, from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, the number of women attending universities in Brazil increased tenfold, while the number of male university students only quadrupled, so that by 1980 women came to comprise close to half the nation's university students (1990, 187). The university experience not only encouraged women to pursue career opportunities beyond the most common training as a primary school teacher, but it also provided them with the critical framework to question the reigning political, social, religious, and sexual values. Marxism provided the liberating model and ideal for many young people while the theater became an important place for discussing the values of autonomy and equality that Marxism espoused (Vaitsman 1994, 108–10).

By the 1980s, dictatorships in the Southern Cone countries and widespread economic hardship throughout Latin America provoked the most recent challenge to the hierarchical and authoritarian practices of patriarchal marriage. In Brazil, Chile, and Argentina the repressive military regimes established during the mid-1960s and 1970s induced a range of collective responses that called women from different social classes away from their homes to defend democratic principles as well as “women’s” issues. When the economic downturn threw many industrial laborers out of work, their wives responded by forming collective kitchens, clubs, and other self-help groups to support their families and others in lower-class communities (Jelin, “Citizenship” 1990, 188). Given the time spent away, some women encountered problems at home that led them to question the traditional division of labor and relations of power (Acurio 1994, 90–97). All these forms of public activism, often independent of political parties or union movements, opened up new spaces for women’s self-development by making them “actors” in their own and society’s transformation (Jelin, “Citizenship,” 189–94; Soares 1998, 35). Lourdes Arizpe describes their efforts this way: “What do so many types of women have in common? They are all involved in actions which through protesting, defending and demanding, make them the active subjects of social change” (1990, xvi).

Democracia en el país y en la casa (democracy in the nation and in the home), a Chilean feminist slogan from the years of the Pinochet dictatorship (Trevizan 1997, 49), expresses the realization that freedom for women is a dual goal that must take place in- and outside the home in order to bring real equality. Arizpe reports that in this call to action there is an implied struggle against all forms of domination, and she compares women's double workday (economic and domestic) to their double militancy (in politics and in marriage): "In one the woman struggles as worker and mother at the same time; in the other as citizen and wife" (xix). This call for equality means that feminists and activists want to remake marriage into a new, more democratic union. Ofelia Schutte has noted the family-oriented aspect of Latin American feminism stating that "the major characteristic in the region is that women hold on to their identity as mothers/family members at the same time that they participate outside the home" (1993, 234). After decades of dictatorship in the Southern Cone and Central America, the idea of democracy in marriage carries significance in Latin America where the efforts to establish a democratic political system are as nascent as those to bring about equality in matrimony. Unlike the traditional divisions between private and public worlds, the goals of democracy and equality unite the personal with the political.

However, while women's opportunities for change have increased steadily since the 1980s, the social imaginary for men, and especially for husbands, remains fairly stable. Regina Barreca declares that little has altered the notion in the United States which maintains the "invisible and static image of the husband as provider, protector and patriarch" (1993, 113). Later she expands this cultural context when she remarks that "Many studies suggest that the primary role of the husband as provider of food and shelter is strikingly cross-cultural and surprisingly unchanging, given the rapidly evolving role of the wife. Husbands are seen as instrumental to survival instead of simply important in our intimate lives" (227). Many men and women still uphold this image of the primacy of husbands in socioeconomic terms. The Argentine sociologist Héctor Bonaparte suggests at least three factors that contribute to the durability of the role "male head of household." First, he notes that many women defend the status quo because they are benefiting from it: "*lo pasan bien porque los ingresos familiares les permiten toda clase de servicio doméstico, comodidades, y un standard de vida con aspectos gratificantes*" [*they live well* because the

family income provides for domestic service, comforts, and a standard of living with gratifying aspects] (1997, 204). He proposes that men resist changes to patriarchal marriage because of what they would have to give up: “desde el ser y la identidad viril, hasta a los privilegios, ventajas, protecciones, indulgencias, justificaciones y ritos sustentadoras” [not only their identity as males, but also the privileges, advantages, protections, indulgences, justifications and sustaining rites] (1997, 203). Lastly, he argues that the work-world contributes to the status quo by reinforcing the dominator role. Thus, men become blind to their own subordination as workers because they are busy with and satisfied by their role as dominator of all the women around them in their work and family life (120).

Regina Barreca and Héctor Bonaparte suggest that patriarchy and patriarchal marriage are so firmly implanted in the social imaginary and so crucial to the capitalist economic system that changes take place only at the individual level, while the traditional structures remain in place. According to Bonaparte, capitalism, racism, and patriarchy are so closely intertwined that they cannot be separated or changed individually (1997, 186–91). Some women have made considerable advances in the work-world, but without altering significantly either that world or the one at home, as Pat M. Keith and Robert B. Schafer point out (1991, 51). While the ideals of democracy and equality in the home represent lofty goals, they are enmeshed in an intricate and complex web of familial and political relations. Elizabeth Jelin explains that this tight association between networks of personal and political relations makes it a formidable task to reform or democratize the sociopolitical environment since it cannot be easily disconnected from family ties. She also indicates the reverse is true, that family ties tend to subordinate individual interests in order to maintain political advantages (“Introduction,” *Women and Social Change* 1990, 2). To summarize, the forces at work to reform the traditional ending of the romance/marriage scenario must engage with powerful institutions in commerce, politics, the church, and with social conventions that have changed little since colonization.

Among the historians and social scientists consulted for this book, several describe marriage in colonial households and in modern day Latin America using dramatic terms. For example, Asunción Lavrin “sets the stage” for her readers in the introduction to a collection of essays on sexuality and marriage in colonial Hispanic America

with the title, “El escenario, los actores y el problema” [The setting, the actors and the problem] (1989, 13). Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Cecilia Rabell open their edited collection on the family in Ibero-America with “Diálogo abierto sobre la familia iberoamericana” [Open dialogue about the Iberoamerican family] (1994, 9) calling attention to their efforts to make public and reciprocal a topic that long has been considered private and monologic.⁴ Lourdes Arizpe’s foreword to a collection of essays on women and social change, “Twentieth-century Women: Characters in Search of an Author” (1990, xiv), utilizes the title of Pirandello’s most famous play to compare the unfinished status of being female but without models, to that of the play’s characters who are unable to finish their play performance and their lives without a dramatist to complete the script.

Why is it so tempting to turn to theatrical analogies when discussing romance and marriage? Marriage represents the most important human relationship between the sexes, because it is charged with the burdensome responsibility of reproducing, socializing, and educating the species while at the same time juggling individual autonomy, sexual desire, and solidarity. As a romantic ideal, marriage exemplifies the best virtues of human behavior—devotion, generosity, kindness, and altruism. At the same time the weight of social norms, gender role expectations, and economic demands can transform affection and dedication into anger, distrust, and guilt. Western culture expects romantic love to fulfill two contradictory and conflictive purposes, as Wexman points out, since it is both a “short, compelling and consuming passion” and the “cornerstone for lifelong monogamous marriage” (1993, 8). Given these obligations, expectations, and complications, it is easy to see that modern marriage contains the key elements for good drama —action, a drive for autonomy, conflict, and resolution.

Romance and marriage generate opportunities for internal conflict not only because they are the site of many varied activities, but also because they are highly controlled by moral imperatives and social norms while at the same time being especially vulnerable to outside forces. Inside the home family life is dynamic, involving relations between generations and sexes that are held together by emotional bonds, economic dependence, and obligation. At the same time forces outside the home such as changing economic conditions, social norms, and politics can put pressures on the family as individuals and as a unit. As the epigraph of this chapter suggests, the ideal of married life

is a solid, unchanging picture in the mind, but in reality it can be vulnerable and fragmenting in response to both internal and external demands (Jelin, "Everyday Practices," 33). In Latin America, family life defines itself as a refuge from the chaotic and dangerous influences outside the home, a concept that is demonstrated by the affluent in gated communities, high walls, security gates, and watchmen, and in social rules governing who may enter.⁵

Romance and marriage are dramatic and theatrical in Latin America because of the cultural importance of couples and families. Having a steady relationship is an important part of growing up and modeling adult behavior for young people. Strong emotions of possessiveness and jealousy drive relations between the sexes and ensure that social life remains divided and regulated, although not equally, as we have seen.⁶ As Ibsen demonstrated, marriage can be suffocating since individuals must attempt to hold on to a sense of self within a human and physical environment that perpetuates narrowly defined gender expectations. Within the confining space of the home, tension between individuals can quickly provoke physical action and emotional display. Whereas romantic films made in the United States during the golden years of Hollywood featured the couple finding a happy ending to their travails (Wexman 1993, 3–8), the Western theatrical tradition of staging romance and marriage tends toward the unhappy and tragic. Since Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, dramas about love and marriage have served to highlight conflict between individuals, families, and societies. Consuelo Morel Montes has observed "el teatro muestra muy pocos amores logrados" [theater shows very few successful loves] (1996, 236). Because their representation of love and marriage usually serves to critique rather than reaffirm social values, few plays find a happy resolution, if a resolution is suggested at all.

Feminine socialization has employed romantic love as the only means girls can use to gain a sense of self, albeit through the love of someone else. Thus, love and marriage are made to appear desirable and appealing to girls. Héctor Bonaparte cites the common wisdom that teaches the importance of love to girls—"lo más que puede esperar una niña es ser amada por un hombre" [the most that a young woman can hope for is to be loved by a man] (1997, 135). Love functions as a validation for women of their desirability and femininity (Barreca 1993, 106), creating a sense of need for women to seek it out in order to reaffirm their identity and value. Romance penetrates the feminine

psyche more easily since looking to others is reinforced as a trait of importance to girls in all aspects of their lives. But as Regina Barreca notes, this kind of romance takes its toll: "Romance is like nuclear waste—it creeps into other aspects of our lives even when we think it is contained. In romance women give up independence and a sense of self slowly not realizing what it will mean in the long run" (128). Romantic love transforms girls into servants once they take their vows of marriage as Bonaparte confirms in this commonly heard saying *Esposa—mujer a su servicio* (Wife—a woman at your service) (43). Confined to their homes, married women accept the domestic domain as their place to exercise some small measure of control. But given the material and cultural power of men, women's resources are limited to affective ties while men impose their dominance through government, civil laws, and religious authority (Barreca, 108).

When women dramatists stage plays that make public the private world of the home, they question romance and its power to control women and convert them into submissive servants. In their versions of women in marriage, they emphasize the possibility of new emotions and new selves based on more egalitarian values. The home dramatized on stage, which has often been described as a womb or a haven, becomes what Liliana Trevizan calls in her description of women's fiction of the 1980s *espacios desafiantes* (defiant spaces) (1997, xii), that is, places where women directly challenge the status quo and attempt to enact democratic versions of male-female relations. As women longing to be free of emotional and physical servitude in the home, these characters are searching for new versions of being female that contradict the traditional passive and subservient image of Latin American women. In their journeys, the protagonists must confront the fact that masculine power controls domestic space, divides its inhabitants according to sex roles, and organizes their opportunities accordingly. The challenge becomes, then, how to reclaim and remake space so that it serves purposes of nurture and growth rather than confinement and repression.

In order to examine these plays about marriage and the home, I will employ a framework about the meaning of space in the theater. Michael Issacharoff calls attention to the nuances in dramatic space by comparing narrative space with its one-dimensional imagined world to dramatic space with its multidimensional world that is represented on stage and imagined to exist beyond it (1981, 211). The dynamics

of the theater often rest on the conflict between these two domains (215). Hanna Scolnicov employs this multidimensional relationship of dramatic space in *Women's Theatrical Space*, her feminist study of plays from the Greek, Roman, and European masculinist theatrical canons. She claims that both in society and on the stage women have been identified with the house which in turn defines their social rank, body, and sexuality (1994, 7). Scolnicov argues that in the development of Western theater the male viewpoint is directed toward entering female space, whereas the female point of view, in modern times, is how to escape the space of the home (8). Thus, Ibsen's Nora, of *A Doll's House*, rebels against her domestic prison by walking out the door in the climactic closing scene. Scolnicov shows that in contemporary theater the equation of woman with home comes to an end and she declares that "Space is no longer a woman" (154). However, in her final chapter, the critic notes that today's feminist playwrights have not transcended that space, but rather are employing it critically since it still contains many unresolved questions about feminine identity (155). In these observations, Scolnicov refers to well-known British playwrights Maureen Duffy and Caryl Churchill, but she could be speaking about Latin American women dramatists as well. In the realist tradition of using the home as a battleground and the marriage partners as warring parties (Scolnicov 1994, 133), all of the plays studied here involve a space marked as feminine. But unlike Ibsen's Nora, who wants to regain her sense of self by leaving the home, what Scolnicov calls "her sacred duty to herself" (98), these Latin American women characters are fighting to reclaim their bodies and their identities by taking back the home on their own terms.

In all of the plays analyzed in the three sections of this chapter, home is the site where the values of autonomy and equality intersect with the values of sexual difference and division. In the sections on romantic love and sexual politics, homes ruled by patriarchal values suffocate and circumscribe the dreams and identity of female protagonists who challenge those traditions and norms. The four plays discussed mark the beginning and the end of a forty-year period of tremendous political and social upheaval that initiated a restructuring of relations between the sexes in Latin America. In the last section with its four plays on gender bending, the home continues to operate as the organizing space for relations between men and women. However, it is a home where sex roles and gender are either redefined by

reversing their traditional characteristics, or by making them mobile and variable.

Romantic Love and the Loss of Self

El vuelo de la grulla and *Cariño malo* are one-act plays and first works by their authors that demonstrate the conflict between women's idealized notions of romantic love and their encounters with real-life men. Of the two plays, *El vuelo de la grulla* [The flight of the crane] by Ana Istarú has received less scholarly attention. It was first performed in 1984, the same year it was published in the Costa Rican theater magazine *Escena* as an example of the dramaturgy of the author, then a recipient of a national scholarship. The definitive version was performed by the Compañía Nacional de Teatro in 1994 under the direction of Remberto Chávez (Rojas and Ovares 2000, 315).⁷ *Cariño malo* [Bad love] has attracted considerable attention for its experimental form and unusual theme. It was first performed in 1990 at the Teatro de la Universidad Católica de Chile after two years of rehearsals by the dramatist, Inés Margarita Stranger, the director, Claudia Echenique, and a group of actresses.⁸ The play appeared in the *Revista Apuntes* published by the Universidad Católica de Chile in 1990 as well.

Both plays employ poetic language to communicate the loss of the feminine self in romantic love, as María de la Luz Hurtado has proposed for *Cariño malo* (1998, 37). Together these pieces demonstrate that romantic love should not constitute the only life project for women, because it often prevents the formation of a complete person, which is a more worthy life goal. In her comments on *Cariño malo*, Morel Montes states: "ser mujer no necesariamente pasa por el proyecto amoroso sino que es un trayecto que vale la pena recorrer" [being a woman does not necessarily require passing through love, it is a trajectory that is worth following in itself] (1996, 219). Both plays aim to influence and educate the audience, as the director of *Cariño malo* stresses in an interview when she states that her objective was: ". . . comunicarme, lograr una difusión masiva y modificar estructuras sociales y familiares" [. . . communicate my message, reach a large audience and change social and familial structures] (Rojo 1991, 257).

El vuelo de la grulla is a metaphoric title that refers to the efforts a young married woman makes to work outside the home at some-

thing more fulfilling than keeping house. In his introduction to the translated version of the play, Timothy J. Rogers summarizes the situation as: “Her immediate world is founded in a patriarchal value system that stifles any questioning of self-fulfillment on her part . . . but now she is determined to transform her dreams into reality, to become free from her unrewarding status and to escape like the symbolic unfettered crane of the title” (1989, 7). When she expresses these needs to her husband he opposes any change in the distribution of responsibilities. Worse yet, he and his mother intimidate her and force her to abandon her dream and comply with their version of wifely duties.

Cariño malo's abstract and minimalist setting portrays three women who represent the division of self caused by an unhappy love affair. During the course of the play, the women undertake a journey of healing that involves enacting rituals of male-female relations until the three become one again and that one woman prepares to relive her childhood. In her analysis of the play, Morel Montes describes it in these terms: “La obra investiga en zonas de la mente femenina que nunca en nuestra dramaturgia habían sido tratadas como tales y que son importantes de reconocer” [The play investigates areas of the feminine mind that have never been treated before and that are important to acknowledge] (1996, 224).

I will argue that in both plays the protagonists act to affirm themselves, in symbolic and real ways, and to gain agency over a love that has caused them a loss of reason and a surrender of self. María Luisa of *El vuelo de la grulla* attempts to assert herself in a series of escalating actions that begin when she goes on strike and refuses to do housework, then argues with her husband and threatens to move out, and finally tries to force her mother-in-law to leave. When her actions provoke her husband's violence and recriminations instead of understanding and support, she feels abandoned and defeated. She grieves the loss of her dreams and herself in exchange for a love that offers her little self-expression. Her attempts at affirmation and agency are foiled by those who claim to want the best for her.

Cariño malo portrays the loss of dreams to love as well, but also the need to recapture and rebuild a new female identity. There are no real masculine bodies on the stage, but the power of men to control women in love is always present in the words of the protagonists and in the skits they perform. Whereas Istarú's play starts with the optimism of its protagonist who believes in love, in her husband, and in

the possibilities for change, Inés Margarita Stranger's play starts at the opposite point, with a loss of love and the pain of disbelief. But while the Costa Rican playwright plots a course of failure for her protagonist, the Chilean offers a more promising ending.

Both plays question the importance and power of romantic love for/over women. Traditional socialization teaches women to place romantic love at the center of their lives and to commit their resources and energies to pursuing men to love and marry. Sara Rojo calls love "la meta creada para todas las mujeres" [the goal created for all women] (1991, 127). If this is true, then when love goes bad, women lose their center, their purpose and their goal, that is, they lose their sense of identity. Consuelo Morel Montes explains that "Siempre se supone que el odio destruye y eso lleva al dolor y la reparación, pero cuando lo que destruye es el amor se queda en una situación sin salida" [We have always assumed that what destroys is hate and this leads to pain and atonement, but when it is love that destroys, one is stuck in a situation with no exit] (1996, 222).

The title *Cariño malo* refers to a negative force that "somete, anula y culpabiliza e impide que las mujeres se constituyan en seres integrales" [submits, voids and blames, and keeps women from becoming complete beings] in Rojo's words (1991, 128). If love can be bad, as the title of the play implies, then there can also be such a thing as good love, one that does not handicap or stunt women. *El vuelo de la grulla* appears to present an example of "good love" in its domestic setting with a young couple, happily married in their own home. Yet this love is destructive for María Luisa who has suffered an identity crisis, because she is no longer comfortable with her routine as a housewife. Unfortunately she learns that change in one partner does not guarantee adaptation by the other. María Luisa discovers that she participates in a traditional patriarchal marriage that is not an equitable relationship, but rather one that accords separate but "complementary" spaces and jobs to each and subordinates women to men. Sociologists Pat M. Keith and Robert B. Schafer comment on situations like María Luisa's in which one person is under benefited and they note that this situation may be disappointing, distressing, and may make the individual feel victimized (1991, 158). Certainly this description applies to Istarú's protagonist.

In *El vuelo de la grulla*, Esteban and María Luisa come into conflict over the meaning of "love" in their marriage. For Esteban the love he

gives is defined in terms of fulfilling his duties and anything outside of this definition cannot be love. He tells María Luisa that his love is *recto* (correct), because he works to maintain the house and he is faithful to her. He sees their relationship as an exchange and he reasons that because he performs his role she should fulfill hers. For him, any change in her indicates a loss of love for him and a lack of loyalty, since patriarchal marriage requires wives to give unquestioned support to their husbands. As Esteban remarks:

“—¡Una esposa sigue a su marido, porque así debe ser, y no hay una ley humana que lo cambie!” [A wife follows her husband, because that is the way it is, and there is no human law that will change that] (17).

From his perspective the “natural” arrangement that he accepts cannot be questioned, but if it is, then the questioner not the relationship itself becomes the problem. The system is in balance according to Esteban and he blames María Luisa for upsetting it by not wanting to have children, and by wanting to change the work load inside and outside the home.

María Luisa harbors a different definition of love that has evolved since she first married Esteban while still in high school. According to her when she was young,

“no tenía juicio” [she had no judgment] (17),

however now she has outgrown her younger ideas and expects her love and her marriage to do the same. She reasons that love makes them equals in everything, which means in work both in- and outside the house. María Luisa:

“—¡No serías capaz de barrer el piso solo por el inmenso amor que me tenés?” [Wouldn’t you be able to sweep the floor just because you love me so much?] and “¡No quiero sirvientes, quiero compartirlo todo! ¡Las responsabilidades, los problemas, las ollas sucias!” [I don’t want servants, I want to share everything! The responsibilities, the problems, the dirty dishes] (17).

What is clear throughout the lengthy argument between the couple is that María Luisa has many illusions about what their love and marriage could mean that go beyond its current definition. Because

she can imagine another kind of love, she sees her present situation as a slave; she feels resentful and suffocated at home. From her perspective she is asking for so little, just a chance to try something to use her potential. Esteban has only one answer to her reasoning:

“Tengo una casa y allí quiero a mi mujer” [I have a house and I want my wife in it] (17).

He is determined to resist her while at the same time she has made up her mind to find a convincing argument to change him.⁹

El vuelo de la grulla is a tragedy in which María Luisa creates a standoff with her husband until, in complete frustration, he loses control of himself, threatens her, and then hits her. However, the factor that changes the equation in his favor is not, surprisingly, his abuse of his wife, but rather the arrival of his mother for Sunday lunch. She immediately agrees with her son regarding María Luisa's malaise and seizes the opportunity to offer her services to prepare lunch and even to move in with them. Doña Berta is an invader who quickly takes possession of the kitchen and begins throwing away María Luisa's treasures. Worse yet, María Luisa discovers in a phone call in the closing moments of the play that her own mother reaffirms the position taken by her husband and her mother-in-law. Thus, the play concludes with a defeated protagonist who has no power to win against such overwhelming obstacles that destroy her will.

The setting reinforces the divisions that María Luisa wants to renegotiate and Esteban wants to maintain. The opening scene with its realistic, domestic surroundings of a kitchen and dining room, is so familiar and mundane that it is difficult at first to see its divisions and inequalities. For the audience and for Esteban the opening scene represents the normal image of married life. The play begins with each person working, even though it is Sunday. She cleans the floor while he sits at the dining room table doing calculations related to his sales job. Her simple clothing, apron, standing position, and broom reinforce her image as the person who performs the physical labor of keeping up the house. His conservative dress and his location at the table mark him as the worker outside the house. He is not participating in the cleaning of the home, rather his location at the table reinforces his role as the patriarch whose status and gender identify him as worthy of being served. This division in dress, in location, and

in task not only associates the couple with two separate jobs and two different places in the house, but also with the ideology of complementary marriage. Such an arrangement accords tasks for each that are separate and different from the other and at the same time necessary for the marriage to maintain its balance. Both husband and wife complain about the difficulty of their jobs: hers is boring and physically exhausting, while his is demanding and demeaning. Yet he accepts the divisions and exercises the benefits that his traditional superior role accords him while María Luisa questions both the divisions and the limitations. Esteban is a prime example of Héctor Bonaparte's contention that "varones sometidos en el terreno económico y político, pueden actuar como 'patrones' y 'jefes' en la casa" [men oppressed in the world of economics and politics can act as bosses in the home] (1997, 182).

All the action of the play takes place within the mimetic space of the home. Access to that home is controlled by Esteban, who serves as its jailer. His mother comes in, she and her son go out, but María Luisa cannot leave. She is isolated by her responsibilities and place within the home as wife and isolated from the world outside the home by the same condition. María Luisa longs to leave the labor of the home in order to develop herself in the work-world, but Esteban expects to come home to a refuge from those work demands. In this refuge, María Luisa is reduced to the condition of slave, a point she makes in her argument with Esteban. Her real strengths as a person are intellectual and creative, but neither of these are fulfilled within the confines of the home she occupies on stage.

To escape her boredom, María Luisa builds an imaginary world of fantasy and dreams of doing something productive in the work-world. During the play, Istarú's protagonist attempts to bring her imagined world of fantasy and work into the space of her home. She employs poetic language to describe the world of her alter ego Leandra whose story she enacts at the beginning and end of the play. Leandra, who rescues her lovers, leads a flock of birds, and has adventures, portrays characteristics of strength, leadership, and heroism. María Luisa dramatizes Leandra's actions with the hope of winning her husband's sympathy when she asks him for permission to work (16). However, Esteban is more amused and aroused than convinced that her performance in some way speaks about his wife's aspirations. María Luisa also imagines possible jobs for herself, especially after hearing a

radio program about a former classmate who has just defended a thesis in anthropology. She compares herself to that classmate and she dreams of opportunities beyond the home. However, a house defined by Esteban as a refuge from work, an unchanging and stable abode, cannot nurture María Luisa's dreams, because they would alter the balance inside the home. Her imagined opportunities that may or may not exist somewhere beyond the home in a space she can only imagine, are a fantasy that she has created to cultivate her needs. But they are in conflict with her husband's definition of himself and of their shared space.

The tension between an unseen force in diegetic space and a visible force on stage is a common theatrical model, according to Michael Issacharoff (1981, 210). In *El vuelo de la grulla* both Esteban and his mother argue that the outside world is an unfriendly, corrupt place, where María Luisa is not qualified to work, and that her place is in the safety of the home. As such María Luisa's imagined world beyond the home in diegetic space is no more than a fantasy, easily discounted by others and unsubstantiated by experience or example. As a fragile alternative reality it cannot constitute a threat against the strong forces within the home. The change purse, which she grabs as she tries to walk out the door, represents her inadequate preparation to be a real threat. Its few coins cannot buy her food or shelter, a point her husband relishes in making, just like her dreams and fantasies cannot come true if they exist only in an imaginary world.

The fragility of María Luisa's dreams, and of her self, reappear in the final scene of the play as she gives a second performance of the adventures of Leandra after her husband and mother-in-law have left to collect Doña Berta's belongings. Alone in the home María Luisa expresses her feelings of hopelessness and despair. This moment projects a more familiar image of woman as the Pietá, but the being she cradles and describes is not a child but her broom that she addresses as if it were her alter ego Leandra. Her imagery of clipped wings refers to the taming of birds and is an apt comparison for her own sense of being confined.

The final erasure of María Luisa and any illusions of another life outside the home will occur after the play ends when Doña Berta and Esteban return with the mother-in-law's belongings. María Luisa cannot expand her existence beyond the home and at the same time she cannot even be the woman of the house anymore since her mother-in-law will also occupy that role. What's more, husband and mother-