

## Tea for Two: Performing History and Desire in Sabina Berman's *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*

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A resounding commercial success, Sabina Berman's recent play, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1993), may appear to be merely another dramatization of the problematic nature of contemporary relationships.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the play proffers neither patriarchal power mongers nor victimized female "others." On the contrary, as I shall argue, it is an insightful, if indeed amusing, analysis of gender identity. Rather than simply denouncing (or, inversely, perpetuating) traditional gender roles (male or female), Berman shows them to be citational performances as she provides a "historical" account of gender identity and demonstrates that we are all products (as well as producers) of our historical, gendered circumstances. While there are any number of focal points from which to analyze this play, I shall center on three areas that may initially appear to be strange bedfellows: historiography and/as narrativity, desire (both narrative and erotic), and the performance of gender. As I hope to demonstrate, however, these three topics are not only closely interrelated in this play; they are also underlined (if indeed unexpectedly) in the ritualistic serving and drinking of tea, which provides one of the play's principal leitmotifs.

The plot line of the frame play can be summarized as follows. The almost middle-aged Gina and the middle-aged history professor, Adrián, are involved in a "modern" relationship predicated on its lack of commitment. Encouraged by her son's friend, Ismael, Gina decides to force Adrián to make a commitment but discovers he is seeing another woman. Ismael consoles her, but he is soon replaced by Adrián with his promise of marriage and a son. When Adrián and Gina meet again for the first time after his unexplained absence of three months, she rejects him because she is now in love with Ismael; Adrián reacts by throwing himself out the window, which, in spite of his melodramatic gesture, is on the ground floor. Some time later, he returns to her apartment one last time and is seduced by its new owner,

Andrea, Gina's former business partner. The play concludes when, after a dramatic build-up, Adrián's erotic performance proves to be less than award-winning, and Andrea is left holding, not the proverbial bag, but a glass of cognac in each hand. Although unquestionably a feminist critique, this is not just Gina's story, but Gina's and Adrián's story; yet it is also Andrea's and Ismael's, two secondary characters who occupy what might be labeled liminal positions within and between the traditional, mutually exclusive, binary gender poles. To emphasize the effects of history on gender identity, Berman juxtaposes these scenes of contemporary life with scenes protagonized by Pancho Villa, the fictitious-historical character from the monograph Adrián is writing. In this respect, the Mexican playwright provides an insightful analysis of the power of discursive practices and dramatizes how narrative (in the form of history, popular culture, or even the stories told us by others) author(ize)s the gender roles we cite and perform.

Throughout this essay, I shall call upon Judith Butler's theories in *Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter*, where she posits that one's subjectivity or identity is the product of citational and performative acts that simultaneously repeat and enact previously author(iz)ed roles. I shall argue, however, that the performance of those citations often encompasses some degree of modification that responds to a tacit negotiation with one's audience.<sup>2</sup> Butler defines performativity as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects it names" (*Bodies* 2).<sup>3</sup> As she insists, any statement, even one traditionally considered constative, is performative to the extent it authorizes or brings into focus (makes "real," in some sense) that which it names -- that is, even as the performance repeats, it creates and author(ize)s anew.<sup>4</sup> And, in Butler's theoretical structure, a norm "takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations it compels" (*Bodies* 13). This is not to suggest, however, that the citational performance is necessarily voluntary, chosen at will, for as Butler further notes, "The 'activity' of this gendering cannot, strictly speaking, be a human act or expression, a willful appropriation, and it is certainly not a question of taking on a mask; it is the matrix through which all *willing* first becomes possible, its enabling cultural condition" (*Bodies* 7, emphasis added). Within this theoretical framework, I would like to suggest that Berman presents gender performance (whether one is male or female) as an on-going process of negotiating one's way through a finite set of historically permissible acts which are ultimately linked to and result in the performance of citational (previously authorized) desires -- narrative and erotic.<sup>5</sup> I shall further argue that in the Berman play, the various nuances of performance (as conscious, theatrical production, as a system within which

social identity is rehearsed and given form à la Butler, and as sexual activity) overlap while at the same time these nuances are linked to narrativity and citationality. That is to say, gender performance is a citation or stylized repetition, enactment (perhaps to some degree conscious but certainly not completely) of previous narratives (ones that exist in the world or ones that are creations of our inclinations toward narrativity).<sup>6</sup>

*Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* begins as friends and business associates, Gina and Andrea, drink tea and discuss Gina's affair with Adrián. Although the title promises a historical play, Berman provides a new twist to the traditional historical project, first by giving voice to a female rather than to the "conquering male," whose voice is the conventional source for historical narrative, and second by allowing her narrative to deviate from the public and often violent events that frequently define the realm of historiography.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, Gina recounts the typical series of events that occur when Adrián appears at her door every two or three weeks. Thus, the opening of the play is citational in a number of ways. First, Gina is narrating their "history," articulating their prior "ritualistic," habitual actions -- themselves citational and performative, to a large degree reenactments, with minor variations, of 1950s cinema and other popular narratives. Second, although less obvious, the opening words, "Cada dos o tres semanas" (23), which refer to the (in)frequency of Adrián's visits, repeat the temporal motif which is one of the structuring elements of any historical narrative. That is, the play opens by calling attention to both its historicity and its potential for narrativity. At the same time, that opening line serves as a marker (if indeed indirectly) of the negotiative aspects of Gina's performance. When her interlocutor, Andrea, repeats that line, the time frame, with the minor modification of a change in inflection (an added question mark), Gina's narrative and "historical" authority and position are challenged. As a result, she amends the number to "O cuatro días," in a gesture that signals her compliance to the expectations of her audience. Her "history," her narrative, and her performance will attempt to conform to her perception of her audience's (narrative) desires -- indicated by means of their words, inflections, gestures, or even silences. Thus, while her comportment is certainly citational, it is also creative, performative -- the same but different, a citational performance influenced by the present audience, just as any discursive practice is, including historiography.<sup>8</sup> Without the interest (desire) of her audience, her dominant position as narrator cannot be sustained, and she cannot continue to tell "her" story in "her" way (which, as we have just seen, is ultimately not "hers" at all). Thus, her modification signals both the citation and the negotiation as it underlines the circular

influence of the (perceived) audience on the performance or the narrative. In this manner, Berman obliquely posits that historians too may well produce the tale their audiences are prepared (want) to receive.

But, this is only the beginning, for part of Gina's narration is reiterated by Andrea to Adrián as the final act opens: "La miras... fijamente. Respirando fuerte. La besas. Ella dice: espérate, siéntate, te sirvo un té" (81). Andrea's citation of Gina's words underlines the fact that her "performance" in the final act is exactly that. Gina's narrative in the first act leads her to conclude that Adrián is "lo que se llama un hombre directo" (24). Thus, in the final act she assumes the role of "direct woman" to provide the performance she thinks he wants. Paradoxically, however, as noted, Gina's narrative was already influenced by Andrea, in what is obviously an endless, not to say vicious, circle. Let us note, however, that Andrea's quotation is not quite accurate; at no point in the first act does Gina say exactly those words. But, this mis-citation also echoes back to Gina's performance in the first act insofar as even her first words, "cada dos o tres semanas," already enact a modification in response to audience expectations, for Adrián had not appeared for a month.<sup>9</sup> Thus, this circular series of citational performances proves to be foundationless, an imitation without an origin, as Butler has suggested gender performance inevitably is.<sup>10</sup> Unreliable (or "misperformed") as the citations may be, Berman's characters nonetheless repeatedly produce and are products of a circularity by which, and within which, they author(ize) and (re)negotiate their roles.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Berman dramatizes the fact that, as Nancy Fraser has argued, social identities are not monolithic; they are not "constructed once and for all and definitively fixed. Rather, they alter over time, shifting with shifts in agents' practices and affiliations" (178). In other words, individuals assume different discursive positions as they move from one discursive frame to another, or I would add, even within the same discursive frame.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the characters' gender performances prove to be contingent on desire and vice versa. While Gina assures Andrea that she does not want to marry the history professor, she does seek a relationship that encompasses more than the sporadic erotic trysts. To that end, (she tells Andrea) she insists they have tea in the living room and converse, in what even she labels part of "un cierto ritual" (23) that leads to the "lucha ridícula" (25) as she tries to develop a "relationship" (as women are supposed to) and he tries to get her into bed as quickly as possible (as men are supposed to). The fact that Gina cannot answer Andrea's question about why she insists on the ritual tea and conversation underlines the fact that they are merely imitative

practices, symptomatic of both the role(s) she feels sanctioned to enact and the desires she is authorized to iterate. Thus, Berman suggests that even the desires the characters perform may be citational, author(iz)ed by previous narratives and that none of them can perform a desire other than those for which they have been historically prepared. Obviously, it is no accident that Berman has chosen to pair history and gender in this work; each is unquestionably impacted by the other.<sup>13</sup> But it is important to note that were either Gina or Adrián to cease or change their citational performances, and by implication perform different desires, the other's performance would become unnecessary, or worse, superfluous and invalid -- the pre-text would not find a proper context. This is literalized in the final act where Andrea's citational (mis)performance as a "direct woman" invalidates Adrián's citational performance (Humphrey-Bogart-style lover), and he is left without a functional role. Quite literally, if indeed humorously, he cannot perform.

Not coincidentally, however, Berman portrays Gina (and ultimately all the characters) as caught between and among multiple competing master narratives borrowed from popular culture. On the one hand, the "master('s)" narrative would lead to the bedroom, with its closed door to block our view, or the kiss, which would similarly be semi-observed by the fade out. Obviously, both endings allude to the fulfillment of erotic desire, but that resolution is only potential. The desire (in the classical cinematic or novelistic tradition) is never visibly fulfilled; the film, play, or novel simply ends with the tacit assumption that it will be. Nonetheless, on the way to that implicit resolution, the narrative must be sustained, tension (desire) must mount, fulfillment must be delayed by whatever twists and turns necessary -- hence the ritual tea in this case.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise, the mastery, the conquest, will be shown to be as trivial (and as unmasterful) as indeed it is. On the other hand, the other "master" narrative cited would end with marriage and "happily ever after," which Gina is supposed to desire but apparently does not (or so she says, but this too may well be a citational performance of "modern woman").<sup>15</sup> So why bother with the living-room formalities, queries her friend, Andrea. To this Gina can only respond tautologically, "Quiero tomarme un té con él," words immediately undermined by her, "Carajo, se me olvidó mi té" (25), a statement which might be understood as, I want it because I want it, because I am supposed to want it. At the same time we are encouraged to recognize that what matters is less the end (the fulfillment of desire, erotic or narrative) than the means, the creation and performance of desire, the narrative twists and turns that delay the fulfillment (and by implication, death) of desire, maintain the narrator's central position, and at the same time provide all the characters with a role, a *raison d'être*.

Indeed, the play repeatedly destabilizes our notion of ending (*telos*) as the “natural” goal of narrative insofar as it emphasizes process and deferral. At the conclusion of the play, Gina, who may or may not “live happily ever after” with Ismael, has disappeared from the scene; her end is left hanging, quite literally. And, as indicated, Adrián and Andrea’s climatic bedroom scene is anti-climatic: both literally and figuratively nothing happens. Andrea is left holding the drinks, and Adrián may seem to have reached a point of self-knowledge (implicit *telos* in much narrative), but, as he exits with shoes and socks in hand, it is certainly not clear to the audience what (if anything) he has learned. In this manner the play accentuates the artificiality of narrative teleology with its arbitrary frame (beginning and end -- from feigned ignorance to questionable knowledge) much as it underscores the arbitrariness of historical teleology through its references to the failure of the Mexican Revolution, which led to few (perhaps no) changes in the basic power structure, in spite of Villa’s “heroic” efforts to “hacer patria” and his prolific fathering of sons (teleological goal of erotic desire as figured by the patriarchy).<sup>16</sup>

Narrative postponement and its links to desire are further foregrounded in Scene Two of Act I, which interrupts Gina’s narrative. Paradoxically, that scene simultaneously provides an interruption (deferral) and dramatizes its antithesis (immediate fulfillment of desire, resolution). The scene is a movie-like enactment of a fantasy of an unproblematic, erotic encounter. Adrián appears at the door and assumes a Humphrey-Bogart-like pose before he and Gina fall into each others’ arms and he sweeps her off to the bedroom. Here there are no words and certainly no tea, just the depiction of two characters prepared to do what Gina will later label “matar el deseo como un animal.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the scene itself is a citation of a citation insofar as it stages a dramatization of Gina’s words which, in turn, cite a movie plot or romance novel, real or imagined. What is not clear, however, is whose fantasy or desire this is -- Gina’s, Adrián’s, or Andrea’s (or all of the above). Although the scene enacts his express desire, one must wonder if the wordless movie scene is not the desire of the women as much, if not more than Adrián’s. The difference may be that he is authorized by previous discourse to express and perform that desire; they are not, at least not in the same way. Thus, Berman suggests that they are all trapped in a maze of contradictory discourse and the internally incoherent roles author(iz)ed by that discourse, discourse and roles that cite, perform, and perhaps even constitute certain (but not other) desires for each. And, even more daring, she speculates that perhaps desire itself is performative and citational, limited to the thinkable, to what we have been previously authorized to desire.<sup>18</sup> Certainly, Gina’s re-citation of her

totally trite and repetitive list of desires at the end of Act II, the spatial and temporal center of the play, suggests that such is the case.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, we might understand Adrián's (mis)performance in the final scene as a result of his inability to break with the past, as Andrea advises him, and focus on what is in front of him, both literally and figuratively, in the form of new/different/other desires. Or, are we to understand that Adrián perhaps wants not what he says he wants, but what Gina says she wants -- deferral rather than immediate gratification? Is what seems to be a universal, "natural," "feminine" role merely a projection onto her that allows him to believe his desire is other?

What is apparent is that all characters perform historically endorsed, ritualized, and more important, engendered social roles, roles delineated by other narratives, but roles that again may well be imitations without origins. Adrián, who admits he can think of nothing but his monograph on Villa, must play the super macho (modeled after Villa) who desires nothing other than a clean-cut conquest, that is, immediate, wordless, physical gratification/resolution (be it erotic or mortal), with the violence implicit in cutting off, truncating the narrative that might sustain, prolong, and heighten that desire. Let us not forget, however, that the Villa who provides his citational performance model is already a narrative creation/citation, product of numerous historiographers, including Adrián himself, who have necessarily rewritten, re-cited the "original" as a result of their own present (temporal and physical) circumstances and audience.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, as part of the "negotiation" and in order to accommodate his performance, Gina plays the domestic(ated) woman who wants a relationship, conversation, and tea -- desire postponed.

Further dramatizing the citational and its bidirectional movement, throughout Act I their conversation/love-life is interspersed with Adrián's commentary about his monograph on Pancho Villa.<sup>21</sup> Again, Berman's point seems to be that (as Hayden White had earlier proposed) historiography necessarily partakes of the tropes of narrativity (including its emphasis on telos and closure). Meanwhile, in a clever use of metatheatre, those contemporary conversations are juxtaposed with conversations from Villa's love-life, as Villa himself appears on stage in episodes that in many ways parallel those of Adrián and Gina in spite of the more than 80 years that separate them. But, again, the point may well be that by the 1990s Villa's amorous conquests are quintessentially narrative fiction. More important, not only does the Villa narrative provide the basis for Adrián's performance, but inversely that narrative itself is affected by the performance. This effect

is dramatized more directly in Act II as Villa smells the smoke from Gina's cigarette and hears the tapping of her typewriter.<sup>22</sup> We expect the past to impact the present; it is unusual for a playwright to focus on the reverse, on the fact that narrativity is inevitably dependent on the present as much as on the past to the extent that present has been classified as telos. Surely the present shapes or frames that past in light of the perceived "final mastery."

By means of the metatheatrical segments, the play also underscores the multiplicity of authorities (sometimes unexpected, often contradictory) we cite and suggests that this leads to a degree of incoherence in our performances. For example, although clearly Villa is Adrián's authority throughout the play, in this first act it is not clear that Gina's delay with the tea, which takes a while to steep, is not itself a citation of Villa's maneuvers and tactics -- designed to delay, increase the desire, before they "matar el deseo como un animal" (32), intended, that is, to sustain the ("her") narrative, a narrative/conversation that Adrián would truncate, silencing her with his erotic telos and subsequent departure. In this respect, the tea becomes the emblem of ritualistic delay -- narrative and erotic even as it intertwines the two. But, here again Berman dramatizes the effects of two competing master narratives. On the one hand, Villa is perceived as "un hombre directo," a perception promulgated by movies and popular myth.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, numerous history books assure us that many of Villa's military tactics were carefully planned and that his attacks were delayed, not always immediately, spontaneously carried out. In other words, Villa's perceived identity -- even as it is re-created through narrative -- lacks that internal coherence in which we would like to believe but which inevitably eludes our performative identities. As Butler has suggested, identity is a narrative ideal more than a description of experience (Gender 16), and, as figured by Diana Fuss, the I is "a complicated field of multiple subjectivities and competing identities" (33). That is to say, both characters are citing and performing multiple, and more important, conflicting and contradictory narratives. Thus, although the audience may initially perceive Gina as a descendant of Villa's perceived victim (Mujer), Berman seems to suggest that to view either woman in the monolithic role of victim may well be an oversimplification. As suggested, Gina's delay with the tea in the first act may itself be a citation of Villa's tactical maneuvers -- designed to delay and catch the "enemy" off guard and may ultimately be related to the unthinkable (or at least the unspeakable) -- her desire.

In this manner Berman implicitly raises the question of the investment, potential strategic gain, involved in performing any role and



encourages spectators to question why the characters position themselves, modify their performances, as they do. What are the punitive repercussions of refusing a role and equally what are the implicit rewards of accepting it?<sup>24</sup> De Lauretis theorizes that what motivates individuals to take up one discursive position as opposed to another is something of an emotional commitment and something of “a vested interest in the relative power (satisfaction, reward, payoff) which that position promises (but does not necessarily fulfill)” (16).<sup>25</sup>

We might ask if the same premise might not be true of desire, for surely, Adrián’s “vested interest” returns us circularly to the question of desire, erotic and narrative. Not irrelevantly, for him language is erotic and its goal is the fulfillment of desire -- even when he assumes ostensibly different roles.<sup>26</sup> It should be noted that Adrián rarely converses (engages in meaningful, two-way communication), although he frequently lectures (engages in monologue). In this respect, his language not only speaks of conquest, it is a form of conquest. That his erotic desire is almost indistinct from his narrative desire is apparent as he speaks of his monograph and is adamant that he does not like the preliminaries, he wants to be already “*montado en el tema* [. . .] *cabalgando*” (29, emphasis added). Further citing/performing Villa, he insists that does not want his monograph to be written with “*delicadezas, mariconerías lingüísticas*” and that “*Quiero hacer sentir toda la violencia del asunto: quiero que mi libro huela a caballo, a sudores, a pólvora*” (30, emphasis added). Lest there be any doubt as to the underlying, erotic nature of what he says, his speech ends abruptly with, “¿Y el té?” -- the tea that stands between him and the fulfillment of desire.

The use of language to talk about and perform desire continues in the metatheatrical protagonistized by Villa in Act I, where he is served tea by Mujer (his nameless victim and object of desire), before he shoots her. There Villa (like Adrián) can talk of little other than his erotic desire: “Es usted muy bonita. [. . .] Es usted, de veras, requete bonita. [. . .] Es usted requete preciosa, qué recondenada suerte. [. . .] Ya me ve amaneciendo arrepechadito a usted, ¿no es verdad?” (35-36). By talking about his desire, Villa not only heightens it, he also manages to project it onto the other, making it appear to be hers rather than his.<sup>27</sup> Thus, as she reaches out to him (ostensibly to take his tea cup, but the gesture can surely be read more metaphorically), he pulls out his gun rather than his “other weapon” (the one on which Adrián relies in the metaphor that is literalized with the cannon at the end of the play). That is, once he has performed a metonymic inversion and the desire seems to emanate from her, he is able to “kill” it by shooting her.

Similarly, as Gina and Adrián continue to wait for the tea to steep, they talk about their desire, but they also talk about talk, about what they

should say. In this respect, the conversation both performs and constitutes the desire while in both the frame play and the historical metatheatre, the tea supplies the pre-text (both literally and figuratively) that allows the characters to articulate their desires, and by speaking of them, to heighten them. Finally, frustrated in his efforts to fulfill his desire and reach telos (as Villa does with his gun), Adrián again resorts to monologue, arguing that there is no such thing as a natural conversation. Echoing what seems to be Berman's point, he insists that all acts must be based on inescapable, automatized patterns, including I would add, the desire they talk about and perform as they talk about it. Revealingly, Adrián's monologue here also ends abruptly with his, "Y te deseo," which turns the conversation back to *te*, to his desire.

Nevertheless, for all their ostensible similarities, his *te* is significantly different from her *té*. Indeed, it is apparent throughout their conversations that Gina and Adrián are using language differently, based on different presuppositions or historical-cultural contexts. I would insist, however, that those differences are first citational and second, exist not only between the characters but within each one (manifesting themselves in the incongruous roles each performs). For example, to her earlier response about the tea, "Está infusándose," he responds, "In-fu-sán-do-se. Qué fascinante" (30). An invented word, but one we all understand, "infusándose" is not a proper word in two senses: first, it is not appropriate for an educated professor/writer, and second, it belongs to a domestic language, a language for which Adrián has no need. It is not part of the authoritative narratives he citationally performs.<sup>28</sup> Yet, on a more figurative level, the invented participle (articulated by Gina and repeated by Adrián) also designates the process by which one character's citational discursive practices are absorbed into another to create a different substance, a unique performance/identity that combines the qualities of both, if not always coherently. The creation of the new word points to and reenacts the formation (performance) of a new subjectivity, comprised of multiple ingredients.

But why all this focus on tea? Of all the actants Berman might have used, why specifically tea to embody the deferral of desire, among other things? I would like to propose that tea functions in this play as both a social and linguistic referent. First, the taking of tea is obviously a ritualistic, social event that evokes certain status and requires "correct" (cited and citable) conversation. Second, a ritual that is foreign to Mexico, it responds to a desire to be (or appear to be) other. By drinking tea, one defines oneself as (one becomes) international or cosmopolitan. At the same time, the "Mexican" ritual is no doubt a citation of the British custom, which in turn is

a citation of the Oriental ritual. In this manner, the tea itself marks the performativity, the citationality, and the negotiation as I have been discussing them – the sameness and the difference with which it has been “infused” into the Mexican culture.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, just as the phoneme *te* slips back and forth between the literal and the figurative, much of the theatricality of the play is predicated on the continual slippage between these two semiotic points of reference. Thus, when characters utter a figurative expression, the literal meaning is also underlined – often humorously – in what we might call a literalization of the figurative. For example, in Act I Adrián prepares to depart as Ismael arrives. When Gina insists that he wait a moment, the stage directions indicate: “Adrián cruza adelante una mano sobre la otra, se espera estrictamente un momento” (38). Indeed, I would argue that the multiple levels of theatre or performativity we encounter throughout the play (theatre taken as reality as opposed to theatre recognized as such – metatheatre – etc.) encourage spectators to consider the multiple levels on which all language must function and be understood. The slippage among the levels of theatre underscores the continual slippage between the literal and the figurative, and the effects of one on the other, as Berman dramatizes the (often humorous) problematics of a literal reading and performance of a narrative that was initially figurative.<sup>30</sup> One might well wonder to what extent our citational gender performances are also literalizations of what at some point in history was intended to be figurative. Indeed, the figurative may be but an oblique attempt to reconceive reality.

The interplay between the literal and the figurative is further emphasized in Act II when the much younger Ismael urges Gina to force Adrián to make a commitment. Significantly, in spite of the fact that Ismael is a generation younger and “differently masculine” insofar as he ostensibly rejects Adrián’s hypermasculine role, he still cites and prompts her to perform the old narratives.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Adrián’s obsession with Villa and the Mexican Revolution, which he sees in terms of heroes and traitors, is echoed in Ismael’s polar extremes (“Decirle: o todo o nada” [48]) and his definition of “love” in terms of war: “en el fondo eso queremos los hombres: que alguien nos *tumbe* todas, todas, nuestras idiotas *defensas*; que alguien nos *invade*, nos haga suyos; nos *libere* de nosotros mismos” (49, emphasis added). Although Ismael’s narrative performs an inversion of power positions, making her the conquering hero, it never challenges the basic structure of the old narrative. Nor does he ever question the literal acceptance (and by implication, performance) of the figurative war terminology, although Berman seems to ask, what can we

expect from characters who have been taught to perform and desire in this manner?

Once “conquered,” Ismael (who acknowledges he does not know how to lead) dances with Gina to the tune of a bolero (specifically, “*Desdichadamente*,” sign of their citational performance of unrequited love at this point). However, the younger, “differently masculine” man is soon replaced by Adrián and his old narrative -- that is, his ostensible promise of marriage and a son in what might be viewed as a spoof on Freud’s prescriptions of woman’s desire.<sup>32</sup> Although Gina thus literalizes a linguistic trope by falling from the arms of one into the arms of the other, as might be expected by now, the “other” is not significantly other/different. The similarities between the two not-so-different males are further underscored in their professions. Adrián (re)writes history; Ismael designs wooden blocks. Clearly, both occupations are predicated on and limited to endless repetition with only minor variation.<sup>33</sup> I would hypothesize that the same is true of gender identity and performance as I have been discussing them. Subtly emphasizing those limitations of our performances, Berman concludes the act as Gina and Adrián dance to the tune of a different bolero, “*Una y otra vez*” (a title that underlines the inescapability of the citations), and she re-cites her litany of cliched desires.

The limitations of the desires we are authorized to perform are again highlighted at the beginning of Act III when Adrián returns to Gina’s apartment for the first time in three months, and she informs him that she has “fallen in love with” Ismael. That even “love” is citational and has its own history is humorously underlined in Adrián’s reaction: “*Por favor, a tu edad ese lenguaje. Enamorada. [ . . . ] Existe una bibliografía inmensa sobre ese estado de ilusión. Desde Platón hasta Freud y los posfreudianos, pasando por Kierkegaard y Marcuse*” (67-68). Adrián’s attempts to reconquer her (by means of whatever words and performance she might desire) are accompanied by Villa’s running commentary. Failing to conquer her with his macho role à la Villa, and much to Villa’s chagrin, Adrián assumes the role of sensitive modern man (a role which to the audience is clearly performed in bad faith). Still, Villa takes Adrián’s “sensitive” role as personal insult and injury, literalized via the knife in his back and the bullet wounds he receives each time Adrián conducts himself as other than a true “he-man.” Thus, Berman literalizes the notion that to attempt to perform a different citation (to perform and desire differently) is to “poke holes” in the old narrative. At the same time, she implicitly speculates that perhaps Villa’s narrative initially had to be written in a more masculine extreme to compensate

for the writer's perceived potential inadequacies and that our own subjectivity, sense of self, necessarily influences our re-writing (performance) of prior narratives. Or is it simply that "sensitive man" was an unthinkable role in Villa's time?<sup>34</sup> Or, and inversely, would wide-spread acceptance of the modern, sensitive man role invalidate the previously author(iz)ed role of super macho and result in a need to re-write it, a re-writing that would again undermine the teleological goal of both narrative and history? At the same time, Berman seems to be suggesting that what is needed is a "revolution" in gender performance. But, she also seems to hold little optimism for that revolution, which may prove to be as disappointing as the Mexican Revolution. In the words of Adrián, "¿De qué sirvió la Revolución, la lucha del general Villa, si sus nietos están igual de chingados que él de escuincle? A otros les hizo justicia la Revolución" (83).<sup>35</sup> As I argued above, sensitive modern man as performed by Ismael is still fraught with contradictions and fails to avoid citing and performing prior narratives of hypermasculinity. Telos (as embodied in progress to the implicitly superior modern man), like coherent identity, once more proves to be a narrative illusion.<sup>36</sup>

Act III ends when a despairing Adrián melodramatically throws himself out Gina's window. Ironically, however, she lives on the first floor. Here, as when Gina has to tell him to stand still so she can throw the roses in his face, Berman underlines the citationality of the roles the characters perform (in these two cases, not unconsciously) and the absurdity or ineffectiveness of those citations when performed in bad faith: when the pre-text is out of context.<sup>37</sup> In these two instances we laugh, but beneath the laughter lies the implicit question: how many of our citational performances, even those we reenact with seriousness and good faith, are equally out of context, incongruous with other roles we alternately perform?

Again defying our desire for telos (and the telos of desire?), the implicit resolution of Act III is negated at the beginning of Act IV when the alive and well Adrián returns to the same apartment, looking for Gina, who no longer lives there. Undermining both the gesture toward final closure and all notion of the proper (both in terms of social correctness and propriety), Gina's apartment and all its contents (presumably including Adrián) have been sold to Andrea, who is a willing substitute for her friend. In an impressive, dramatic build-up to a love scene Adrián and Andrea disappear into the bedroom as Villa rolls out a huge cannon and extends its telescopic barrel, literalizing the metaphoric link between gun and potency. When he finally fires, the cannon goes limp and all that comes out is a tiny ball -- much ado about nothing. The play ends with the reappearance of Adrián and

Andrea as he departs leaving her holding a glass of cognac in each hand rather than the tea held by Mujer as she was shot and abandoned by Villa.<sup>38</sup> Tea, it would appear, is appropriate only in anticipation of the bedroom scene, before desire dies/is killed.

Thus, as noted earlier, the ending which is a non-ending, destabilizes our notion of narrative closure and foregrounds citational performativity. It would appear that Adrián cannot perform because he and Andrea are citing different scripts; they belong in different plays. Or is the problem that they are citing roles that are too similar?<sup>39</sup> Her performance as a direct woman in response to her reading of him as a direct man ultimately fails to authorize, or even leave space for, the conquering hero role. Indeed, her performance may come too dangerously close to what we have traditionally interpreted (or inversely prescribed) as the masculine role. Emphasizing what might be read as her masculinity, Adrián is fascinated with Andrea's "bigotito," surely an oblique reference to Berman's own *Suplicio de placer*. In the first act of that play, the two characters share a moustache, signaling both an blurring of well-defined gender roles and the hom(m)osexuality discussed by Irigaray, a desire, that is, for the same (the masculine) and an erasure of the feminine.<sup>40</sup> One might argue that in some sense the moustache functions in an similar manner in the more recent play to the extent that Adrián desires (to be) and assumes the role of (cites) Villa, emblem of the macho par excellence and cannot perform when Andrea performs a role other than the traditional one of passive (and undesiring?) femininity. That is, her sexual aggressiveness -- her perceived masculinity or metaphoric *bigotito* -- renders him roleless, suggesting perhaps that what neither of the male characters is prepared to accept is the woman as a desiring (and by implication active) subject (rather than strictly as an object of desire, passive) -- in spite of the fact that at times it is they who project the desire onto the women. And, by "prepared to accept" I mean quite specifically that neither has a citable model; prior discourse has not author(iz)ed such a role -- that is, a role other than ostensibly passive victim (although as I noted earlier the passivity of the females may be more a monolithic perception than an accurate description of their behavior). For example, epitome of the macho, Villa is nonetheless described as "con aire desconfiado" (33) when he is with Mujer. During their ritualistic tea, Villa is clearly attracted to the woman, but he is annoyed that she is not afraid of him -- "Ni yo merito le impongo miedo" (36).<sup>41</sup> Perhaps that is why he had to kill her, because she too left no room for his conquering-hero role. When our performative citations leave us no alternatives for present circumstances, we must create and negotiate anew. But in doing so, we risk

“misperforming,” although as I have argued, “misperformances” (pre-texts out of context) nonetheless provide the foundation for future citational performances, as Berman amusingly dramatizes at several points. In this respect, Berman seems to suggest that our prescriptions of masculinity as fearless potency and femininity as undesiring passivity may be narrative fictions (wishful thinking) more than reflections of experience, which, again, is far less monolithic.

Adrián explains the problem differently, however: “No ... pude, y creo que, por un rato ... no voy a poder ... [. . .] ... no voy a poder ... olvidarla” (93-94). Let us not forget, however, that earlier in the play, Adrián confessed that he could think of her only in parts, not as a whole, and that it frightened him to think that she exists apart from him (65). Furthermore, the fact that he was quite able to forget Gina frequently when she was available suggests that, as a historian, he can remember (be interested in, desire) only that which is past and reduced to discourse. Her absence at this point makes her as mythical a figure as Villa and thus desirable in a way that the physically present Andrea is not. Similarly, one must wonder to what extent we should read Gina’s attraction to the much younger Ismael as an impossible desire to return to an earlier time, either that of her own youth or that when she was the needed mother -- both moments, again, that she is supposed to desire, that have been scripted as authorized desires. Thus, Berman seems to ask what narratives have taught us to desire only what we cannot or do not have. What political, strategic ground is predicated on keeping us ever desiring? On the other hand, we might posit that the *la* that Adrián cannot forget is generic Woman, the fiction, narrative that has been made of her, a fiction Villa encourages him to share with Gina as he tries to cue him on what to say to her in Act III: “Siempre has sido la misma mujer. Por más que te cambie por otra, siempre has sido la misma, una sola mujer...” (73) -- read, one pre-scribed role with little space for other positions and other desires.

Or, we might understand that what Adrián cannot forget is the old narrative, told time and again, and most recently by him. It is no doubt revealing that in the last act, Andrea asks him to write a different historical narrative. She wants him to tell the story of her grandfather, Plutarco Elías Calles, Villa’s enemy and from Adrián’s perspective a traitor to the revolution. She offers to supply him with all the materials he will need, but he cannot or will not tell a different story, or for that matter, even re-consider the one he has already told, perhaps because an alternative narrative might destabilize the one on which he has literally and figuratively staked his life.

In conclusion, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* unquestionably underscores the problematics of both gender identity and desire. Nonetheless,

Berman offers no prescriptions for change, perhaps because that future narrative is not yet writable, indeed it may not yet be thinkable. The only agenda for future action seems to be Andrea's admonishment to Adrián to break with the past and see, really see, what he has in front of him.<sup>42</sup>

### *Quinnipiac College*

### Notes

1. In his review of theatre in Mexico City during the summer of 1993, Timothy G. Compton validly summarizes the play as an "insightful focus on relationships between the sexes" (135), "signaling the need for a new kind of romantic relationship, cautioning against blind acceptance of 'History,' and exploring the relationship between past and present" (136). Born in 1955, Berman is a relatively young playwright, author of less than a dozen works. Although none of her other plays has been as commercially successful as *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, her *Suplicio de placer* has certainly received critical acclaim, as have *Aguila o sol* and *Yankee* (Bill). An actress and a director herself, she trained under the well-known Mexican director, Abraham Oceransky, who, in turn, has directed some of her plays.

2. A citation, in the sense I use the term, repeats or reenacts (or even represents) a previously authorized gesture or pattern, if indeed not necessarily consciously. I would further argue that even if the performance evinces no variation from the citational model, the lack of modification is still a response to the tacit negotiation with one's audience. Although my theoretical focus throughout will be Butler, other feminist critics have proffered similar theories. For example, in 1987 De Lauretis proposed that "The construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation" (9).

3. Similarly, Butler too has argued, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -- an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition* of acts." See *Performative Acts* (270, italics in the original).

4. Furthermore, as Jacques Derrida has argued, a performative utterance succeeds only if and because it repeats a "coded" or iterable utterance -- that is, only if and because it is identifiable in some way as a "citation" (cited in Butler, *Bodies* 13).

5. Heilbrun expresses a similar notion in a different way when she states, "we cannot tell stories we have never heard" (108), and later, "We cannot yet make wholly new fictions; we can only transform old tales . . . . Out of old tales, we must make new lives" (109).

6. For a functional definition of narrativity, I shall borrow from Elin Diamond, who draws from a number of other scholars to define narrativity as, "the process by which a spectator of any representational medium will construct a narrative, i.e. a causal chain of events moving toward a telos or completion" (94).

7. Significantly, a number of Berman's plays have a historical basis, and in them she frequently emphasizes questions of language and the masculine voice of the conqueror. I think specifically of *Rompecabezas*, which deals with the murder of Trotsky, *Herejía*, which takes place during the colonial period, and *Aguila o sol*, which deals with the period of the Conquest. Burgess discusses Berman's use of history in her earlier plays (78-91).

8. Throughout this study I use the term historiography to refer to the narrative of history (as opposed to historical events themselves).

9. Butler is repeatedly specific about the social enforcement of gender roles: "The 'performative' dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms" (*Bodies* 94); "'sexed positions' are not localities but, rather, citational practices instituted within a juridical domain -- a domain of constitutive constraints" (*Bodies* 108); "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (*Gender* 33); "the tacit collective agreement



to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions -- and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them . . . . [T]he historical possibilities . . . are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions alternately embodied and deflected under duress" (*Gender* 140).

10. Butler proposes, "In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction" (*Gender* 138).

11. This circular citation/authorization is true of theatre in general. To some extent, what we observe on stage is an imitation or citation of life off stage or of our illusions of life off stage; yet surely we would all agree that, inversely, what happens on stage is likely to influence the spectators' future comportment off stage and the accompanying illusions that pass for "reality."

I would like to insist that my use of the term "role" is not intended to suggest a masquerade or theatre in the sense of a conscious superimposition of the mask over some inherent essence. Rather, one negotiates with one's audience (perhaps consciously but more often not) so that the latter will (mis)take, (mis)recognize role A as opposed to role B (or any number of others) to be one's essence. Thus, what I call a role is, in the words of Butler, an "enabling cultural condition" (*Bodies* 7).

12. Fraser further notes, "there are a plurality of different discourses in society, therefore a plurality of communicative sites from which to speak. . . . individuals assume different discursive positions as they move from one discursive frame to another [and there are] conflicts among social schemas of interpretation and among agents who deploy them" (185-86). She also posits that social identities are "nonmonolithic" (186).

13. Quoting Jeffrey Weeks's *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, Vorlicky notes that "[i]dentity is . . . [a] self-creation . . . on grounds not freely chosen but laid out by history" (Vorlicky 2, emphasis added).

14. In his *Reading for Plot* Peter Brooks also acknowledges that narratives (specifically plots) shape texts "and by extension, lives" (xii) and the relation between narrative desire and erotic desire: "Narratives both tell of desire . . . and arouse and make use of desire as dynamic of signification" (37). He also posits that the need to tell is "a primary human drive that seeks to seduce and to subjugate the listener, to implicate him [sic] in the thrust of a desire that never can quite speak its name -- never can quite come to the point -- but that insists on speaking over and over again its movement toward that name" (61).

15. Not irrelevantly, the "happy ever after" is another desire not visibly fulfilled. It is promised but not shown.

16. Berman's play on words is surely intentional here. *Hacer patria* humorously points to the patriarchal foundations of both fatherhood and fatherland and the perhaps intentional strategic slippage between the two. Immediately after his mother asks how many grandchildren she has, Villa tells her he cannot keep track because "andamos haciendo patria" (45), in what is ostensibly a reference to his patriotic endeavors but which must also be read as a representation of his erotic adventures.

17. Surely the ambiguity of this simile is intentional. Does "like/as an animal" refer to them and how they are going to "kill" desire -- they will kill it as an animal does, without a notion of history? Or does it refer to desire itself, which like an animal, can be killed without qualms?

18. In *Bodies* Butler refers to "the radical unthinkability of desiring otherwise, the radical unendurability of desiring otherwise, the absence of certain desires, the repetitive compulsion of others" (94).

19. She says, "Quiero... Quiero... dormir... cada noche contigo. Quiero despertar contigo, cada mañana. Quiero desayunar contigo. Quiero que vengas a comer diario aquí. Quiero irme de vacaciones contigo. Quiero una casa en el campo. Quiero que hables con mi hijo de larga distancia, que hablen de cosas de hombres, que yo te lleve un té mientras hablas con mi hijo [ . . . ] Quiero un collar de oro con mi nombre [ . . . ] Quiero dejar de fumar [ . . . ] Quiero otra casa junto al mar [ . . . ]" (58).

20. As Compton accurately notes, not only does Villa's life affect Adrián, Adrián's affects Villa's (136).

21. This is a monograph that Andrea will later label a novel and at that one that is "chiquita" (84).

22. That Gina should be typing Adrián's manuscript is surely another comment on the discursive contradictions we all experience. In Act I he has objected to her new business, contesting her "Estamos dándole trabajo a la gente" with "No. Están esclavizándolos" (31). Apparently, his "allowing" her to type his manuscript (for which she is presumably not paid) is not to be perceived as exploitation or enslavement.

23. The introductory character descriptions state, "Es el Villa mítico de las películas mexicanas de los años cincuenta, sesenta y setenta" (20).

24. Each of the characters, including Adrián and Villa, positions him/herself as victim at some point. That each of the males does it quite consciously should lead us to wonder to what extent the females do (or do not do) the same.

25. De Lauretis's theory does not pretend to be original, but is her summary of Wendy Holloway's reading of Foucault.

26. One could argue that in Act I he plays the conquering hero, in Act II the unfaithful lover, in Act III the sensitive modern man, and in Act IV the self-pitying, middle-aged, defeated "hero."

27. Analogously, Butler has suggested that the naming of erogenous zones is what makes them erogenous, for language forcibly shapes "the interrelationships through which physical bodies are perceived" (*Gender* 114).

28. It is revealing that Adrián criticizes the language usage of both women characters, telling Andrea that *okey* is not a Spanish word and questioning her use of *agüita*, ostensibly setting himself up as the linguistic authority.

29. For quite a different reading of the significance of taking tea, see Jarrod Hayes, who links tea with homosexuality.

30. Although my terminology here would suggest that the literal and the figurative are mutually exclusive binary poles, I perceive them more in terms of an infinite number of shades, mixtures of the two, along a continuum from one extreme to the other.

31. I borrow the term "differently masculine" from Robert Vorlicky, who in turn borrows it from Ken Corbett. Although the latter uses it specifically in reference to homosexual men, in *Act Like a Man*, Vorlicky argues that "if gender is viewed as a fluid construct, then all men are necessarily differently masculine from each another, just as all women are necessarily differently feminine from each another" (259). While I certainly agree with Vorlicky, I use the term somewhat more simplistically here to suggest that, outwardly at least, Ismael does not appear to endorse traditional notions of masculinity, the hypermasculinity à la Villa that Adrián cites and performs.

32. On more than one occasion Freud suggested that the female's desire for a penis is normally transformed into a wish for a baby (presumably, preferably male). I would also argue that Adrián's "promise" to give her what "she wants" (presuming anyone could know what that might be) is more verbal manipulation, language that overtly serves both a literal and a figurative end. He never actually says he will fulfill any of her desires; all he says is "Está bien," which literally says nothing, but which she interprets figuratively as acquiescing to what she wants.

33. There seems to be no indication in the play that Adrián's version of Villa varies from the official history. Furthermore, he is unwilling to reconsider writing the history of Andrea's ancestors.

34. Sedgwick briefly discusses what she calls the production and deployment of an extraordinarily high level of self-pity in nongay men which, unlike machismo, is essentially never named or discussed as a cultural and political fact. She suggests that this "role" is manipulative and functions to allow the heterosexual male to have it both ways, as it were (145-46). Elsewhere, she questions the "naturalness of any desire" (172).

35. What Adrián overlooks, what holds absolutely no interest for him, is the fact that, in the words of Jean Franco, the Mexican Revolution "constituted a discourse that associated virility with social

transformation in a way that marginalized women at the very moment when they were, supposedly, liberated" (102).

36. Nigro has noted that "a major concern in some feminist theatre has been to disrupt narrative on stage, and challenge the audience's own desire to create tidy and closed narratives" (141). Throughout this essay I am indebted to Nigro's perceptive analysis of the relationship between narrative and theatre in three Mexican plays, including Berman's *Suplicio de placer*.

37. Significantly, the roses, the pre-text, are doubly out of context here since they were given to her by Ismael.

38. In another amusing literalization of the figurative, Adrián departs carrying his shoes, suggesting that he did not "ie with his boots on."

39. One wonders if Berman's choice of names is not intended to suggest this. It cannot be coincidental that the two names, Adrián and Andrea, while not identical, have phonetic resonance.

40. See the Nigro article for a discussion of the moustache in *Suplicio*.

41. Paradoxically, the "tea" here is not a "tea" for according to Adrián, Villa never ate or drank anything until his sergeant tasted it to be sure it was not poisoned. Both the phoneme and the ritual to which it refers suggest participation and partaking of the beverage. Without that, there is no "tea," and the signifier is empty.

42. For quite a different reading of the play, see the Medina article.

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