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Dramatic Strategies Made Clear: The Feminist Politics in Griselda Gambaro's *Puesta en claro*

Abstract

In this essay I explore the feminist aspects of *Puesta en claro*, written in 1974, when Griselda Gambaro was not yet considered a writer who paid attention to feminine issues. Yet to the extent that Gambaro always focuses on the constellation of problems relating to power relations, she is including feminine and feminist issues in her text, and continues a tradition many critics relate to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, as I shall argue in my conclusion. Seen within the trajectory of Gambaro's dramaturgy, *Puesta en claro*, as a play from the 1970s is also remarkable in showing a change in the typical pattern of victimization for her characters. Her audience sees that it is possible for the victims to renounce their passivity and rebel. Moreover, she embodies that message in the sign of a blind, apparently defenseless, domesticated, dominated woman. I suggest that in the creation of the blind woman Gambaro comments on the significance of the male gaze, not as an inherent attribute, but as a controlling agent derived from the patriarchal system. She also shows that the private spaces of the domestic sphere to which women are relegated within the patriarchy can be reconstituted as a site of power.

Keywords

Griselda Gambaro, *Puesta en claro*, feminism, feminine issues, power, power relations, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, play, theatre, patriarchy, Argentine literature, Argentine theatre

Dramatic Strategies Made Clear: The Feminist Politics in *Puesta en claro* by Griselda Gambaro

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Award-winning author of over thirty plays, several novels and short story collections, Griselda Gambaro is considered one of Argentina's foremost writers and one of Latin America's premier playwrights. In this essay I explore the feminist aspects of *Puesta en claro* "Made Clear," one of the least studied plays by Gambaro, yet a play that serves as an exemplum of her dramaturgy, especially its inherent feminism and its political commentary. Although the play was first produced in 1986, and published in 1987, it was written in 1974, when Gambaro was not noted by the public or her critics as a writer who paid attention to feminine issues. In this play, however, the female presence on stage is prominent, and the representation of "woman" leads us to question gender roles in a society dominated by the patriarchy. To the extent that Gambaro always focuses on the constellation of problems relating to power relations, she is including feminine and feminist issues in her text, and continues a tradition many critics relate to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, as I shall argue in my conclusion. Seen within the trajectory of Gambaro's dramaturgy, *Puesta en claro*, then, as a play from the 1970s is also remarkable in showing a change in the typical pattern of victimization for her characters; she advises her audience that it is possible for the victims to renounce their passivity and rebel. Moreover, she embodies that message in the sign of a blind, apparently

defenseless, domesticated, dominated woman. I suggest that in the creation of the blind woman Gambaro comments on the significance of the male gaze, not as an inherent attribute, but as a controlling agent derived from the patriarchal system. She will also show that the private spaces of the domestic sphere to which women are relegated within the patriarchy can be reconstituted as a site of power.

While it is always important to recall the historical situation in which a text was written and place the text within the concrete reality of its temporal production, with Gambaro the public and the private, fiction and fact are especially united. On the personal level, the politics of oppression instituted by the military regime installed in 1976 forced Gambaro into exile from 1977 to 1980. Until 1977, she had walked a tightrope similar to the feat of one of her fictive characters, La ecuyere in *Dios no nos quiere contentos* (1979, *God doesn't want us to be happy*), by displaying the special talent of being able to reach the critics while evading the censors. Although it is too simple to assume that a direct, one-to-one correspondence exists in the relationship between a work of fiction and the historical reality from which it was generated, her plays function as polysemous signs, offering meanings on several levels. Plays such as *The Blunder*, *The Camp*, and *The Siamese Twins* can be interpreted from a psychological perspective or even as metatheatrical comments on the role of the artist in society, although they are most often taken as political allegories.

National politics of oppression also have had an impact on the nature of the critical enterprise vis à vis Gambaro. When I was asked in 1979 to write a review of her theater in a journal that was to be published in Argentina, she cautioned me not to mention the fact that the plays could be read as political allegories of the current Argentine situation and that the characters of her dramatic world were as victimized as the Argentine people they clearly represented. Appreciating her personal risk, I focused my comments on how she presents generic characters involved in a series of situations rather than offering the developmental plots and psychological profiles associated with conventional dramas; and how she uses violent physical images to explore relations of power and the

ambiguities and cruelty of existence in a post-Holocaust, absurdist world. Indeed, in her early phase of writing, Gambaro did not situate her dramatic universe in any exact time or geographic location and specifically avoided the use of nationalist motifs or the Argentine forms of *voseo*. As in the stories of Jorge Luis Borges, where anecdotal details change while the focus remains on one basic theme, so, too, we find in Gambaro's plays from the 1960s and 1970s that anecdotal differences cannot obscure a recurring pattern of action where an innocent person becomes the victim of an oppressor (Cypess, "Plays" 95.)

At first, the political message of her plays escaped the detection of the censors while reaching the critical audience who could appreciate her specific political commentary clothed in the signs of the latest theatrical currents from Europe. She also exercised self-censorship when she refused permission for the production and publication of her plays; in particular, she took out of circulation *Información para extranjeros* (*Information for Foreigners*) written in 1972 at the beginning of the guerrilla movement in Argentina and not published until 1987. Aware that she was dealing with dangerous material, she nevertheless felt compelled to write the play, whose violent scenes of torture and kidnappings were based in part on actual daily events even before the years of the infamous "Dirty War" (1976-1983). The fascist regime of María Estela Perón, for example, had already begun the operation of death squads to "eliminate guerrillas and other subversives" (Foster 8).¹ In this play, as in other works (*Nada que ver* "Nothing to do with it," as a good example), Gambaro is prescient, anticipating all too graphically the atrocities the military regime perpetrated on the *desaparecidos*. Gambaro was well aware of the cruel consequences of political criticism; she had received a warning in 1973, when her house was searched and her name was placed on a list of prohibited writers, along with Osvaldo Dragún, Roberto Cossa, Carlos Gorostiza, among others.

Although Gambaro's public in Argentina and abroad was pleased to recognize a strong and impressive dramatic voice emanating from a woman playwright who was providing arresting and important ideas about the real world of politics and the semiosis of the theatrical world, most of her plays

ignored women on stage.² Nevertheless, as Kirsten Nigro convincingly argues, Gambaro evinces a feminist perspective. After first clarifying that there is no consensus about the concepts of “feminist discourse,” she notes the absence of “lo obviamente femenino” ‘the overtly feminine,’ in Gambaro’s dramas even in the most popular sense of the word (65). Nigro has suggested that the apparent lack of the “feminine” element in Gambaro’s early plays does not mean a lack of interest, but that often an absence, a silence may in effect be a subtle directive to attend to the subtext. Nigro agrees with Ann Jones on the importance “to listen ‘otherwise,’ to read between the lines for desires or states of mind that cannot be articulated in the social arena and the language of phallogentrism” (Jones 99).

Although difficult to discern by many members of the audience, some of Gambaro’s public were able to listen “otherwise,” and the meaning of the sign “woman” was decoded as a result of her presentation of characters on stage. Ignacio in *Siamese Twins* is one example of the character who suffers the trajectory of many women (and other marginalized peoples) in his victimization by Lorenzo. He may be masculine according to biology, but with regard to culture and ideology, Ignacio was a stand-in for the female, that is, for the “other” who has been so marginalized that “she” does not appear on stage. Nigro reminds us to read between the lines with Gambaro’s work, even in the early plays in which almost no women appear:

Aún ahí se insinúa lo femenino, pues aunque ausente físicamente, sí está ahí en los paradigmas que rigen el comportamiento de los personajes. Por ejemplo, la victimización de Ignacio por Lorenzo en *Los siameses* tiene implícito una oposición entre lo activo/lo pasivo, el de arriba/el de abajo, el fuerte/el débil; o sea lo masculino/lo femenino, sin que aparezca en escena el signo concreto, la mujer, a quien se le atribuye lo negativo de este binarismo.

Even here the feminine is injected, but although absent physically, it is present in the paradigms that govern the behavior of the characters. For example, the victimization

of Ignacio by Lorenzo in *The Siamese Twins* contains implicitly an opposition between active/passive, the one above/ the one below, strong/weak; that is, masculine/feminine, without having to appear on stage the concrete sign “woman,” to whom all the negative features of the binary grouping is attributed. (67)

In other words, the absence of the visual signifier “female” does not mean that the playwright is not referring to the culturally defined signified “female.” Cultural encoding, as Sue-Ellen Case asserts, “is the imprint of ideology upon the sign—the set of values, beliefs, and ways of seeing that control the connotations of the sign in the culture at large. The norms of the culture assign meaning to the sign, prescribing its resonance with their biases” (*Feminism* 116-17). In Western culture the sign “woman” has been configured along cultural associations and characteristics—the elements of “passive,” “weak,” “vulnerable,” characteristics that were associated with certain kinds of (male) characters in Gambaro’s plays, as noted above.

It should be noted that the absence of actresses on stage reflects the Greek classical conventions of the stage, where women were ostracized from the actual staged production. The Greek tradition of prohibiting women on stage, and producing no women writers, was repeated in Shakespeare’s England and in Japan’s Kabuki tradition (to name just two). As Case comments:

the result of the suppression of actual women in the classical world created the invention of a representation of the gender “Woman” within the culture. This “woman” appeared on the stage, in the myths, and in the plastic arts, representing the patriarchal values attached to the gender of woman while suppressing the experience, stories, feelings, and fantasies of actual women. (Case “Classic Drag” 318)

I would not like to exaggerate the claim, but Gambaro offers an interesting commentary on the classical conventions of the stage; whereas the Greeks used a male in female dress to signify “woman,” Gambaro uses a male who “performs” as a

female. By using a male signifier who may signify “female” in her polysemous dramaturgy, Gambaro stresses behavior and ideology over biology. That is, the vulnerability, passivity, and finally, the complete loss of power leading to destruction and death as the character is manipulated by those in power reveal “the intimidations and negotiated concessions which come into play as a result of the imbalances and inequities immediately produced by a relation between . . . two human beings” (Bersani 10). Beyond focusing on essentializing categories of “male” and “female” behavior, Gambaro emphasizes that the basic factor affecting the inter-relationships between all human beings is the relation of power and its negotiations.

Gambaro’s concerns for power relations in all its various ramifications eventually led her to explore the problems of authoritarian governments through the use of a particular, and visible, feminine figure.³ In *Puesta en claro* she explores the problems inherent in an oppressive society, and specifically, a patriarchal society, in which power, authority, and discipline are related to maleness, and in particular to the driving principle of Fatherness.⁴

Since *Puesta en claro* has not been discussed in the critical literature, and I refer to it only briefly in my introductory essay on Gambaro’s dramaturgy (Cypess, “Gambaro”), it is useful to summarize its major plot points. In this play the innocent victim is Clara, whose actions and dialogue indicate that she is blind. As a blind woman, she is completely dependent on the doctor, who says he can restore her sight. The doctor tries to convince Clara that she can see, and as hard as she tries to agree with him, her actions prove to the audience that she cannot see. The doctor further subjugates Clara by bringing her to his home as his wife to care for his family, which includes three children and a grandfather. There Clara is treated with even greater disdain and cruelty by the supposed children, who are actually grown men. The grandfather acts as if he, too, were brought in to play a part, like Clara. They seem to be objects who must respond to the doctor/husband who controls the dramatic situation.

The Argentine public was very much like Gambaro’s portrayal of the desperate protagonist Clara. In the same way

that Clara does not contradict the doctor's statements that she can see, and pretends to see whatever the doctor tells her she sees, many Argentine citizens did not (dare to) oppose the military dictatorships and concurred with whatever the authorities put forth as "true," as legitimate sociopolitical claims. I would suggest, too, that the inept but brutish doctor recalls José López Rega, the minister of Social Services under Isabel Perón, and heir to the pro-Nazi wing of Perónism, as well as a representative of authoritarianism, anti-democratic, terrorist techniques, (as he is characterized by Tomás Eloy Martínez in *La novela de Perón* [*The Novel of Perón*], just as the children Félix and Lucio may be allusions to the secret police who hide behind plain clothes.⁵ Juancho, the son who always falls asleep when at home, is an apt characterization of members of the Argentine public who preferred to avoid the reality of the fascist state by maintaining a Lethe-like condition.⁶

One may argue that before the presence of Clara in Gambaro's dramatic world, the entire play *Información para extranjeros* (1972, *Information for Foreigners*) was an attempt to warn Argentines about the dangers of denying what they knew to be true about their political reality. In this play Gambaro warns the audience that they cannot ignore reality and that no one is safe in the everyday reality of Argentina. The world of the stage, described here as a house in which take place assassinations, kidnappings, tortures, abuses, was no different from the world of everyday reality. The spectators as well as the actors are expected to move about the alternately darkened and illuminated areas of the theatrical space, as the stage directions carefully detail. In this tour de force, Gambaro used "theater"—the space of the performance as well as the act of witnessing a theatrical event—in order to force the audience to see, in the sense of recognize and comprehend, acknowledge the reality to which they preferred to blind themselves.

When I participated in a presentation of *Information for Foreigners*, in Mexico City in December, 1993, I was particularly affected by the vignette in which a woman in concentration camp type garb is being tortured in a space alongside the spectators while our attention was supposedly meant to be on a stage diversion. We keenly felt the tension of wanting to help

her, yet being told by our guide that we should ignore her. She wasn't suffering, really, she wanted to be there. And when we heard pistol shots in the darkened room, we were given no explanation; and when we saw people being led away we were told they were going off to an official function. Gambaro recreates in this play much the same environment that Argentine citizens faced during the years of the Dirty War, when they did not want to admit the real meaning behind the acts of terror and violence.

Information for Foreigners becomes more than an interesting theatrical experiment, when it is seen as an allegory for an Argentine national tragedy. Its *mise en scene* forces the spectators to acknowledge their general passivity and requires them to question the nature of events in their own environment. In the earlier plays, only the actors were involved with trying to determine the nature of the reality presented to them by the authority figures, but in *Information*, the spectator is made part of the process as well. The boundary between stage and life becomes blurred as the actor/guide asks the spectator to comment on the acting as well as on the reality of the events enacted. Because of its dramatic self-consciousness, the work can be seen as a metatheatrical piece, in which the actors make the spectators aware of the theatricality of the moment. Yet the dissolution of the barrier between the events of the stage and the events of the real world indicates to the spectator that the kidnappings, acts of cruelty and torture on stage are taking place beyond the theatrical space as well.

In *Puesta en claro*, Gambaro once again addressed the need to force the audience to see themselves on stage, and recognize their situation in the activities in play on stage. As she would do with increasing frequency in the plays of the 1980s—in *La malasangre* (1981, *Bitter Blood*), *Del sol naciente* (1983, *From the Rising Sun*), *Antígona furiosa* (1986, *Furious Antigone*), she uses the body of a woman to create a singular dramatic image that combines gender and politics. In depicting the blind Clara as an unsuspecting, unknowing public, dependent on others whom she cannot/should not trust, Gambaro dramatizes the situation of the passive Argentine peoples victimized by their military governments. She also explores the meaning of the male gaze in the theatre. As noted

majority of playwrights, directors and producers are men. This triumvirate determines the nature of the theatrical gaze, deriving the sign for ‘woman’ from their perspective” (qtd. by Case 118). By presenting a blind woman as her protagonist, Gambaro uses irony to comment on the idea that women are both objects to be gazed upon, and at the same time sightless within the theatre as in “reality” (remember that Gambaro had already eliminated the barrier between the stage and the audience in *Information*). Case builds upon what she calls “feminist psychosemiotics” (118) to discuss how the representation of women in the dominant theatrical discourse is always taken from the male gaze. “When the ingenue makes her entrance, the audience sees her as the male protagonist sees her. The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his desire. In this way, the audience also perceives her as an object of desire, by identifying with his male gaze. This example illustrates one major cultural assumption—that the male is the subject of the dramatic action” (119). Gambaro also illustrates the assumption of the male as the subject of dramatic action and the initiator of the gaze in *Puesta en claro*; she illustrates it and exposes the dangers inherent in its maintenance.⁷

How can Clara initiate the gaze, when she is blind? She appears almost as an automaton, a doll-like creature as she repeats the doctor’s words, follows his commands. For example, when he proposes marriage to her, he talks about his needs, his loneliness, his desires for a woman:

Uno vuelve a su casa y no tiene una mujer con quien hablar. ¿Cómo te fue hoy? nadie me lo dice.
 Clara (gira la cabeza, buscándolo. Dulcemente) ¿Cómo te fue hoy?

One comes home and doesn’t have a wife to talk to. How did it go today?—no one says it to me.
 Clara (turns her head, searching for him. Sweetly) How did it go today?

Clara’s repetition in a sweet tone of the very words of the doctor shows how eager she is to accept the wishes of this master, and to enact the role required of her in the patriarchal

world, a role that shows her as object of desire. Gambaro also includes dialogue and many gestures in the stage directions to show how the doctor thinks of Clara as this object of desire. He often seats her on his lap, as if she were a doll, or a child-like creature, but he also acts in a lewd manner, directing her hand over his body parts. At the end of the first scene, the two are interrupted in their intimacy when the Doctor's colleague enters the hospital room, eager to confirm his expectations that the doctor has failed once again to restore Clara's sight. Clara is forced to make believe she sees in front of this witness and appears to be completely humiliated. In the final gesture of the first scene, however, Gambaro shows that Clara will not always maintain this passive, compliant posture. The doctor is boasting to his colleague about his success, which "merits a kiss":

Doctor: Me merezco un beso. Vení, linda. Nos casaremos.
(Clara tantea, extraviada.)

Doctor: I deserve a kiss. Come, my pretty. We shall get married. (Clara searches [for him], lost.) (139)

Clara evidently does not see, and cannot locate the doctor, but the doctor whistles (as if to call a dog?) so she knows in which direction to walk to reach him and to feign seeing. Without a word, according to the stage directions, Clara's next gesture reverses all the expectations of the doctor, the patriarchy:

Imprevistamente, como un error que parece casi deliberado, Clara se vuelve, avanza hacia el Colega y lo abraza.

In an unforeseen/unexpected manner, as an error that appears almost deliberate, Clara turns, moves towards the Colleague and embraces him. (139)

One wonders if this act of rebellion, to not follow the doctor's orders and embrace the other man, is indeed an error or a deliberate attempt to act independently. We question, too, whether Clara can see, or whether she is only feigning blindness, using this defense as a means to gain the protection of the doctor. Throughout the play the answers to these questions

remain equivocal, the resolutions not made clear. Furthermore, this kind of error, a miscalculation which appears almost deliberate, is repeated at the play's conclusion. The accident/on purpose produces serious consequences as the final act initiated by Clara in her negotiation of power relations.

The doctor, appropriately named Augusto, clearly acts as a dictator, and controls Clara with his power as signified by the male gaze (and dramatized in the binary pairing sighted/sightless). He assumes that his power is immutable and unassailable, eternally his, yet Gambaro shows that power relations are volatile, dynamic and that power is "a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess" (Foucault 94).

Puesta en claro is one of the few plays prior to the work of the 1980s in which Gambaro introduces a married "couple," yet of course, the doctor and Clara are no ordinary "married couple." The comments of Hélène Cixous can shed light on the use of the couple in Gambaro's plays. Cixous reminds us that the sign of binary opposition so basic to traditional masculine discourse "is founded in the *couple*. A couple poised in opposition, in tension, in conflict. . . . To be aware of the couple, that it's the couple that makes it all work, is also to point to the fact that it's on the couple that we have to work if we are to deconstruct and transform culture" (44). Nigro has already noted for us the many coupled oppositions of traditional discourse that Gambaro attempts to destabilize in her plays (see above). In *Puesta en claro*, Gambaro presents a traditional man/woman couple whose descriptions accentuate not only the political aspects of the play vis à vis Argentina, but the gender politics in which most Latin American women live. First, as has been noted, she relates the two main characters in a doctor/patient relationship, which is another traditional unbalanced relationship of power. The blind Clara is physically dependent on the doctor to operate on her eyes in order to regain her sight. He already has operated three times (133), although he denies even that fact, just as he denies that the most recent operation was not a success. When she states clearly and simply "No veo" 'I don't see,' the Doctor refuses to accept her word, and acts as if he is being victimized rather

than Clara. Then, as the dialogue in its black humor emphasizes, the Doctor manipulates Clara so that his view of reality is established as “true,” and her position is undermined, negated:

Clara: No veo.

Doctor: No diga eso, necia! ¿Cuántas veces quiere que la opere? Estoy podrido. Tiene los ojos abiertos. ¿A quién quiere engañar? Soy médico.

Clara: I don't see.

Doctor: Don't say that, stupid. How many times do you want me to operate on you? I'm fed up. Your eyes are open. Who do you want to fool? I'm a doctor. (135)

This dialogue also establishes the idea that if the doctor (in his identity as dominant force in the power relations) says she can see, she should accept his word as law. He also usurps her position as victim, as if she were willfully not seeing despite his earnest efforts. As proof of *his* good will, the Doctor promises Clara that if she behaves herself, he will bring her to his house. He also adds that he is lonely, needs someone in the house to cater to his needs, and that Clara can play that role. In order to understand why Clara would even want to “audition” for that role, one needs to consider the social context in which she has been formed. For we can understand her need to place herself in the care of a doctor if she is indeed blind; but why would she submit to being treated as an object, as the submissive partner in the coupling?

When Clara tells the Doctor that she had a dream about him and his children, the answer becomes clear that she has accepted the patriarchal agenda about the myth of the family and her role as female. In her informative essay, Sarah Radcliffe alludes to the context of social and sexual disparity in which women like Clara are engendered: “In Latin America, to see women as agents in identity politics is to challenge the hegemonic structures of Latin American society around the family, sexuality, Catholicism, and formal politics, which assign women to an unproblematized position as family maintainers on a daily and generational basis” (Cubbitt, qtd.

by Radcliffe 104). How does Clara become transformed from the object in the power structure to an “agent in identity politics?” What causes her to react, finally, to the abuses of her oppressors? While the answers are not made perfectly clear, the text does supply us with the evidence.

It is not enough for Clara to realize that she is being misinformed and mistreated by the men, she must act on this information. She appears powerless to defend herself because of both her blindness and her status as a woman. As the children instruct her, “No empecés a cambiar todo. Si sos nueva, respetá nuestras costumbres” ‘Don’t begin to change everything. If you are new, respect our customs’ (156). Instead of following the party line and remaining passive, however, as do other characters in Gambaro’s dramatic world (as Ignacio, or Emma, perhaps, of *El campo*, or the mother in *La malasangre*), Clara uses the elements of her weakness to attack the men in control. She cooks a meal for her husband and children which contains a poison that kills the doctor and the two sons who are the oppressors, while the simple son Juancho and the grandfather remain unharmed.

The scene of the dinner turned last supper provides an excellent context in which to examine the feminist politics of Gambaro. After having always been mistreated by the Doctor, Lucio, and Félix, Clara suddenly changes her demeanor, apparently no longer resisting the structures of oppression. She acts so sweetly, announcing: Me voy a portar bien, Augusto. Sé . . . todo. ‘I am going to behave well, Augusto. I know . . . everything’ (180). We may well ask, what is it that she knows now? Has she finally assimilated her proper role in the social and sexual hierarchy? Or has she found the weapon she needs to subvert his gaze, to resist his power? The answer, again, is unclear, but I suggest that Clara knows but will not say what she knows, and that she does rebel. For example, I read her desire to prevent Juancho from eating the meal she has prepared, just as she refrains from eating, not as an issue of deference, as the august doctor might think, but a result of knowledge of its true nature. The simple son Juancho almost warns the others about the impending danger:

Juancho: No nos salió bien. No coman porque. . . .

Clara: Tonto . . .

Juancho: Tiene . . .

Juancho: It didn't come out right. Don't eat because . . .

Clara: Stupid . . .

Juancho: It has . . . (180)

What does the meal contain? The dialogic interactions are ambiguous, and become meaningful for the audience only after the three suffer the punishment/revenge accidentally (intentionally?) prepared for them. In consideration of their fate—death—Cixous' observation that the couple is "engaged in a kind of war in which death is always at work" (44) seems especially appropriate.

In response to the Doctor's question about the omelette's ingredients, Clara imperturbably answers, "Carne picada, y huevo, y cebolla frita" 'Spiced meat, and egg, and fried onions' (181). Blind to the reality of his wife's preparations, the doctor enjoys the meal to which he feels entitled. In approval of her skill in the kitchen, Augusto invites her to his bed as a reward; using a diminutive which may be more patronizing than tender, he issues more directives to his submissive patient/wife (and patient wife): "Vení, Clarita. Me decidí. Vamos a consumir el matrimonio. . . . Vení a la cama . . ." 'Come, Clarita. I've decided. Let's consummate our marriage. Come to the bed' (181).

Before he can reach the bed, the sacred space in which he will show his mastery, the Doctor lets out a monstrous death rattle and falls rigid, physical signs of his death. How ironic that he was not able to consummate the reward, but that Clara gave him her own surprise gift instead. Was she acting with knowledge or in ignorance of the lethal effect of her recipe? The grandfather questions her directly, "¿Qué hiciste, nietita?" 'What did you do, dear granddaughter?', and she answers "Nada, abuelo. Soy ciega" 'Nothing, grandfather. I'm blind.' Insisting on her innocence/impotence because of her physical state, she then adds, "No sé si agregué algo más" 'I don't know if I added something extra' (182). The grandfather affirms her lack of culpability, too:

Abuelo: No ves y entonces . . . cualquiera puede equivocarse. ¿A quién se le ocurre mandar a una ciega a la cocina? Quiso

aprovechar demasiado.! Se jorobó.

Clara (neutra): Un accidente.

Abuelo: Justo.

Grandfather: You don't see and then . . . anyone can make a mistake. Who would think to send a blind person into the kitchen? He wanted to take advantage too much. He screwed himself!

Clara (neutral): An accident.

Grandfather: Right!

Is that judgment correct, that it was an accident? How should we see, interpret, the signs? Clara asserts that she does not desire the house the doctor brought her to, and that furthermore, he lied to her, and that “la mentira es peligrosa, tan grande” ‘Lying is dangerous, [when it’s] so immense’ (183). Is that what she learned, somehow, despite her blindness, that the doctor was not to be trusted in his description of their space/house, of the life they were to lead together, in this nation of oppressors? “Nada es como uno piensa. Y sin embargo . . .” ‘Nothing is as one thinks. And nevertheless’ says Clara, in the closing dialogue of the play. And when she is asked directly by Juancho, the sleepy fellow, whether she can see, she closes the play with the final admonitory declaration: “Si estás despierto, veo.” ‘If you are awake, I see’ (185). Thus, despite the title’s promise that the events will be “made clear,” the audience is not sure whether Clara accidentally or purposefully added the poison, whether she has regained her sight or is still blind. What is clear, however, is that she has freed herself of the unjust domination that controlled her by exercising her own free will. Her rejection of passivity anticipates the more active roles created by Gambaro in the 1980s and witnessed in *Bad Blood*. Clara anticipates Dolores of *La malasangre* and Suki in *Del sol naciente* (1984, *From the land of the Rising Sun*) in that these women are more active and able to attempt their own liberation.

I want to suggest that Gambaro, in a process not unlike that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, goes back to a female space, to the kitchen, to find the way to react to the phallogocentric system and “domesticate” it. We recall how in the “Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz” “Reply to Sor Filotea,” Sor Juana recounts her experiences in the kitchen as a way to learn about the world:

What could I not tell you, my Lady, of the secrets of Nature which I have discovered in cooking! . . . But Madam, what is there for us women to know, if not bits of kitchen philosophy? . . . As Lupercio Leonardo said: One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper. And I am always saying, when I observe these small details: If Aristotle had been a cook, he would have written much more. (225)

Sor Juana did not allow her confinement in the kitchen to prevent her from knowing about the secrets of Nature, or philosophy: aesthetics, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, all these were learned in her kitchen. Yet, as Ludmer so cogently states:

To know and to say or speak, Juana demonstrates, constitute opposing fields for a woman: whenever the two coexist, they occasion resistance and punishment. Saying that one doesn’t know, not knowing how to say, not saying what one knows, placing knowing over not saying—this series unites the apparently distinct sectors of the text . . . [the Respuesta]. (87)

Just as Ludmer claims that Sor Juana used the tricks of separating “the field of knowing from that of saying,” and then reorganizing “the field of knowing in accordance with the field of not saying (remaining silent)” (87), I suggest that Gambaro has embodied these tricks in the performance of Clara. Clara, too, appears to accept, like Sor Filotea, “her socially assigned subordinate role, and the intention to remain silent, not to say, not to know,” (Ludmer 88). Silence constitutes a space of resistance, not only in Sor Juana’s text, but in the subaltern space of contemporary Argentina. One recalls

the last phrase shouted by Dolores in *La malasange*, which is one of the more powerful comments to be heard: “El silencio grita! Yo me callo, pero el silencio grita!” ‘Silence cries out. I’ll be quiet, but the silence cries out!’ (110). This oxymoron challenged the imposition of silence by a dictatorial system, just as Clara’s silent and announced resistance to authoritarianism and its use of “public saying” as a “space occupied by authority and violence” (Ludmer 90). As “weak sisters” Sor Juana, or Clara, or Dolores, appear to be accepting the superior’s project, only to trick the oppressor by a retreat from collaboration. The Clara who was a docile patient and a submissive wife entered the kitchen to fulfill her duties, but left a free woman. Her use of the woman’s sphere, and her knowledge, acquired in silence, proved fatal to her enemies. Ludmer’s gloss on the strategy of Sor Juana seems to fit well the actions of Clara: “Her stratagem (another characteristic tactic of the weak) consists in changing, from within one’s assigned and accepted place, not only its meaning but the very meaning of what is established within its confines” (93). The female as a signifier associated with passivity, blind obedience has been defrocked and the kitchen as a female space of nurture and/or enslavement has been decoded. There is no safety now in the house for the male hero, and the kitchen is a space of empowerment for the female subject.

I do not refer to Sor Juana merely to be fashionable at a time when she is widely discussed because of the anniversary of her death in 1695, but to acknowledge a female literary tradition.⁸ Sor Juana’s name is often called into play because she is considered our first feminist dramatist of Latin America, or at least the first to be published and presented on stage. Although most critics have focused on her non-dramatic production, as opposed to Gambaro’s situation, a number of essays published in the 1990’s have paid attention to her subtle critique of the patriarchal system in her theatre, most specifically in *Los empeños de una casa* and the way Sor Juana encoded a critique of marriage and the games involved in coupling.⁹ Moreover, like Gambaro, Sor Juana also explored the social construction of sexual categories (Merrim, Cypess, Weimer) and manipulated gender switches, playing not only with the “mujer varonil,” but with the less sanctioned trans-

vestite, the male in female dress. As Merrim cogently states, "Sor Juana voices a personal script from behind the mask of male theatrical conventions" (*Mores* 94). Gambaro, too, represents male theatrical conventions that she subverts and exposes. She includes characters who defend the patriarchy or are victimizers, only to be unmasked as victims themselves (Lorenzo as the classic example) or, as the Doctor, suffer a reversal of power, surrendering his subject position (and life) to the female. Just as the female protagonists of *Los empeños de una casa* determine the movements of the male characters, Clara determines the fate of the Doctor/spouse.

As a symbolic blind character who joins other vatic literary figures, Clara should not be likened to Homer, who related the past, or Tiresias, who saw into the future, for Clara addresses the present, and her story is a description of her Argentine socio-political context and the story of women in Latin America. The play shows the destabilization of the male gaze and the patriarchy that empowers it. This is the direction of Gambaro's plays, her message for the character, the audience, Argentina, us: to use the power to see and not say sí, but to know, act, change. No essentializing categories here, for if a blind, vulnerable woman can use her abilities to effect change, then we all can enter into the power play.

Notes

1. Ever since the return to democratic institutions in Argentina, the production of material, both fiction and non-fiction, regarding the nature of the fascist governments that ruled in the 1970s and 1980s, has been enormous. Consult Andrés Avellaneda, *Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina 1960-1983* (2 vols.) (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1986); Daniel Balderston, ed., *Ficción y política. La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar* (Buenos Aires: Alianza Editorial, 1987); Fernando Reati, *Nombrar lo innombrable, Violencia política y novela argentina 1975-1985* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Legasa, 1992); Saúl Sosnowski, ed. *Represión y reconstrucción de una cultura: el caso argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1988).

2. For a listing of critical work on Gambaro, see Cypess, Moore and Kohut, *Women Authors of Modern Hispanic South America: A Bibliography of Literary Criticism and Interpretation*, 23-27. By dividing the citations

according to genre, the bibliography points out the inordinate number of essays referring to Gambaro's theatre in comparison to her narrative.

3. It has been said by the Chilean feminist Julieta Kirkwood that, "The concrete daily experience of women in Latin America is authoritarianism," as Sarah Radcliffe quotes her (111).

4. I use these terms as a result of my readings of Sheila Ruth, "Sexism, Patriarchy, and Feminism," *Women and Men: The Consequences of Power*, ed. Dana V. Heller and Robin Ann Sheets (Cincinnati: Office of Women's Studies, 1976), 56; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), among other texts.

5. Although it is not the focus of this essay, Gambaro's penchant for the pun, and for irony and humor in the naming of the play and the characters are worth noting. In naming her blind character "Clara" Gambaro uses clear contradiction, since she lives in darkness. The children also bear ironic names, since they bring neither happiness (Félix) nor light (Lucio) to the household. The title, too, promises that things will be "puesta en claro," (made clear), but that supposition also proves erroneous, as I shall soon discuss. Only the doctor/father seems appropriately named, as Augusto recalls the patrician, patriarchal Roman subtext of the Caesars.

6. Clara points out the similarities in their two situations by equating his sleepiness with her blindness:

Juancho: Vine cansado y dormí mi siesta:

Clara: Qué suerte, ¿eh? No ves nada, como ciego

Juancho: I came home tired and took a siesta.

Clara: What luck, huh? You don't see anything, just like a blind man.

(160)

7. Becky Boling offers an insightful reading of how Gambaro deconstructs the spectacle of the theatrical event in *El despojamiento* (1981, The striptease), in "From Pin-Ups to Striptease in Gambaro's *El despojamiento*," *LATR* (1987): 59-65.

8. I would agree in this regard with Merrim's critique of Paz's failure in *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* to "situate its subject's works either in a female literary tradition or within the context of women's writing" ("Towards a Feminist Reading . . ." 20).

9. I refer to Sandra Messenger Cypess, "Los géneros re/velados en *Los empeños de una casa* de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," *Hispanamérica* 64/65 (1993): 177-185 (an essay based on a paper given at MLA in 1991); Edward H. Friedman, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Los empeños de una casa*: Sign as Woman," *Romance Notes* 31.3 (1991): 197-203; Stephanie Merrim,

“*Mores Geometricae*: The ‘Womanscript’ in the Theater of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.”

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