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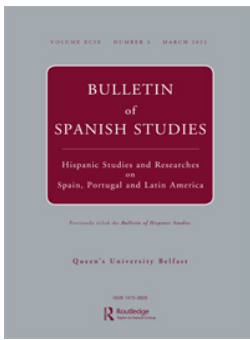
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Fiona J. Mackintosh

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‘Escritores de envergadura’: Gendering Bestsellers in Claudia Piñeiro’s ‘La muerte y la canoa’ and ‘Bendito aire de Buenos Aires’

FIONA J. MACKINTOSH

University of Edinburgh

Introduction

Claudia Piñeiro (b. 1960) has achieved international status and tremendous success as a novelist.¹ As well as being hailed by Josefina Licitra as the ‘primera dama del policial argentino’, part of a perceived boom in Latin-American women’s writing, she has also been branded a ‘bestseller’.² The label is one with which Piñeiro has taken issue:

1 Her prizes include the Clarín Premio de Novela (2005), the Premio Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (2010), the Liberaturpreis (2010), the Premio Rosalía de Castro (2014), the Premio Nacional de Novela (2018), the Blue Metropolis Prize (2019), the Premio Pepe Carvalho (2019), the Premio Dashiell Hammett (2021), the Premio Negra y Criminal at the Festival Atlántico de Género Negro Tenerife Noir (2021) and being short-listed for the International Booker Prize 2022.

2 See, for example, her author profile on Amazon.co.uk wherein she is described as ‘South America’s bestselling crime novelist’ (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Claudia-Pi%C3%B1eiro/e/B001JOK2ZY?ref=dbs_p_pbk_r00_abau_000000> [accessed 28 June 2022]). See the following articles in *Infobae* and *El País* regarding the boom in Latin-American women’s writing: Luciana Sáliche, ‘En los ranking de bestsellers ahora mandan las mujeres’, *Infobae*, 27 October 2018, <<https://www.infobae.com/cultura/2018/10/28/en-los-rankings-de-bestsellers-ahora-mandan-las-mujeres/>> (accessed 28 October 2018); Gabriela Saidón, ‘“La ola negra”: radiografía del boom de las escritoras argentinas en la novela policial’, *Infobae*, 22 April 2019, <<https://www.infobae.com/america/cultura-america/2019/04/22/la-ola-negra-radiografia-del-boom-de-las-escritoras-argentinas-en-la-novela-policial/>>

No me preocupa tanto que a alguien no le guste lo que escribo, sí me preocupa el prejuicio. Hay gente que se me acerca y me dice: ‘Ay, yo no te había leído porque sos bestseller’. Y yo no soy bestseller, mis libros pueden serlo. Yo soy Claudia Piñeiro.³

Nevertheless, Piñeiro recognizes that the label ‘bestseller’ is hard to shake off. Mass popularity and huge sales interact in complex ways with self-image, perceived literary status and prestige of authors, which sends one back to Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital.⁴ This topic has been amply explored by Lígia Bezerra’s study of literature as commodity in relation to Piñeiro’s 2011 novel *Betibú*.⁵ The present article aims to complement Bezerra’s interrogation of the relationship between literary status and commercial success, focusing instead on gender in Piñeiro’s presentation of the figure of the bestselling author. Rather than examining Claudia Piñeiro’s own literary profile, I will examine how she genders economic success through her humorous fictional portrayals of bestselling

(accessed 22 April 2019); and Paula Corroto, ‘El otro “boom” latinoamericano es femenino’, *El País*, 14 August 2017, <https://elpais.com/cultura/2017/08/13/actualidad/1502641791_807871.html> (accessed 14 August 2017). For her status as ‘bestseller’, see ‘Las novelas de Claudia Piñeiro, todas best-sellers’, *La Capital*, 17 January 2018, <<https://www.lacapital.com.ar/escenario/las-novelas-claudia-pineiro-todas-best-sellers-n1541228.html>> (accessed 7 January 2018); ‘Claudia Piñeiro Mujer, Escritora y Bestseller’, *Qué leer libros*, n.d., <<https://queleerlibros.com/claudia-pinerio-mujer-escritora-y-bestseller/>> (accessed 20 October 2017); and Mariel Zani, ‘“Catedrales” de Claudia Piñeiro lidera la lista de libros más vendidos del país’, *DiarioVivo*, 10 March 2020, <<https://www.diariovivo.com/catedrales-de-claudia-pineiro-lidera-la-lista-de-libros-mas-vendidos-del-pais/>> (accessed 10 March 2020), the latter of which sums her up as ‘escritora multipremiada y referente indiscutido de la novela negra’. See also Josefina Licitra, ‘Desde el country’, *La Nación*, 26 August 2011, <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/cultura/desde-el-country-nid1400031/>> (accessed 28 June 2022).

3 Hinde Pomeranec, ‘Claudia Piñeiro: “Hay que tomar un poco de distancia del poder”’, *La Nación*, 3 November 2014, <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/cultura/claudia-pineiro-hay-que-tomar-un-poco-de-distancia-del-poder-nid1740909/>> (accessed 28 June 2022).

4 Paul Crosthwaite succinctly summarizes Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and symbolic capital in *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2019), 4–7. For another recent examination of the continued relevance of Bourdieu’s theories, see Nicola Glaubitz, ‘How Useful Is Bourdieu’s Notion of Cultural Capital for Describing Literary Markets?’, in *How to Read the Literary Market*, ed. Dustin Breitenwischer, Philipp Löffler & Johannes Völz, *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 69:1 (2021), 43–55.

5 See Lígia Bezerra, ‘The Business of Writing Literature: Literature As a Commodity in Claudia Piñeiro’s *Betibú*’, *Cultural Studies*, 33:2 (2019), 325–41, which argues that ‘*Betibú* critiques the limitation of acceptable ways to read literature’ (330). Bezerra notes how the novelist character *Betibú* is also classed as a ‘bestseller’, to which she reacts as Piñeiro does (328). See also Bezerra’s ‘Everyday Life in the McOndo World: Consumption and Politics in Claudia Piñeiro’s *Las viudas de los jueves*’, *Chasqui. Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana*, 41:2 (2012), 19–32, in which she explores how ‘the reframing of the opposition between “grand” literature and mass culture, under conditions of production marked by the power of the publishing market, may contribute to literature’s political engagement today’ (20).

male authors in the stories 'La muerte y la canoa' and 'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires', from her collection *Quién no* (2018), which has received little critical attention to date. In particular, I shall look at the masculinized concept of the 'escritor de envergadura' in relation to bestsellers and the cult of personality which surrounds them, and I will analyse how this label 'de envergadura' helps us to understand the gendering process at work. Both stories are set in Buenos Aires in the sphere of publishing and in them the reading public is presented primarily as fans or consumers at promotional activities such as book signings and author readings, thus shifting the emphasis firmly from engagement with the written content of books to a more superficial interest in the writer's personality and image. I shall argue that through these primarily humorous portrayals, Piñeiro nevertheless implies a critique of the 'gendered pressures of the book industry' within which authors are consecrated.⁶ This is an issue about which Piñeiro feels strongly; in her opening speech at the 2018 International Book Fair in Buenos Aires, she drew attention to women being *invisibilizadas* in terms of literary prizes, juries and the literary canon.⁷ She was also one of over a hundred writers who criticized the disproportionate underrepresentation of women in the Mario Vargas Llosa Bienal held in Guadalajara in 2019.⁸

The first edition of Piñeiro's only collection of short stories to date was published by Alfaguara in September 2018, and the second edition followed only a month later, confirming Piñeiro's popularity. 'La muerte y la canoa' and 'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires' form a natural pairing, since both fictionalize—with a strong degree of irony and cynical humour—emotional and ethical entanglements within the circuits of literary production, validation and promotion. More specifically, both thematize and comment on the phenomenon of the bestselling author. The transatlantic nature of this world is foregrounded in both stories, where Spanish publishing companies or authors are featured within a specifically *porteño* setting.⁹

6 Bezerra, 'The Business of Writing Literature', 328.

7 See her '¿Qué se espera de un escritor? La disidencia como estado de alerta', *44.ª Feria Internacional del Libro de Buenos Aires*, 26 April 2018, n.p.; <<http://www.el-libro.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/claudia-pineiro-discurso-inauguracion.pdf>> (accessed 28 June 2022).

8 Lorenzo Herrero quotes the protest letter to which Piñeiro was a signatory: 'las instituciones literarias siguen organizando y promoviendo espacios en los que la participación de mujeres aún es minoritaria o nula y, cuando se cuestiona, sus responsables recurren a una visión meritocrática falaz, en lugar de combatir desde dentro los privilegios masculinos'. See 'Más de un centenar de escritores critican la falta de presencia femenina en la Bienal Mario Vargas Llosa', *PublishNews*, 28 May 2019, n.p.; <<https://publishnews.es/mas-de-un-centenar-de-escritores-critican-la-falta-de-presencia-femenina-en-la-bienal-mario-vargas-llosa/>> (accessed 9 August 2022).

9 This might hint at issues of economic neocolonialism through the activities of publishing giants such as Grupo Planeta, based in Spain, which operates in Spain and Latin America and owns sixty-four companies, including Espasa, Destino, Seix-Barral, Emecé and Tusquets. However, it is not a one-way street: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial is

In both stories, publishing is presented as a gendered hierarchy, since the bestsellers are male (Martín Jenner and Benito Landó respectively) or achieve literary validation through male backing (as Vanina Sarásuri does), but their books are published, marketed and launched—and their needs are ministered to—by a predominantly female publishing infrastructure, except for key management roles such as financial director which are held by men. The gender dynamics at play are integral to the development of the plots.

‘La muerte y la canoa’: The Fraudulent ‘autor de envergadura’

From its very title, with the formulation ‘La muerte y la...’, this story invokes the world of crime fiction, and by extension, the broader publishing phenomenon of genre fiction.¹⁰ It encourages the reader to make connections to other such formulaic titles, perhaps the best known of which, in the specific Argentinian context, would be Jorge Luis Borges’ famous 1942 fiction ‘La muerte y la brújula’.¹¹ Such intertextual resonance could act as a shorthand for indebtedness, belatedness and a general Bloomian ‘anxiety of influence’ regarding Argentina’s classic author, who is arguably still the only Argentinian writer to gain admission to the notional canon of ‘World Literature’.¹² But it might simultaneously point to a dilution of Borges, a diminution of him, by virtue of his influence being

based in Mexico, and it owns Mondadori—now Literatura Random House—Debate, Debolsillo, Ediciones B, Grijalbo, Lumen, Plaza & Janés, Sudamericana and Alfaguara, the publisher of Piñeiro’s books. The Latin-American Boom phenomenon was similarly transnational, with Carmen Balcells at Seix Barral being responsible for the meteoric rise of many Latin-American authors including Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. I am grateful to the first anonymous reviewer of this article for this and other observations.

10 Indeed, it was first published in English as ‘Death and the Canoe’ in the anthology *Buenos Aires Noir*, ed. Ernesto Mallo, trans. John Washington & M. Cristina Lambert (New York: Akashic Books, 2017; republished in Spanish 2019) in the section entitled ‘Revenge’. Héctor Fernando Vizcarra sees this story, and the others by women writers in the same collection, as reworking a masculine genre from within, including ‘la subversión de la imagen reiterativa del cuerpo femenino como víctima inerte’, in ‘El formato antológico del cuento policial contemporáneo y sus implicaciones: *Buenos Aires Noir* y *Mexico City Noir*’, in *Narrativa criminal en(tre) México y la Argentina*, ed. Hernán Maltz & Yasmin Temelli, *iMex*, 11:21 (2022), 23–36 (pp. 33–34).

11 First published in *Sur* in May 1942. Of course, in the wider Latin-American context, there is also Ariel Dorfman’s 1990 play, *La muerte y la doncella*, which would take the intertextual resonances in a somewhat different direction towards writing in response to the Southern Cone dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s. The basic point nevertheless remains that titles can always be construed by the reader to be in a relation of dialogue or dependency with other pre-existing titles.

12 Robin Fiddian charts Borges’ rise to ‘international cultural icon’ in his Introduction, ‘Borges in Context, Context in Borges’, in *Jorge Luis Borges in Context*, ed. Robin Fiddian (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2022 [1st ed. 2020]), 1–8 (p. 1).

omnipresent yet in a superficial way, here reduced to a mere formula of 'death and x/y/z', as if he provided the first step in a self-help guide on how to become a successful crime fiction writer.¹³ So from its very title, the story simultaneously evokes ideas of both originality and derivativeness. On the one hand it gestures towards a 'high culture' literary author, but one who deliberately exalts and champions the classic murder mystery style of detective story. On the other, it suggests an uneasy relationship to that tradition through imitation, and adaptation. The title therefore sets the scene for the narrative to come which features a bestselling author who is internally insecure about his own literary status.

The text's opening paragraph locates us immediately within the context of the international book trade, with a Spanish bookseller making (perhaps neo-colonial) inroads into the Latin-American marketplace:

Apenas unas semanas atrás, la librería española Papiros había abierto una sucursal en Buenos Aires, en San Telmo, frente a la plaza Dorrego, apostando al turismo constante de la zona sur de la ciudad. Y para darle difusión al emprendimiento, nada mejor que convocar al escritor estrella del momento, Martín Jenner, a dar una charla y firmar ejemplares.¹⁴

The international focus of this enterprise is further highlighted by the fact that they are targetting their marketing at tourists, rather than at local customers. The emphasis is on publicity and marketing, and on spreading the word about the bookshop's inauguration via a book signing. The bestselling author Martín Jenner is drafted in purely for his pulling power, not because they particularly want to sell the specific content of his books. The profile of this celebrity writer is thus defined by his economic viability. He has a 'fabuloso contrato' (217) and sells more than half a million copies of any book he writes, regardless of what kind of book it is, just by virtue of it bearing his signature (217). Hence, Jenner is considered by the (male) commercial director of the publishing house, 'que sólo iba a presentaciones de autores *de envergadura*' (219; my emphasis), as belonging to that category.¹⁵

13 We should recall that beginning in 1945, Borges, with Adolfo Bioy Casares, edited the Séptimo Círculo series of crime fiction, translating English language cerebral crime stories. He had also previously written a review essay 'Los laberintos policiales y Chesterton', published in *Sur* in July 1935, in which he analysed the underlying rules of G. K. Chesterton's way of writing detective fiction.

14 Claudia Piñeiro, 'La muerte y la canoa', in *Quién no* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2018), 215–34 (p. 217). Further references are to this edition and will be given in parentheses in the main text.

15 In M. Cristina Lambert's translation, the phrase 'autores de envergadura' is simply rendered as 'bestselling authors', which shifts the emphasis entirely to the economic success, rather than the perceived status, of the writers.

While this word ‘envergadura’ obviously encompasses great economic success, it is the gendered aspects of this term that will be the primary focus of my analysis, since its multiple meanings and collocates chart a fascinating gendered lexicon. Literally it means wing-span (of a bird or plane), or in nautical terms, the spar to which sails are attached. In its metaphorical sense, as used here, of importance, prestige, reach and consequence, it predominantly collocates to traditionally masculine and patriarchal worlds such as politics, war, science and seafaring, and more recently to football and other team sports. In this context, it also seems relevant (if less etymologically rigorous) that the constituent parts of the word ‘envergadura’ are significantly weighted towards the masculine; ‘verga’ means ‘spar’ in nautical terms, but also ‘penis’ or ‘prick’, and ‘dura’ is hard. Thus, at least subliminally, the masculine collocations are borne out by the images conjured up by the word itself.¹⁶

The *Fichero general* of the *Diccionario histórico de la lengua española* provides a number of instructive examples of how the phrase ‘de envergadura’ has been used.¹⁷ A 1911 occurrence describes it as figurative: ‘Importancia y prestigio, especialmente en política’. In 1927 the phrase ‘de gran envergadura’ is glossed as ‘de mucho prestigio o de gran tamaño’ and ‘Envergadura por importancia, fuste’.¹⁸ A 1928 entry cites Manuel Gálvez’s novel of that year *Los caminos de la muerte*: ‘El único hombre de carácter, de envergadura, es Urquiza’, Urquiza being a nineteenth-century Argentinian *prócer*, army general and statesman. The field of war continues in a 1953 example where the Ministro de Guerra is described as an ‘apoyo de envergadura’. Alongside these powerful political and military

16 As a graphic illustration of these blatantly sexualized connotations, see the Kindle book by Magela Gracia, *Ante una gran envergadura* (<<https://www.amazon.com/-/es/Magela-Gracia-ebook/dp/B098FFWD7V>> [accessed 9 August 2022]) and its accompanying cover design and description: ‘A Iván Garrido no lo conocía nadie por su nombre. O casi nadie. Porque al comandante del Ala 14 todo el mundo lo llamaba Envergadura. Y no por lo que midiera su avión desde una punta del ala a la otra. Esa medida era conocida; estaba en los planos del caza. La otra medida ... no tanto. Vale, quizá últimamente sí que era bastante conocida, porque su lista de conquistas se había multiplicado en el último año. Y las mujeres hablaban mucho ... de medidas’.

17 Examples of the phrase ‘de envergadura’ may be viewed via the *Fichero general* of the *Diccionario histórico de la lengua española*, <<https://apps2.rae.es/fichero.html>> (accessed 9 August 2022).

18 It is instructive to compare the word ‘fuste’, which, similarly, has literal meanings of various phallic objects such as sticks, tree trunks, shoots, stems and shafts, combined with the metaphorical meaning of significance or substance. The *DRAE* gives the etymology as deriving from the Latin *fustis*, *palo* (stick), and its meanings as ‘madera (parte sólida de los árboles)’; ‘vara (palo largo y delgado)’; ‘vástago (conjunto del tallo y las hojas)’; ‘armazón de la silla de montar’; and finally ‘nervio, sustancia o entidad’. Its sole example of this metaphorical sense relates to a man: ‘Hombre de fuste’. See the entry for ‘fuste’, *Diccionario de la lengua española*, <<https://dle.rae.es/fuste?m=form>> (accessed 10 August 2022).

associations, we also have more generalized collocations in the Real Academia Española's contemporary usage database between 'envergadura' and 'hombre', all indicating the man's physical stature as weighty and impressive, even threatening. There are only two significant collocations between 'envergadura' and 'mujer', and in both cases the context is to see the woman's physical capacities as either exceptional or doubtful:

Antes de que Barbosa pueda reaccionar, la Madre Nieve le ha agarrado los testículos con su mano huesuda y se los está apretando *con una fuerza que resulta completamente inverosímil en una mujer de su envergadura*. Él se queda sin aire. (Javier Calvo, *El jardín colgante* [Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2012]; my emphasis)

Doctor Guitart, hay una pregunta muy diferente que queremos plantearle. Una mujer de la envergadura, la altura y la fuerza de Belarmina Mendizábal, ¿hubiera podido realizar las heridas mortales que acabaron con la vida de las víctimas del asesino en serie al que buscamos? (Alicia Giménez Bartlett, *Mi querido asesino en serie* [Barcelona: Planeta, 2017])¹⁹

We also have examples of the word being applied to works of literature, and (as in Piñeiro's story) to the writers who produce them. One 1950 *DRAE* example cites the Bodleian Library in Oxford as being typical of the kind of environment required to produce works of 'envergadura'; undoubtedly quite a masculine world until the general admission of women, as wryly observed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.²⁰ The *DRAE* example from 1966 is most pertinent here: it contrasts a male writer of 'mucho ruido y pocas nueces' with those who produce works 'de envergadura', clearly indicating the use of this phrase as a literary value judgment.²¹

The question clearly arises, given the preceding highly masculinized connotations and collocations of the phrase, is it also commonly applied to female authors? The few women writers to whom I have found the word

19 These examples may be accessed through the search function of the *Corpus del Español del Siglo XXI*, <<https://apps2.rae.es/CORPES/org/publico/pages/consulta/entradaCompleja.view>> (accessed 10 August 2022).

20 The *DRAE* cites Salvador de Madariaga, *Cuadro histórico de las indias* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1950 [1st ed. 1945]), 895: 'Obra de esta envergadura solo es posible intentarla en un lugar de trabajo como el que ofrece la Bodleiana de Oxford'. Woolf, in her composite portrait of Oxford and Cambridge as 'Oxbridge', notes that 'ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction' (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own; Three Guineas* [1929], with an intro. by Morag Shiach [Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1992], 9).

21 The *DRAE* cites Luis Alberto Sánchez, *Correo Literario* (Madrid): 'Sin duda el señor del mucho ruido y pocas nueces habría dado media vida por ser autor de un libro de alguna envergadura'.

directly applied are the famous proto-feminist seventeenth-century Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Nobel prize-winning Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, and—most recently—Uruguayan writer Cristina Peri Rossi, recipient of the Premio Cervantes 2021.²² Interestingly, these three writers are united by their queer sexuality.²³ An article applauding the awarding of the Costa Rican Premio Nacional de Cultura Magón to a woman for the second year running refers to both recipients as ‘de envergadura’, implying they have made their way in an otherwise male-dominated environment.²⁴ Whereas male writers are unproblematically granted this stature, women rarely are, unless they trouble heterosexual normativity in some way. Implicitly, the quality of ‘envergadura’ is not immediately or straightforwardly associated with the (heterosexual) feminine and is seen as exceptional in women. When used, it appears as a concerted strategy to bolster women’s status in a hostile or unbalanced (in gender terms) patriarchal framework. We can productively compare these sexualized qualities of ‘envergadura’ with Christine Battersby’s groundbreaking study *Gender and Genius*, which explores in minute detail a deep, culturally embedded link between (literary) genius and male sexuality. She summarizes her investigation of the history of genius from Classical times to the present in unequivocal terms: ‘*Genius* reveals itself as divine promptings from within the male self: to reproduce, and to produce

22 For Sor Juana: ‘Ningún novelista del siglo XVII tiene la envergadura de sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’, described by Eduardo Lizalde, interviewed in José Luis Merino, *Una botella al mar: México 1970–1971: 19 entrevistas* (México D.F.: FCE, 2018), Chapter 7; for Mistral: ‘desconociendo su tremenda envergadura intelectual’ in the words of Carlos Decap in promoting his *Gabriela Mistral y sus desconocidos vínculos con Concepción* (Concepción: Editorial Univ. de Concepción, 2021) (<<https://noticias.udec.cl/libro-revela-la-desconocida-relacion-de-gabriela-mistral-con-concepcion/>> [accessed 10 August 2022]); and for Peri Rossi: ‘“la trayectoria de una de las vocaciones literarias de nuestro tiempo y la envergadura de una escritora capaz de plasmar su talento en una pluralidad de géneros” ’ in the words of the jury for the Premio Cervantes 2021 <<https://www.telesurvtv.net/telesuragenda/premio-cervantes-literatura-escritores-latinoamericanos-20211124-0029.html>> (accessed 10 August 2022).

23 See the following works which address explicitly these writers’ sexualities: Rosa Perelmuter, *Los límites de la femineidad en sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: estrategias retóricas y recepción literaria* (Madrid: Iberoamericana/Frankfurt am Main: Editorial Vervuert, 2004); Licia Fiol-Matta, ‘A Queer Mother for the Nation Redux: Gabriela Mistral in the Twenty-First Century’, in *Queering Archives: Historical Unravellings*, ed. Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy & Zeb Tortorici, *Radical History Review*, 120 (2014), 35–51; and Aina Pérez Fondevila, ‘El deseo y sus accesos: una entrevista a Cristina Peri Rossi’, *Lectora*, 11 (2005), 181–93.

24 Melvin Molina, ‘Escritores celebran a Julieta Dobles como Premio Magón 2013’, *La Nación*, 20 January 2014, n.p.; <<https://www.nacion.com/viva/cultura/escritores-celebran-a-julieta-dobles-como-premio-magon-2013/ZXOMNKGLA5AUXOX6KDXHYAVFZU/story/>> (accessed 10 August 2022). The two writers are poet Julieta Dobles and Yadira Calvo, a feminist philologist who researches sexism in language.

artistically. The pen, paintbrush and sculptor's chisel are made substitutes for the penis'.²⁵ 'Envergadura' is, similarly, a quality more readily applied to those possessed of the 'genitals of genius'.²⁶

There is, nevertheless, also a mocking side to the phrase 'de envergadura' if we consider the definition in a 1955 example given in *DRAE*: 'importante o que pretende serlo' (my emphasis), implying that an element of pretension and vanity is present. The illustrative example reads as follows: 'Decir que el político X es hombre de gran envergadura, por afirmar que tiene prestigio, es tomarle el pelo [...], pues que gran envergadura pueden tener aves tan torpes como los pavos'. It is on the instability of this term between praise and mockery that 'La muerte y la canoa' hinges. Martín Jenner, beloved of the publishers for making their enterprise economically viable, may start out as 'de envergadura', but in this case his trajectory will not be a noble one since his prestige is built purely on economic value (and in the final twist, we see that his actual writing—which might give him cultural value—is not his own). Like a caricature of Charles Baudelaire's poet-albatross, whose vast wing-span is noble in flight but clumsy on deck, this bestselling and extremely profitable writer deceives his fans into thinking he is noble in flight, but when seen close up, from the privileged vantage point of the omniscient narrator, he is revealed to be unethical, cynical and callous.²⁷

We can chart Martín Jenner's vanity and pretension from the beginning of the story. Whilst walking from his apartment in the trendy modern *barrio* of Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires, rented for him by the publisher as part of his 'fabuloso contrato', to the book launch in San Telmo, Jenner passes through dirty streets with broken paving slabs and groups of young people drinking beer, and he is indignant at not being recognized by anyone there. His dismissive comment is that '[e]sta gente no lee' (218). Whether 'esta gente' demarcates a social grouping or a generational gap is not clear, but he is at pains to distinguish himself from them. To add insult to injury, as Jenner walks through this 'uncultured' zone, he is then asked

25 Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 63; original emphasis.

26 Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 61.

27 See Charles Baudelaire, 'L'Albatros': 'Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées / Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer; / Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées, / Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.' (*Les Fleurs du Mal* [1861], ed., intro. & notes par Antoine Adam [Paris: Éditions Garnier frères, 1961], 12). In Juan Carlos Villavicencio's translation: 'El Poeta se asemeja al príncipe de las nubes / Que frecuenta la tormenta y se ríe del arquero; / Exiliado sobre el suelo en medio de las burlas, / Sus alas de gigante le impiden ya marchar.' ('El albatross', de Charles Baudelaire. Traducción de Juan Carlos Villavicencio', *Descontexto. Revista Descontexto. Arte/Política/Cultura. A cargo de Carlos Almonte & Juan Carlos Villavicencio*, 6 April 2010, <<https://descontexto.blogspot.com/2010/04/el-albatros-de-charles-baudelaire.html>> [accessed 11 August 2022]).

if he will take a photo of a woman sitting next to the statue of Quino (Joaquín Salvador Lavado Tejón)'s popular comic strip character, Mafalda, in the Paseo de la Historieta. Thus, not only are his pride and self-image as a writer of stature wounded by *general* non-recognition, but an individual treats him as a mere member of the public who will assist her in her validation of a different sort of cultural capital, that of Mafalda cartoons. Jenner thus feels doubly indignant at being transplanted into a different cultural value system, one which places cartoon characters above literature. Of course, Mafalda carries a significant amount of cultural capital herself, given her status of 'Patrimonio Cultural' recognized by an official plaque.²⁸ However, Jenner needs his own literary self-image to be reflected by an admiring public, so he is more in his comfort zone when he enters the bookshop Papiros, checking his reflection in the glass door as he goes in.

The gendered aspects of the phrase 'autor de envergadura' come to the fore in the social power dynamics of the book-signing episode that follows. Jenner's launch of his latest book is to take the form of an interview with the female editor of one of the most read cultural magazines. She is, despite her position, described as an 'insegura mujer' (219), who—when she tries to 'lucirse haciendo extrañas vinculaciones entre distintos textos de Jenner' (219)—is cut short by the writer, who then proceeds to turn the interview into a lecture. Thus their intended dialogue becomes a male-centred monologue.²⁹ Piñeiro appears to satirize both the insecure female critic who tries to impose theories on texts and the domineering male author who considers any critical reading, particularly by a female critic, to be inferior to the original source and *locus* of meaning, the author himself. The satire is also a critique of the patriarchal literary and publishing system in which women are made to feel like impostors when occupying certain positions of authority or influence. Certainly, this reading is supported by Jenner's ongoing patronizing behaviour towards the female interviewer; he only returns the microphone to her so that she can replace it in its stand, not letting her use it to speak, thereby treating her as he treats his own female publisher, who in addition to editing his works, 'cumplía también la función de estar atenta a cada uno de sus pedidos, del orden que fuera' (219). There is possibly implied sexual coercion here, or at

28 For a detailed examination of Mafalda's cultural heft, see Isabella Cosse, *Mafalda: A Social and Political History of Latin America's Global Comic*, trans. Laura Pérez Carrara (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2019 [1st Spanish ed. 2014]).

29 This is reminiscent of an observation made by Victoria Ocampo in 1935 in her lecture 'La mujer y su expresión' (later printed in *Sur* [1936]): 'Creo que, desde hace siglos, toda conversación entre el hombre y la mujer, apenas entran en cierto terreno, empieza por un: "no me interrumpas" de parte del hombre. Hasta ahora el monólogo parece haber sido la manera predilecta de expresión adoptada por él' (reproduced in *Debate Feminista*, 21 [2000], 61–69 [p. 62]).

least the potential for Jenner's abuse of his position and status. Thus, a stereotypically gendered power dynamic is in evidence: the male author in a leading role, with females relegated to secondary roles which are parasitical in some way upon the primary act of literary creation, whether by ushering it into print, trying to interpret its significance within the broader cultural scene, or pandering to the whims of its creator.

As literary creator but also—and especially—as fashioner of his own self-image, Jenner is clearly quite fastidious. As the text carefully specifies, he appears at the book signing '[c]on su habitual sonrisa, sus uñas de manicura perfecta esmaltadas en color azul y una lapicera Lamy' (219). Following Battersby's theory on the gendering of genius, these descriptive details fit with Romantic ideas of genius in which the male genius is 'feminine' but still full of 'virile energy'.³⁰ He relies on his huge and diverse readership for his status as 'escritor estrella del momento', and yet is fully aware that their loyalty is a cult of personality rather than devotion to what he actually writes; they are 'fieles no tanto a lo que escribía sino a él mismo' (221). His readership ranges from twenty to sixty in age, and all are 'sensiblemente enamorados del autor' (220). He shamelessly and cynically cultivates their adoration, 'festejando con falsa humildad todos sus halagos' (220), even to the extent of allowing them to take selfies with him. This ironic, hypocritical echo of the earlier scene in which he refused to take a photo of the woman alongside Mafalda sets the sympathies of Piñeiro's reader at odds with Jenner. The act of pseudo-bonding makes Jenner's readers feel part of his family, linked to him in some way, but from his perspective, the apparent proximity to his readers is entirely calculated. It is what drives the 'contrato autor-lector' (221), as he puts it to himself. Furthermore, as the omniscient narrator reveals to us, Jenner feels utterly repulsed by their closeness whilst recognizing that it is a necessary evil in order to sell his books.

Jenner's reliance on his readers' loyalty is absolute, since he would be nothing without their following. Yet it is also precarious, since it is subject to the whims of taste, fashion, the *Zeitgeist*. Furthermore, although they can make him a bestseller, they are not the official arbiters of literary value. The 'real' arbiters of literary value in the 'mundillo literario' that Jenner moves in are the judges who award literary prizes, those who select books of the year, of the bookfair, of the book festival or those who compile lists of 'must-reads' in the Sunday supplements (220). Jenner has never received this kind of 'official' acclaim, which explains his attitude of resentment and high-handedness to the female editor-in-chief of the literary magazine. He defensively dismisses the need for such validation, saying he receives this from his loyal readers, who he describes as 'capital'. Perhaps cultural capital if they are discerning readers, but primarily

30 Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 3.

capital in a monetary sense: ‘Jenner se decía, y les decía a los pocos que se atrevían a preguntar, que no le importaba, que su capital estaba allí, frente a él, haciendo cola para llevarse su ejemplar firmado’ (220). He also passes a wry comment on the current publishing world regarding the fact that authors have to be their own promoters: ‘Hoy un escritor [...] con sólo escribir no llega a ninguna parte’ (221).

We are thus presented with the cynical self-promoting bestseller, who knows what the deal is, and who goes through the motions in order to keep the readers happy and the money coming in, yet who is disrespectful, dishonest and dismissive both of his readership and his female colleagues. This *status quo* is suddenly interrupted, as a dishevelled young man comes into the bookshop, apparently also wanting his copy signed. Jenner is at the point of obliging, only to find a threatening note thrust under his nose inside the book’s cover which baldly accuses Jenner of being a fraud: ‘Este libro lo escribí yo, Señor Jenner, usted lo sabe. Crápula, estafador’ (223). The remainder of the story follows how Jenner deals with the increasing unwanted attentions of this angry young man, who leaves the same note on the windscreen of the editor’s car, thus apprising Jenner’s publishers of the allegation made against him. The publishers agree to do nothing about it, but discussion revolves around the incident, and Jenner subsequently finds a whole letter from the young man, signed ‘Antonio Borda’, waiting for him in his flat. It emerges that Borda had sent Jenner the only copies of his manuscript entitled *La muerte y la canoa*, since Jenner promised he would read it, a promise which he apparently makes to anyone.

The endgame begins with an ultimatum from the young man, who threatens to commit suicide in seventy-two hours if Jenner does not publicly announce Antonio Borda to be the true author of *La muerte y la canoa*. Jenner reasons that the man would not go through with his threat of suicide, but true to his word, the young man appears hanged opposite the Papiros bookshop three days later. We thus have a fuller and increasingly repugnant picture of Jenner as not only cynical with regard to his reading public but also criminal; Jenner emerges as a supreme plagiarist who passes off someone else’s writing as his own in order to make money out of it.³¹ In the media maelstrom that follows (231), Jenner gets a lot of airtime in which he plausibly explains the circumstances away as ‘coincidencias, temas que están en el aire y que en varias cabezas toman distintas formas literarias’ (231). He even goes so far as to make a display

31 Interestingly, a reviewer of Piñeiro’s ‘La muerte y la canoa’ identifies it as self-plagiarism from another short story, ‘Samantha Dubois’, published in *El crimen tiene quien le escribe: cuentos negros y policíacos latinoamericanos*, comp. Ramón Díaz Eterovic (Santiago: LOM, 2016), and points out the irony of Piñeiro’s ‘doble publicación’, given the subject matter of the stories. See Anon., review of *Argentina Noir, Resumen*, 24 April 2021, n.p.; <<https://resumen.cl/articulos/literatura-argentina-noir>> (accessed 11 August 2022).

of compassion for the poor, mentally unstable Antonio Borda.³² 'His' *La muerte y la canoa*, meanwhile, goes into its twenty-first edition, with sales rocketing from the sensational publicity; on the back of this he is invited to the prestigious Festa Literária Internacional de Paraty, and the late Borda is rapidly converted by the media into a 'hipster, mitómano, poeta y suicida' (231).³³ In a final, anticipated, turn of the screw we see Jenner calmly burning Borda's manuscripts of *La muerte y la canoa*. The writer of bestsellers, the writer deemed 'de envergadura' by the financial director, is thus revealed to be a total fraud; insincere with his public, a plagiarist on an epic scale and unrepentant at having caused the suicide of an aspiring young writer who trusted him. The portrayal of this bestseller, and the status granted to him within the patriarchal world of publishing, is morally—though not economically—bankrupt.

'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires': A Woman's Place in the Publishing Hierarchy?

Where 'La muerte y la canoa' signalled a potentially derivative and parodic relationship to high literary status with its possible allusion to Borges, this second title appears more ambiguous. The phrase 'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires' could sound like a muttered curse, ironically signalling the city's notoriously polluted air quality and indicating generalized dissatisfaction with the place, or it could be a hyperbolic, self-consciously playful apostrophic exclamation to the city at large. The phrase is referenced explicitly twice in the text itself. It is first uttered by a self-satisfied Spanish author, Benito Landó, whilst travelling with his female publicist in a taxi to a promotional event. He rolls the window down to inhale the air of Buenos Aires (which—according to Greenpeace and WHO pollution reports from the time this story was published—is far from clean) and to revel in his own facile alliteration.³⁴ The phrase also recurs at the very end

32 My thanks to the second anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing out the possible nod to the Buenos Aires psychiatric Hospital Borda in this character's surname, and also the parallel between Jenner's act of plagiarism and Ricardo Piglia's 'Homenaje a Roberto Arlt', first published in *Nombre falso* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1975), 97–172, in which 'un texto en que se teoriza sobre el papel de la falsificación y del plagio en la literatura se convierte a su vez [...] en un plagio y una falsificación múltiple de citas y de hechas' (Jorge Fornet, '“Homenaje a Roberto Arlt” o la literatura como plagio', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 42:1 [1994], 115–41 [p. 116]).

33 Bezerra analyses the importance of this event, established in 2004, for fostering relationships between readers and writers ('The Business of Writing Literature', 338).

34 See 'Greenpeace places respirator mask on Buenos Aires statue to protest pollution', *Agencia EFE*, 17 May 2018, n.p.; <<https://www.efe.com/efe/english/technology/greenpeace-places-respirator-mask-on-buenos-aires-statue-to-protest-pollution/50000267-3619273>> (accessed 11 August 2022).

of the narrative, where the author's gesture is consciously repeated by the publicist, but in both cases there is an ironic distance between the character's point of view and that of the implied narrator.

Like Martín Jenner, Benito Landó is fêted by his publishers since he keeps their enterprise buoyant, personally accounting for sixty per cent of the company's entire global annual turnover. His works are described as '*libros históricos, siempre adornados con una trama secundaria erótica y con alguna intriga policial menor pero suficiente para garantizarle un lugar en los principales festivales de novela negra del circuito europeo*'.³⁵ As with the link between Jenner and crime fiction, the key formulaic elements of various kinds of genre fiction are present. Rather than in 'La muerte y la canoa', here historical fiction, erotic novel and detective fiction are mixed together in what is opportunistically calculated to be a winning recipe.

Also like Martín Jenner, Landó is obsessed with his self-image and with being recognized by others in order to validate that image. He is described entering a bookshop for a signing, 'la espalda erguida como si estuviera montado sobre un caballo, mirando a un lado y otro para ver si era reconocido' (145). This description likens him visually to outsized equestrian statues of great national *próceres*, such as that of General Manuel Belgrano in the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. The statuesque image is then both echoed and simultaneously deflated in the process of reduction to a two-dimensional photograph printed life size onto a stand ('una gigantografía con su foto' [145]). His female fans are more interested in his signature than in his writing: 'se le acercaron varias mujeres para pedirle que les firmara lo que fuera: libro, servilleta, el ticket del estacionamiento' (145). If one compares this scene to the book signing with Martín Jenner, one can see clear parallels. Jenner recognizes the power his image exercises over his readers, and he consciously (and cynically) cultivates that through signings and selfies. Landó's image is similarly revealed to be entirely based on a 'cult of personality': Landó's fans are content with his signature on a parking ticket, not feeling the need to actually acquire and read his book; Jenner's fans would feel fulfilled by having their photo taken with him. In neither case is the work of literature the *locus* of value.

Nevertheless, a key difference in this story from that of 'La muerte y la canoa', particularly with regard to the gender dimension, is that Landó himself does not become the protagonist. Or rather, what he would see as his 'rightful' place as protagonist (by virtue of his undisputed bestseller status) is challenged by two women. One of these is a writer, Vanina

35 Claudia Piñeiro, 'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires', in *Quién no*, 137–52 (p. 140; my emphasis). Further references will be given parenthetically in the main text.

Sarásuri, and again the presentation of her is redolent with clichés of the publishing world:

[...] aunque Vanina no tenía muchos lectores, ni la crítica especializada se había ocupado de ella sino como de *una integrante más de su generación*, ese año fue la escritora más solicitada, la *figurita* difícil después de que Cándido Garibaldi, eterno *candidato* mexicano al premio Nobel de Literatura, dijera que era *la mejor escritora viva de habla hispana*.

(141; my emphasis)

Being a woman writer who does not belong to the bestselling category, and who has not been taken up by expert critics except to include her as an 'also-ran' in her generation of writers, she would be languishing in relative obscurity, were it not for the illustrious patronage (and the inevitable note of condescension and paternalism that this implies) of a male Mexican author. He himself gains prestige from always being touted for the Nobel Prize for Literature without ever actually winning it (this is perhaps another nod to Jorge Luis Borges, who was the most famous Latin-American author never to win the Nobel Prize). His praise of Vanina is carefully qualified; she is the best living female author in Spanish, a label which keeps her separate from the universal category of 'authors—gender unspecified', which by default is gendered as male. This ghettoization of women writers has been a persistent complaint on the part of authors; furthermore, the narrating voice participates in this gendered, backhanded praise, since calling her a 'figurita' implies a belittling, decorative quality rather than intellectual prowess. Vanina has been involved, we learn, in an affair with the director of a publishing house, and it is hinted that there is a lot of 'chisme' about such affairs in the publishing world. Like Jenner's female editor in 'La muerte y la canoa', perhaps Vanina too has experienced (sexual) coercion by superiors in the publishing hierarchy. It is noteworthy that she is referred to by her first name throughout, after the one mention of her surname. Although this is mainly because our view of her is focalized through someone who knows her, it is typical of the treatment given to many women writers, which tends to have the effect of diminishing their perceived literary stature.³⁶

36 This is particularly the case with *poetisas*, such as 'Alfonsina' (Storni) or 'Florbela' (Espanca). Such discriminatory use of language in the treatment of female professionals (not just writers) has long been documented: 'the use of the first name alone [...] sounds patronizing [...]. It would seem as though male members of the profession are [...] loath to admit women to full membership in their club, and this trouble in terms of address [...] is symptomatic of deeper problems' (Robin Lakoff, 'Language and Woman's Place', in *Language and Society*, 2:1 [1973], 45–80 [p. 71]). However, since the text itself refers to her as 'Vanina', I will follow suit in my analysis.

The second woman who displaces both Landó's protagonism and that of Vanina, by virtue of the narrative being exclusively seen from her perspective, is nevertheless inferior to them both in terms of the publishing hierarchy. She is a publicist and marketing assistant, yet right from the opening of the narrative she threatens to sideline both authors with her pressing domestic and interpersonal concerns.³⁷ The story hinges on the fluctuating relationship between this significantly unnamed character, through whose eyes we view the others, and the female author Vanina. In their line of work, they have occasion to meet sporadically at literary festivals, such as that in Bogotá, which is where they last met—five months before the moment of the narrative present.

The dynamics of the publishing world are established concisely through reference to the Bogotá festival being 'uno de los de moda en el circuito' (141), and the hierarchy within literary festivals is spatially symbolized by the relative distance from the centre of each of the guest tables. Most important is 'la mesa de los figurones' (141), where Vanina is placed—a 'figurita' amongst the 'figurones'?—whilst the publicist is relegated to a lowly 'mesa apartada del centro de la escena' (142).³⁸ The publicist's cynicism about her job exposes many clichés about the world of publishing: promoting books of investigative journalism which she considers 'un bodrio' (142); trying to interest sellers in a poetry anthology which has received no critical attention whatsoever (141); pandering to the glamorous hegemonic masculinity-affirming high life lived by Landó ('cocaína y mujeres' [143]), a parallel with Jenner's penthouse apartment in Puerto Madero; surviving the ceaseless round of promotional activities and 'la pequeñez y la aidez del mundo literario' (145).

On the occasion described, five months previously in Bogotá, Vanina had willingly abandoned the 'aburrimiento supino' (141) of being with the 'figurones'; she moved to her friend's table, and thereafter they drank wine together in Vanina's hotel, ending with the publicist putting a rather drunken Vanina to bed before returning to her own (presumably less

37 In this respect, this story calls to mind Piñeiro's novel *Betibú* (2010) where the importance given to daily minutiae alters the character of the narrative, a fact implicitly acknowledged by Betibú's musing that 'la vida de cada día, lo cotidiano, hasta lo banal, se mezclan con el crimen en un menjunje que quita dramatismo al horror y perturba lo simple' (Claudia Piñeiro, *Betibú* [Madrid: Santillana, 2013], 268).

38 For readers of Piñeiro's earlier novel *Las viudas de los jueves* (2005), there is an interesting parallel here in terms of narrative positioning with regard to gender. In that novel too the men possessed social status—albeit precarious—by virtue of their economic importance, but the women's perspectives claimed narrative superiority. *Las viudas de los jueves* was originally short stories, written for Guillermo Saccomanno's 'taller literario'. See Natalia Blanc, 'Claudia Piñeiro: "El cuento tiene una precisión de un mecanismo de relojería"', *La Nación, Cultura*, 23 September 2018, n.p.; <<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/cultura/claudia-pineiro-el-cuento-tiene-precision-mecanismo-nid2174826/>> (accessed 11 August 2022).

luxurious) hotel. Therefore, the baseline for this friendship is a sense of female solidarity and equality in defiance of the publishing hierarchy; Vanina perhaps feels slightly indebted to the other woman for looking after her when she was temporarily incapacitated, and the publicist perhaps subconsciously has romantic feelings for Vanina (she arranges Vanina's hair on the pillow before leaving). At the present moment of narration, the publicist is trying to get back in touch with Vanina, and the narrative shows an increasingly fraught divergence between her repeated attempts at calling, emailing and texting Vanina, and the minutiae of her own daily life, ministering to men: to Landó in the publishing company, and in her domestic situation as a wife, and a mother of two boys.

The narrative highlights the fact that behind the 'glittering' world of bestsellers and the apparent glamour of their sphere are the conflicting pressures of working life and family demands for those who are cogs in the publicity machinery. Likewise, behind the façade of professionalism and success, there is a deep-seated cynicism regarding the way the publishing, marketing and book promotion circuits operate. Finally, there is the particular issue of a perceived betrayal and the sense that a friendship has become devalued, almost contractual, reduced to the fulfilment—or not—of the social obligation of returning voicemails. The publicist's escalating resentment at Vanina's lack of response to her repeated texts, calls and messages shows this. What began as a whim to contact her for no particular reason (perhaps subconscious attraction?) quickly escalates to fury at a perceived slight, which she attributes to Vanina's change in status. Now that Vanina has the backing of a canonical male author—as a female colleague from Vanina's publisher cynically puts it, 'con el espaldarazo de Garibaldi ahora su libro se vende solo' (146)—the publicist presumes that Vanina considers herself too high and mighty to contact her one-time friend, as if she had turned back to the 'mesa de los figurones' and taken on that narcissistic bestseller identity.

Crucially, the publicist's resentment is expressed in a highly sexualized way, in the language of female rivalry over a man: 'Ahora que Garibaldi le hizo *crecer las tetas*, la escritorcita no contesta, ¿pero por qué mierda?' (146, my emphasis). Vanina's publishing success is figured entirely in physical, sexual terms, not in terms of sales or literary supplements. The implication is that a woman's place in the publishing industry is inescapably gendered—even sexualized—and, in her anger, the publicist is complicit with this patriarchal framework, adopting and ventriloquizing the male gaze which reduces female authors to their physical appearance and vital statistics.³⁹

39 As theorized by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3 (1975), 6–18: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure' (11).

Furthermore, the belittling diminutive ‘escritorcita’ replicates the patronizing dismissal of women writers more commonly associated with a *machista* or hegemonic male perspective, which divides the literary world into a hierarchical binary of writers and female writers. The publicist’s outraged dignity and sense of what is owing to her in terms of responses to her messages also leads her to designate Vanina a ‘reverenda hija de puta’ (150), again using offensive sexualized language.

While this internal psychodrama plays out, the woman’s husband and sons find her behaviour towards them increasingly distant; in the final scene, she has neglected both domestic and professional responsibilities. She exits Landó’s book launch early (against the explicit prohibition of her boss) in order to rush to MALBA, Buenos Aires’ Museum of Latin American Art, where Vanina is participating in a round table. She arrives just as it is ending; Vanina looks radiant whilst she herself looks a mess. We as readers are in suspense, expecting some kind of dramatic outburst or showdown. In the anticipated moment of encounter, Vanina deigns to greet her with a kiss, saying ‘Hola’, ‘¿Cómo estás?’ and ‘Nos vemos’ (152), three perfectly standard phrases that amount to nothing more than mere phatic communication. Yet somehow, bizarrely, this suffices for the publicist, who rather than throwing all her resentment about the unanswered messages onto Vanina, seems suddenly bewitched. It is as though the publicist has been transformed, indeed converted, into one of the adoring fans, in love with the bestselling author: ‘Si Vanina la había saludado y le había dado un beso, entonces todo estaba bien’ (152). Perhaps she is seduced by Vanina’s brief public acknowledgement of their personal bond (however illusory and superficially maintained), the effect of which is magnified by Vanina having achieved bestseller status. Perhaps she has realized that allowing the male gaze to distort her view of Vanina is ultimately harmful to them both, since it perpetuates the patriarchal hierarchy within which they are both constrained.

It is at this point that the story’s title is once more invoked; while the publicist is in a taxi alone, *en route* to a promotional dinner for Landó, she consciously imitates his earlier action of rolling down the window to breathe in the city’s air. Where previously she had paid more attention to checking her phone for messages than to Landó’s smug appreciation of smog and his trite ‘poetic’ encapsulation of it as the blessed air of Buenos Aires, now she seems swept up in it. She realizes that she no longer has time to collect her husband’s wedding suit from the dry cleaner’s (an outstanding errand mentioned as a week overdue in the opening line of the story), and her blithe dismissal of this domestic triviality seems to symbolize her willingness to abandon obligations to her heterosexual relationship, pursuing her own career and the attention of Vanina, who makes her heart beat quicker (152).

Conclusion

In these two stories, bestsellers are caricatured, both in terms of the cult of personality which sweeps aside questions of quality and integrity in the whirlwind of marketing and publicity, and in terms of the hierarchical gendering of roles within the publishing industry that fosters bestsellers. Consequently, the texts present a humorous but also somewhat bitter view of the book industry in Buenos Aires. Returning to the phrase of 'escritor de envergadura', and of whether women writers can be considered as achieving that designation, I would suggest that (as is the case with the examples given of Sor Juana, Mistral and Peri Rossi), women can have such status, but they are more likely to do so if their gender troubles the heterosexual feminine, or if they are 'consecrated' by male patronage, as is the case with Vanina Sarásuri in 'Bendito aire de Buenos Aires'.⁴⁰ As Battersby observes, 'the achievements of women who have managed to create are obscured by an ideology that associates cultural achievement with the activities of males'.⁴¹ It is noteworthy that women (like Landó's adoring female fans or the publicist adopting the objectifying male gaze) are frequently complicit in this patriarchal ideology and consecration process. For example, in a 2016 *Babelia* article celebrating Vargas Llosa's work being accepted into the Pléiade collection (symbolic of great literary prestige), the journalist—Pilar Reyes—reports the anecdote that Vargas Llosa was as pleased about receiving this news as when he heard he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Her comments are revealing: 'No sé si es cierto o no, pero creo que tiene todo el sentido que *un homenaje de esa envergadura* signifique para él un reconocimiento comparable a la mayor distinción literaria del mundo'.⁴² Here we can see how the masculinized word 'envergadura' is directly linked to notions of consecrated literary status, which a female cultural journalist does not hesitate to

40 We might here draw a real-life parallel with the case of Chilean authors Isabel Allende and Pablo Neruda. The Nobel laureate poet's literary authority is leveraged by Allende in her autofictional novel *Paula* to consecrate her move from journalism into fiction. She narrates how Neruda invited her to his house in 1973; she prepared diligently for interviewing him, but when she tried to begin, he apparently said to her: 'Usted debe ser la peor periodista de este país, hija. Es incapaz de ser objetiva, se pone al centro de todo, y sospecho que miente bastante y cuando no tiene una noticia, la inventa. ¿Por qué no se dedica a escribir novelas mejor? En la literatura esos defectos son virtudes'. See Isabel Allende, *Paula* (Barcelona: Plaza y Janés, 1994), 240. In this backhanded way, Neruda is made to give his paternal blessing (note the familiar use of *hija*) to her embarking on a career as a novelist, and by association, she garners literary status.

41 Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 23.

42 Pilar Reyes, 'La conquista de la ciudad soñada', *El País*, 4 March 2016, n.p.; <https://elpais.com/cultura/2016/03/02/babelia/1456923527_806021.html> (accessed 11 August 2022), my emphasis. The only Latin-American writers in the Pléiade collection are Borges, Octavio Paz and Vargas Llosa.

apply to a supremely canonical male author. So like the publicist who is drawn to Vanina but equally capable of seeing her through a male gaze and participating in sexualized critique of her, this journalist uncritically shores up the masculinity of the literary hierarchy by deploying the word 'envergadura' in the context of a supremely male-dominated literary collection. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Piñeiro is at pains to distinguish between her bestselling books and the labelling of herself as a 'bestselling author'. If being a bestseller approximates to possessing the quality of 'envergadura', then to judge by these two stories, it is not a quality Piñeiro is anxious to claim. As Isabel puts it to Elena, in Piñeiro's novel *Elena sabe*, 'no le crea a la gente que nos pone nombre'.⁴³ Whilst Piñeiro acknowledges and participates in the inevitable consumerist operation which is the world of mass publishing and book promotion, she nevertheless reminds us of the ongoing need to make that world a more egalitarian place in gender terms, and of the responsibility women share with men in making it so.*

43 Claudia Piñeiro, *Elena sabe* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2007), 173.

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