

Feminist Metatheatricalism: Escofet's *Ritos del corazón*

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As Cristina Escofet herself explains, the writer-protagonist of *Ritos del corazón* (published 1994; first staged 1997) has much in common with her Argentinean author. In a 1998 talk, Escofet described Laura as a “sister” who was sent to her “con su valija de refugiada del pasado” (“Heroínas”). More recently, she has said: “*Ritos del corazón* es parte de una Cristina que habita en mí, y que se llama Laura” (e-mail 6 September 99). Like her author, Laura would like to “renacer no hacia atrás sino hacia adelante, hacia el respirar de un siglo nuevo” (Preface to *Ritos* 129); but she cannot escape the feminine myths of the past, among them, her own youthful self.

The surreal action of *Ritos del corazón* takes place in an abandoned theatre, where prototypical characters, in search of an author and an audience, come to act out their roles. In the frame play, Laura says she no longer has a place to live (“Mi familia me dejó en la calle...” 136). She has answered an ad (“paraíso alquilo”) placed by Juanita, only to discover that the announced paradise is a vacant theatre, not an apartment, that doors lead nowhere, and that even the telephone is a useless prop. Juanita, the theatre caretaker, is a *gallega* who regrets immigrating to Argentina instead of “Jollivud” where she might have been another “Jreta Garbo.” She assures Laura that the theatre is a paradise, “un paraíso de l’imaginación” (132).¹ Laura indignantly leaves, but then returns, dragging her trunk with her. Juanita raises the rent, tells Laura she is expected to work seven days a week as a *sereno*, and adds her to the theatre inventory with the number 1789.² On the other hand, Juanita also consoles Laura, encouraging her to use her imagination: “¿Usted sabe lo feliz que puede vivir creyéndose lo que usted misma se inventa?” (137). Laura hopes to settle in, bring out her typewriter, and begin to write about the new

woman. Instead the set is soon invaded by the ghosts of the past — part of the baggage hidden in the metaphorical trunk.

Like Rosario Castellanos's *El eterno femenino* (written 1973), with which it has various aspects in common, Escofet's openly feminist satire avoids the pitfalls of agitation propaganda through its use of exuberant metatheatricalism and humor. The metatheatrical and comic strategies highlighted in *Ritos del corazón* to varying degrees are also present in other plays by Escofet: *Té de tías* (1985; dir. Eduardo Pavelic, Teatro Abierto), *Nunca usarás medias de seda* (1990; dir. Daniel Marcove, Teatro De la Campana) and *Señoritas en concierto* (1993; co-production with Teatro General San Martín).³ Lola Proaño-Gómez correctly includes humor as a significant aspect when she defines Escofet's theatre as "la mezcla hábilmente equilibrada de humor y poesía, con la reflexión psicológica y filosófica" (215). That psychological and philosophical reflection is presented through the woman's perspective.

With reference to Castellanos's *El eterno femenino*, Carl Good observes that the women characters, whether historical figures or contemporary ones, tell their own stories; in this way, Castellanos "invierte la tradición dramática situando a la mujer en la posición de privilegio subjetivo" (Good 60). While Castellanos's play also includes male characters, Escofet's *Ritos del corazón* features an all-female cast that evokes "personajes de la realidad eterna" (*Ritos* 130). These characters range from women of earlier centuries (a very young medieval woman from the thirteenth century, a work-weary country woman of the eighteenth century, a very young nineteenth-century romantic), to icons of twentieth-century popular culture (Greta Garbo, age 25, and Marilyn Monroe, age 32), to members of Laura's own family (her grandmother, when she was in her thirties, and her mother, as a ten-year old who does not want to get married and have children), and to Laura in her youth (Laura II). The desired mode of representation, specified within the text by Laura, is a Brechtian "efecto de distanciamiento" with a "tono confidencial posmoderno" (*Ritos del corazón* 139).

In her study of women playwrights during the period 1960-1990, Ann Witte selects Griselda Gambaro (b. 1928) and Aída Bortnik (b. 1938) as representative of Argentina. She finds that they, as well as several other socially and politically committed women playwrights whom she mentions in passing, "used – and frequently still use – a language traditionally male-dominated and often wrote from a male point of view" (71). Only gradually, after the return of democracy to Argentina in the 1980s, does Witte discover

“the development of a feminist discourse, which still remains secondary to a more general political critique” (146). Witte does not include the early works of Cristina Escofet (b. 1945) in her study; had she done so, she would have had to alter her conclusions. Starting with her first play, in 1985, Escofet was already breaking away from the patterns Witte defines.

Escofet has been a political activist. She identifies herself as belonging to “la dorada juventud del 70. Soy de la generación perdida. Todos mis amigos y amigas fueron víctimas de la represión, incluida mi familia” (e-mail Sept. 99). She was ousted from the faculty of the University of La Plata, where she taught History of Modern Philosophy, because of opposition to her from the Asociación Anticomunista Argentina. She subsequently turned to writing and theatre. But her activism in the turbulent 1970s does not preclude Escofet from also being an avowed feminist, “educada por el feminismo desde joven” (“Heroínas”). She is familiar with feminist theories and speaks of her work in those terms. She defines feminist writing as a search for self-awareness; in her own writing, she places emphasis on gender roles and the female subject (“Heroínas”). “Creo que mi tema es la identidad femenina, la identidad de género. . . . la búsqueda de una voz propia” (Proaño-Gómez 216).

Not only this dominant theme but also their theatrical mode place Escofet’s plays into a feminist current. Escofet rejects Aristotelian, conventional drama in favor of an episodic, Brechtian structure.⁴ The accompanying acting style has a distancing effect. Elin Diamond observes with respect to Brechtian theory as applied to feminist theatre: “The actor must not lose herself in the character but rather *demonstrate* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations, a conduit of particular choices” (50). Diamond notes that in feminist satires “gender is relentlessly exposed as ‘performativity,’ as a system of regulatory norms which the subject ‘cites’ in order to appear in culture” (46).

In the case of *Ritos de corazón*, the complex metatheatrical structure layers roles within roles, thus demonstrating the character’s function while emphasizing the performativity of gender. Escofet refers to the play as a set of nesting dolls, “muñecas rusas,” in which she, too, is “una capa más” (“Heroínas”). The ten roles may be played by five actors; in the original production (directed by Eduardo Pavelic), two performers doubled in three roles each, while a third took on two roles.⁵ With a change of costume, an actor can be Marilyn Monroe one minute and a ten-year old girl or an eighteenth-century country woman the next. Gender and even age are mere constructs.

Only the actor playing Laura has a single role: that of the writer-protagonist, in her forties, whose exploration of both her personal unconscious and the collective female unconscious underpins the action. The mature Laura, however, is doubled in the form of Laura II, the ghost of what she was in her militant youth. For other characters, there is also a layering of roles within roles. Most notable is Juanita, the caretaker of the abandoned theatre, who at times parodies the role of Greta Garbo in her famous movie portrayal of Camille. Indeed Laura is at first frightened away in part by Juanita's performance of her role within the role, clutching a camellia in her hand and coughing repeatedly: "Es la tisis. El que no tose en estos tiempos, es de otra época..." (134). When the "real" Greta Garbo emerges from behind the costume rack, her supposedly authentic recreation of the Camille role (165-66) is immediately followed by Juanita's burlesque of the same scene. Disappearing momentarily after Greta Garbo's entrance, Juanita returns also dressed like the film character, and proceeds to both parody and criticize the famous role:

Eh... Duval, ¿sabe cómo me gustaría verlo sin las polainas?... Ay, perdone, antes usted siempre será una dama, con o sin camelias, no como algunas... Ay, Jreta, más vitaminas y menos camelias... (166)

Juanita effectively upstages Greta Garbo through her comic performance. We are reminded by Laura II that Greta Garbo herself was a construct, no less a fiction than the mythical Marilyn Monroe (a professional identity adopted by Norma Jean Baker). Juanita's portrayal of Greta Garbo thus involves four levels of reality: the real-life Greta Lovisa Gustaffson, who adopts the professional identity of Greta Garbo, who in turn creates the role of Camille, which Juanita then parodies.

For at least some members of an Argentinean audience, there is a further metatheatrical layering in the role of Juanita. In performance, Juanita is the dominant comic figure, continually evoking laughter. Her deliberately exaggerated acting style is to emulate that of Niní Marshall, to whom the play is dedicated. At curtain rise, Juanita is looking at herself in a mirror: "*Ella viste de mucama, exactamente igual que Cándida, el personaje de Niní Marshall, y ensaya frente al espejo su mayor fantasía: ser por un momento Greta en La dama de las camelias*" (131). Juanita, dressed like a character created by Marshall is rehearsing another character, as created by Greta Garbo. Marshall was Escofet's acting teacher: "mi maestra, una gran cómica" ("Heroínas"). The extratextual reference was not lost on theatre critics. P.

Espinosa's 3 November 1997 review in *El Cronista* of *Ritos de corazón* began by identifying the work as a tribute to Niní Marshall.⁶

The playful metatheatricalism of *Ritos del corazón* both subverts any possible portrayal of a unified character and calls attention to the performativity of gender. As is typical of radical feminist theatre, "representation and subjectivity are made to reveal themselves as gendered fictions rather than natural or inevitable realities" (Fortier 74). When the grandmother appears, she wants Laura to write *her* story, which she considers typical of all women: "Cualquier mujer se sentirá representada. Cualquier mujer sabe verse en una silla esperando..." (154). To demonstrate that role, she instructs the little girl (her daughter) to take her place behind the chair and the mature woman (her granddaughter) to take her place in the audience. "Atención, comienza la obra..." (154). That the Grandmother's role is an oft-repeated performance is made clear some moments later by the little girl's narrative aside: "Ésta es la parte en que el abuelo la engaña" (155).

The various costumes, particularly those of Marilyn Monroe and Greta Garbo, are related to what Elaine Aston has called over-display; often associated with cabaret form, over-display can be a feminist strategy that alienates "the vestimentary sign-system of the 'feminine'" (94). The text in performance is postmodernist, fulfilling expectations outlined by Jill Dolan:

Logically, a postmodernist performance style that breaks with realist narrative strategies, heralds the death of unified characters, decenters the subject, and foregrounds conventions of perception is conducive to materialist feminist analyses of representation. (97)

For Dolan, "coherent conceptions of identity are specious since even race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, are constructed within discursive fields and changeable within the flux of history" (96). By juxtaposing figures from different historical moments and different social classes, Escofet effectively visualizes how gender norms change over time. In applying Brechtian theory, she also achieves gender critique as defined by Diamond: "gender critique refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas, and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity" (45).

In *Ritos del corazón*, Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe object strongly to the insipid words that they were forced to say in their films; they ask Laura to write new texts for them. But they object just as strongly when Laura II, in her role within the role of director, tries to force them into different scripts, ones featuring equally stereotypical roles but without their identities

as glamorous sex symbols. Greta and Marilyn are stuck with their fixed images and silly dialogue. Neither Laura nor Laura II could turn these cultural icons into contemporary figures because they cannot or will not change.

Some of Mark Fortier's observations about *Cloud Nine* (1979), the well known play by British feminist Caryl Churchill, could be equally applied to *Ritos del corazón*. Both plays break with subjectivity as set up by the patriarchy (74). Both do most of their "feminist work in a specifically theatrical way, in the interplay between characters and actors" (77). Escofet's Marilyn Monroe, Greta Garbo and, somewhat less obviously, the other figures from the past, cannot change. In this sense they are like the Victorian characters in act one of Churchill's play: "Each of these characters has imposed on them a social identity which oppresses them and limits the possibility of remaking themselves in a more liberated and self-chosen way" (Fortier 78).⁷

In *Ritos del corazón*, her "homenaje a muchas mujeres, fantasmas del pasado, una generación que es la mía" ("Heroínas"), Escofet explores the collective image of woman, including individual and collective memory. As a proponent of Jungian theory, she believes that archetypes can be unmasked but not ignored: "Sin una convivencia en profundidad con nuestras imágenes y grabaciones inconscientes, nuestro viaje como mujer se torna incompleto" ("Heroínas").⁸ Laura's initial intent to look only to the future in order to address a new woman is hence doomed to failure. The new woman must first understand the past in order to create something better. It is, as Escofet's says, a kind of digging for bones, of going deeper and deeper in search of parts of oneself ("Heroínas").

To a certain extent, the unmasking process in *Ritos del corazón* is not unlike that of Castellanos's *El eterno femenino*. In describing the latter, Raúl Ortiz states:

En *El eterno femenino* Rosario Castellanos arranca las máscaras, combate mitos y, ante un conflicto que no por dramático resultaba menos ambiguo e impreciso en el planteamiento, apunta con idioma ágil, jocosos y dúctil, contra la hipócrita complicidad de hombres y mujeres que se arrellanan en un status quo del que ambos sexos pretenden obtener ventajas y provechos. (12)

Where Escofet differs somewhat from Castellanos is in the Mexican writer's insistence on ancestral lies, that is, on the distortion of history. While speaking to the other historical figures, Castellanos's Sor Juana proclaims that it will not be easy for them to represent their true selves:

Porque nos hicieron pasar bajo las horcas caudinas de una versión esterotipada y oficial. Y ahora vamos a presentarnos como lo que fuimos. O, por lo menos, como lo que creemos que fuimos. (*El eterno femenino* 87)

Escofet wishes to deconstruct the “categorías binarias del patriarcado” (“Heroínas”) but is less concerned about demythologizing per se.

Whether myths from the past are true or false, they remain part of the collective unconscious and therefore must be dealt with. In *El eterno femenino*, a machine has been invented to keep women from thinking while they sit under a hairdryer; but from the protagonist’s dreams, that is, from her subconscious, come the seeds of rebellion against the status quo. Escofet’s protagonist is ready to rebel before she confronts the figures from the past. Perhaps for that reason the myths are not subjected to the same kind of demystification. The three historical archetypes need Laura to be their voice but they will not change their image simply because she gives them expression. According to the Romantic:

En la historia se entra como mito o como prototipo o no se entra...
¿Qué te has figurado que es morir? ...La muerte es tu única oportunidad de ser para siempre la foto fija de vos misma capaz de resistir la eternidad.... (149)

Fixed images notwithstanding, Escofet’s characters from the past are capable of surprising and amusing us. The medieval woman speaks of her devotion to the Virgin and how she sought a monk’s guidance to express her piety; we quickly suspect that he also helped her resolve the question of her own virginity. Laura’s grandmother identifies herself with a chair: metaphor for the submissive wife and mother who patiently awaits her unfaithful husband; but she clearly awaits not his return but his death: “‘Te morirás primero y yo me quedaré con todo.’ Y así me quedé” (155). The grandmother was incapable of active rebellion but hopes that her daughter will achieve greater independence than she by becoming a seamstress. Certainly Laura’s mother as a child and Laura, throughout her life, have been far less willing to accept traditional female roles than were the grandmother or the historical archetypes.

Underpinning Laura’s desire to write about the new woman, to stop wasting time and stop looking backwards, is her concern about the numerous “muertes cotidianas” to which women are subjected. Because of frustrations and disappointments, because of obstacles placed in her path, a woman’s life

is a series of little daily deaths. Laura reads to Juanita from her script in progress:

“Nadie resiste andar con diez años de atraso... Y entonces, se produce la muerte cotidiana, por cansancio.” Eso dice la actriz, y en ese momento se enciende una luz lila pálido. De identidad femenina.~

Cuesta saber quién es una mujer que diariamente debe repasar no menos de diez años de continuos errores. Cuesta y cansa. Y al cansarse una muere. ¿Cuántas veces por día muere una mujer? (139)

Juanita interrupts Laura, comically criticizing, among other things, the stage directions that would have the actress turn her back on the audience. Later she parodies the whole concept in a passage filled with laments of “ay... ay... ay...” (153). Nor is Juanita alone in rejecting Laura’s basic premise. The figures from the past want Laura to write about their real deaths and they treat as trivial Laura’s own complaints:

MEDIEVAL. – Tu abuela murió seis millones cuatrocientas treinta y tres mil veces.

PUEBLERINA. – Tantas veces murió tu madre que al final nadie se lo creyó.

ROMÁNTICA. –A Juana de Arco tuvieron que matarla de verdad. (140)

In spite of the numerous objections, Laura, the writer-protagonist of the text, still seeks to overcome those little deaths by giving voice to a woman who is ready to enter the future. Nevertheless, understanding the past – her own as well as that of other women – is the first step along the way.

In *Ritos del corazón* Escofet effectively presents aspects of that past with humorous, theatrical flare. She gives expression to the collective female unconscious and, in the process, allows the spectators, both Laura in the frame play and the real audience, to purge themselves of their myths. Perhaps, in existentialist fashion, Laura II is correct that an individual’s past informs that person’s present and that her voice will always be part of the mature Laura.

On the other hand, Juanita may have wisdom on her side when she comically proclaims that Laura’s ideal woman “que no se consuela de vivir de recuerdos, y de tan cansada se muere no de muerte propiamente dicha” will revive from those deaths and wish to awaken “dentro de cien años como la Bella Durmiente...” (153). Laura’s point, indeed the hope that underpins the multilayered metatheatrical games, is that the hundred years have already passed and that Sleeping Beauty can awaken with new freedom to embark

upon the adventures of her choice. If gender is merely a construct, the individual woman can decide what she wishes to be.

In the concluding scene, Juanita affirms that Laura has convinced her: “Yo prefiero entrar en el hacia allá con imagen de más adelante” (175). Juanita finally rejects the role of Greta Garbo but, on a comic note, now declares she would like to be Lola Flores. Laura, engrossed in her writing, ignores the comment and continues to work. In the reality to which the play returns, Laura, Juanita and Every Woman are free to construct their own identities.

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Notes

¹ The space Laura rents is the stage, not the upper gallery of seats to which the word “paraíso” normally refers in a theatre.

² The date of the French Revolution is no doubt deliberate.

³ *Ritos del corazón* was first staged in October 1997 but, under the title *Voces del corazón*, had already been written at the time of her interview with Proaño-Gómez, prior to the premiere of *Señoritas en concierto*.

⁴ Citing a study by Christopher Innes, Elaine Aston states that British “feminist playwrights consciously reject conventional forms as inherently masculinist” (57). In a similar vein, Elin Diamond notes that “the most innovative women playwrights refuse the seamless narrative of conflicting egos in classic realism” (50).

⁵ The original production was televised on 2 January 1998 on “Ciclo de Teatro,” a program hosted by Enrique Masllorens. My references to Pavelic’s staging are based on a videotape of the televised performance that Cristina Escofet kindly gave me during her 1998 visit to Rutgers.

⁶ In an e-mail sent 13 September 1999, Escofet relayed key statements from two reviews of *Ritos del corazón*. Espinosa’s review in *El Cronista* proclaimed the play to be “la mejor obra de Escofet” and “un agradable acercamiento al universo femenino.” The 6 November 1997 review in *La Nación* presented this characterization: “Mezcla de confesión alucinatoria e intento de representatividad general, el texto de Cristina Escofet sangra en medio de sus fantasmas personales e históricos.”

⁷ An interesting comparison might also be made between *Ritos del corazón* (and Castellanos’s *El eterno femenino*) and the first act of Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982). The contemporary professional woman, Marlene, finds herself surrounded by historical and artistic female figures from the past. While Escofet identifies herself with Laura, who is trying to overcome the submissive female myths of the past, Churchill is clearly critical of Marlene, a stand-in for Margaret Thatcher who stands in contrast to the feminist role-models of the past. Escofet is unfamiliar with the works of British playwright Caryl Churchill (e-mail 12 Jan. 2001).

⁸ Escofet has recently published a Jungian study titled *Arquetipos, modelos para desamar (palabras desde el género)* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Generación, 2000). In press at the same publisher is a second volume of her plays: *Las que aman hasta morir, Eternity class y ¿Qué pasó con Bette Davis?* (e-mail 21 December 2000). The last of these titles quickly calls to mind the Garbo and Monroe figures in *Ritos del corazón*.

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