

The Role of “La Chica Moderna” in Three Post-Revolutionary Mexican Plays

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During Mexico’s post-revolutionary period, three prominent female dramatists adapted for the stage the role of professional career women in order to question the extent of women’s equal participation in Mexican society and, in the process, introduced a new, modern image of working women in the popular imagination. In response to rapid transitions for women following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), dramatists Magdalena Mondragón, María Luisa Ocampo, and Concepción Sada Hermosillo addressed specifically the role career women would play in the process of modernizing Mexico by producing accomplished female doctors as the protagonists of their plays whose performances would seek to enact a role model for “la chica moderna.”¹ This “chica moderna,” or modern woman, is educated, determined to succeed, and talented in her field, yet despite her enriched professional life still feels the pressure from a patriarchal and Catholic society to fulfill the conventional roles of mother, wife, and family caretaker. Focusing on Concepción Sada’s *El tercer personaje* (1936), Magdalena Mondragón’s *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán* (1938), and María Luisa Ocampo’s *La virgen fuerte* (1942), this study examines how these three plays advocate for women’s advancement in the workplace without denigrating femininity.² As women began to leave the private space of the home in order to participate in a growing capitalist society, their feminine identity was considered compromised, and they were often stigmatized as “masculinized” females. Despite their femininity being challenged, the female protagonists in all three plays engender a positive image of “la chica moderna” who is cast as necessary in the process of nation building.

An interest in advancing women’s careers in Mexico began years before the revolution and coincided with the expansion of educational institutions nationwide. It was during the regime of President Benito Juárez (1855-

1872) that primary education was made obligatory, resulting in a dramatic increase in the number of public schools. From 1843 to 1874, the number of officially registered schools increased from 1,310 to 8,103 with a ratio of four schools for boys only to every one school for girls (Soto 11). This rapid growth in general education led to a high demand for teachers, and during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), women's enrollment increased in secondary schools, art schools, vocational schools, and business schools such as the Escuela Comercial "Miguel Lerdo de Tejada." By 1895, women teachers occupied over one-half of the nation's elementary teaching positions (12). Although teaching, nursing, and clerical work were the most popular professions for women at the time, a few pioneering women chose to enter other fields. The first woman to graduate with a professional degree in dentistry in Mexico was Margarita Chorné as early as 1886. She would soon be followed by Matilda P. Montoya who, after overcoming much resistance to women becoming licensed doctors, became Mexico's first woman physician in 1887. Inspired by her predecessors, María Sandoval de Zarco scandalized "la gente decente" by becoming Mexico's first female lawyer in 1889, and María Guerrero became the first female public accountant in 1908. In *Against All Odds*, Anna Macías notes that by 1904 "there were at least three women doctors practicing in Mexico," (12) and Shirlene Soto confirms in *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman* that "by 1910, the National University in Mexico City had graduated five women medical doctors, two women dentists, a woman lawyer, and a woman chemist" (12).

As the number of educated working women increased, so did the controversy over women's place in Mexico's transitional society. One of the leading arguments by antifeminists was the philosophy of Social Darwinism which maintained that women were inferior to men biologically, psychologically, socially, and morally. In *The Shattered Mirror*, María Elena de Valdés more specifically refers to a "Mexican social order" where women have been assigned

the role of custodians of spiritual values. Consequently, from birth, they have been tutored in the unquestioned truth that their primary function in life is motherhood, whether it be by physical birth and nurturing of children or within the religious orders; thus it is that Mexican women have been brought up to believe that their obligation in the economic order of this society has been to attend to the needs of the family group. (47)

For Macías, *machismo* (“extreme male dominance”) played a significant part in deterring women’s advancement in Mexico. It was the pronounced machismo in Mexico that made it difficult for feminists to move forward, especially when Mexican men continued to view women as objects and not persons (xiii, 3). This *machista* attitude extended to government officials who manipulated feminist movements for their own gains or were suspicious of some women’s alignment with the church; even the press was known to ridicule or ignore women’s views on issues such as divorce, education, gender equality, and more.

Valdés, Macías, and Soto all note that one of the leading institutions to condemn women’s equal participation with men in society was the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church held the position that women should maintain more traditional roles of wife and mother and that too much education made females unattractive to the opposite sex (Valdés 17; Macías xiv; Soto 74). As one example, Father Medina, S.J. published in the April 1925 issue of *La Paz Social*, a monthly journal under the direction of the Secretariat of the Confederation of Catholic Associations of Mexico, the following statement: “The woman, from the moment that she becomes a worker, ceases to be a woman” (qtd. in Soto 114). Concurrently, the Archbishop of Mexico, José Mora y del Río, believed it was the influence of “a North American custom” of working women that needed to be censured, given that it would lead to the ruin of households, the disregard of Mexican traditional customs, and the loss of family values (qtd. in Soto 114).

Jocelyn Olcott’s study entitled *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* contends that both males and females in Mexican society were concerned with the emerging economic roles of women during Mexico’s transitional period following the Mexican Revolution. Social hardships led to an emerging working class of women, and in post-revolutionary Mexico a substantial number of women were working outside of the home. Some concerns raised during this period were the ability of women to participate in productive labor and municipal posts, women’s suffrage, the “sexual problem” with an increased number of prostitutes (commonly associated with women who worked outside the domestic sphere), and the influence of foreign movements, such as the feminist movements in Europe and North America. For some Mexicans, the flapper skirts and bobbed haircuts from abroad were an affront to “authentic Mexican femininity” and family decency (Olcott 20, 53). Olcott confirms, however, that despite opposition to feminist movements at home and abroad, productive labor was equal to revolutionary citizenship and

“made one a rights-bearing citizen” (29). Thus, it was during the 1916 First Feminist Congress that the question arose as to whether women’s household labor “constituted consumption or production” for purposes of civic rights, and this question persisted through the 1920s and 1930s (29-30).

Despite what appears to be solid, patriarchal traditions of control over women’s participation in society, not all male figures opposed women’s advancements. As one example, Praxedis Guerrero, leader of the Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM), a liberal party that worked to overthrow the Porfirio Díaz regime, proclaimed the following to an audience in Los Angeles, California in 1910: “La igualdad libertaria no trata de hacer *hombre* a la mujer; da las mismas oportunidades a las dos facciones de la especie humana para que ambas se desarrollen sin obstáculos, sirviéndose naturalmente de apoyo, sin arrebatarse derechos, sin estorbarse en el lugar que cada uno tiene en la naturaleza.”³ Guerrero’s speech addresses a growing concern regarding the masculinization of women seeking equal opportunity, and he distinctly advocates that an equality of gender does not upset the “natural order” between men and women (a dichotomous distinction between sexes based on anticipated performances of male/female). While the PLM’s primary agenda was to establish a democratic system of government in place of clericalism and the authoritarian rule of Díaz, their plan also addressed gender equality, the protection of working women and children, and higher wages for primary school teachers. Female teachers, journalists, writers, and more supported the PLM’s cause until the party eventually disintegrated as the revolution progressed.⁴

Considering that productive labor constituted revolutionary citizenship and that this productive labor continued to be stated in terms of a natural order premised on masculine privileges, it was not unexpected when female dramatists shortly following the Mexican Revolution began to stage prominent, educated women as the protagonists of their plays. As women struggled to gain equality in mainstream society, female dramatists faced similar challenges with their theatrical productions, and many women playwrights, actresses, and benefactors did not gain rightful acknowledgment of their work until the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵ In “Especificidad y reconocimiento del discurso dramático femenino en el teatro latinoamericano,” Marcela Del Río specifically foregrounds the emergence of publications, conferences, and associations dedicated to works by women during this period: “En las primeras décadas del siglo XX, un grupo de escritoras y profesionistas de México fundaron en 1934 una asociación a la que llamaron

Ateneo Mexicano de Mujeres con metas que incluían la creación de una revista literaria, de una editorial para publicar la obra de las mujeres, así como la fundación de una Universidad femenina” (42). Some inspirational women held central positions in public institutions, such as Amalia González Caballero de Castillo Ledón, founder of the theatre company La Comedia Mexicana, who became president of Ateneo Mexicano de Mujeres and Subsecretaria de Cultura de la Secretaría de Educación Pública, and Concepción Sada, dramatist and eventual director of theatre at the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes in Mexico City. Virginia Fábregas provided artistic and economic support for the Grupo de los Siete Autores, and it was Antonieta Rivas Mercado’s money that helped mobilize the Ulises experiment. Other women such as María Aurelia Reyes, Catalina D’Erzell, María Luisa Ocampo, and Margarita Ureta produced theatrical productions that addressed feminist concerns, often selling out venues.

In spite of the influences of women on Mexican theatre during this time, research in the area remains scarce and tends to disregard the artistic potential of the works. Kirsten F. Nigro in “Theatre, Women, and Mexican Society: A Few Exemplary Cases” offers the following explanation for this disregard of early women’s works:

[a]nd much of the little that has been written tends to dismiss them [women dramatists from the early twentieth century] as melodramatic, as forerunners to today’s soap opera writers. Thus they are more often than not considered negative influences on the Mexican theatre, present but transparent, too *feminine* for the good taste of critics and other cultural arbiters. (56)

While Frank Dauster reasons that Mexican women dramatists were possibly conforming to a “modelo español,” both John B. Nomland and May Summer Farnsworth agree that the comfortable setting of the middle class combined with traditional and more realistic aesthetics provided these women dramatists the opportunity to forge their way into the theatre while promoting specifically feminist themes (Dauster 26; Nomland 235; Farnsworth 33). Additionally, Nomland’s study of Mexican theatre from 1900-1950 offers a somewhat indifferent recognition of female-authored plays. In regard to two of Ocampo’s plays *Cosas de la vida* and *La virgin fuerte*, Nomland remarks that “ninguna de estas dos obras tiene algo verdaderamente mexicano, ni nada nuevo que decir,” and, in reference to Sada’s *El tercer personaje*, he comments “es extraño que la autora haya tenido que recurrir a lo sobrehumano para tratar un problema que no necesitaba de truco alguno” (237; 238).

It is during this challenging time for women in Mexico when Concepción Sada (1899-?) produced *El tercer personaje*. Sada began her writing career at a young age and, as early as 1932, had already published some of her work under the pseudonym Diana Compecson (Cortés 613). In addition to publishing a number of short stories, some of which appeared in diverse journals located in Mexico City, Sada was an avid contributor to theatrical associations, such as “La Comedia Mexicana,” “Teatro de México,” and “la Unión Nacional de Autores en 1940.” While Sada is most recognized for initiating “Teatro Infantil” in Mexico, she also enjoyed a successful production of *El tercer personaje* at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in August 1936, which was soon followed by the staging of *Como yo te soñaba* (1938), *Un mundo para mí* (1938), and *En silencio* (1942) by the Virginia Fábregas and María Teresa Montoya companies at the Teatro Fábregas and the Teatro Ideal.⁶

Written in 1935 and debuted in 1936 by the Compañía de María Teresa Montoya, *El tercer personaje* explores the life of protagonist Adriana Pradel, an accomplished physician and wealthy single female in her mid-thirties who decides to purchase a husband so that she can fill her lonely life with children. In order to find this male partner, Adriana places an advertisement in the local newspaper and, after reviewing more than fifty responses, chooses three prospective males to interview for the position. The third candidate, Alfredo Noriega, an exile from the Revolution who returns to Mexico in order to rebuild his lost fortune, decides to accept the offer, but under the condition that Adriana’s payment of \$25,000 is a one-year loan to be paid in full once all obligations have been satisfied. Adriana’s plan to have children, however, is never realized since Alfredo only feels rancor for having accepted Adriana’s money while Adriana’s pride keeps her from telling Alfredo about her true desire for motherhood, and their marriage is never consummated. Upon their first year anniversary, which marks the completion of Alfredo’s obligations, Adriana finds that she has fallen in love with Alfredo, and although Alfredo appears to feel the same it is the “Tercer Personaje,” described by the playwright as a “sombra, simbolo de lo desconocido”—an ambiguous figure representing fate, destiny, or perhaps even supernatural intervention—who eventually brings the two together.

The protagonist of *El tercer personaje*, Adriana Pradel, is cleverly staged as a professional career woman who has not been “masculinized” by her non-gender-conforming position. As previously mentioned, there was growing concern during this time in Mexico over the image of working women as masculinized females who, according to Father Medina, cease to be women

once they enter the workforce. Sada seems to address this concern when she creates the protagonist of *El tercer personaje*. From the onset of the play, Adriana appears as a self-assured, determined female with one downside to her life: loneliness. While loneliness is not necessarily a feminine attribute alone, it is precisely this loneliness which continues to mark Adriana as “feminine” throughout the play, given that she claims to be lacking “alguien para quien trabajar, a quien dedicar mi vida, mi entusiasmo” despite her success as a physician and the financial stability from her uncle’s inheritance (Sada 12). In order to contend with this feeling of solitude, Adriana believes that “un hijo, de mi carne, de mi sangre” (and not an adopted child) would complement her current life which she describes as repetitious and without meaning, “igual ayer que hoy... hoy que mañana” (11). This “feminine” display of loneliness, which is converted into a desire for motherhood, subsequently is balanced throughout the play by descriptions of Adriana as a “mujer de ciencia.” As an example of this calculated “mujer de ciencia,” in an impassioned scene between a young admirer of Alfredo referred to as Melida and Adriana, where Melida slaps Adriana during an emotional outburst of jealousy and anger against Adriana for having “stolen” her love, Gustavo witnesses the exchange and commends Adriana for her “serenidad, su sangre fría, su moderación” (51). Yet, in spite of her education, her calm resolution, and her abilities as a physician, Adriana remains a “mujer de corazón,” a sentimental to her long-time acquaintance Magda, and “una mujer diferente, una mujer nueva [...] tan noble... tan digna... tan mujer...!” (47).

Nevertheless, as a woman of high stature, intelligence, and self-motivation, Adriana finds that she must confront a society rooted in patriarchal traditions where women do not commonly decide their own fate. While Adriana interviews each of the three potential suitors, she realizes that her “superior” socioeconomic position as a female causes certain reactions of disbelief, distrust, and outright cynicism. The first male to be interviewed for the position of Adriana’s husband is Mr. Sheprers, an English archeologist who has spent years studying Egyptian ruins and pyramids and “luego la psicología de los antiguos, después la de los modernos aplicada al amor de la mujer” (19). Mr. Sheprers’s intentions with Adriana are to include her as another one of his studies by making her number 165 in his catalog of women. Using broken Spanish to rationalize his objective, Mr. Sheprers makes clear to Adriana that she appeals to him precisely because of her unmarried status: “Necesito poder estudiar a una mujer de su tipo. Usted nunca antes casada...” (20). When Adriana politely responds that she does not desire to

become another one of Mr. Sheprers experiments, his response—while not exactly *machista*—definitely indicates that Adriana stands apart as a confident woman: “¡Oh! yo no perder a usted de vista... ser un poco extraña mujer... rara... rara... Usted sabe lo que quiere” (20).

During the second interview, Juan Quesadas, a bakery owner with a provincial Spanish accent, shows visible signs of uneasiness when meeting Adriana expressly because of her social status and female gender. Juan Quesadas is noticeably proud of his bakery and decides to answer Adriana’s announcement in order to use the money to expand his store. However, he had not expected to encounter self-assured Adriana, and from the moment they first meet, “se detiene asombrado, ve a Adriana; ve a su derredor, se turba, no sabe qué hacer de sus manos. Empieza tartamudeando...” (21). In the end, Juan realizes that Adriana does not correspond to the type of woman he had anticipated meeting, and, after much praising of his pastries with descriptive gestures, he finally admits: “¡Oh!... perdone la señorita, ya iba muy lejos... y cuando Juanico Quesadas dice a caminá... pué a caminá; y si usted no me tira de la rienda... ¡pero... que digo!... usted no me tirará de ninguna rienda... usted no es lo que yo creía... (*con tono lastimero*)” (22). Adriana simply responds with an understanding tone, never portraying herself as haughty or condescending to the males she encounters: “Pues señor... Siento no poder ser su ideal” (22). Instead, Adriana offers to invest money in Juan’s bakery, and he leaves the interview content with the outcome—and himself.

It is during the third interview when Adriana finally meets Alfredo Noriega, the man she chooses to marry in order to realize her plan to have children. From the onset of the interview, Alfredo is not only sarcastic with Adriana for her proposition to buy a husband, but he also feels bitter, humiliated, and degraded for having agreed to meet with her: “Sólo el tratar este asunto me rebela. Resulta humillante...” (25). He refers to himself as “un canalla o un desesperado” (24) and “un artículo bastante caro” (26), a common gigolo who is obliged to accept Adriana’s money in order to save his family from financial ruin.⁷ Even though Adriana never portrays herself as “masculine,” her position of superiority—in this case, financial security and the final decision on which male to marry—implies an imbalance in traditional gender hierarchies where the male customarily handles the money and makes the decisions. Thus, their matrimony, from the beginning, is structured on traditional gender hierarchies that have been unbalanced, and it is this initial contact which sets the stage for the rest of the play, given that the distrust, humiliation, and unmitigated pride (of both Adriana and Alfredo) lead to

miscommunication and an unconsummated marriage. Representative of a mere business negotiation, their life together becomes a farce where Alfredo plays the part of the content husband who arrives from the countryside every once in a while to accompany his wife on outings while Adriana performs the role of the satisfied wife who continues to see patients in her clinic.

In the end, Adriana and Alfredo realize they have fallen in love with each other, and their farcical marriage ends optimistically due to the intervention of the Tercer Personaje. Adriana will become a mother and fill the void that has plagued her life, and it appears that she will continue her practice as a physician; she, in effect, performs a positive image of “la chica moderna,” the new modern woman. In “Papel de la mujer en la obra teatral de seis escritoras mexicanas,” Ruth S. Lamb concludes that “la obra es optimista en que se logran finalmente el amor y la comunicación entre la mujer y el hombre, y la mujer no pierde su nueva estatura social” (443). Although Adriana’s plan required a man in order to be realized, it is important to note that she does not relinquish her role as working woman but instead finds a male partner who accepts Adriana’s status as a progressive female. The female protagonist in Sada’s *El tercer personaje*, then, learns to accommodate motherhood, love, and her profession without sacrificing her female gender or identity.

In the next play to be analyzed, *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán* (1938), Magdalena Mondragón captures the dilemma of professional, educated women in post-revolutionary Mexico who are married but disinclined to fulfill the anticipated outcome of marriage: children. After thirty years of working as a journalist, which eventually led to a productive career as the first female editor of the periodical *La Prensa Gráfica* in Mexico City, Mondragón eventually turned her interests to narration and theatre (Farnsworth 33). *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán* was Mondragón’s first play, and it received commercial success both on stage and later in the film industry when it was turned into a movie.⁸ Considered “la mejor obra teatral del año de 1938” (Galván Romani 79), the work was first staged by the Compañía de Blanca Erbeja at the Teatro Ideal where it received high acclaim for its “aciertos de técnica en varios pasajes y en las argucias del diálogo” and “la eficacia de buscar la belleza en el conflicto sentimental de seres aparentemente sin sensibilidad” (Introduction to *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán* 5-7).

During the play, audiences are introduced to another female doctor, Eloísa Velarde, an internationally recognized surgeon who recently received an invitation as “enviada especial por México al Congreso Médico que se celebrará en París” (25). Eloísa and her husband, Eduardo, agreed before they

married that neither was interested in starting a family, but Eloísa later confesses to her acquaintance—another female doctor, Garza—that she believes she is losing Eduardo, the man she truly loves, because she never adopted the role of motherhood. Eduardo, meanwhile, feels that he represents for Eloísa a “marido decorativo” alongside her promising career (45). Even though Eloísa does not want to abandon her profession in order to start a family, she does consider the possibility of having a child and becoming a housewife in order to satisfy her husband. Unlike Adriana in *El tercer personaje*, Eloísa feels that she would have to choose between motherhood and her profession as a surgeon. Yet, by the time she realizes her true sentiments for Eduardo, it is too late because Eduardo has been romantically involved with a young, passionate woman named Elvira who is expecting his child. Knowing full well that she will not be able to provide Eduardo with the family and passion he desperately desires, Eloísa sacrifices her feelings and tells Eduardo to go live a fulfilled life with Elvira, and the play ends with Eloísa clearly upset about losing her spouse but preparing for her trip to Paris anyway.

In *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán*, as the title suggests, the image of masculinized females is expressed in terms of Eva from Genesis who takes on the prototypical male role of Adán. Eva is not referenced in this play as “a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and survival” as in Mondragón’s 1946 production of *El mundo perdido* (Farnsworth 39) nor is she portrayed as a traitor to her people, as “La Eva mexicana” (Paz 95). Instead, she represents traditional motherhood where females are sanctified in the private space of the home as caretakers of the family. Gender roles appear bifurcated and clearly delimited in this play: females who wish to remain feminine are to follow the example of Eva because “la parte vital de las mujeres son los niños” (13) while “el macho [trae] a su casa el alimento” (31). In the following conversation between Eloísa and her patient Rosa, who has decided to leave her profession as a lawyer once she is married, Mondragón skillfully addresses a gender discourse where male and female roles appear to be “naturally” determined:

ROSA. [...] ¿Te imaginas tú a una pareja viviendo bajo el mismo techo, con profesiones idénticas?

ELOÍSA. ¿Por qué no? Muchos viven así.

ROSA. Pero a la larga son infelices. ¡Imagínate si llego a hacer más clientela que mi marido! Y si no tengo clientela, él me dirá: Hijita, ya ves que como abogada no sirves; córtate la coleta y dedícate a las labores propias de tu sexo. Mira, tú, Eloísa, yo creo que en cada

mujer que es una lumbrera en el arte o en la ciencia, hay una pobre infeliz que no pudo ser mujer. Claro, esto tiene excepciones.

ELOÍSA. Tal vez...

ROSA. Muchas mujeres en el mundo andan equivocadas. Créeme, cuando Eva quiere volverse Adán... ¡todo anda de cabeza!

ELOÍSA. ¿Eva convertida en Adán?

ROSA. ¿Y qué otra cosa sois tú, la doctora Garza, la escritora Cañedo, la abogada Gutiérrez? Muchas de ellas nunca encontraron pareja. Podemos lograr tanto sonriendo.

ELOÍSA. No me gustaría dominar de esa manera. (30)

In this scene, Rosa first explains that she will not be able to continue her profession as a lawyer after she marries since her husband is dedicated to the same profession and it would mean having to compete with him for clientele. In the end, she would be criticized for having more clients than him and equally criticized for not having enough. Her remarks suggest that men are not prepared to accept women professionals as their equals, particularly when the relationship involves a husband and wife. The husband is expected to have greater success at work while the wife is expected to dedicate herself to “las labores propias de [su] sexo.” Further, Rosa proposes in this scene that professional women, including doctors, writers, and lawyers, are females who were never able to find a male partner and, as a result, took on the masculine role of Adán. In this exchange between Eloísa and Rosa it appears that women who dedicate their lives to their work and never marry or, as in the case of Eloísa, marry but never have children, are likened to Eva converted into Adán. Eloísa’s final cheeky remark, “No me gustaría dominar de esa manera,” summarizes her personal expectations to succeed as a surgeon and not as a decorated housewife.

In another scene in the play, the act of converting from Eva into Adán is expressed in terms of both a premised natural order and an inherent performance of gender roles. When Eduardo’s acquaintance, a certain *donjuan* character referred to as Rodríguez, meets doctora Garza, a single professional woman who is also dedicated to her career, Rodríguez suggests to doctora Garza that by marrying him and changing her masculinized appearance—her “armadura de Juana de Arco”—she could return to “normalidad” and recover her “femineidad” (41). At one point during the scene, Rodríguez quickly removes doctora Garza’s glasses and loosens her curly hair so that it falls around her face (42). Doctora Garza promptly defends her position and, disgusted by Rodríguez’s suggestions, pulls her hair back and grabs her

doctor's bag with dignity. Aware that doctora Garza is not going to accept his offer, Rodríguez replies with, "¿Y qué es lo que quiere que haga con una mujer que se olvida de su sexo y se ha convertido en el Peñón de Gibraltar?" (43). As suggested by this scene, femininity is a natural order involving a certain performance. As a female, doctora Garza is expected to take on the role of wife/mother by marrying a male; yet this act of conformity is not sufficient, given that she must also be willing to *perform* her gender by dressing appropriately "feminine." For Eduardo, women who work outside the home affect both an innate gender order and a feminine performance: "Es que cuando las mujeres quieren hacernos la competencia ya no se conforman con trabajar como lo pudiéramos hacer nosotros, sino que casi adoptan también nuestro traje" (42).

Of all the male characters present in this play, Eduardo seems to question most the performance—and acceptance—of traditional, bifurcated gender roles. Eduardo struggles throughout the play to understand the progressive role of this wife and the changing role of women in Mexican society. In the first scene of the play, Eduardo refers to this modern woman as "la mujer de hoy" who does not hesitate in her actions: "camina con paso rápido que ha perdido toda timidez; lucha con el hombre por alcanzar el camión" (13). Fully aware that his wife has achieved international success as a surgeon, Eduardo remains unassuming and never appears to criticize Eloísa for her accomplishments. At one point, he modestly admits that his quiet reserve around Eloísa is "porque no me siento capaz de seguirte" (45). Despite his struggle to understand Eloísa's progressive social position, Eduardo is unable to reconcile with her, and their marriage fails in the end. His solution to their marriage problems is to return to traditional standards and conforming gender roles: "deja tu trabajo, vuelve a mi lado, escapemos a todo lo que se interponga entre nosotros" (48-49). At this point in the play, however, Eloísa has already decided to let Eduardo start a new life with Elvira, who is expecting his child. She appears to blame herself for having forgotten a natural order when she states, "Que te ha hecho mucho mal; pero yo misma me lo he hecho. ¡Ah, Eduardo, qué caro pagamos las mujeres, qué caro paga Eva el querer ser Adán!" (49). Eduardo responds with a surprising answer, one that perhaps suggests that the blame lies not with changing gender roles but instead with a changing capitalist society: "los hombres que también han querido eso [la fama, la gloria, dinero] han sacrificado a los seres que viven junto a ellos. El fracaso no lo provoca el querer Eva volverse Adán, sino la ceguedad de la ambición" (50).

Mondragón's play is quite possibly cautioning audiences that a profession can take you away from life, family, love, and, in the case of Eloísa, her "natural" femininity. Yet, what does Eloísa's role reveal about professional women in early twentieth century Mexico? Working women are irremediably scripted as Adán despite their passion and a desire to remain "feminine," an ambiguous term itself yet one that does not necessarily imply "antifeminist." In order to be accepted as a professional female, Eloísa attempts to re-script feminine roles in society and redefine gender performances as non-absolute yet still markedly male/female. Throughout the play, Eloísa clearly remains feminine, as evidenced by the exchange with Eduardo's young lover where Eloísa becomes visibly upset when she hears of Eduardo's clandestine relation; yet even during this incident she finds herself unable to express her emotions, exclaiming "¡Si tan sólo, como cualquiera otra mujer, pudiera llorar! ¡Si pudiera llorar!" (38). Her performance does not conform to the standards for "cualquiera otra mujer," and, in the end, she appears to be marked as a failure at "femineidad," defined here by motherhood and emotional instability, but as a success in the medical field. The two disciplines of motherhood and professionalism are not reconciled in this play despite the fact that Eloísa remains passionate about her husband and committed to her career. Unlike her predecessor, then, Mondragón foresees a problematic relation between traditional female values and modern female roles in a changing Mexican society.

Four years following Mondragón's theatrical success with *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán*, María Luisa Ocampo debuted her version of an accomplished physician in *La virgen fuerte*. First staged in Tampico, Mexico in 1942 and then programmed for the Fábregas theatre in 1944, *La virgen fuerte* was a commercial success, receiving much commentary from the newspapers for its principal theme, euthanasia. In *María Luisa Ocampo: Mujer de teatro*, Socorro Merlín notes that the controversial theme of euthanasia in Ocampo's work stimulated discussions on a topic that had never been staged before in Mexico (101). After her successful theatrical production of *La virgen fuerte*, Ocampo wrote a screenplay based on the drama and continued to publish theatrical works as well as novels.⁹

The first act of Ocampo's *La virgen fuerte* stages a scene between a young female student named Luisa, who is struggling to become a doctor with what little economic support she receives from her aunt Lucinda, and Luisa's wealthy boyfriend, Pedro. Luisa and Pedro undoubtedly love each other, yet Pedro's parents disapprove of the relationship between the two

young lovers due to differences in social class. When Pedro receives notice that his parents are sending him to the United States for five years in order to complete a specialization, he invites Luisa to join him not as his wife, but as his girlfriend/lover. Luisa does not accept anything less than marriage, emphasizing that she may portray an image of an independent and “modernizing” woman, but she still believes in sexual confinement, the importance of marriage, and family honor, so she ends their relationship. In the second act, Luisa finds a prominent position in a local clinic where she is placed in charge of the women’s ward. When a young patient pregnant with her first child is admitted to Luisa’s clinic with life-threatening injuries from a car accident and Luisa witnesses the pain and suffering of the young woman, Luisa makes the decision to end the patient’s life with an overdose of morphine. The young pregnant woman, unbeknownst to Luisa, was Pedro’s wife and, upon discovering Luisa’s act of euthanasia, Pedro quickly becomes upset and blames Luisa for his wife’s death. Even though Luisa is eventually forgiven by Pedro and absolved of all blame, in the end she is invited to become the wife of Doctor Roviroso who offers Luisa his support and asks her to begin a new life with him elsewhere.

While the central theme to this play is the controversial topic of euthanasia, it is equally important to understand that Luisa’s femininity is directly tied to her act of compassion toward a severely injured and agonizing female patient. Throughout the play, Luisa’s femininity is explicitly questioned by her male companion workers and her aunt Lucinda. As an unmarried woman, Luisa is constantly reminded of her single status by her aunt Lucinda, and Luisa’s male co-workers accuse Luisa of overworking in order to avoid hidden sentiments and portray herself as “la virgen fuerte.” In a conversation with her aunt, Luisa comments on her status as a “doctora” who is no longer recognized as a woman: “ningún hombre se da cuenta de que yo existo como mujer. Para todos soy la señorita doctora, la que cura y trabaja” (33). The director of the clinic, Doctor Gámez, also accuses Luisa of ignoring her femininity by placing too much emphasis on her duties in the clinic. His remarks to Luisa echo similar dialogues from Sada and Mondragón’s earlier plays: “me duele que una joven como usted, que necesita vivir en una casa alegre, con pájaros, flores, niños que sean suyos... se agosten en estos lugares.... La juventud pasa y no quisiera verla soltera por toda la vida. La maternidad hace a la mujer completa” (37). Further, as the only female doctor working at the clinic, Luisa finds herself confronting sexist attitudes toward women despite her equal status as their co-worker. Doctor Fernández, an aggressive male

figure who attempts to “conquer” Luisa, accuses her of being a *rebelde* and an arrogant woman. Despite Luisa’s apparent dislike for him, Fernández still confirms that Luisa “... sucumbirá, porque yo soy el más fuerte” (40).

These comments scattered throughout the play hint at the possibility that Luisa has indeed accepted the role of a “masculinized” female who has conclusively dedicated her life to her profession in exchange for the prototypical—and apparently more feminine—role of motherhood; in effect, she is another example of Eva converted into Adán. It is, however, in the momentous decision to end the life of a suffering patient that Luisa’s femininity is reexamined as incompatible with her profession, suggesting that her gender essentially obstructs her ability to perform the rational duties of a doctor. Ocampo first introduces the topic of euthanasia early in the play, cleverly staging the idea as a question of ethics that cannot be disassociated from genuine emotions. After prescribing the double dose of morphine that will end the life of the suffering patient, Luisa appears visibly nervous, yet proudly explains to Rovirosa: “Hablarán de la ética profesional, pero yo sé que es una máscara que nos ponemos los médicos para ocultar nuestros verdaderos sentimientos” (55). It is important to note that at this point in the play, the act of euthanasia is presented as an ethical debate with no allusion to gender differences. Luisa clearly includes herself with all doctors, male and female alike, by stating “nos ponemos los médicos.”

Yet the reactions of the other doctors in the clinic later in the play suggest that such a controversial act of mercy is perhaps accountable to feminine characteristics inherent in women. For Fernández, Luisa’s decision was based on feminine emotions that overcame scientific reasoning. Her motivation, he explains, was “romanticismos de mujer,” given that “la doctora, como toda mujer, sobrepone sus emociones temperamentales al deber profesional” (60, 62). During his discussion with Rovirosa and the director, Fernández blatantly accuses Luisa of prescribing the overdose to Pedro’s wife “por rivalidad femenina” (64). In contrast, but perhaps due to his romantic interests in Luisa, Rovirosa defends Luisa’s actions by referring to himself as “su más ardiente defensor” (62). The contentious act of euthanasia then becomes a question of gender, and Luisa’s inability—or unwillingness—to perform according to the standards of a presumed patriarchal order becomes a means of justifying her actions and perhaps even accepting them.

By addressing the topic of euthanasia together with another experimental topic in post-revolutionary Mexico—changing feminine roles—Ocampo cleverly integrates femininity with professionalism. While it may

appear that Luisa is judged liable due to her female gender, in the end, her guilt is resolved and her professional status is reinstated. Indeed, when Luisa defends her own actions, she proposes that her femininity is precisely the key to understanding patient suffering. She explains:

Me movió la compasión ver su agonía desesperada; su miedo espantoso a morir... Entonces... viniendo de lo más profundo de mi corazón, sentí una rebelión indomable por todos los conceptos que se levantaban como barreras para impedirme una solución. Esa rebelión no era como usted piensa, doctor Fernández. Usted no puede comprenderla porque para ello es preciso penetrar en el alma de la mujer, saber que puede llegar a los más grandes crímenes por un sentimiento de caridad. ¿Hice bien? ¿Hice mal? No lo sé. Ninguno lo sabe tampoco.

Dios que fue testigo perdonará mi rebelión y juzgará mis actos. (65)

Luisa clearly defends her act of rebellion as an act of empathy that only a woman could comprehend. Her feminism is inscribed as a necessary element to perceptive understanding of patient suffering, and the act of euthanasia is rendered as a moral standard surmountable by a natural quality of compassion inherent in Luisa. Here, scientific reasoning collides with sentimentalism commonly associated with femininity, and Luisa distinctly advocates that, at times, it is necessary to rebel against standard and often apathetic scientific procedures.

Luisa's position as a professional female, then, appears to be advantageous in respect to patient understanding, and her status as a "chica moderna" is further confirmed by the closing dialogue of the play. Rather than continue her work as a "virgen fuerte," a woman who professes to be strong, who resists pain and suffering, and who is "al margen de los deseos y las tentaciones, la atracción del sexo..." (39), Doctor Roviroso proposes that the two of them begin a new practice together elsewhere. It appears that Luisa will be able to feel "débil y pequeña" and continue her practice with Doctor Roviroso by her side. To contemporary readers, Doctor Roviroso's proposal may seem patronizing by suggesting that Luisa needs his strength in order to overcome her feelings of loneliness and desperation. Ocampo recognizes, however, the elevated role of women professionals in such controversial acts as euthanasia and foregrounds the need to inscribe feminism as essential to Mexico's changing capitalist society. By rescuing aspects of femininity in Luisa, and by emphasizing female participation in the advancement of modern Mexico, Ocampo promotes "la chica moderna" as a positive representation of female power, ingenuity, and compassion.

All three plays, *El tercer personaje*, *Cuando Eva se vuelve Adán*, and *La virgen fuerte*, explore the progressive role of working women in Mexico's modernizing state following the Mexican Revolution. Departing from prototypical roles for women as mothers and family caretakers, Sada, Mondragón, and Ocampo offer instead a positive image of a modernizing female who is struggling to reinvent herself in changing economic times. The growing concern for women working outside the traditional space of the home is boldly examined by all three playwrights who cleverly suggest that reconciliation between femininity and working women can be achieved on varying levels. For Sada, the two disciplines of motherhood and professionalism achieve a succinct balance once the main characters learn to acknowledge their love for one another, and Mondragón's protagonist does eventually rediscover the passion for her husband, although it is too late and she is left alone with her promising career. In *La virgen fuerte*, Ocampo suggests that women have more to offer to Mexican society as professionals by artfully scripting for stage the controversial act of euthanasia together with feminist issues. To some readers, these three plays may appear to reinforce the importance of motherhood and femininity; however, it is important to remember that by maintaining certain feminine characteristics in their protagonists, these dramatists reduce the risk of alienating their audiences while foregrounding feminist issues on stage. By acknowledging the valuable participation of professional females in Mexico's growing capitalist economy and by confirming the femininity of their female protagonists, Sada, Mondragón, and Ocampo offer their audiences an emerging role of "la chica moderna" who is not a masculinized female but instead an empowered female figure capable of participating on an equal level with her male counterparts.

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Notes

¹ Jocelyn Olcott references "la chica moderna" as one of several new archetypes that emerged following women's participation in the Mexican Revolution. See *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, p. 17.

² Luisa Josefina Hernández also published a play with a professional female as the protagonist titled *Los frutos caídos* (1956). Hernández's theatrical production has not been included in my discussion since the play was written for a later audience and the main character, Celia, is not a doctor but instead an administrator for an insurance company. Furthermore, the play addresses distinct issues of female advancement in the 1950s in Mexico, including the topic of divorce.

³ See Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Sembradores: Ricardo Flores Magón y El Partido Liberal Mexicano: A Eulogy and Critique*, Monograph No. 5, "La Mujer," (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Center Publications, 1977), p. 112.

⁴ In addition to the leader of the PLM, there are two other central male figures worth mentioning who advocated for women's advancement in Mexico during this period: Governor Salvador Alvarado (1915-1918) of the state of Yucatán (the first state to grant women's suffrage in the early 1920s) and President Venustiano Carranza (1917-1920). Although accused of manipulating women's causes for his own political gains (Macías xiv), Governor Alvarado worked to improve working conditions for women and, in 1915, he signed a rather progressive law that protected women and children in the workplace by limiting working hours, setting minimum wages and health standards, and providing days off and accommodations for women with children. Under the presidency of Venustiano Carranza, divorce was legalized and, in 1917, he issued the Law of Family Relations which guaranteed a legal voice to married women, including equal guardianship and child custody rights and paternity suits against fathers with illegitimate children.

⁵ See Frank Dauster, "Raising the Curtain: Great Ladies of the Theater;" Kirsten F. Nigro, "Theatre, Women, and Mexican Society: A Few Exemplary Cases;" John B. Nomland, *Teatro Mexicano Contemporáneo 1900-1950*; and Marcela Del Río, "Especificidad y reconocimiento del discurso dramático femenino en el teatro latinoamericano."

⁶ For additional biographical information, see the introduction to *El tercer personaje* in the 1950 publication by the Sociedad General de Autores de México. A complete list of Sada's literary works can be found in the *Dictionary of Mexican Literature*, p. 613.

⁷ Audiences later learn that Alfredo accepted Adriana's proposal in order to pay for his younger sister's medical treatments. Unbeknownst to Adriana until the final act of the play, Alfredo's sister is her patient, and when the family relation is finally revealed, Adriana appears confused, overwhelmed by her emotions, but genuinely pleased; her money, in effect, saved the life of her young patient.

⁸ For an extensive list of Magdalena Mondragón's publications, see May Summer Farnsworth's "La Eva Mexicana": Feminism in Post-Revolutionary Mexican Theatre," p. 43-44.

⁹ For a complete list of Ocampo's publications, see Merlin's *María Luisa Ocampo: Mujer de teatro*, p. 137-38.

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