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SEX, VIOLENCE AND POLITICS: EROTICISM IN THE WORK OF CRISTINA PERI ROSSI

by

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ABSTRACT

Cristina Peri Rossi (Uruguay, 1941) highly privileges sexual and erotic themes in her writing. Although literary critics have tended to eschew this facet of the author's work in favor of her irreverent social critiques, this study proposes to show how Peri Rossi's erotic representations act both directly and indirectly to articulate such arguments. In this regard, my objectives are twofold: First, I examine how Peri Rossi inscribes her erotic writing into a male-dominated tradition of erotic literature. To this end, I discuss her revision of canonical works which govern/reflect social norms of gender and sexuality, particularly traditional psychoanalytical theory and classic mythology. I then explore how the author's erotic representations relate to the various social concerns she addresses in her writing, specifically issues of sex/gender, sexuality and authoritarian government. Regarding sex/gender, I focus on Peri Rossi's deconstruction of the binary engendering system, resulting in the possibility of change in and/or ambiguity of both sex and sexuality; the author's literary transgressions of social gender roles are also considered. With respect to sexuality, I discuss how Peri Rossi challenges social norms of sexuality through representations

of homosexuality, children's sexuality and incest. Finally, I address Peri Rossi's allegorical indictment of military abuses though sexual and/or erotic depictions. In each of these cases, Peri Rossi transforms eroticism, a traditionally private matter, into a public vehicle capable of opposing and subverting social oppression.

Chapter One

Peri Rossi's Socio-Historic and Literary Context

1.1 Socio-historic Background

Throughout the 60s and early 70s, until her exile to Spain in 1972, the Uruguayan writer Cristina Peri Rossi won several national prizes and widespread recognition by literary critics.[1] This acclaim focused primarily on her innovative --and frighteningly accurate--[2] allegorical rendering of Uruguay's political instability and incipient violence. Her works denounce both the decadent democratic government in Uruguay and the repressive military regime that succeeded it in 1973.[3] Because political protest plays such an important role in Peri Rossi's work, it will be helpful to review briefly the major events involved in Uruguay's transition from a democratic government to a

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[1] Los museos abandonados was awarded Arca Editorial's "Premio de los Jóvenes in 1968; El libro de mis primos won the Biblioteca de Marcha's prize for narrative in 1969.

[2] The collection of short stories, Indicios pánicos, is credited with predicting future events, such as the political scourges and human rights violations which began in earnest in 1973.

[3] See Hugo Achugar, "Primeros apuntes," Mario Benedetti, "Vino nuevo" y Ángel Rama, La ciudad letrada y La generación crítica.

military state.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Uruguayan government has been characteristically party-centered, with two major parties, the "Colorados" and the "Blancos," deciding all major issues of national affairs. By 1971, however, instability threatened this bipartisan system. The corruption and inefficiency of the entire bureaucracy, along with economic crisis and growing pressures from the lower class, divided the two traditional parties into what Carlos Andrés Luján terms "two-and-a-half parties" as dissenting factions separated from the major parties amid mounting leftist support (21).

This governmental instability was further aggravated by what political scientist Edy Kaufman terms a "power vacuum" (22). Juan María Bordaberry, who was president at the time of the coup, proved to be a weak leader; he ceded easily to military pressures, affording top officers substantial political power in exchange for their support of his presidency. Ironically, the leftist guerrilla organization Movimiento Nacional de Liberación, known as the Tupamaros, afforded military leaders an excuse to intervene into matters of the State; their main justification for seizing control was to eliminate the Tupamaros, which they claimed had permeated the University and other institutions.

Once the military appropriated decision-making

responsibilities, it consolidated its power by defining the government as a "civil military regime"; that is, military officials effectively ruled the country, yet they retained the president as a figurehead in order to gain a wider base of support. However, these officials lacked a coherent, long-range plan as to the management of national (and international) affairs. Instead, they concentrated on immediate "purification" goals, which entailed the elimination of governmental corruption and leftist subversion. They classified all Uruguayan citizens as A, B, or C with regard to the "threat" they posed to the country and systematically outlawed all groups with leftist affiliations, attacking labor unions, the university, and the press. Violators were judged by a flagrantly repressive military penal code. Further, the secret police systematically detained and tortured overwhelming numbers of prisoners without trial --even years after the government claimed to have eradicated all subversion. In 1975, Amnesty International documented that one in every five hundred Uruguayans was imprisoned, one in every fifty had been interrogated, and one in every five was living in exile (Kaufman 29).

Eventually, the military dictatorship brought about its own downfall. Foreign outrage over human rights abuses, the failure of its economic program, the erosion of its base of

support, military infighting, and the lack of effective leadership all contributed to the regime's loss of authority. In 1980, a plebiscite defeated the regime's proposed constitution, thus revealing the extent of its unpopularity. As a result, the democratic system of government was gradually reinstated; by 1985 the military rulers had been completely removed.

1.2 Critical Reactions

These political events inform much of Cristina Peri Rossi's writing. In fact, responding to the author's virulent literary attacks against fascism, critics initially focused primarily on political aspects of her work. After Peri Rossi fled to Spain to avoid persecution, however, her writing began to address a broader range of concerns. Correspondingly, critics began to call attention to the author's denunciation of social, as well as political oppression, most notably regarding women. These feminist investigations renewed critical interest in Peri Rossi as a writer and paved the way for a wide variety of studies, which have addressed most of the author's major concerns. However, they have consistently excluded a large and very central aspect of her work: her extensive aesthetic

exploration of eroticism.[4] As Felicia Cruz has effectively demonstrated in her dissertation "Blurring Differences: Cristina Peri Rossi's La nave de los locos," critics have tended either to ignore, diminish or neutralize the erotic themes in Peri Rossi's works (53).

The critical reaction to Evohé (1971), a collection of erotic poetry, represents an extreme example of this negative response. In an interview with John Deredita, Peri Rossi describes Evohé, her first wholly erotic work,[5] as "un pequeño escándalo mal digerido, que molestó a mucha gente e hizo sentir incómodas a otras personas" (Deredita, 136). This response is surprising for two reasons: first, because Uruguay has a long and distinguished tradition of women authors who write erotic poetry (including Delmira Agustini and Juana de Ibarbourou) and second, because all of Peri Rossi's previously published works of narrative[6], which critics universally lauded, incorporate emphatically erotic allusions, descriptions and actions.

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[4]One important exception is Hugo Verani, who has devoted considerable attention to Peri Rossi's erotic poetry. See especially, "La rebelión del cuerpo y del lenguaje."

[5]Los museos abandonados (1968) as well as El libro de mis primos (1969) contain many erotic descriptions; until very recently, however, they had been analyzed only in terms of their criticism of Uruguayan society.

[6]Viviendo (1963), Los museos abandonados (1968), El libro de mis primos (1969) and Indicios pánicos (1970).

One explanation for the negative critical reception of the author's erotic poetry is her already established reputation for works of political protest. The publication of Viviendo in 1963 and later Los museos abandonados in 1968, both of which won national prizes, paved the way to public acknowledgement such as that of Mario Benedetti, who characterizes Peri Rossi as "particularly representative of 'los jóvenes-jóvenes,' a group of young Uruguayan writers dedicated to the denunciation of fascism and military oppression (63-8). Ironically, while Peri Rossi's acceptance into this acclaimed group initially launched her career as a writer, it also lead to the rejection of her non-"revolutionary" works. With regard to the negative reception of Evohé, Peri Rossi remarks: "Hasta puedo imaginar que alguien lo considerara como un mal menor, algo que se me podía tolerar en virtud de...(y aquí una lista de posibles méritos)" (136). These "possible virtues" evidently allude to the more accepted leftist militant stance of her previous works.

As Felicia Cruz points out, the detractors of Evohé did not sufficiently consider Peri Rossi's specificity as a woman and a lesbian as well as an anti-fascist intellectual (Cruz 91). This reduction of Peri Rossi's work into the strict parameters of militant leftist writing exacerbated the "problem" of her erotic expression in several ways.

First, political concerns tended to opaque all others in the tense climate of military witch hunts and guerrilla resistance that plagued Uruguay in the 60s and 70s. Consequently, some revolutionary peers tended to view the publication of erotic poetry as frivolous and irrelevant. This is an attitude shared by the comrades of the poet Federico (Pablo) in El libro de mis primos (1969):

> Pablo poetiza y eso no está bien. No está bien. Hemos discutido varias veces, con la dirección, acerca de sus características... 'No nos hará daño' dice Rafael, pero yo no pienso lo mismo. Creo que puede perturbarnos, con su manera de ver las cosas, o de no verlas... Tiene la tendencia a idealizar, a ver las cosas mal, a confundirse... Hay que ser radicales, en estas cosas. No necesitamos poetas, sino combatientes (150).

This comrade's opinion is manifestly ironic. Peri Rossi holds very explicit views regarding the importance of continued literary production, even under threat of imminent civil war; "perturbar" is precisely what she intends, and is also evidently what she feels is required. The author describes her own work as "provocativa, de ruptura" (Deredita 134) and "iconoclasta" (135). Taken in the context

of the homoerotic Evohé, these terms may be seen to apply not only to the denunciation of fascist oppression, but also to the socially-ingrained attitudes of her peers; thus, the author's defiance of social norms is as much a struggle against oppression as her fierce criticism of the fascist regime.

In addition to their objection to non-militant poetry, many revolutionaries also denied and rejected the inclusion of women's rights in their planned reforms. Peri Rossi observes:

> Desgraciadamente, no siempre el pensamiento revolucionario se ha dedicado a [la revolución sexual], y algunos de los que han querido hacerlo han sido rápidamente anatemizados o excluídos de los partidos donde militaban... a la medida que el asunto se soslaya, lo que se consigue es que muchas actitudes reaccionarias a nivel sexual perduren, ya que entonces el individuo revolucionario tenga o caiga en contradicciones agudas y perjudiciales. Y no me refiero sólo al problema de las "tendencias sexuales minoritarias", sino también al problema de las reivindicaciones femeninas, a la lucha contra el machismo institucionalizado, y también contra el

machismo solapado..." (136).

In other words, many revolutionaries sincerely wish to create a new and more just social order, yet practice sexism and perpetuate sexist systems, such as consecrating male authors ("poetas") yet patronizing female authors ("poetisas"). Consequently, although Evohé's positioning of woman as a sexual/erotic subject was also "revolutionary" and possibly complementary to leftist ideals of social equality, this text was ultimately rejected by readers and critics alike. According to Alicia Migdal, "some female Uruguayan authors" were accepted in revolutionary circles of intelligentsia only "como joven y como mujer amablemente marginada de la posibilidad de reclamar un lugar dentro de la hegemonía masculina" (217).

Moreover, the issue of "minority sexual tendencies" that Peri Rossi mentions in reference to homosexuality is, of course, another consideration that must be taken into account to explain the paucity of critical acclaim for the homo-erotic Evohé. It is sufficient to recall the attitude of Castro's Cuba towards homosexuals to demonstrate that the displacement of the traditional ruling class does not necessarily imply that all ideological aspects of society are reconsidered or restructured. David William Foster notes that in Cuba "whereas female prostitutes were

"redeemed" by medical treatment and incorporation into a productive society as defined by the new social programs, male prostitutes and anyone suspected of being homosexual were rounded up and sent to forced labor camps" (68): "revolutionaries" intending to abolish social injustice were blinded to historically-ingrained prejudices. Thus, since Peri Rossi's readers and critics tended to regard her as a "revolutionary writer," the hostility and/or disregard displayed toward her erotic texts might be attributed to these readers' focus on military power rather than literature, the inequality of women and women's issues in the leftist movement and the social predomination of homophobic attitudes.

This disregard for issues of gender and sexuality that pervade the majority of Peri Rossi's writing only began to change after the author's exile to Spain. The novel La nave de los locos, published in 1984, played a significant role in the critical re-appraisal of her work. La nave de los locos, which has been credited as her most important work to date,[7] skillfully incorporates the author's "iconoclastic" views with respect to all forms of oppression: gender-

[7]Critics such as Gabriela Mora, Lucía Guerra Cunningham and, most recently, Felicia Jane Cruz all concur in this judgement.

related, erotic and military.[8] The success of this novel (especially in feminist circles) has created an international audience for her work. Enthralled readers have begun to study her previous texts, a circumstance which has in turn provided a much richer interpretation of her opus. The recent focus on gender issues in Peri Rossi's literary production has naturally led to an increased, as well as more sympathetic, awareness of the role of eroticism in these texts.

1.3 A New Erotic Language

As with eroticism, language and its uses have long fascinated Cristina Peri Rossi. As she comments in a recent interview with Susan Camps,

> Uno de los amores de mi vida es mi amor por las palabras... Cuando era chica en mi diccionario la A venía muy dibujada, y dentro [había] una cantidad de objetos que empezaban con A. Yo creía que las palabras eran como cofres. Por ejemplo,

---

[8]Subsequent chapters will examine the relation of eroticism to each of these forms of oppression. Chapter three will focus on social oppression related to gender, chapter four will address social prohibitions of sexual expression and chapter five will examine the role of eroticism in Peri Rossi's depictions of military oppression.

> la A era un baúl donde estaban todas las cosas que empezaban con A, la B... Sigo leyendo los diccionarios cuando tengo ganas de sentir un placer puro... Yo disfruto con la lengua (47).

Moreover, Peri Rossi strongly associates the pleasure of language with the pleasure of erotic contact. In fact, her first collection of poetry, Evohé, is entirely dedicated to drawing an erotic connection between the word and the female body. To cite two short examples from this collection:

> Quedó, lisa y pronunciada como una muerta...
>
> La amé
> en un corro de palabras
> que en torno a ella
> hicieron cerco.[9]

In an interview with Psiche Hughes, Peri Rossi clarifies the aesthetic affinity she perceives between language and eroticism:

> Erotic action and the action of writing hold for me something in common which is the ludic element. The element of play. In the same way in which a

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[9]This edition of Evohé does not have page numbers.

> body has density, color, light and shape, so words have texture, density, and there are bodies which I love and words which I love in the same way in which there are bodies and words which repel me. Eroticism is very similar to the creating activity (271).

This association of word and play, of language and eroticism, reveals a subversive intent with regard to traditional concepts of language. Since language has historically been a male-controlled instrument that has facilitated the subjugation and negation of women, words themselves have been imbued with masculine-biased connotations and evaluations. As Peri Rossi contends, "No es casual...que las mujeres sean 'poetisas.' La declinación del género, en español, es abiertamente despectiva: los hombres son poetas, las mujeres son "poetisas", es decir, poetas menores" ("Literatura y mujer" 503).

Women writers who wish to challenge this established patriarchal vocabulary and the social institutions it supports find themselves obliged to employ a male-oriented language system which resists subversive attempts to express

feminine[10] meanings. As Amy Katz Kaminsky observes, the language we have inherited is permeated with gender-grounded significations:

> The polarized and rigid binary of male and female... has been used to ascribe meaning to such diverse cultural phenomena as imperialism and electrical wiring. The radical recovery of women's sexuality that lesbian feminism implies, then, is a profoundly political act (224).

Cristina Peri Rossi has discussed the importance of a new language, of new words and images to describe the female erotic experience, in an interview with John Deredita. The author insists upon the need to "liberate feminine homoerotic writing from its corset of imagery fashioned by men" (138) because male-oriented conventions of figurative erotic language are strongly associated with the social oppression of women: "La exaltación lírica de las bellezas femeninas es la contrapartida de su comercialización en la publicidad, en la pornografía, en la prostitución" (137).

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[10]Here and throughout the dissertation I employ the adjective "feminine" not in reference to the culturally-ascribed characteristics of woman, but rather to describe (however problematically) women in the collective. For a discussion of this matter, see Eliana Rivero, "Precisiones de lo femenino y lo femenista."

Peri Rossi proposes that lesbian poetry must surpass the language of Sapho, whose verbal expression designates the feminine erotic object without varying from masculine representations.

The author is confident that she has succeeded in this endeavor:

> Soy consciente de las dificultades de esa proposición, por toda la serie de sobreentendidos culturales y estéticos que nos gobiernan, y que hay que desbrozar, como un bosque. Aun buenas escritoras... pecan de "sáficas:" [crean] seres vistos a través de sus cuerpos, poco pensantes, tan ornamentales como las mayólicas o los gatos persas. Ya siento que doy otra nota, vinculada también con la estética tradicional, pero mucho más polémica y rebelde (138).

Peri Rossi's "rebellious and polemic" tone demythifies and deconsecrates traditional expressions of romantic love. The author regards the desublimation of conventional discourses of love as a particularly important goal for all contemporary women poets writing on female sexuality: "la franqueza de los versos, sus apelaciones sin reservas a la sexualidad, su desgarrado despojamiento, nos hablan de una

forma diferente de tratar el tema del amor, el tema del deseo" (Peri Rossi, "La poesía" 33). The author's subversive attitude toward conventional expressions of love is openly proclaimed in her own literary production as well, as may be seen in her poem "Condición de mujer" from the collection Otra vez eros (1994):

> Soy la advenediza
> la que llegó al banquete
> cuando los invitados comían
> los postres
>
> Se preguntaron
> quién osaba interrumpirlos
> de dónde era
> cómo me atrevía a emplear su lengua
>
> Si era hombre o mujer
> qué atributos poseía
> se preguntaron
> por mi estirpe
>
> "Vengo de un pasado ignoto --dije--
> de un futuro lejando todavía
> Pero en mis profecías hay verdad
> Elocuencia en mis palabras
> ¿Iba a ser la elocuencia
> atributo de los hombres?
>
> Hablo la lengua de los conquistadores,
> es verdad,
> aunque digo lo opuesto de lo que ellos dicen."
>
> Soy la advenediza
> la perturbadora
> la desordenadora de los sexos
> la transgresora
>
> Hablo la lengua de los conquistadores
> pero digo lo opuesto de lo que ellos dicen (10-11).

As a woman, and as a lesbian, Peri Rossi seeks to dismantle the old associations of words pertaining to a language system that acts to maintain patriarchal control. By associating the old male-centered vocabulary steeped in centuries of male-centered meanings and values with female sexuality, and especially by assigning these words an exclusively feminine (lesbian) erotic value, Peri Rossi effectively undermines traditional ways of perceiving/employing language as well as conventional denotations.

Thus, while the language she employs challenges existing norms governing erotic expression, it also inscribes an innovative, woman-centered, lesbian perspective. As we have seen, traditional expressions of "love" (generally associated with the courtship ritual and the establishment of a family) are displaced in favor of representations of erotic pleasure as an end in itself. Employing relentlessly explicit depictions of eroticism, no aspect of the lover's body is left unexplored. Peri Rossi describes her own view of the literary role of eroticism as follows:

> Creo en la poesía erótica, a veces muy directa, otras veces muy metafórica, pero con fuertes componentes carnales, conectada con el cuerpo y la

> sensibilidad femenina, llena de símbolos y que juega mucho con la sensualidad de la palabra (Ragazzoni 241).

Despite the author's increasingly direct and defiant celebration of lesbianism in her poetry, male protagonists and narrators continue to dominate her narrative production. However, this narrative strategy functions to subvert, rather than support patriarchal attitudes and expectations. Jean Franco explains this technique, which is common to several contemporary women authors:

> Estas escritoras [Rosario Ferré, Clarice Lispector y Cristina Peri Rossi] desenmascaran la hegemonía genérica que ubica al narrador masculino en la posición de autoridad y de productor. Las mujeres 'ventrílocuas' se instalan en la posición hegemónica desde la cual se ha pronunciado que la literatura es deicidio, la literatura es fuego, la literatura es revolución, la literatura es para cómplices, a fin de hacer evidente la jerarquía masculina/femenina (42).

Peri Rossi herself states both psychological and social reasons for her use of male narrators:

> La literatura es el terreno de la libertad; no hay normas que respetar. Querer ser hombre o querer ser mujer, o querer ser homosexual, siempre es neurótico. Y lo es porque crea una tensión entre la multiplicidad del ser y las exigencias sociales: no hay nada más ridículo que un hombre que se cree muy hombre: esto es siempre una simplificación, una reducción... Utilizo el feminino o el masculino según el efecto que me interese despertar en el lector, para provocarlo... (50).

Since Peri Rossi decides the gender of the narrator on the basis of the subject matter she wishes to address and/or the response she wishes to arouse in the reader, she is forced to take into account the cultural assumptions and preconceptions that Western readers bring/apply to the text:

> Estamos hablando de una cantidad enorme de sobreentendidos... que tiene el lector. Lo universal sigue siendo masculino, blanco, y europeo. De manera que, por ejemplo, piénsenlo en el caso de Kafka, cuando Gregorio Samsa despierta una mañana, tiene que ser un hombre porque una mujer se supone que no tiene esos problemas

[metafísicos] (Bergero 79).

As a result, her recent novel Solitario de amor presents a masculine narrator/protagonist who, in first person, details the agony of a doomed love affair. In this case, the author chose to employ a masculine narrator not because the novel explores metaphysical issues, but to avoid prejudicial misinterpretation on the part of readers:

> A mí me hubiera encantado que Solitario de amor fuera entre dos mujeres, me hubiera encantado, pero habría sido otra novela, no la que yo quería escribir. En ese caso, yo quería hacer el análisis para luego involucrar al lector y que luego no se quejara, "ay, claro, es que son enfermas, eso les pasa por ser lesbianas" (Bergero 79).

Ironically, the masculine narrator of Solitario de amor is the novelistic character with which Peri Rossi most strongly and personally identifies:

> Me siento completamente identificada con el personaje protagonista, a pesar de que es un hombre. Creo que en este caso es irrelevante.

> Que el protagonista sea una mujer o sea un hombre no cambia nada. Por lo tanto creo que es mi libro más autobiográfico, me siento totalmente reflejada en esa manera de sentir (Camps 40).

Despite the difficulties inherent in labeling the sexuality presented in Solitario de amor, this novel provides an excellent example of Peri Rossi's innovative approach to erotic description. As Gabriela Mora observes, "[Peri Rossi] delights in choosing terms for their unusual sounds and multiple connotations that add sensuality and ambiguity to the lyrical quality of her style" (441). Aside from extensive formal experimentation,[11] the author also dispels conventional definitions of the erotic, considering unexplored aspects of the body.

Peri Rossi discards the abstract euphemisms traditionally engaged to refer to eroticized areas or erogenous zones in favor of concrete and detailed, even scatologic descriptions of the body and the sexual act. The narrator of Solitario de amor openly names previously "unmentionable" body parts, intensely and explicitly detailing the objects of his love:

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[11]For an overview of Peri Rossi's formal experimentation, see Gabriela Mora, "El mito degradado de la familia en El libro de mis primos de Cristina Peri Rossi."

> Nazco y me despojo de eufemismos; no amo su cuerpo, estoy amando su hígado membranoso de imperceptible pálpito, la blanca esclerótica de sus ojos, el endometrio sangrante, el lóbulo agujereado, las estrías de las uñas, el pequeño y turbulento apéndice intestino... (16).

As may be seen in this passage, Solitario de amor takes a revolutionary approach to the traditional "love story." In its sexual treatment of body parts and substances normally lacking erotic connotations, this text rejects narrow conventions of what may be considered erotic, literally "opening up" the body to new meanings. Furthermore, despite the graphic detail of these descriptions, they never degenerate into vulgar, obscene, or pornographic language. The lover's body is always treated with sensitivity and respect, which, to a large degree, mitigates the distancing effect of the frank erotic descriptions.

1.4 Sexuality, Eroticism, Pornography

This unconventional combination of graphic erotic imagery and great emotional sensitivity expresses Peri Rossi's particular viewpoint regarding eroticism and related concerns. Since distinctions between sexuality, eroticism and pornography are subject to debate among critics, an overview of the author's understanding of these terms will clarify both the sexual/erotic depictions in her work and my references to them throughout this study. Peri Rossi's recent essay, Fantasías eróticas, draws a fundamental distinction between eroticism and sexuality:

> El erotismo es a la sexualidad lo que la gastronomía al hambre... el grito de terror al Lamento de amor... la sonrisa espontánea al Himno a la alegría de la Novena Sinfonía de Beethoven... De ahí que el erotismo sea una creación de la imaginación y del espíritu sobre el puro instinto, brutal, indeterminado y generalmente torpe (39).

The oppositional nature of these analogies implies a hierarchy of values. While eroticism reflects the "higher" (positive) facets of humanity such as imagination and spirit, sexuality is linked to "lower" (negative) animal

traits like instinct, crudeness, clumsiness and brutality. By extension, Peri Rossi equates brute sexuality with other traits deemed base, particularly violence and aggression.

In her writing, Peri Rossi's aesthetic association of sexuality with violence serves to denounce both social and political injustices. In the social realm, Peri Rossi illustrates the difference in power between men and women through cases of what she, echoing Adrienne Rich, refers to as "sexual slavery" (Deredita 137). To cite only one instance, the sixth chapter fragment of La nave de los locos graphically describes a cinematic production (Demon Seed) in which a phallic machine rapes Julie Christie while male spectators passively enjoy the spectacle.[12] Peri Rossi's sexual rendering of political violence is even more overt. In El libro de mis primos, the governmental attacks against the guerrilla are explicitly depicted in terms of rape and castration.[13]

Moreover, Peri Rossi links political repression to pornography. She feels that the repression of desire under Franco incited the extreme opposite response: an explosion of violent pornography:

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[12]See chapter four.

[13]See chapter five.

> Fíjense lo que ha pasado en España, alienación del deseo, represión muy fuerte durante el franquismo. Saltan a otra alienación, la pornografía. Pero, ¿por qué? Porque la represión invita a la respuesta radical contraria; es tan alienada la represión que había durante el franquismo como es alienada la pornografía brutal que hay... no está liberado el hombre que durante cuarenta años sólo hizo el amor con su esposa y cumplió todo el deber y un día se lanzó a la calle y viola a una mujer; es tan degenerada una cosa como la otra (Bergero 80).

Peri Rossi views both of these extremes as forms of alienation; pornography, like fascism, provides a cultural model for sexuality which subordinates individual desires. The example she cites simply inverts the relation of oppressor/oppressed created by fascist society. Thus, rather than providing for freedom of sexuality, pornography reproduces and intensifies social injustice toward women. Peri Rossi explains that:

> en sociedades donde todavía reina la esclavitud femenina, el hombre erotiza aquello que satisface sus deseos, exclusivamente... la comercialización

> de las bellezas femeninas en la publicidad, en la pornografía, en la prostitución (Peri Rossi, Desde la diáspora 137).

In marked contrast to this pejorative view of sexuality and pornography, Peri Rossi views eroticism in wholly positive terms. Although she identifies the distinction between sexuality and eroticism as one of culture, here she refers to "culture" not as society (which has perpetuated the sexual victimization of women), but as the triumph of civilization over instinct. In an interview with Adriana Bergero, she defines culture, in this sense, as "the spiritual and intellectual cultivation of artifice which distances itself from purely intuitive behavior" (Peri Rossi, Yo me percibo 82).

Despite regarding eroticism as a product of culture, Peri Rossi places great emphasis on individual, rather than collective erotic desires. Because no two individuals are attracted to precisely the same combination of attributes, Peri Rossi concords with George Bataille, who views eroticism in terms of individual psychology. Paraphrasing El erotismo, Peri Rossi states that:

> La actividad sexual es común a los hombres y a los animales, pero sólo aquéllos hicieron de la

> sexualidad una actividad erótica, es decir, una investigación o búsqueda psicológica del fin natural de la reproducción (Fantasías eróticas 50).

Peri Rossi's texts take this concept to the extreme by creating a radical division between socially programmed erotic behavior and individual perceptions of the erotic. Her characters are rarely attracted to socially eroticized objects (pornographic "playmates," models, beauty queens, etc.) or physical attributes (slenderness, youth).[14] Returning to the example of La nave de los locos, although the protagonist (Equis) originally found pleasure in Julie Christie's cinematic rape, he soon rejects this model of sexual victimization in favor of unconventional, yet tender erotic liaisons: first with an elderly, obese woman and later with an aggressive, bookish teenager.

Gabriela Mora, among other Latin American feminists, lauds Peri Rossi's departure from social expectations of eroticism, citing her as among the contemporary authors who have gone farthest towards disassociating women's sexuality from its traditional affiliation with motherhood:

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[14]See chapter three.

> sigue imperando el modelo de la sacrificada entre nuestras escritoras...quizás Albalucía Angel y Cristina Peri Rossi son las que van más lejos en desenmascarar a la madre burguesa posesiva y 'consumidora', y en explorar el placer erótico femenino" (Mora, "Un diálogo" 67).

Peri Rossi, in contrast, regards herself as forming part of a growing number of contemporary Latin American writers who employ this subversive approach to erotic representation:

> más que una poesía de **amor**, la poesía lírica de los jóvenes latinoamericanos es una poesía erótica, desmitificadora y sin tabúes...la franqueza de los versos, sus apelaciones sin reservas a la sexualidad, su desgarrado despojamiento, nos hablan de una forma diferente de tratar el tema del amor, el tema del deseo" (Peri Rossi, "La poesía de los jóvenes", 33).

Although all of Peri Rossi's publications contain some erotic elements, beginning with her first publication (Viviendo 1963), since Peri Rossi's exile to Spain, her texts have relentlessly explored different aspects of

eroticism. For example, the novel, Solitario de amor (1989), the collection of poetry, Babel Bárbara (1990), and the essay, Fantasías eróticas (1992) all focus exclusively on distinct aspects of erotic relationships. In Peri Rossi's own words:

> Cuando hay una preocupación tiene que ser abordada desde varios lados. Solitario de amor es un libro sobre la obsesión amorosa. Yo escribo Solitario de amor que es la parte trágica, la parte sentimental de ese tema, pero escribo paralelamente la parte lírica que es Babel Bárbara. Y, además, inconforme con haber intentado abordar este tema sólo por estos dos lugares escribo un ensayo, Fantasías eróticas, con lo cual yo me siento más contenta de haber abordado el tema del sexo y de la obsesión amorosa por tres lados..." (Bergero 69).

As we have seen, Peri Rossi uses erotic themes to challenge both literary and social norms. The author's erotic imagery radically breaks with traditional representations of 'woman' as erotic object. Her erotic poetry posits a woman as the erotic subject, inscribes a woman-centered perspective and replaces traditional

euphemistic imagery with frank, carnal descriptions. With regard to social issues, the author's erotic themes --both in poetry and prose-- address such concerns as the social oppression of women, social tabus regarding sexuality and military abuses. In subsequent chapters, we will examine how Peri Rossi uses eroticism and/or sexuality to speak out against these forms of oppression.

Chapter 2

Theoretical and Mythical Revisions

2.1 Revisionist Mythmaking

One way in which the author uses sexual imagery to oppose social oppression is by adapting and revising canonical models of gender and sexuality. Psychoanalytic theory and Greek mythology, in particular, are central to Peri Rossi's erotic representations. With regard to the former, Felicia Jane Cruz notes that as Peri Rossi's writing began to reflect "an ever greater concern with the erotic, fantasy and desire as the primary, predominant impulse in all humans," it also displayed an "incrementally greater proclivity toward psychoanalytic theories" (121). In other instances, Peri Rossi associates sexual desire with mythology; the narrator of "Las bañistas," for example, reflects upon the frequently tragic outcome of amorous relationships in the Greek myths.

While Peri Rossi incorporates such canonical works into her writing, she does not simply reproduce the ideas they contain, but rather critically revises the original text from a feminist, marxist perspective. This revisionist technique has a long and distinguished history. Spanish American women writers since the time of Sor Juana Inés de

la Cruz[15] have re-written and re-interpreted classic myths. More recently, Adrienne Rich has proposed that the process of mythical revision is essential to feminist inquiry:

> Re-vision --the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-- is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (35).

Alicia Suskin Ostriker, in Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America, refers to this textual strategy as revisionist mythmaking. Her understanding of the revision process places more emphasis on the creation (making), rather than the destruction (revision) of canonical works. Ostriker believes that the original text lends itself to multiple --and even

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[15]See Stephen M. Hart, "Is Women's Writing in Spanish America Gender-Specific?" with regard to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's El divino narciso and Gertrudis Gomez de Avellaneda's Saúl.

contradictory-- interpretations. Thus, she finds revisionist interpretations to be as valid as traditional ones:

> [C]anonized biblical texts, and the traditions built upon them invite transgressive as well as orthodox readings; the outrageous rewriting of biblical narrative by women poets, far from destroying sacred Scripture, are designed to revitalize it and make it sacred indeed to that half of the human population which has been degraded by it (31).

Although Ostriker refers principally to the Bible and to classic mythology, Peri Rossi extends this revisionist technique to apply to the now-classic psychological theories of Freud and Lacan as well.

2.2 Eroticism and Psychology: Freud

Peri Rossi's literary representation of sexuality consistently engages Freudian theory and symbolism. Even ostensibly non-erotic narrations use imagery such as houses, locks and other enclosed spaces in reference to the womb; conversely, phallic "keys" permit masculine access. Within

overtly erotic contexts, particularly those involving men, the influence of Freud's Oedipal theory becomes increasingly explicit. Nevertheless, Peri Rossi does not simply dramatize Freudian precepts, but adapts and critically revises them from a feminist perspective.

The author, strongly influenced by Luce Irigaray's interpretation of Freud, indicts the phallocentrism of Freud's explanation of both male and female development. For men, the Oedipal model presupposes a conflict between the young boy's sexual desire for his mother and the father's concomitent prohibition of this desire with the threat of castration. Peri Rossi, in contrast, transforms Freud's father-dominated triangle into a woman-centered relationship, privileging the womb over the penis as universal signifier. To cite just one example, the protagonist of the novel Solitario de amor regards Aida, his female sexual partner, as an idealized "mother"[16] to the extent that he feels marked jealousy and antipathy toward her son. Ironically, sexual intimacy with the mother-figure fails to fulfill him; his access to Aida's body merely mimes his true desire: re-entry into the womb.

Freud, in "The Uncanny," addresses this homesickness for the womb. As Jane Gallop explains, for Freud, the boy

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[16] See especially the novels Solitario de amor and La última noche de Dostoievski.

experiences this sentiment as the Oedipus Complex ebbs: "The fact that the mother is not phallic means that the mother as mother is lost forever, that the mother as womb, homeland, source and grounding for the subject is irretrievably past" (148). Peri Rossi, in contrast, views this nostalgia for the womb not as a stage in the renunciation of the mother, but a reaffirmation of her centrality; the author's male characters do not go on to "master their Oedipus complex" but remain fixed in their desire for the womb. Referring to Solitario de amor, the author explains:

> el protagonista de la novela no solamente está enamorado de una mujer que tiene un hijo, sino que en cierto modo lo que anhela no es ser ese hijo sino tener con ella una unión equivalente a la que ésta ha tenido con su hijo en su útero. O sea que el paraíso perdido del amor siempre es la relación interuterina (Camps 42).

This depiction of sexual desire radically alters Freudian precepts, for which ultimate meaning depends on the possession or lack of the penis. Since in this case the womb replaces the penis as the universal signifier, Peri Rossi's representation likewise displaces the father in

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This depiction of sexual desire radically alters Freudian precepts, for which ultimate meaning depends on the possession or lack of the penis. Since in this case the womb replaces the penis as the universal signifier, Peri Rossi's representation likewise displaces the father in

favor of the mother as the dominant figure. In fact, although the Oedipal model presupposes a conflict between father and son, Peri Rossi's interpretation of the son's desire makes the father's prohibition irrelevent; only the physical impossibility deters the protagonist from re-entering the womb. Correspondingly, the father figure is entirely absent from the narration.

With regard to feminine sexuality, Peri Rossi's revision of Freudian precepts is far more pervasive. A brief review of feminist critiques regarding the Freud's explanation of the engendering process will be useful to clarify Peri Rossi's own approach to feminine sexuality. Revisionists have found the Freudian model less than satisfactory for a variety of reasons. First of all, as several feminist critics[17] have pointed out, Freud's concepts are based on physiological factors rather than historical and cultural conditioning. Second, feminist critics have shown that using the penis (or its lack) as the central issue in the formation of gender identity is completely arbitrary. In the words of Carole Siegel,

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[17]Karen Horney and Clara Thompson's early studies, as well as the more recent work done by Juliet Mitchell and Elizabeth Grosz emphasize social context as the key both to female development and to Freudian insights. Also see Joel Kovel, "The Castration Complex Reconsidered."

> The idea of castration as a basis of identity formation, whether in Freudian reference to the penis or in Lacanian reference to the phallus, masculinizes power. Female power becomes...a contradiction in terms, realized only in the fantasy figure of the phallic mother (17).

Third, this treatment of the "phallic mother" as a "fantasy figure" has also been questioned. Freudian theory completely overlooks the presence of the female clitoris, defining the female as "absence" or "lack;" In reference to Freud's disregard for the female organ, Luce Irigaray designates it "the blind spot" (89). Some contemporary feminists reject Freud's postulation of "vaginal" eroticism, focusing on the clitoris as the female erotogenic organ: since the female also possesses an external genital organ, "penis envy" becomes irrelevant. Following this argument, there is no longer any reasonable basis for the female infants either to "abandon" the mother in favor of the father or to trade her pre-oedipal aggressive behavior for the masochistic attitude traditionally associated with motherhood.

Even more problematic for the consideration of works written by a lesbian author is the fact that Freudian theory does not account for homosexuality except as an "aberration"

to the heterosexual norm. As Adrienne Rich has argued, heterosexuality in Western society is compulsory, and transgressions are severely castigated (631). Amy Katz Kaminsky further concludes that: "Heterosexuality is so deeply ingrained that it is passed off not only as "natural" but as the *sole* natural expression of sexuality" (224). Thus, following the Freudian model, a homosexual person is one who has not "successfully" completed the process of integration into his/her "appropriate" gender identity. In Speculum of the Other Woman, Luce Irigaray contends that for Freud, female homosexuality "remain[s] obliterated, travestied-transvestized--and withdrawn from interpretation" (101). That is, since the Oedipal model cannot explain lesbianism except as deviance, Freudian theory simply ignores lesbians altogether.

Peri Rossi, like these theorists, questions and revises Freud's ideas pertaining to feminine sexuality. While Freud posits that the female child desires her father sexually, then later transfers this desire to her lovers, this idealized "father figure" is conspicuously absent from Peri Rossi's erotic writing. Despite the author's persistent exploration of her protagonists' oneiric and psychological motivations, even heterosexual women characters never ostensibly see their lover (either male or female) as a "father."

Peri Rossi also desublimates another central pivot of Freud's understanding of the female role: the mother-child relationship. For Freud, the mother receives masochistic gratification from child rearing. In the words of Susan Rubin Suleiman, "the girl must reject her own mother in favor of the father, whose child she longs to bear" (Risking 14). For Peri Rossi, in contrast, women's satisfaction and fulfillment comes exclusively from sexual pleasure. Correspondingly, the author's protagonists are rarely wives or mothers; they entirely lack the "maternal instinct" so long attributed to women.

Further, since women's pleasure is divorced from reproduction, homosexual pleasure becomes possible, as expressed in the author's erotic poetry. Peri Rossi undermines the Freudian definition of woman as "absence" (as lacking/desiring the father's sexual organ) by characterizing female protagonists not as "phallic mothers," but "phallic women" with their own self-sufficient sexuality. One example is the poetic voice in this lesbian poem from Evohé:

> "la palpo, la apalabro, la manto [sic], la calco, la pulso,/la digo, la encierro, la lamo, la toco con la yema de los/dedos,/ le tomo el peso, la mojo, la entibio entre las manos,/la acaricio, le

cuento cosas, la cerco, la acorralo, le clavo un alfiler, la lleno de espuma..." (14).

In this passage, the female subject is not limited to either the traditionally female (receptive) or male (phallic) role, but celebrates both possibilities as part of her own eroticism. She alternates images of penetration (with tongue, fingertips or pinpoint) with those of reception: enclosing, fencing and corralling her lover. In a further challenge to notions of feminine passivity/masochism, the poetic voice here usurps the power, dominance and aggression traditionally symbolized by the phallus. Rather than envying the father's or lover's penis, the (female) poetic voice proves capable of acts associated with either gender role; the penis is consequently unnecessary and undesired.

Peri Rossi also forthrightly addresses the issue of "penis envy" in the short story "El umbral" from Una pasión prohibida. Here a dreamless woman envies her husband's ability to access his own subconscious; she is certain that the insights into her own psychology that she could gain by dreaming would enrich her life. Although she repeatedly attempts to dream, she is unable to cross the imaginary threshold into her subconscious. Her husband, on the other hand, possesses the phallic "key" that permits him to open the door to his own dreams. When the couple attempts to

overcome the wife's problem by dreaming together, the woman falls behind and is ultimately abandoned by the husband who intends to cross the dream threshold alone. Before he can get through, however, his enraged wife stabs him in the back.

Although a first reading of this story would appear to corroborate the Freudian premise of "penis envy," a careful examination reveals that the woman does not perceive herself as "castrated," nor does she desire the husband's penis as an end in itself. Her ultimate goal is the self-knowledge that would come from access to her own subconscious; the phallic "key" is simply a means to this end. Because the man can dream while the woman cannot, the story appears to corroborate Freud's premise that the penis is the key to (masculine) psychology.

The female protagonist, who does not possess a penis, is therefore left out. Since Freud posits the analysis of dreams as perhaps the most important means of garnering insight into an individual's psyche, the psychological process of the dreamless wife remains unclear; further, as Freudian theory cannot adequately account for feminine development, there is little basis for such understanding. When faced with this problem, the protagonist turns the husband's "key" into a weapon to be used against him. In wielding the phallic knife, she temporarily assumes the

dominant, aggressive role usually associated with masculinity. In one sense, therefore, this appropriation of the phallus permits her to escape from the Freudian paradigm of female masochism. She successfully prevents her husband from crossing the dream threshold without her. However, the act of stabbing her husband, while it symbolically usurps the masculine role of phallic penetration, is ultimately more a form of venting her pent-up frustration than a solution to her problem. Since she does not desire (or envy) the phallus itself, but rather the self-knowledge it allowed her husband to attain, her satisfaction in turning the masculine implement against its owner is necessarily short-lived. Even after appropriating the symbolic "penis," she cannot pass the dream threshold. Possession of the phallic "key" neither unlocks the mysteries of her own subconscious nor leads to fulfillment because psychoanalytical theory cannot convincingly explain the feminine subconscious. Consequently, this story ultimately suggests that the real "lack" is the absence of adequate theoretical explanations of female psychology, rather than the absence of the penis. In summary, Freudian theory informs many of Peri Rossi's literary representations. However, the author does not simply transplant Freudian theory into a literary context, but instead re-interprets and re-writes this model for the

acquisition of gender identity. In this way, Peri Rossi's literary rendering of the Oedipal model establishes an intertextual dialogue not only with Freudian theory but also with its many feminist revisions.

2.3 Eroticism and Psychology: Lacan

As with Freudian precepts, Peri Rossi's writing also enters into critical dialogue with Lacan's theory. In particular, she engages and revises his concept of the "mirror phase" of development. According to this theory, the pre-linguistic infant forms his 'ego,' a false construct which presupposes an unchanging core of identity, by identifying with his mirror image.

Peri Rossi, like Lacan, relates the mirror image to identity; however, she uses this identification not to create a stable self-image but to deconstruct it; her mirrors serve to highlight discrepancies between appearances and reality. The short story, "Los espejos de colores" from the collection Cosmoagonías, exemplifies this deceptive quality of mirror-image recognition. Here, a shrewd vendor plies special colored mirrors which reflect only that which the observer wishes to see. She usually has no trouble finding receptive clients because, paradoxically, the exorbitant price she demands for the mirrors makes it seem

impossible that she could be selling merely colored glass. Further, although the protagonist begins to doubt the allegedly "magic" qualities of his mirror and mentally berates the duplicity of the vendor, when he does encounter her again he expresses complete satisfaction with his purchase.

Upon gazing in the mirror, the protagonist, like the Lacanian child, identifies with an illusory, idealized image. However, because he is an adult, this self-recognition in fact inverts the psychological process that Lacan describes: the child ultimately exchanges the visually-inspired mirror-image identity for a linguistic identity implied by the appropriation of the pronoun "I." The protagonist, in contrast, digresses; he rejects a complex, changeable linguistic identity in favor of an stable, visible self-image.

In fact, throughout the story the protagonist consistently prefers tangible to abstract considerations. Curiously, he both values and justifies his purchase according to its price: as the significance of the mirror (for the protagonist, at least) resides in its alleged magical properties, rather than purely aesthetic considerations, the excessive price is the only tangible evidence of its worth. Moreover, the protagonist is only entirely convinced that the mirror reflects what he desires

in the presence of the saleswoman. Although he begins to doubt when he is alone, he is reassured when he once again comes into contact with the vendor; only her tangible presence is able to convince him of the aptness of his purchase. These physical and visible clues finally lead him to accept the mirror's idealized image as a reflection of his own desires, and therefore of his own identity.

Lacan's concept of specular identity is not, however, limited only to the reflection from a mirror. According to María Brigitta Clark, the Lacanian imaginary (because it is an image) identity constitutes and reinforces itself through mirroring in other people as well (67). Thus, the imaginary identity is particularly manifest in relationships in which the object is compared to a narcissistic self-image.

Peri Rossi adapts this idea of mirroring through interpersonal contact into a metaphor for lesbianism. Her collection Lingüística general, in particular, often represents the poetic voice and her lover as identical mirror images. This self-recognition in the lover's body is evident in the following excerpt from Lingüística general:

> Te amo como mi semejante
> mi igual mi parecida
> de esclava a esclava
> parejas en subversión
> al orden domesticado
> Te amo esta y otras noches
> con las señas de identidad

cambiadas
...
Hacemos el amor incestuosamente
escandalizando a los peces
y a los buenos ciudadanos de éste
y de todos los partidos (74).

In this context, the focus is not the formation of an individual identity, but rather the projection of this specularized identity onto the sexual partner. On a symbolic level, the mirror image becomes a metaphor for lesbianism, because, both being women, they share the same anatomical features. As Inmaculada Pertusa observes,

> La identidad en los poemas de Lingüística General surge cuando el poeta se ve a sí mismo y ve a otra mujer mirándole desde su reflejo. Es el momento en el que es consciente del propio yo por medio de la identificación con la otra persona (249).

Nevertheless, the lesbians' identification clearly surpass the superficial, visual boundaries imposed by a mirror; they also share the same position in society. Indeed, the poem proposes the lovers' common social standing as a central facet of their sameness: as "slaves" they are "coupled in subversion." Thus, the lesbian lovers identify with and "reflect" one other socially as well as physically:

their shared experiences as women and as lesbians create a common bond between them.

The lovers also reflect each other in an emotional sense. Peri Rossi emphasizes their closeness by labeling their lovemaking "incestuous."[18] While in a literal sense this term denotes sexual relations among close relatives, Peri Rossi here transforms it to metaphorically convey the lesbians' physical and emotional likeness. Moreover, the poetic voice's erotic attraction to her own reflection is unabashedly narcissistic. Although she constitutes her lover as a reflection of herself, the inverse is never true: she herself is not a reflection of her lover. Because she projects her own self-image onto her lover, the poetic voice's allusion to incest may also refer to the symbolic consummation of an erotic union with herself.

While in the case of lesbian relationships, the mirror serves as a metaphor of unity between lovers, Peri Rossi most commonly adapts the Lacanian mirror to serve not as an instrument of reflection, but as a means of distortion. In accordance with Lacan's model of the Imaginary, the author posits the unified image projected by the mirror as a false representation of a necessarily fragmented identity.

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[18]Peri Rossi commonly uses the word "incest" to symbolize emotional and intellectual affinity in the context of an intimate relationship. For further discussion of this point, see the analysis of El libro de mis primos in chapter five.

However, Peri Rossi takes this division between the perceived self and the actual fragmentary identity one step further. The colored glass, mirror fragments, and circus mirrors[19] which appear in various texts provide the means for a further distortion of identity, since the projected image of a skewed mirror does not correspond even to the protagonist's perceived image of him/herself.

This distortion of self-image may be seen in the story "el fabricante de espejos" from the collection Una pasión prohibida, in which a talented artisan constructs mirrors which conform to any specification of size, shape or function. Besides the more usual round, oval and triangular mirrors, he has also fashioned them in the shape of a wave, a window, the sun, a lake and even a human face. As opposed to the idealizing mirrors in "Los espejos de colores," such deforming speculums destroy narcissistic illusions concerning physical appearance and identity. As Elia Kantaris observes,

> Peri Rossi confronts this concept [of mirror imagery], not with the

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[19]Some of the works in which deforming mirrors appear are: "Los extraños objetos voladores" and "Los juegos" from Los museos abandonados, "La historia del príncipe Igor" from La tarde del dinosaurio, "Los espejos de colores" from Cosmoagonías and "El fabricante de espejos" from Una pasión prohibida.

> inevitability of the symbolic order as portrayed by Lacan, but with the *possibility* of prising open a gap in the symbolic by opposing it to a new "imaginary." The mirror-maker... constructs ingenious mirrors which "play" with the images people expect to see of themselves... distorting, fragmenting or "equivocating" the codes through which these "self-representations" are transmitted (251).

While regular mirrors passively reproduce the object(s) before them, these irregular glasses actively influence or determine the reflected image to differing degrees. By confronting the observer with a fragmented or distorted reflection, these mirrors do not merely destroy the subject's unified self-image, but lead him/her to question the reliability/validity of all forms of visual representation, of all symbols.

This challenge to the symbolic mode is made explicit in the artisan's most disconcerting mirrors. There is a mirror for souls, a mirror which delays time, a mirror of dreams, a mirror of memory (made available only to children), a

sleepwalking mirror and a mirror of love, which superimposes two figures, feature by feature, into a single body. These mirrors do not reflect concrete objects but rather abstract considerations such as time, space, the subconscious and emotion; they mediate not physical appearance but the very fabric of reality.

By applying specular (mis)representation to areas beyond superficial appearance, these mirrors purport to make visible what before was intangible (time, space, memory, etc.). In doing so, they expose the ideological structures which form the bases of this reality. Rather than eternally reflecting the symbols of a patriarchal order, these introspective mirrors open to question the cultural constructions which govern what we perceive as "real" and "true." Such mirrors --like Alice's looking glass[20]-- seem designed more to promote reflection on the part of observers than to reproduce the objects within their scope. As Kathleen Lignell observes: [Peri Rossi's] mirror is the means to transformation, allowing as it does a space in which to break with norms and create another time and space (24).

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[20]Lewis Carroll has exerted a profound influence on Cristina Peri Rossi's writing. One case in point is the Uruguayan author's poem entitled, "Aplicaciones de la lógica de Lewis Carroll," lucidly analyzed by Kathleen Lignell in "The Mirror as Metaphor in Peri Rossi's Poem 'Applications of Lewis Carroll's Logic.'"

This premise is borne out by the artisan's current and greatest project: the construction of a wall of mercury which will surround the city. Focusing once again on interior rather than superficial considerations, this mirror will overlook facades, reflecting instead the insides of every house in minute detail. Like the wavy mirrors that produced a physically distorted reflection, this mirror is also expected to have the effect of destroying the observer's complacent illusions-- in this case regarding his/her social conscience. The builder hopes that, seeing the negative aspects of the city constantly reflected back at them, the inhabitants will take steps to improve their conditions.

Moreover, the most important purpose of the mercury wall, as revealed in the last line of the story, is to confront each citizen with "an enormous, incessant spectacle of multiplicity and fragmentation" (131). This specular image of fragmentation conclusively shatters the coherent identity of the Lacanian mirror. According to Kantaris, "instead of reflecting and reinforcing the ego as does Lacan's mirror, it relativizes it by portraying it as one element in a simultaneous... totality" (251).

However, this mirror questions more than the observer's established notion of identity; it also unravels ideological tenets. Continuing the project begun with mirrors which

reflected abstract components of social reality, the mercury wall's fragmented, chaotic reflection of the surrounding world relentlessly dismantles patriarchal concepts of world order, power hierarchies and systems of exclusion. Peri Rossi's use of the mirror to decenter such institutions is particularly significant in the light of her opposition to authoritarianism; throughout her work she links "the monopoly of power to the process of alienation --the way the construction of one groups's 'self-identity' appears to depend upon the denial and destruction of another's" (Kantaris 247). The wall of mercury consequently splinters the view of reality imposed by the military; at the same time, it also renders visible the perspective of the oppressed: while the wall forces inflated egos to view themselves as only one fragment among countless others, it also confers equal importance upon elements that may have been previously excluded. In this way, the artisan's "masterpiece" becomes a mirror of utopia which embraces social diversity and equality.

As may be seen in the preceding instances, Peri Rossi re-writes the Lacanian "mirror" stage theory both to construct and deconstruct notions of identity. On one hand, intensifying Lacan's postulation of the mirror as an idealizing agent, Peri Rossi transforms the mirror into a metaphor for lesbian sexual relations. Conversely, mirrors

become a means of distortion. Skewed mirrors, by garbling the objects they reproduce, serve to fragment the observer's visual identity, question the symbolic order and even to unravel the ideological premises of power hierarchies. These revisionist interpretations thus broaden Lacan's original formulations, addressing very different issues than those originally included or intended by the theorist.

2.4 Mythical Revisions

Like the now-classic psychoanalytical theories of Freud and Lacan, classic (European) mythology both reflects and strengthens the patriarchal ideological framework underlying Western social norms and beliefs. As Sarah Dening observes, classic myths establish role models for social behavior, particularly regarding issues of gender and sexuality: "Each society shapes its beliefs about what constitutes proper sexual behavior and what is taboo to fit its particular social, psychological and poltiical needs. All cultures have therefore evolved myths concerning reproduction and sexual behavior" (7). Alicia Suskin Ostriker adds that myths are "the sanctuaries of language where our meanings of 'male' and 'female' are stored" (4).

Peri Rossi's interpretation of Greek mythology consistently challenges the phallocentrism of these models.

Her textual allusions to the Greek myths are encoded as contestatory discourses designed to re-evaluate mythological ideals pertaining to gender and gender roles. In the words of Ana María Moix, Peri Rossi "revisa el anaquel mitológico y extrae Ariadnas y Eurídices, pero de inmediato aprieta los tornillos a los presupuestos míticos y al poner al día sus símbolos los hace rendir significados nuevos" (60).

Rather than adhering to the classical versions, the author uses the original myth merely as a point of departure to inscribe new meanings. Her texts incorporate relatively few elements pertaining to the original myth; a name is often the only direct link connecting Peri Rossi's representation with the original account. Apart from such mythical referents, the author's settings are invariably contemporary and seemingly unrelated to their mythological subtexts; nevertheless, the comparison implied by the mythical name challenges social norms both in myth and in contemporary society.

Peri Rossi's depiction of the mythical figure Ariadna, as seen in the stories comprising the collection Los museos abandonados (1968), is perhaps her most provocative revision of traditional Greek mythology. According to classical accounts, Ariadna provided her lover Theseus with a ball of yarn with which he was able to find his way out of the Cretian labyrinth after slaying the Minotaur. After fleeing

Crete, Theseus ultimately abandoned Ariadna on the island of Naxos. Classical accounts differ with regard to Ariadna's ultimate fate. Some say that she committed suicide in despair, while others maintain that Dionysus fell in love with her, married her, and gave her a golden crown which he placed among the stars. In either scenario, Ariadna is strongly associated with yarn or thread, and by extension with the domestic duties of the female gender role in Western tradition. She is also noted for her faithfulness to and collaboration with her lover, although Theseus did not return her fidelity.

In the short story "Los juegos," Ariadna and her lover appear not in a Cretian labyrinth, but within the artificially constructed maze of an abandoned museum. The narrative commences by describing her fascination with and translation of the old tomes residing in the Museum. Thus, Peri Rossi's mythical revision inverts the classical model of female behavior by associating Ariadna with words and intellectual creativity rather than yarn and domesticity. In fact, this story progressively subverts every aspect of the original accounts of Ariadna. While in these versions Ariadna is a passive character who aids her lover from behind the scenes, Peri Rossi's story shows her as the controlling partner in the protagonists' relationship. It is Ariadna who takes the initiative in most matters, while

her companion passively attempts to please her. She makes the key decision to abandon the translation of old histories in favor of more pleasurable pursuits; as a result, they invent a "hide-and-seek" game to appease their boredom. As the game begins, Ariadna casts herself in the role of huntress, while the narrator meekly hides: "Ariadna aceptó entusiasmada, y fue ella misma la que, desnuda, decidió perseguirme por los recónditos pasillos del museo oscuro" (85).

In direct contrast to her traditional role, it is she, rather than her male companion, who most successfully navigates the "labyrinth" of the museum. While he is ultimately unable to discover her hiding place, Ariadna is always able to find him easily. When she encounters his first place of refuge, Ariadna initiates a dramatic change in their relationship; her choice of "punishment" --allowed by the rules of the game-- takes the form of violent sexual possession. Again, this action demonstrates her decisive, even aggressive, demeanor.

Once again contrasting with the original myth, here it is Ariadna who abandons her lover. Tiring of the game, Ariadna hides herself for the last time; her lover, unable to discover her whereabouts, is left to fend for himself in the deserted museum. Confronted with the uselessness of his frantic search, he suddenly realizes that Ariadna has left

the building. In a final inversion of the mythical model, Theseus, rather than Ariadna, suffers an ambiguous, yet tragic, fate. While seeking his lover, he hears a mysterious sound, which --he assumes-- comes from Ariadna. While investigating, he carelessly topples a statue. This event initiates a chain reaction in which the entire museum crumbles, crushing him in the debris.

This story has often been analyzed with regard to its political implications. In this context, Saúl Sosnowski, among other critics, posits the decaying museum as a symbol of the decadent bourgeoisie in Uruguay (147). As such, the museum also represents the patriarchal ideals perpetuated by Western bourgeois society regarding the female gender role. It is this structure which Ariadna takes special delight in demolishing with her game. As we have seen, throughout the story she undermines the mythical Ariadna's traits (passivity, dependency and resignation) by her independent, assertive behavior. This inversion of the protagonist's mythical characteristics effects a subversion of the traditional model of the female gender role which is reinforced by her final act: she abandons her lover, evidently viewing him as a part of the structure she is leaving behind. By deserting both her lover and the physical confines of the museum, the protagonist symbolically abandons the constraints of another institution

as well --the patriarchal, bourgeois ideology.

Another figure which Peri Rossi employs to revise the mythical model of female behavior is Cassandra. According to Greek legend,[21] Cassandra, also known as Alexandra, was left overnight in the shrine of Apollo, along with her brother Helenus. During the night, serpents entwined the children and flicked their tongues in the youngsters' ears, enabling them to foresee future events. When Cassandra again spends the night in Apollo's temple as an adult, the god appears and attempts to seduce her. Cassandra's refusal provokes Apollo to punish her by causing her prophesies, although true, to be disbelieved. The most famous instance of her prophesies going unheeded occurs when she announces that the Trojan horse is full of soldiers. Only Laocoon believes her, and he is soon silenced, with disastrous results for the city of Troy.

Cassandra is the mythical figure which appears most frequently in Peri Rossi's writing. In the poem "El bautismo," from her collection Babel Bárbara, the author employs the image of Cassandra, along with that of the biblical tower of babel, as a poetical metaphor:

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[21]All summaries of Greek mythology used in this text are based on information presented in Robert E. Bell, Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary.

Yo te bautizo Babel entre todas las mujeres
Babel entre todas las ciudades
Babel de la diversidad
ambigua como los sexos
nostálgica del paraíso perdido
--útero materno--
centro del mundo
cordón umbilical
<<Poeta --grita Babel--
soy la ciega de las lenguas
la Casandra en la noche oscura de los
significantes.>>

As is the case with Cassandra, whose prophesies are eternally condemned to disbelief, the image of the tower of Babel, whose construction was halted when God imposed disparate languages upon the workers, evokes images of non-communication and incomprehension. Babel symbolizes the loss of a paradise, a utopia comprised of shared language and mutual understanding. Within the context of the poem, this linguistic paradise is associated with yet another lost paradise: that of the mother's womb. The image of the uterus, which is described as "the center of the world," is particularly appropriate given the importance of femininity to this poem. In fact, the women-centered perspective of this poem is made apparent from the first verse. Here the female poetic voice, by the act of baptizing, or naming the woman --particularly within the biblical context suggested by the name "Babel"-- usurps the masculine power that was originally given only to Adam. This subversive act

constitutes a revision of biblical gender roles.

In the last three verses of the poem, Babel, wresting the word from the poetic voice, simultaneously depicts herself as "blind" and compares herself to Cassandra, the visionary. This paradoxical metaphor becomes even more ironic when one considers that her "blindness" (referring to sight) is actually linguistic (referring to sounds). Furthermore, although Babel may perceive herself to be "blind" in the "dark night of signifiers," this image is in fact immediately challenged by the articulateness of her own direct expression. Thus the words of Babel, like those of Cassandra, are seen to make sense; their (mis)interpretation is left to others.

The poetic voice, for her part, embraces ambiguity. The third verse suggests that diversity is of more importance than a single "correct" answer; ambiguity is presented as eminently positive. As may be seen in the subsequent verse, the poetic voice associates ambiguity with sex as well as with linguistic considerations. This, again, is ironic; traditionally, sex distinctions have been perceived to be singularly unambiguous, to the extent that they are routinely attributed to genetics. Here the poetic voice, speaking for Peri Rossi[22], portrays sexual ambiguity

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[22]For a more detailed discussion of Cristina Peri Rossi's views on sex, gender and gender roles, see chapter three.

as natural; in so doing, she questions the accepted binary configuration of the sexes as male and female.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, Peri Rossi adapts and revises both psychoanalytic and mythological texts with respect to gender and sexuality. Regarding the Freudian Oedipal model, Peri Rossi displaces the penis as universal signifier while indicting the deficiencies in this theory's explanation of female development. The author likewise re-writes Lacan's "mirror stage" theory, using the mirror as a vehicle alternately to represent lesbian identity and to disintegrate established notions of social reality. Finally, Peri Rossi engages Greek mythology, revising the accounts of tragic heroines Ariadna and Cassandra to challenge conventional gender roles. In this way, Peri Rossi not only exposes the phallocentrism of classic texts which both determine and reflect social attitudes, but to a large extent subverts these premises, inscribing instead woman-centered representations of gender and sexuality.

Chapter Three

Considerations of Sex and Gender

3.1 Defining Sex and Gender

The theorization of "women's identity" has always been problematic. Even while feminists have rejected male-created myths of "woman," many have unquestioningly embraced the term "women" as a basis of commonality. Thus, Monique Wittig proposes that we must "thoroughly dissociate 'women,' the class within which we fight, and 'woman,' the myth" (Jones 364).[23] Although one may be a woman, however, one is necessarily much more as well; placing undo emphasis on womanhood diminishes the importance of other factors that contribute to the formation of identity, such as race, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation. Further, "women" cannot be proven to exist at all. As Judith Butler cautions, there is no identity common to women that somehow constitutes a stable subject for feminist theories:

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[23]Monique Wittig originally made this statement in her presentation "One is Not Born a Woman," given at the Second Sex Conference in September of 1979 at the City University of New York Graduate Center, New York, N.Y. It was later quoted by Ann Rosalind Jones in her essay, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'ecriture féminine*."

> Is there some commonality among "women" that preexists their oppression, or do "women" have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone? Is there a specificity to women's cultures that is independent of their subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures?...The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the "specificity" of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute "identity" and make the singular notion of identity a misnomer (4).[24]

The falsely unified subject "women" is further fragmented and problematized by the division between "sex" and "gender." This distinction was originally used to counter essentialist arguments, attributing biological characteristics to "sex" and defining the cultural interpretation of this sex as "gender." This formulation is problematic, however, because if gender is seen to

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[24]See also Sandra Harding, "The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory."

invariably mirror sex, the distinction between the two would fade:

> What sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to that construction? On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law...In such a case...gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation (Butler 8).

On the other hand, if the sex/gender distinction is "taken to its logical limit, [it] suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (Butler 6). Following this interpretation, even if the stability of the two sexes could be assumed, the *gender* one is assigned would not necessarily correspond to one's biological sex (i.e. a man could have a feminine gender or vice versa) or even that genders would be reduced to only two. Thus, one is able to find examples such as this excerpt from Mark Twain cited by Susan Gillman: "Hellfire Hotchkiss [the girl] is the only genuwyne male man

in this town and Thug Carpenter's [the boy] the only genuwyne female girl, if you leave out sex and just consider the business facts" (109).

Yet, even more pointedly, the assumption that sex is a biological, or pre-cultural, characteristic can also be called into question. As Butler argues:

> What is "sex" anyway? Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such "facts" for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or a genealogy that might expose the binary options as a variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (6-7).

If the designation of sex, like that of gender, is shown to be a social and linguistic construction, then rigid notions of sex/gender determinacy must be discarded; sex, like gender, may be seen as performance. Since actions are subject to individual will, this performative notion of sexuality "can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meaning" (Butler 33). One of these subversive possibilities is that of sexual ambiguity.

This ambiguity of sex and gender plays an important role in Cristina Peri Rossi's literary work. The indeterminate characterization of sex (and sexuality) appears in Peri Rossi's writing as early as 1976 in "Gámbito de reina," from the collection La tarde del dinosaurio. This short story effectively inverts the gender roles of Scherezada and the prince as presented in the Arabian Nights. Instead of a powerful prince beguiled by the story-telling talents of a condemned maiden into staying her execution, here it is Queen Alejandra who alternately threatens the life of a male captive and cajoles him to entertain her: "Cuéntame una historia, Vitruvio, y por una noche más verás las lentas y silenciosas ocas deslizarse por el lago y Cerón tañerá el laúd" (118). Since Vitruvio proves somewhat reluctant, the queen tries to tempt him with the offer of a sexual bribe. The servant she proffers, however, is of uncertain sex/gender.

This ambiguity stems from two conflicting perceptions regarding the servant's sex/gender identity. Since this character neither acts of its own accord nor speaks directly, its depiction is alternately controlled by Vitruvio and Alejandra. Vitruvio perceives the servant in the more traditional role of female-victim. When Alejandra attempts to seduce her own attendant --after the captive has already turned down the offer--, Vitruvio entreats the servant to resist the queen's sexual advances, telling her to "close her legs" (118). In choosing this specific means for the servant to resist queen Alejandra, Vitruvio specifically identifies the character as female.

Queen Alejandra, in contrast, deliberately obscures the sex/gender of the servant. From the first moment she offers her attendant to Vitruvio, she refers to him/her as: "la efeba niño, la niña efebo" (118). Interestingly, the servant's actions seem to support Alejandra's characterization of him/her more than that of Vitruvio. Despite Vitruvio's urging, she neither objects to nor makes any move to resist the queen's sexual advances. In refusing to "close her legs" to Alejandra, the servant refutes Vitruvio's perception of him/her as a victim of sexual assault. The resulting conflict between the captive's perception and the servant's actions question the reliability of Vitruvio's other observations --particularly

his presumption that the attendant is female.

Just as the servant's sex/gender remains undecided, his/her sexual orientation is ambiguous as well. By first offering the attendant to Vitruvio, then seducing the servant herself, queen Alejandra obscures his/her sexuality. This bisexual use of the servant suggests another important consideration: when sex/gender becomes indeterminate, so does sexuality. When there is no longer a standardized gender role to follow, neither is there a specific model of sexual orientation. As a result, not only gender, but also both hetero- and homosexuality are fused within the person of the androgyne.

3.2 Gender as Performance

As we have established, the performed gender role may be considered to constitute gender, rather than vice versa. When actions cease to indicate a specific sex/gender, traditional identity is lost; alteration or (ex)change of gender identity is possible according to the actor's desires. This performative definition of sex/gender is fundamental to Cristina Peri Rossi's textual presentation of sex, gender, and gender roles. The author consistently rejects the limited and limiting paradigm of "opposite sexes." For example, in "La ciudad" from El museo de los

esfuerzos inútiles, the female protagonist, echoing Peri Rossi's views, asserts, "Cualquier precisión sexual, querido mío, me parece escandalosa. Tenemos el sexo que nos imponen; a lo sumo, lo aceptamos" (173).

Peri Rossi denounces as "neurotic" the social imposition of restrictive definitions of sex and gender on a complex, multi-faceted personal identity. In the interview "Soñar para seducir: Entrevista con Cristina Peri Rossi," the author explains:

> La atribución de sexo es casi siempre neurótico. Querer ser hombre, o querer ser mujer, o querer ser homosexual, siempre es neurótico. Y lo es porque crea una tensión entre la multiplicidad de ser y las exigencias sociales: no hay nada más ridículo que un hombre que se cree muy hombre; esto es siempre una simplificación, una reducción (50).

As a consequence of this tenet, the author attempts to escape conventional definitions of sexual identity in her literary representations. Mirroring Butler's theoretical proposals, Peri Rossi dissolves the accepted distinctions between sex and gender; these terms are conflated into one meaning. Moreover, the author does not simply replace

biological essentialism with an equally rigid understanding of culture as the unquestioned determinant of gender identity; rather, sex/ gender is expressed through actions and is thus subject to change according to the actor's (or the narrator's) wishes.

The definition of sex/gender thus depends exclusively on social criteria, the acted gender role. When a particular character behaves in a way that does not reflect social expectations of his/her gender role, a confusing or "blurring"[25] of that character's sex/gender results: he/she is rendered indistinguishable and ambiguous. The resulting figure is that of the androgyne, an indeterminate mixture of both male and female.

The most commonly cited example of androgyny in Peri Rossi's work is the character Lucía from La nave de los locos. Although Equis meets and falls in love with her as a woman, when he later finds her at an erotic dance club, she has become:

> Un hermoso efebo el que miraba a Equis y se sintió subyugado por la ambigüedad. Descubría y se desarrollaban para él, en todo su esplendor, dos mundos simultáneos, dos llamadas distintas, dos

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[25]Here I allude to Felicia Cruz, "Blurring Difference: Cristina Peri Rossi's La nave de los locos."

> mensajes, dos indumentarias, dos percepciones, dos discursos, pero indisolublemente ligados de modo que el predominio de uno hubiera provocado la extinción de los dos (195).

In this passage, the narrator does not present Lucía as a "woman dressed as a man," but describes an actual change in sex/gender. Lucía's altered clothing and appearance, together with her on-stage performance, obscure recognition through the fusion of both masculine and feminine styles, shapes and actions. Lucía has shed her socially recognizable (female) gender identity in favor of ambiguity; neither the spectators nor the reader is able to discern if s/he is a man masquerading as a woman or a woman masquerading as a man.

Furthermore, the fact that this scene takes place on a stage calls attention once again to the manifestation of gender roles as a form of acting. The radical change in identity that "Dolores" and "Marlene" effect on stage simultaneously reduces the standard gender roles that society considers "normal" and "natural" to the status of an act. The androgynes effectively demonstrate that gender identities may be put on or taken off at will.

In addition to her gender, moreover, Lucía's sexuality has also become indeterminate. Following her nightmarish

pregnancy and abortion, she vehemently swore that she would never again enter into a sexual relationship with a man. This stated intention to change her sexual practice seems to be corroborated by her present appearance as a lesbian ("Marlene" and "Dolores"). Despite these stage names, however, the narrator insists that neither actor is readily identifiable as to sex/gender. As a result, their expression of sexuality can be termed neither "heterosexual" or "lesbian." Since her only sexual contact is that shown with another androgynous being, it appears that her sexuality has become as indeterminate as her gender.

Despite the seedy context of Lucía's re-construction of her own sex/gender and sexuality, she is never portrayed as an oddity or a freak. As Mary Beth Tierney-Tello points out,

> The erotic lesbian scene seems to send out disparate signals: while explicitly enacted for the titillation of the male spectators, it also parodies the gender identities and the compulsory heterosexuality of the conventional sexual economy that virtually sponsors the show (201).

The narrator, however, privileges the perspective of the actors, rather than the expectations of the audience.

Instead of a sordid cabaret, the narrator describes Lucía's performance as completely voluntary and *natural*:

> [Era] un hombre disfrazado de mujer, o una mujer, un travesti, uno que había cambiado sus señas de identidad para asumir la de sus fantasías, alguien que se había decidido a ser quien quería ser y no quien estaba determinado a ser (Peri Rossi, La nave 191).

The two actors' performance is decidedly not, as might be supposed, a degrading pornographic experience they are forced to endure, but rather a mutually consensual exploration of androgynous sexuality.

In fact, it is the homogeneously male spectators who appear as distinctly "unnatural" and repulsive. The customers are reduced to the status of animals; they become fused into a grotesque and dehumanized mass of sweating, brutish voyeurs:

> Arrellenados en sus asientos, con esa falsa seguridad que les daba el ser muchos y anónimos, haber pagado la entrada, estar abajo y no arriba, tener el abdomen con grasa, el aliento pesado, el chiste fácil y un músculo reflejo entre las

> piernas, los espectadores parecían haber retrocedido a algún estadio de impunidad infantil, en el cual se sentían dominadores, desinhibidos, irresponsables. El anonimato y el sentimiento de formar parte de un mismo grupo (no había casi mujeres en la sala) estimulaba una conducta provocativa, obscena, falsamente ingeniosa. Se oían chistes, burlas, réplicas, bolsas llenas de aire que estallaban, largos eructos, silbidos, aplausos y pataleos (Peri Rossi, La nave 190).

This passage suggests that the behavior of the spectators is directly attributable to a psychological distinction drawn between themselves and the actors. The audience has come to the show with preconceived, socially-ingrained attitudes and assumptions about gender and sexuality. Thus, the contrast made between their own position and that of the actors is based upon a series of oppositions with regard to their expectations of the show: spectator/spectacle, superiority/inferiority, judge/judged, invulnerability/vulnerability, protected/exposed, anonymous/identified, uninhibited/restricted.

Having paid for admission gives the audience a feeling of superiority. The inverse of this sentiment is projected upon the actors, who are seen as inferior, as present only

for the benefit of spectators; being "bought" for the price of admission reduces them to the status of a commodity. Consequently, in their role as spectators, the men assume the authoritative role of judge: they appraise the actors' performance and express their approval or displeasure through obscene jeers and vulgar body noises.

Physical position and lighting also contribute to these contrasts: while the audience is grouped in a dark, protected area, the actors are exposed and vulnerable on a raised and lighted stage (to which the audience, nevertheless, has free access). The darkness of the area occupied by the spectators, along with their quantity and uniformity, imparts a certain anonymity upon the audience. The actors, in contrast, are defined in advance by the poster outside the theater:

> SENSACIONAL ESPECTÁCULO
> TRES PASES CONTINUOS
> PORNO-SEXY:
> SENSACIONALES TRAVESTÍES
> ¿HOMBRES O MUJERES?
> VÉALOS Y DECIDA USTED
> MISMO
> (Franja verde)
>
> (189).

The actors are confined to the erotic transvestite roles into which they have been cast; their actions on stage cannot transcend these boundaries.

Likewise, while the spectators are very vocal in the

expression of their opinions and reactions, the actors are unable to venture comments or directly criticize the audience. As a "spectacle," their participation is limited to the purely visual. Thus, the spectators, reassured by a position of security and superiority, indulge in a perverse affirmation of what they perceive as the masculine role: obscenity, prolonged burps, wolf-whistles, etc.

Ironically, however, the performers subvert--even while apparently fulfilling--these oppositions that are based on the spectators' expectations. Just as "Dolores" and "Marlene" escape from traditional definitions of gender through androgyny, they also liberate themselves from the audience's typecast as "show" or "commodity." Although the spectators perceive the show as an "act" performed strictly for their titillation, the actors' on-stage reality is very different.

Neither "Dolores" nor "Marlene" give any indication that they are aware of the spectators at all: both "Dolores" and "Marlene" dedicate their actions only to each other. Furthermore, the narration indicates that the androgynes' erotic involvement is not an act; each is genuinely stimulated by the other. Throughout the episode, "Dolores" and "Marlene" treat each other with sincere affection, sensitivity, desire and dignity. The androgynes, in their affirmation of a non-gendered identity and

sexuality, assert their own subjectivity; in so doing, they effectively undermine the audience's attempts to make them into passive objects of (masculine) desire.

Not only do they avoid degradation and objectification, but they also manage to turn the tables on their viewers; it is ultimately the audience which becomes the "spectacle." While the androgynes' actions are increasingly shown to be natural, sincere and oblivious to their audience, the spectators, as we have seen, are reduced to a freakish mass of depraved and dehumanized voyeurs.

In fact, when Equis goes backstage to find Lucía, the androgynes regard Equis as if *he* were an object:

> Equis quedó de pie, junto a la puerta, con la penosa sensación de que las mujeres lo miraban sin curiosidad, sin sorpresa, como si fuera un objeto. Una mesa o un ropero junto a la puerta, obstaculizando el paso (195).

The disquieting lack of response to Equis's presence is not, however, a simple inversion of the objectification that the male spectators projected upon the actors. The androgynes may see him as an object, but not an object of desire. The performers manifest no sexual interest towards Equis at all; as a man, with all the patriarchal attitudes he represents,

he is simply an obstacle to them.

By the end of the novel, however, Equis could also be considered androgynous. As the novel progresses, Equis becomes increasing conscious of the social oppression of women[26]. This progress could also be seen as a journey toward androgyny, since at the end he discovers the key to becoming a worthy partner for the androgynous Lucía. Witnessing the transformation of Lucía leads to an epiphany; at that moment Equis realizes that to be worthy of her, he must give up his virility. In giving up his virility, Equis relinquishes his cultural identity as a male. Upon making this decision, Equis, too, becomes androgynous. As a result, he is now an appropriate partner for Lucía. At the same time, his rejection of culturally defined masculinity rends the apparently harmonic feudal order of the tapestry and brings about the downfall of the king, along with the patriarchal order he represents:

> Se oyen truenos, relámpagos alados cruzan el cielo, una pesada piedra cae y abre el suelo, animales extraños huyen por los cerros, "¡Su virilidad!", grita Equis, y el rey, súbitamente disminuido, el rey, como un caballito de juguete,

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[26]See Felicia Jane Cruz, "Blurring Difference," 199-204.

> el rey, como un muñequito de pasta, el reyecito de chocolate cae de bruces, vencido, el reyecito se hunde en el barro, el reyecito, derrotado, desaparece. Gime antes de morir (197).

3.3 Masculine Gender Roles

Since, as has been established, sex/gender is indistinguishable from and dependent upon performative gender roles, it is useful to analyze the manner in which these gender roles are presented in Peri Rossi's work. These obviously include male roles as well as female, as Jehlen reminds us: "speaking of gender does not mean speaking only of women. As a critical term, 'gender' invokes women only insofar as in its absence they are essentially invisible" (265). The discussion of masculine gender roles is particularly essential to an analysis of Peri Rossi's work because, for reasons discussed previously, male characters play an important role in her literary production.

With regard to masculine gender roles, Peri Rossi's narrative challenges the historical ideal of masculine chivalry and the masculine role in romantic courtship. As will be seen, Peri Rossi's literary portrayal of gender roles serves to highlight the contrast between socially-

constructed ideals of gender and the concrete reality of gender performance. Thus, the acted gender roles in Peri Rossi's work serve to consistently deconstruct traditional gender roles for both men and women.

In La nave de los locos, Peri Rossi posits the inappropriateness of anachronistically applying medieval ideals of masculine chivalry to a present-day context. This novel presents chivalry as an archaic masculine gender role incongruously imposed by society onto a contemporary reality. To underline the conflicts created by this perpetuation of medieval values, La nave de los locos juxtaposes the medieval concept of chivalry with contemporary situations that render it problematic.[27]

Just as the supposedly "harmonic" structure of the medieval tapestry in this novel does not correspond to contemporary perceptions of reality, this temporal discrepancy in world-vision emphasizes the contradictions between medieval and contemporary ideas of the masculine gender role, questioning the relevance of the patriarchal medieval ideals to contemporary gender relations. In contrast with the world-vision represented by the medieval

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[27]Other key references to medieval times include the medieval tapestry with its feudal representation of social order and the title, which refers to the medieval practice of dispatching the insane and other social "undesirables" in unguided crafts to drown. Literary precedents which allude to this practice include the Latin Stultifera navis and Sebastian Brant's Das Narrenschiff.

tapestry, contemporary society is no longer governed by kings. However, as demonstrated by the superior and derogatory attitude of the "abortion bus" driver towards the pregnant, abandoned women, social power remains under patriarchal control. In practice, the chivalric ideals of courtesy and protection give way to power struggles and abuse. Here the bus driver wields his power over the women--for only through this transportation services can they arrive at the abortion clinic--to bolster his own self-importance.

Furthermore, in Equis's case, as we have seen, the characteristics traditionally associated with knighthood--strength, courtesy, bravery in battle, loyalty to the king, and saving the "damsel in distress"-- only serve to frustrate him in his search for Lucía. Equis "evolves from being a (self-perceived) active chivalric hero who seeks to "rescue" (and desires to possess) his idealized "damsel in distress" (Lucía), to becoming a humble, receptive man that does not view women as men's ancillary other and/or helpmates (Cruz 203).

This description of Equis's transformation underlines two fundamental binary oppositions on which gender roles are based: masculine activity vs. feminine passivity and masculine superiority vs. feminine inferiority. Equis, as a man, originally identifies with the masculine gender role.

He perceives himself as a chivalric hero and actively pursues Lucía; she, however, rejects his advances and flees from him. Also, by casting himself in the role of "rescuer," Equis effectively establishes his superiority over the "damsel" that needs to be rescued. Equis's desire to "save" and to possess Lucía also leads to rejection; he soon discovers that she does not want either to be saved or possessed. To be genuinely worthy of Lucía, as is shown by the riddle, Equis must finally throw off the pre-defined, chivalrous masculine role and meet Lucía on equal terms.

Another salient example of the discrepancy between Medieval chivalric ideals and contemporary reality in La nave de los locos is the character Percival, who, although existing in a contemporary setting, is identified both by the chapter heading and by the character Morris as a "knight of the Holy Grail." Peri Rossi's choice of Percival to represent the virtues appropriate to a contemporary knight is significant because he symbolizes everything that the other Knights of the Round Table do not--rather than strength, valor or success in battle, Percival is known for his purity. Medieval Arthurian lore hails him as the "virgin knight;" it is this purity which enabled him, and no other knight, to behold the holy Grail.

As his association with the Arthurian virgin knight suggests, Percival proves to be completely lacking in the

conventional knightly attributes. He is young, rather weak, and characterized more by semantic and metaphysical ponderings than by physical battle.[28] His only "enemies" are the elusive villains who contaminate the park's duck pond with garbage and toxins; he is a guardian rather than a warrior. Neither does Percival work in the service of a king, but rather, manifestly prefers solitude.

Because of this desire for solitude, he becomes upset when the character Morris takes shelter from the rain in the same kiosk. In response to Morris's timid greeting, the boy abruptly asserts: "éste es un lugar público. Cualquiera puede venir" (139). This incivil reaction to the newcomer's presence once again highlights Percival's lack of adherence to the knightly code. His rudeness to Morris violates the code of chivalry, a term which has become nearly synonymous with courtesy.[29]

Although he embraces his association with the Arthurian knight, Percival clearly is at odds with the traditional

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[28]To cite just a few examples, "Era curioso cómo algunas palabras tenían dos significados, y uno no tenía nada que ver con el otro" (133) ..."las cajillas estrujadas de cigarrillos, con algo digno en su desplazamiento, como si quisieran ignorar --pensaba Percival-- esos residuos que afeaban las aguas y convertían al lago en un fétido vertedero" (133) ..."no le cabía la menor duda de que las bellas cosas decadentes lo eran porque guardaban una rara relación con el tiempo" (135).

[29]The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines chivalry as: "The qualities idealized by knighthood, such a bravery, courtesy, and honesty" (236).

knightly role both in character and in performance. Through this simultaneous acceptance and rejection of medieval expectations, Peri Rossi's Percival redefines knighthood; he becomes a revolutionary "knight" that is more compatible with contemporary times. Just as Equis's knightly efforts to rescue and possess Lucía are shown to be quixotic and outdated, in the "knight" Percival these same traditional chivalric qualities are ironically absent. In the novelistic representation of Percival, the conventional knightly qualities are displaced in favor of other salient characteristics, notably intelligence and sensitivity.

As has been previously noted, Percival is given to complex reflections about the functioning of language and the ills of contemporary society. This intelligence is accompanied by an acute sensitivity. Since Percival has literary pretensions, he is extremely sensitive regarding the use of language: "no emplearía jamás una palabra que no sonara bien" (140); his first concern in the conversation with Morris entails reaching an agreement with respect to language usage. As demonstrated by his concern for the ducks, Percival is also very sensitive to sights, sounds and smells. In fact, he comes to the park expressly to escape the city and its problems: "Vivimos en un mundo de olores nauseabundos. Por eso tengo que venir al parque, un rato, todos los días. A desintoxicarme" (141). These, then, are

the qualities of Peri Rossi's "knight:" he is a free-thinking intellectual, sensitive, wise and sophisticated, yet still idealistic. In this characterization of a contemporary knight for contemporary times, the novel indicates that these qualities comprise a far more apt ideal than the chivalric knight of medieval times.

The short story "Historia de amor" from the collection El museo de los esfuerzos inútiles dramatically presents another instance where social ideals of gender and the actual practice of those ideals enter into conflict. This story, however, focuses on the idealized gender roles involved in romantic courtship, rather that chivalry.

"Historia de amor" presents an ironic parody of the traditional sequence of romantic love, according to which the man actively pursues the woman, the lovestruck woman surrenders herself to him and, in acceptance of this gift, her suitor marries her. Here the woman, complying with traditional expectations, gives herself up completely to her beloved. Her "gift," however, is laden with implicit stipulations; in recognition of these social expectations, her lover perceives her surrender to be a suffocating burden which condemns him to a lifetime of suffering.

Upon accepting the woman's "gift," the protagonist finds himself in a situation parallel to that of the Greek Sisyphus, who was eternally condemned to roll large boulders

up a mountain; he must bear not a stone, but rather the weight of his beloved, up a mountain. When he finally succumbs to exhaustion under the increasingly heavier load, the woman offers dire consolation: "Te amo--me dijo--. Te he brindado mi vida. ¿Cómo no ibas a darme la tuya?" (115).

In this story, the man's traditional social obligation to provide singlehandedly for both himself and his wife is portrayed in a very literal sense: the man must physically bear the burden of the woman's weight. Ironically, this compliance is punished, not rewarded; the protagonist's gallant acceptance of the "burden" leads inexorably to his own suffocation. Moreover, the woman's final words demonstrate her willful complicity in a social order which places undo responsibilities on the husband. In a further irony, the cruelty she displays towards her suitor makes a mockery of the love she professes to feel for him --the supposed motive for her "surrender" in the first place. Although the man's sacrifice is seen to be the greater of the two --he literally expires under the burden of the woman's dependence, while she merely entrusts her life to him--, both sacrifices are ultimately seen as unnecessary and counterproductive, a depiction which renders the traditional courtship ritual absurd.

3.4 Feminine Gender Roles

With regard to feminine gender roles, Peri Rossi's narrative challenges the historical construction of the female as a passive aesthetic object. According to Rosario Castellanos, traditional, male-centered ideas of feminine aesthetic beauty have contributed to the inactivity of women and have rendered them sexual objects of masculine contemplation:

> Let us not forget that beauty is an ideal composed and imposed by men, which by strange coincidence corresponds to a series of qualifications that when fulfilled transform the woman who possesses them into a handicapped person; that is, without exaggerating, we might more accurately state, into a thing (Mujer que sabe latín... 237).

In Peri Rossi's representations of erotic encounters and sexual relationships, these narrow and limiting definitions of feminine attractiveness are overthrown. Throughout her literary production, traditional hallmarks of attractiveness are replaced by other qualities found admirable; attraction is rarely based on physical

attributes. When it is, they are not the physical characteristics commonly associated with feminine beauty, i.e. slenderness, youth, long hair, etc.

The novel La nave de los locos openly portrays Peri Rossi's opposition to traditional concepts of beauty and desirability. In the fragment entitled "El angel caído," Equis, the protagonist, feels strongly attracted to a woman who emphatically does not satisfy the culturally-defined ideals of age, complexion and weight. Although she is an elderly, obese woman, the chapter heading describes her as a "fallen angel" (74) and Equis is sexually stimulated by her presence: "Equis adivinó la tibieza de esa gordura, el blanco extraordinario de la piel, la contenida flaccidez de una carne que lentamente se iba desmoronando, y la amó" (76). In this passage, Equis balances every attribute of his lover which could be culturally perceived as a defect with an admiring qualifier: her fat is "warm," her pallid skin "extrordinary" and her flaccid flesh "controlled."

Moreover, her principal attraction for Equis has little to do with her body, but rather her attire; his desire and his fantasies soon begin to revolve around the sandals she is wearing:

> Equis amó esas sandalias rosadas. Si hubiera sido un maniático sexual--y en sus sueños lo era, como

> todo el mundo--Equis se habría dedicado a perseguir a mujeres que usaran sandalias...[éstas] dejaban algunos trozos del gordo pie al descubierto, con sus muelles dedos como almohadillas y el angosto y blanco tobillo al aire (80).

By focussing on the protagonist's foot fetish, the narration ultimately reveals far more about Equis's tastes and desires than it does about the object of his desire. As Peri Rossi affirms in her recent essay Fantasías eróticas, it is not the object in itself which stimulates sexual desire, but rather

> ...es en la mirada, en la emoción y en el sentimiento de quien ama donde surgen los símbolos, las imágenes que envuelven al objeto con un ropaje de atracción y de repulsión que constituye la riqueza y la ambigüedad de la vida erótica (45).

By breaking with the notion that desire is stimulated by an object which conforms to cultural ideals of physical beauty, Peri Rossi focusses attention on the desiring subject. Under the idealizing gaze of the subject, almost

any feature of the desired object may be eroticized. As a result, Peri Rossi's character's express desire through the adoration of ambiguous, amorphous bodies, irregular features and fetishism.

Interestingly, although the Swedish woman represents an extreme example of disconformity with traditional standards of beauty --and thus may produce a distancing effect on the part of readers-- she does not become a caricature. Despite the unconventionality of her appearance, she is described with sensitivity and admiration. In fact, the encounter between Equis and the Swedish woman is the most tender narration of lovemaking in the entire novel. By employing a respectful tone, the narrative voice thus succeeds in making both the woman's "grotesque" physical appearance and Equis's fetish appear natural and acceptable.

3.5 Inversions of Gender Role

Traditional gender roles are further challenged in Peri Rossi's narrative via the inversion of masculine and feminine gender roles. In the context of an erotic encounter, men have historically been seen as taking a dominant, controlling role; the role of women has been one of submission, whether forced or willing. Peri Rossi's narrative sets these criteria on end.

"surrendering" to a suitor, women are often the controlling partner in a sexual relationship. In "La ciudad de Luzbel," for example, Luzbel chooses her lovers, rather than vice versa. Once again, this selection flouts cultural standards of attractiveness; rather than basing her choice on physical attributes, Luzbel chooses her lover according to his knowledge of poetry. As a potential suitor knocks on the door, she recites the first line of poetry; the man gains admittance only if he is able to supply the correct complement to her initial verse. Otherwise, he is permanently rejected.

Similarly, in "Te adoro" from the collection Cosmoagonías, it is the woman who selects and manipulates her lovers, even while maintaining the appearance of passivity and imbecility which are frequently attributed to the female sex. In an ironic rendering of a typical seduction scenario, the professor Alex is unethically involved with his nineteen-year-old student, who shows considerable enthusiasm and admiration for him: "Te adoro. Adoro tus discursos. Adoro cómo me hablas. Adoro que me enseñes cosas" (74). However, one begins to suspect that the student is not the innocent victim she first appears when she makes the same comment ("Es un tipo fenomenal...lo adoro") about a fellow professor. Ironically, this colleague decides to call Alex to confess at length his

colleague decides to call Alex to confess at length his irresistible attraction toward the same student. Just as Alex begins to question the student's innocent appearance, the conversation turns toward the possible arrival of Alex's wife, at which point the student reveals: "Me acosté con ella algunas veces...En realidad, la adoro" (82).

This confession effectively turns the tables on Alex, who has cast himself in the comfortably superior role of seducer of innocent students or, alternatively, as the unfaithful spouse. Since the student expresses the same opinion about everyone (te/lo/la adoro), what seemed at first a spontaneous and enthusiastic amorous declaration is soon reduced to a pat phrase. In fact, the only person the student is sincerely concerned about throughout the story is the wife: first the student inquires about her whereabouts and confides that the wife is her Greek professor; then she encourages Alex to answer the phone because it might be his wife; finally, she confides that his wife is her lover. The seemingly dim-witted student has ultimately manipulated them all.

In summary, this chapter has established, based on theoretical works by Judith Butler, that sex, like gender, is culturally defined. Consequently, there is no distinction between the two terms; they become conflated. Given the social nature of gender identification, we have

seen that sex/gender is ultimately dependent upon one's *performance*, or acted gender role. Since sex/gender is not a fixed or essential identity, socially-enforced gender roles may be "blurred" by acting in a way that does not conform to a specific gender role. These concepts are borne out in Peri Rossi's narrative, in which androgynous (of ambiguous sex/gender) characters appear. This chapter also explores ways in which the author confuses, counteracts and inverts traditional sex/gender roles for both men and women. I pay particular attention to social standards of beauty for women and the code of chivalry for men.

Chapter Four

Breaking Norms of Sexuality

4.1 Theoretical Considerations of Sexuality

Adrienne Rich argues that Western societies have historically ingrained heterosexuality as the sexual norm, thereby establishing a polarity which relegates homosexuality to the opposing definition of "deviant" or "abnormal." This heterosexual norm is enforced and reinforced by cultural conditioning:

> women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives. The chastity belt; child marriage; erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film; idealization of heterosexual romance and marriage--these are some fairly obvious forms of compulsion, the fist two exemplifying physical force, the second two control of consciousness (Rich 185).

In addition to these forms of persuasion that encourage

women to conform to heterosexual dictates, society also applies both physical and psychological pressures to discourage lesbianism. According to Rich,

> [Many texts] illustrate the bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible (178)... Attacks against unmarried women have ranged from aspersion and mockery to deliberate gynocide, including the burning and torturing of millions of widows and spinsters during the witch persecutions of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, and the practice of suttee on widows in India (185).

The social coercion of women into heterosexuality, as well as the historical torture, punishment and oppression of lesbians[30] amply demonstrate that sexuality is not a matter of "free choice" for women, but rather one of social compulsion. The prevalent tendency to view (and label) heterosexuality, lesbianism, gay sexuality and bisexuality as "options" of sexual identity is therefore problematic

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[30]See Jonathan Katz, Gay American History.

because it implies an equality of social conditions that does not exist. Because of this inequality, the use of such terms as "sexual preference" or "alternative lifestyle" when referring to lesbianism can lead to damaging inaccuracies.[31]

Due to the pervasiveness of the heterosexual dictate, most women perceive lesbianism in the same way as the rest of heterosexual society: as "deviant," "abhorrent" or simply nonexistent. In the words of Amy Katz Kaminsky, "heterosexuality is so deeply ingrained that it is passed off not only as "natural," but as the *sole* natural expression of sexuality. To be called "lesbian" is to be called 'monster.'" (224).

Anthropologist Gayle Rubin further posits that the binary of sexuality underlies, and strongly contributes to, the binary of gender. The channelling of female sexual drives into a socially-acceptable heterosexual expression largely determines the female gender role. In this regard, sociologist Catherine MacKinnon proposes that "inequality is built into the social conceptions of male and female sexuality, of masculinity and femininity, of sexiness and

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[31]Rich cites Nancy Chowdorow's book, Reproduction of Mothering as an example of inaccuracy. Chodorow concludes, "The heterosexual preference and taboos on homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds with other women unlikely--though more prevalent in recent years."

heterosexual attractiveness" (220). As a result of heterosexual demands on the construction of the female gender, an inflexible, polarized, gender-identified sexuality is formed in which women are often cast in the role of sexual victims of masculine aggressions and abuse.

According to Amy Katz Kaminsky, a common aspect of women's oppression is androcentric society's regulation of female sexuality: "women's sexuality has been defined and legislated in culture so that women get cast as primarily sexual beings, with our sexuality understood in reference to androcentric needs or fears" (223). This statement is consistent with the characteristics that Kathleen Gough[32] outlines of male power over female sexuality: the ability of men to deny women sexuality, the ability to force it upon them and the ability to convert women into objects used in male transactions" (69). Within this social context, sexuality is closely linked to violence and oppression; it becomes more a function of power relations than a matter of mutual sexual attraction. These unequal power relations are

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[32]The eight characteristics of male power that Gough lists include: the power to deny women sexuality, the power to force sexuality on them, the power to command or exploit their labor and control their produce (sic), the power to control or rob them of their children, the power to confine them physically and prevent their movement, the power to use them as objects in male transactions, the power to cramp their creativeness, and the power to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments.

rendered socially acceptable by granting men the sexual right to women's bodies.

Ironically, the violence and abuse created by this power differential in heterosexual relationships are blamed not on the male victimizers, but rather, on their female victims. As Rich explains,

> the rape paradigm--where the victim of sexual assault is held responsible for her own victimization--leads to the rationalization and acceptance of other forms of enslavement, where the woman is presumed to have "chosen" her fate, to embrace it passively, or to have courted it perversely (188).

Also, assigning the female sole responsibility for her own subjugation consequently liberates the male from any accountability; thus, there is created a

> mystique of the overpowering, all-conquering penis-with-a-life-of-its-own [which derives authority from] the law of the male sex-right to women. The adolescent male sex drive, which, as both young women and men are taught, once triggered cannot take responsibility for itself or

> take no for an answer, becomes, according to Barry, the norm and rationale for adult male sexual behavior (Rich 190).

Kathleen Barry explores the commonalities of situations in which women are forced into sexual subordination. This cultural ideology leads to what she terms "female slavery," which she defines as:

> present in ALL situations where women or girls cannot change the conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions, e.g. social pressure, economic hardship, misplaced trust or the longing for affection, they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation (33).

This "cultural sadism" normalizes violence and abuse toward women, while absolving the male victimizers of responsibility for their actions. This ideology is perpetuated, in part, by the vast industry of pornography. As Rich points out,

> even so-called soft-core pornography and

> advertising depict women as objects of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality: essentially as a sexual commodity to be consumed by males (185).

In pornographic representations, violence and sadism are frequently inseparable from sexuality. Such displays increase women's vulnerability and promote the eroticization of women's subordination. The underlying implications of this social tenet of sexuality are even more alarming. According to Rich,

> along with this message comes another, not always recognized: that enforced submission and the use of cruelty, if played out in heterosexual pairing, is sexually "normal," while sensuality between women, including erotic mutuality and respect, is 'queer' (Rich 185).

This important observation underscores the arbitrary nature of society's homophobic stance. By imbuing only one form of sexuality with positive connotations, it necessarily condemns all others without regard for other considerations. Overriding such humane concerns as emotional commitment,

tenderness or respect, this unilateral division of sexuality into "good" and "bad" ironically leads to the glorification of many abusive sexual unions and to the victimization of those who participate in some of the healthiest, most mutually satisfying relationships.

4.2 Heterosexual Violence and Power Struggles

Rich's proposal that the heterosexual social norm is rooted in issues of power, rather than freedom of choice, is echoed in Peri Rossi's textual representations of heterosexual erotic alliances. Instead of reproducing social views which hold heterosexuality as intrinsically "healthy" and "normal," the author often portrays heterosexual relationships as violent and oppressive toward women; in fact, the majority of heterosexual encounters depicted by the author are plagued with abuse and underlying struggles for control and domination. As Peri Rossi affirms in her interview with Gustavo San Román,

> Creo que el sadismo es culturalmente masculino. La cultura masculina es una cultura competitiva. Eso está íntimamente vinculado con el poder... Si hay una raza que cultiva culturalmente su agresividad, tiene que haber también unos objetos

> que reciban esa agresividad, sean los toros, sean las mujeres. Hay un barrio periférico de Madrid que se llama Vallecas, que tiene un equipo de fútbol que se llama Rayo Vallecano. Y los domingos, si el Rayo Vallecano gana, los hombres les pegan a las mujeres, y si pierde, los hombres también les pegan. O sea que no hay solución. Quienes reciben la agresividad del mundo competitivo del hombre, son en general las mujeres, víctimas propiciatorias, porque están allí y porque son más débiles físicamente (1046).

This view stresses the social institutionalization of women's victimization in heterosexual relationships; it also calls into question mainstream attitudes that tend to consider sexuality as a "natural inclination" rather than a product of social conditioning. As a result, in Peri Rossi's presentation of heterosexual relationships, the reality of oppression and victimization overshadows the romanticized ideals of "love" that purports to form the basis of the erotic relationship.

The short story "La naturaleza del amor," from the collection Una pasión prohibida, for example, underlines the struggle for power that lies behind the "love" of a heterosexual couple. Here a man loves a woman because he

sees her as somehow "superior" to him. Although the essence of this "superiority" is never specified in the text, one may assume that it confers power, since the word "superior" in itself implies a hierarchy.

When the protagonist finds that the woman also loves him, however, he begins to experience grave doubts: either she is lying when she says that she loves him, or she is not superior to him after all. He reasons that, in either case, his own love for her can only be due to an error in judgement. Disconsolate, he finally abandons the relationship and spends his days playing chess with a life-sized doll.

This story clearly portrays a dichotomy between masculine and feminine perceptions/expectations of love. The man refuses to accept the possibility of love as anything but a power struggle; his own "love" is in fact admiration for the perceived superiority of the woman. Although the woman is prepared to return the protagonist's sentiment, it is precisely this willingness to accept a supposedly inferior partner which disconcerts the man. He finally concludes that her acceptance can only be due to an error in judgement, either on her part or his. For him, rationalization vastly overshadows emotion; he goes on to terminate the relationship on the basis of this elliptical reasoning. Apparently, he had hoped only to indulge in

idol-worship, for he is unwilling to commit himself to a relationship on equal terms.

Further, his substitution of a game of chess for a romantic involvement suggests that he regards the woman more as a rival than a potential partner. As in Rosario Castellanos's poem "Ajedrez," from the collection Poesía no eres tú..., the game of chess becomes a metaphor for the war beween the sexes. Since chess is considered a game of intellect, the man achieves uncontested intellectual superiority simply by changing opponents; he rejects his girlfriend in favor of a doll. His constant preoccupation with hierarchical classifications of superiority/inferiority indicates that his ultimate predilection for a brainless, passive object stems from a desire not for love, but for complete domination. Ultimately, this desire far surpasses the ambivalent admiration that he originally felt for the woman.

In contrast, the woman's view of "love" is characterized by emotion and sacrifice. If she is truly superior, then the decision to accept an inferior mate is guided more by emotional than by rational considerations. While the woman's primary attraction for the male protagonist is the potential for social advancement that she affords, her attraction to him is based on "love," which induces her to sacrifice this same potential. As Rich

explains, the association of women with emotion and sacrifice constitutes a pervasive part of the social myth of "love." Thus, women are conditioned to internalize a set of expectations that does not correspond to their social reality:

> The ideology of heterosexual romance [is] beamed at [women] from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs [and] wedding pageantry (189).

These sources of information lead the female receptor to believe that emotional love surmounts all social barriers (particularly the power differentials between sex and class) while simultaneously leading to marriage, which is in turn is seen as providing social status, financial stability and physical security. In this story, as often occurs in reality, romantic relationships do not live up to this social ideal. Instead, the romantic "knight in shining armor" is revealed to be an opportunist who would use the social mystique of romance for his own ends. Rich posits that this use of the myth of "love" to take advantage of women is by no means uncommon: her article addresses the sexual procurer's manipulation of this social myth of heterosexual "love" to force women into sexual slavery

(189).

Peri Rossi's textual representations cast aside these social myths to associate heterosexual relationships with physical abuse and victimization. In her narrative texts, this erotic victimization of women is often presented allegorically. In the case of the short story "Sordo como una tapia," from the collection El museo de los esfuerzos inútiles, for example, an inanimate object is used to demonstrate the power disparity between men and women in heterosexual relationships. Despite the fact that the story is titled by the popular phrase "sordo como una tapia," the "protagonist" is neither a wall ("tapia") nor hard of hearing ("sorda"). Instead, this story personifies a door (puerta). As with "tapia," "puerta" is grammatically feminine in the Spanish language. This door, the ostensible subject of the narration, clearly symbolizes a human female; among its many degrading experiences is that of sexual victimization by men.

Despite the fact that the door is judged to be both very strong and of excellent quality (being of solid oak), the narrator immediately observes that the door is heavily scarred and has "dos arrugas profundas, cerca del ojo" (69). These "bags" under her single eye suggest sleep deprivation. This implication is strengthened by the fact that the protagonist discovered and "picked her up" at night. When

read in connection with the door's multiple, peeling coats of garish paint (makeup), and her bedraggled appearance, this pointed reference to deep wrinkles around her eye points strongly to prostitution, which, as we have seen earlier, Adrienne Rich identifies as a form of sexual slavery and gender-related abuse.

Although her previous owners had once "dressed" her in a coat of varnish, she is now in rags: "de la capa de barniz, sólo quedaban algunos rastros, hilos de aceite que bajaban mansamente, interrumpiéndose antes de llegar al final" (69). As a final evidence of the door's degradation, the narrator reveals that:

> alguien la había quemado con un cigarrillo (siempre hay perversos que se propasan con los débiles, especialmente si el lugar es sombrío y la débil atractiva)... (70).

The door, being a passive object designed for human use, indicates a similar passivity in its female counterparts. This passivity is highlighted by the narrator's blatantly contradictory characterization of the door both as "strong" and as "weak." Since the door is made of oak, it is strong enough to be of value to the man who discovers it; for this reason, he "rescues" it from the wasteland. On the other

hand, since the door is female, it is automatically consigned to the category of "las débiles," which, regardless of its actual strength, re-defines it as both an easy target for male sexual victimization and as needing to be "rescued."

Although the man considers that in "saving" the door from the garbage, he is in some way redeeming the "cowardly" acts of other men who have previously mistreated it, he inadvertently upholds the same condescending view of women that instigated her abuse in the first place. Upon discovering the door, he describes it as: "desmayada, sin fuerzas...y *casi* tan alta como él (emphasis added)" (70). For a door to fulfill its usual function, it must, of course, be taller than the person who walks through it; however, since in this case the door is seen as a female, practicality cedes to the fantasy. The male protagonist casts himself in the superior role of chivalric knight to rescue a romanticized "damsel in distress;"[33] accordingly, the idealized "damsel" cannot be physically taller than her rescuer.

Similarly, despite his protestations to the contrary, the man's interest in the door is sexual: the protagonist feels a Freudian compulsion to fill any openings. For this

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[33]Refer to chapter three for a discussion of chivalry and male gender roles.

reason, he covers the door's "nakedness" with newspaper as he carries her home: "Él era muy sensible a los orificios; no soportaba, en realidad, los agujeros vacíos" (71). In a symbolic version of sexual intercourse, the man is excessively preoccupied with filling in the door's scratches and dents; he is especially concerned about the deep cigarette burn. Although this phallic predisposition indicates a sexual awareness of the door, in the end, he has a different use for it. Since it is a passive, mute object, the man presumes it deaf, like the "tapia" of the title. In exchange for his cosmetic repairs, he uses the door as an unresponsive object to which he may recount his life story.

The novel El libro de mis primos presents an even more disquieting example of the erotic victimization of women. In a sadistic parody of "playing doctor," Alicia's cousins complicitly entice her to relinquish her doll into their care by promising her inclusion into their exclusively male play group. Once in possession of the doll, however, they effectively exclude Alicia from participation--or even observation--of their actions, under the pretext of a medical examination realized by authoritative "doctors," which are unquestioningly presumed to be universally masculine.

Although the cousins originally inform Alicia that her doll is afflicted by illness, once Alicia is distracted from

her doll's "examination," their focus silently and inexorably shifts to what they euphemistically term "corrective surgery." Their common masculinity permits them to easily turn from one role of authority to another. Without altering their assumed identity as "doctors," their goal changes from healing the doll to forcing her to conform to what they, following heterosexual dictates, consider "correct" for her sex. To fulfill this mission, the cousins resolve to surgically transfigure the doll to correspond to these specifications. Their first action is to undress the patient, which highlights her vulnerability; as soon as the doll is completely exposed to their view, Gastón, the lead cousin, repeatedly and shamelessly gropes her genital area. Despite the doll's passivity, Gastón also gleefully suggests the possibility of having to tie her up "si se mueve mucho" (101).

The "doctors" then proceed to grotesquely stretch and redden the doll's breasts. Once her chest is sliced open, her breasts are disproportionately distended and her new nipples are bloodied with paint, the cousins pronounce themselves satisfied with their work and focus their attention on her vaginal area. They open the doll's legs and laboriously perforate her with a sharp scalpel. When she is opened, the cousins remove the apparatus which fills her abdomen. Not coincidentally, it is this same device

that permits her to speak; in removing it, the cousins effectively silence her cries of "Mamá."

Each cousin in turn then participates in the doll's violation. Among other things, fingers, hands, a door key, a sharpened pencil, a laurel branch and sharp rocks are roughly inserted into her opened cavity. Although this horrifying description of the doll's violation may appear exaggerated, it in fact strongly parallels actual cases of the political torture of women, both in Uruguay and Argentina.[34] Consequently, most of the items which the cousins' force inside the doll have obvious symbolic connotations of phallic penetration, violence and conquest.

At the same time, other cousins who complicitly participate in the doll's violation -- yet feel less at ease-- fill the doll with softer, more rounded objects: a piece of cloth, a ball, tobacco and an old coin. These materials, although not so obviously violent, nevertheless continue to strongly connote masculine domination; the narrator himself refers to the ball, the coin and the tobacco he inserts into the doll's opening as his "semilla" (106). The ball's typical context is that of sporting events, a traditionally masculine recreation; by placing the ball inside the doll, the narrator places these two

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[34]See June Nash and Helen Safa, eds., Women and Change in Latin America: New Directions in Sex and Class.

activities on the same level, thereby constituting the doll's violation as another form of (masculine) entertainment. The insertion of the coin is an even stronger image of male oppression. It indicates masculine control of currency, but also suggests prostitution --the coin may be seen as a monetary recompensation for the cousins' intrusion. Of all these items, however, smoking tobacco has the strongest symbolic relation to masculinity. It is largely consumed by men, it assumes a markedly phallic shape (cigarette, cigar or pipe) and it is commonly used as a symbol of authority --particularly the cigar.

Clearly, the cousins' true objective is sexual torture, rather than healing, or even the "correcting" they first used to explain/excuse their actions. By the time they are finished, the doll is broken and mutilated: "ahora había perdido su color natural y se le notaban algunas estrías" (107). The cousins react to the doll's "death" by covering her with a sheet and secretly burying her in a cardboard box. The fact that the cousins cover the doll constitutes a mute admission that the doll has emerged less, rather than more, presentable from her "corrective surgery;" she now must be hidden from view. Furthermore, the cousins' recognition of the doll's "death" implies a simultaneous acceptance of culpability.

This fact, however, is guarded as a guilty secret. The

doll's burial, like the operation which lead to it, disguises a hidden agenda. The cousins swiftly and unceremoniously inter the "body" without informing Alicia--or anyone else--of the event. In this way, they avoid public scrutiny of their actions. Despite the large number of adult family members present in the house, the results of the cousin's "surgery" are never discovered or questioned. In fact, the doll is subsequently obliterated from memory. Not even Alicia attempts to reclaim her toy; the doll simply disappears.

Gabriela Mora, in her article "El mito degradado de la familia en El libro de mis primos", sees this novel as an allegorical representation of Uruguayan society. In this "family," the adults correspond to the decadent, bourgeois, old order of Uruguayan society. The children, in contrast, represent newer social tendencies, including both the fascist regime, which supports and prolongs the values of the old order, and the leftist resistance. Although the cousins are all children, the novel's back cover appropriately cautions: "El mundo de la infancia... debe sin embargo verse desde sus claves adultas;" the violation of the doll, therefore, should be interpreted not as child's play, but rather follow the wider criteria of the social ideology of the decadent Uruguayan government propped up by nascent military fascism.

Read in this light, one may surmise from this episode that the Uruguayan military authorities, represented by the cousins in their role as "doctors," propagated torture and death instead of life. Gastón is revealed as a fascist leader; his victim, the doll, is tortured, mutilated and "disappeared." The fact that adult family members turn a blind eye to this disappearance demonstrates the extent to which the old, bourgeois order guiltily collaborates in and condones the military's violations of human rights. Once the cousins bury the doll, their own actions are similarly "buried:" the adult members of the family, having left the cousins unsupervised, never discover nor question their behavior.

The military, in turn, perpetuates the traditional bourgeois attitudes towards sexuality, which are clearly expressed in the cousins' treatment of the doll. This experience parallels the role of Uruguayan women in heterosexual relationships:

> La muñeca--claro símbolo de la mujer--es imagen exagerada de la pasividad que por siglos se ha institucionalizado como parte esencial de lo femenino. En manos de Cristina Peri Rossi, el objeto de cartón, en expresiva paradoja, cobra vida precisamente para reforzar la idea de cosa

> inane que se puede manipular a antojo... (Mora 70).

This interpretation suggests that, as with the doll, women are only passive participants in the sexual act. This immobility is not only socially conditioned, but also physically enforced; one may recall Gastón's threat of bondage should the doll prove unusually active.

The cousins' treatment of the doll implies that heterosexual relationships function not only to immobilize women but also to silence them. The extraction of the apparatus that permits the doll to speak points toward a similar silencing of Uruguayan women; this symbolic muzzling emphasizes that women have been denied a voice even with regard to the expression of their own sexuality. As Rich indicates, women are the helpless victims of forcible, violent, sexual encounters, which include not only rape--as is the case with the doll--but also prostitution and other forms of sexual slavery; furthermore, this sexual victimization is so pervasive as to be considered "normal" (185).

Significantly, the doll's cry, which the cousins suppress, is that of "mamá." This quelling of communication and support between Alicia and her doll can be generalized to apply to all women. As seen in this case, the silencing

and isolation of individual women effectively eliminates the possibility of their turning to other women for assistance. At the same time, it reinforces the heterosexual tabu with regard to the forging intimate bonds with other women. As Mora has pointed out, Alicia's cries for her doll, which at first are constant and monotonous, gradually diminish as the "operation" progresses. Alicia soon learns to accept the fact that she no longer has any control over her own doll.

Indeed, Oliverio, the cousin who narrates this chapter, discounts Alicia's sobbing as frivolous and without foundation. He scathingly dismisses her tears as a way of "entertaining herself:"

> Escucho, cerca de la puerta, el llanto bajito de Alicia, que ahora llora monótonamente, como si ya no tuviera más ganas de llorar, pero sin saber qué hacer, con qué entretenerse, continúa llorando (94).

Even more pointedly, Oliverio subsequently begins to perceive Alicia's accompanying sobs not as a repudiation of his (and the other cousins') actions, but rather as a form of sexual stimulation, almost as if the cries were a passionate reaction to his own sexual exploration of the doll. As he raises the doll's dress, for instance, he hears: "el sollozo de Alicia, que ya no parece un llanto,

sino un canto" (94-95).

To Oliverio's ears, the cries regain their original sorrowfulness only when Gastón steals the initiative by invading the doll's pubic area with his hands. Even so, Alicia's weeping is increasingly muted:

> Gastón le pasa las manos por las piernas. Cerca del suelo se oye a Alicia, que ahora, ha convertido casi inadvertidamente, sin transiciones, el llanto en un lamento suavísimo, que me parece es una canción de tristeza que yo oí una vez en la iglesia. Gastón le pasa y le repasa las manos por las piernas (95).

The correlation and merging of Alicia's complaints with the sexual exploration of the doll indicates that, on a sexual level, Alicia has become an extension of her doll; it is no longer clear whether Gastón is caressing the doll or its owner. What is certain, however, is the result. Although Mora interprets the textual connection drawn between Alicia's weeping and the church as an allusion to a never-realized marriage, I prefer to view Alicia's lamentation as foreshadowing the actual outcome of the doll's violation: her death and burial.

The doll, however, is more than a symbol of female

passivity; she is also, by definition, an object whose only reason for existence is the entertainment of others. For the cousins, the focus of their operation is not their victim, but themselves; the doll is only an object designed for their pleasure. In mutilating the doll to conform to their specifications of femininity, therefore, the cousins are acting out their own desires of sexual domination and victimization.

On a symbolic level, especially in view of the close connection made between the doll and Alicia, the cousins' attitude toward the doll corresponds to socially-ingrained ideas of women as sexual objects. As such, women, like the doll, are forced to conform to aesthetic ideals created and enforced by masculine society. As a result, women are (often forcibly) alienated from their own bodies,[35] as occurs with Alicia's doll:

> Piernabierta con los ojos muy claros fijos en el techo, como si aquello que le está sucediendo más abajo del vientre le fuera ajeno, fuera de otra, que no le perteneciera, no le estuviera sucediendo a ella. Queda piernabierta, los ojos fijos en el

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[35]Gabriela Mora originally made this observation in the article, "El mito degradado de la familia en El libro de mis primos," 68.

techo, indiferente (96).

Since for the cousins, the doll's only function is the fulfillment of their sexual demands, when she is no longer able to do this, she is considered "useless" or "dead" and is therefore discarded. Thus, by associating the doll with Uruguayan women, it is suggested that women are not only used as sexual playthings for male consumption, but also that this is their ONLY function, making them expendable once they serve no further use in this capacity.

Revealingly, the doll's defining characteristic is ultimately seen to be a Freudian absence:

> Imagina un pozo enorme, que no termina nunca, cuyo valiosísimo misterio es, precisamente, estar vacío, no contener nada. La hemos ahuecado para eso. Para comprobar su ausencia (104).

This absence, however, is completely artificial, since the doll originally contained both stuffing and a voice mechanism. The narrator's statement that they emptied her in order to prove her emptiness is therefore paradoxical. This contradictory reference to female emptiness also holds important implications for psychoanalytical theory. When parallels are drawn between the doll and women, and also

between the doll's vacated interior and the Freudian definition as female absence, this episode suggests that these psychoanalysts,[36] like the cousins, artificially impose "absence" on women.

As Irigaray contends in her critique of Freud's "Femininity," Freud describes female Oedipalization in terms of masculine sexuality (the preoedipal girl is a "little man" who goes on to become a castrated man) because he never actually thinks in terms of a little girl; The theorist, judging by his own sex, only includes what he sees of hers, which is nothing:

> Women's castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her *having* nothing... That is to say, *no sex/organ* that can be seen in a *form* capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing*. *No being* and *no truth* (Irigaray 48).

But this is not the only sense in which women have been defined as absence. Women, like the doll, are socially conditioned to be passive, immobile, decorative objects. Even with regard to something so personal as their own

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[36]For a more thorough examination of psychoanalytic theory and its role in Peri Rossi's work, see chapter two.

sexuality, their own sexual partners and their own role in the sexual encounter, their voices are silenced and their perspective is often entirely absent.

4.3 Lesbianism

In contrast with heterosexuality, which Rich sees as promoting violence and abusive treatment of women, she views lesbian existence as a supportive, positive alternative for women. This is so because the affirmation of lesbianism implies a radical negation of heterosexual social standards. According to Rich, "Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on the male right of access to women" (Rich 192).

The recognition that heterosexuality "may not be a 'preference' at all, but rather something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force" (191) challenges the popular assumption that most women are innately heterosexual; it also permits lesbianism to be viewed as a sexual expression which is as "natural" (or more "natural" than) heterosexuality. Thus, lesbianism affords the theoretical possibility of supportive relationships for women; nevertheless, sociological investigations into actual lesbian relationships reveal

frequent instances of violence and abuse.[37] This consideration highlights the pervasiveness of heterosexual patterns of domination.

Rich, however, speaks of lesbianism less as a sexual practice than an ideal. For her, lesbian existence goes beyond mere sexuality. She expands traditional definitions of lesbianism, employing the term "lesbian continuum" to address a wide range of woman-identified experiences, such as "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (192). She does not, however, define the role of sexuality in the formation of this woman-centered perspective. In this regard, Kaminsky cautions that:

> though the notion of woman-centeredness goes beyond sexuality, sexuality remains central to it. This is so because women are constructed in culture primarily as sexual beings, so to redefine women's sexuality is to call into question the basic definitions of "woman" (not least the definition that limits her existence to a sexual one). It is crucial, then, both to demystify the

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[37]See Kerry Lobel, Naming the Violence: Speaking Out Against Lesbian Battering.

> cultural construction of normative sexuality and to insist on valuing lesbianism (Kaminsky 226).

Peri Rossi's literary representation of women and of lesbianism integrates the views of both Rich and Kaminsky. Her work reveals both a constant concern for and about women--Rich's "lesbian continuum"-- and an attempt to redefine normative sexuality in a way that values marginalized forms of sexual expression, including lesbianism. From her earliest works, she has demonstrated a preoccupation with relationships between women, the female body, and female eroticism.

Her first publication, Viviendo (1963), for example, presents exclusively female protagonists. This female-centered perspective did not, however, receive completely favorable critical reviews at the time. As Peri Rossi recalls in her interview with Gustavo San Román,

> Siempre me acuerdo de que cuando publiqué Viviendo, que son tres cuentos protagonizados sólo por mujeres, una amiga mía, una mujer mayor, que por más datos era lesbiana, me escribió una carta que no me gustó nada porque me acusaba de que porque yo era lesbiana solamente había hablado de mujeres (1045).

After the publication of Viviendo, the author began to employ frequently masculine protagonists, not because of this critique, but rather, as has been mentioned previously, because she does not perceive gender as a fixed attribute. As a result, Peri Rossi manipulates the gender of her protagonists according to the effect she wishes to create. Ironically, her use of masculine protagonists has lead to negative critical reactions in the opposite direction:

> En Barcelona, me invita un grupo de feministas a hablar sobre Solitario de amor y una de ellas me pregunta: "A mí me gustaría saber si Ud. no considera que es reaccionario que siendo mujer escriba en masculino?' Entonces, ¿cómo?, si escribo con mujeres resulta que es porque soy mujer y no se puede, está mal; claro, es una limitación, debo escribir sobre hombres; y cuando escribo en masculino resulta que es reaccionario. No me interesa nada todo eso, cuando tú vas a escribir algo, tú tienes que pensar en la autonomía de la cosa que vas a escribir y en cuál es el tema que a ti te interesa (Golano 78).

Furthermore, neither negative critical reviews nor the use of predominantly masculine protagonists has prevented

her from insistently and overtly portraying erotic encounters, both heterosexual and lesbian. As has been shown, the author's depiction of women is consistent with Rich's definition of the lesbian continuum. More specifically, however, the author's work reflects Kaminsky's view, which privileges female sexuality. The author focuses on female eroticism, delineating and re-elaborating the sexual definitions of women that, according to Kaminsky, form the base of the social definition of "woman."

Peri Rossi has celebrated lesbian eroticism since the beginning of her writing career. Two of the stories from her first publication, Viviendo (1963)--"El baile" y "No sé qué"-- discreetly suggest lesbian relations.[38] Furthermore, the author describes her first poetic collection, Evohé (1971), as "erótico y homosexual" (Deredita 134). Appropriately, the title of this collection refers to the traditional cry to summon Bacchus; its poems explore the relationship between language and the female body through various erotic games.

Since the publication of Evohé, Peri Rossi has continued to advance ever more frequent and overt references

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[38]Gabriela Mora brings this point to attention in her biographical essay, "Cristina Peri Rossi" Spanish American Women Writers. 436.

to lesbian eroticism in her texts.[39] In the title poem from the collection Diáspora (1975), for example, the poetic "yo" actively pursues another woman. Another poem from this collection points to the increased importance Peri Rossi gives not only to the erotic description of women, but also to the public celebration of lesbianism:

> A los poetas que alabaron su desnudez / les diré:
> / mucho mejor que ella quitándose el vestido / es
> ella desfilando por las calles de nueva York / --
> Park Avenue-- / con un cartel que dice: / "Je suis
> lesbianne [sic]. I am beatiful [sic] (63).

By 1979, with the publication of Lingüística general, Peri Rossi openly submits the practice of lesbianism as a conscious act of social subversion:

> Nos mirarán con curiosidad--estas dos muchachas
> y quizás, si somos lo suficientemente sabias,
> discretas y sutiles
> perdonen nuestra subversión
> sin necesidad de llamar al médico
> el comisario político o al cura...

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[39]See Felicia Cruz, "Blurring Difference: Cristina Peri Rossi's La nave de los locos," 66.

parejas en subversión al orden domesticado... (74).

In this poem, Peri Rossi's focus pointedly changes from a lesbian's views of her lover to the way in which society views the lesbian couple. While the lesbians delight in each other's love, and relate to each other as equals, they are both "slaves" to social dictates, which regard their union as decidedly shameful. Thus, the couple must be discrete, maintaining absolute secrecy. Any public acknowledgement of their lesbianism will result in punishment and/or "re-programming" by medical, civil ("el comisario político") or religious ("el cura") authorities.

However, this social order, which privileges heterosexuality, is not inalterable; in the poem, Peri Rossi refers to it as the "domesticated" rather than the "domestic" order, indicating that it has been developed and tailored to uphold a specific ideological viewpoint. Since Western society has established heterosexuality as the sole acceptable form of sexual expression (Kaminsky 226), the practice of lesbianism constitutes a threat to this state of affairs, a subversion of the established order.

4.4 Children and Sexuality

Just as Peri Rossi's representation of homoerotic

relationships subvert accepted standards, her portrayal of other forms of erotic encounters also challenges the social norm. As Gabriela Mora affirms, the author subverts erotic norms in favor of freedom (92). As with homosexuality, other types of relationships that society considers "unnatural," "deviant," or "monstrous" --in this case, child molestation-- are also described with naturalness and respect.

Children play a prominent role in Peri Rossi's writing, beginning with her very first collection of short stories (Viviendo) and continuing throughout her narrative works.[40] Her child protagonists, however, correspond more to a literary ideal than to a social reality; as a consequence, they are largely symbolic. To create this ideal, the author inverts the roles of adults and children--and even the whole concept of heredity--as can be seen in the short story "En la playa" from La tarde del dinosaurio. Here, "los padres ya no se parecen a los hijos" (33), rather than the other way around.

In general, Peri Rossi's children are intellectually and emotionally mature, wise, and articulate--even more so than the adults that surround them. The adult protagonists

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[40] Other works by Peri Rossi which prominently feature children include La tarde del dinosaurio, La rebelión de los niños, El libro de mis primos and Indicios pánicos.

"ya no dispensan sabiduría, ni siquiera saben hablar con propiedad (con autoridad)" (Morello-Frosch 200). The children, on the other hand, project an image of purity and morality, not in the sense of innocence, but rather as lacking the decadence and corruption associated with the adult world. In contrast to the innocence and naivete usually associated with youngsters, Peri Rossi's children are sophisticated, idealistic and often dedicated to a social or political cause. As the author explains:

> De alguna manera los adultos quisieran ser niños exonerados de sus fracasos y renunciamientos, que no pactan con nada y que mantienen la ingenuidad de la sabiduría. No se trata de pureza o inocencia, de falta de contaminación, ni mucho menos. Estos niños tienen la sabiduría de los viejos que han pasado por todas, sólo que en su interior la lucidez no ha sido dañada. Es la mirada que se elige ingenua como manera de evitar los renunciamientos de la edad madura, la frustración del hombre y la mujer; una manera de no ser cómplice de los miles de masacres cotidianas (Deredita 141).

As a result of this moral purity, children adopt the role of

ethical arbiters, judging the reality created by adults: "los niños...toman el mundo de los mayores y tratan de ordenarlo con lógica irrebatible, con una capacidad de lucha, de resistencia a la mentira y al abuso" (Morello-Frosch 198).

Even in cases where older children mimic the attitudes and ideologies associated with the bourgeoisie, the Uruguayan military regime and the adult world in general, as exemplified by the "surgery" performed by the (male) cousins in El libro de mis primos, there is always a young voice of rebellion present to subvert and counteract these institutionalized ideas. Within this same text, for instance, Federico, a cousin who did not participate in the "operation," defies his family by joining the guerrillas; likewise, Oliverio, the youngest cousin, ultimately brings about the destruction of the family mansion and the adults within by throwing a single stone.

Peri Rossi employs such uncorrupted, yet ideologically sophisticated children to advance her ideas regarding not only politics, but also sexuality. A central theme of her novel, La nave de los locos, for example, is the rejection of age as a limiting factor for sexual activity.[41] The segment of this novel entitled, "El Viaje XVIII: Un

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[41]Refer to chapter three for an analysis of Peri Rossi's depiction of sexual activity at an advanced age in this same novel.

Caballero del Santo Grial," which explores the issue of sexual relations between adults and children --the act of sexual "deviance" perhaps most violently condemned by society-- depends on the unusual maturity of the child protagonist to avoid conferring negative connotations upon the adult involved.

In this episode, the character Morris becomes involved in a homosexual relationship with Percival, a nine-year-old boy. Despite Percival's tender years, this relationship is far from the typical scenario of "child molestation." Although sexual contact between Morris and Percival is both socially forbidden and against the law, Morris's love for the boy is portrayed as tender and respectful. The peaceful environment of the park and the duck pond, along with Percival's discourse on nature and harmony create an appropriate background for their meeting.

As is the case is many of Peri Rossi's short stories, here the adult and the child exchange roles. Revealingly, it is Percival, not Morris, who dominates their initial encounter, directing the conversation with forthright queries. Morris, on the other hand, is slightly in awe of the child and limits himself to superficial conversation. Most of his responses are aimed at mollifying Percival; at no time does he pressure the child to engage in sexual contact.

Similarly, while Morris appears inhibited and gauche, Percival demonstrates an astounding sophistication regarding sexual matters. He directly addresses the subject of sexuality, describing his mother as "*inteligente y sensual*" (140).[42] Furthermore, he is informed about and undaunted by what the rest of society deems "sexual perversions:" the first question he directs toward Morris is, "¿es usted exhibicionista?," as a result of which Morris is far more discomfited than the child (he quickly checks his zipper). Percival is also nonchalant about the presence of "violadores y asesinos" (104) in the park and calmly accept Morris's homosexual attraction to him:

> ¿Qué hace tu madre? --le preguntó [Morris].
> --Me ama --fue la sorpresiva respuesta de Percival, emitida con perfecta *naturalidad*. Estaba mirando hacia abajo, una lagunita que se formaba en un borde del quiosco.
> --Creo que todos te amamos --afirmó Morris.
> Él nada dijo, como si estuviera muy de acuerdo, o no le confiriera al asunto ninguna importancia (142).

Given the emphasis that the narrative voice places on

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[42]Author's italics.

"naturalidad" (this is the third italicized reference to the word in eight pages), it is significant that Percival contradicts social norms by accepting this sexual advance as natural, while condemning things generally considered "normal," such as city smells and the pollution of the pond.

The fact that Morris subsequently travels to Africa along with Percival and his mother indicates that not only has he gained Percival's complete acceptance, but also that of his mother. As Felicia Cruz observes, the three of them together form a fatherless household (198). Morris himself writes to Equis: "Componemos un trío bastante singular, como imaginarás" (146).

While La nave de los locos presents an idealized sexual relationship between adult and child, the short story "El laberinto" from the collection La rebelión de los niños (1980) portrays the turmoil of a family whose stability is threatened by the conflict between the father's sexual desire for children and the social laws which prohibit the fulfillment of this desire. This story is narrated from the perspective of the son, who greatly admires and respects his father. This admiration is grounded in the many interests they share, including scientific and mathematical investigations. Their principal commonality, however, remains a secret, even from each other--they are both intensely attracted to young girls.

Despite these similarities, their individual perspectives differ markedly. This difference is highlighted from the beginning of the story, when the child appears at the top of an orange tree; the unaccustomed height alters his usual outlook on the world that surrounds him. From this perspective, he begins to challenge the accepted order of the world, questioning mathematical and geographical laws. He himself notes that, "desde arriba del árbol las cosas se veían diferentes" (131).

Nevertheless, the most peculiar difference that the child observes is his father's change in stature. On the ground his father seems a towering figure of authority, complete with phallic cigarette. From the top of the tree, on the other hand, he is reduced to "un hombre chiquito que fumaba" (131). This diminution of the father's stature indicates the possibility of a more permanent, metaphorical loss of stature in the eyes of his son, should the child discover his parent's secret desire for his female playmates.

Given their closeness and the similarity of their tastes, it is not surprising that father and son are both attracted to the same girls. Since the boy is rather timid, he applauds his father's skill in convincing mothers to let their girls play at his house, although he never questions his father's motive. Once the girls are with him in his

room, the boy dares only to touch and pull threads from the girls' dresses. The father's contact with them is more ambiguous; although the text never directly portrays any misconduct on the part of the father, the parents' secretive, fragmented dialogue strongly indicates that he does, in fact, molest the girls:

> --Él te admira --murmuró ella, en voz muy baja--. No me gustaría... No quisiera que nunca...
> --Él te admira --recalcó ella, con rencor--. No estoy dispuesta a... (16).
> --Él te admira --insistió la mujer, con voz crispada, tensa--. Él te admira y no quiero que nunca..., que jamás... (25).

Significantly, the main concern of both parents is not the issue of child molestation per se, but rather the disillusionment that their son would suffer were he to find out about his father's actions.

Although this threatened loss of status with his son is the father's only consideration, the mother addresses the social and legal ramifications of his actions. When she broaches the subject of psychiatric counseling, the father's only response is: "Sí...hay psiquiatras y leyes" (139). By connecting medical with civil authorities, he shows that, in

effect, both form part of the same social apparatus that condemns his sexuality; his subsequent departure constitutes an emphatic refusal to conform to social dictates.

Above all, however, the man abandons his family because he does not want to lose the love and admiration of his son. He recognizes, as the mother insists in her disjointed murmurings, that the child will eventually discover the truth and be disillusioned. His abandoned cigarette, now seen as a symbol of his crumbling authority, underlines the shattering consequences of this revelation:

> Un bloque de ceniza, muy gris y muy sólida, se sostenía en el extremo, y uno sabía que cuando cayera, no caería por partes, se desmoronaría entera, dejando la colilla desguarnecida, sola, infeliz (25).

Interestingly, in this story, as in the episode with Percival, the acceptability or unacceptability of this sexual relationship is seen to depend exclusively --and unfairly-- on the factor of age. Despite the fact that father and son share the same feeling of concupiscence

toward the girls,[43] the social ramifications of their desires differ vastly. The father guiltily recognizes that while his son's desire is seen to be inoffensive, his own behavior is considered criminal. He fervently wishes that he could again be a boy like his son, so that his touching of the girls would be perceived as "innocent:"

> --Si fuera un niño --murmuró el hombre, tratando de resistir la mirada de la mujer. Si yo fuera un niño, ¿entiendes?, nadie lo notaría, nadie se daría cuenta (24-5).

This secrecy would allow him to remain with his wife and son.

As it is, the confused child repeatedly yells, "no quiero que se vaya," from his perch in the tree. The orange tree, which in the beginning afforded him marvelous vistas, now confronts him with an opaque, somber view: "Desde arriba del árbol, nada se veía" (140). Even its oranges are now bitter. Furthermore, the story's ending points toward a similar destiny for the son: while fumbling around in his

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[43]The father diagnoses his son's attraction towards the girls as follows: "ése será tu problema...Creo que lo que sientes es concupiscencia..." (24). His use of the future suggests that the son's desire reflects his own, that in the future the child will also engage in sexual contact with small girls.

pockets, the boy comes up with the thread from the girl's dress.

4.5 Incest

As is the case with the protagonist of "El laberinto," Peri Rossi often imbues children with their own sexuality. This would seem paradoxical since children, by definition, are sexually immature. To explain this inconsistency, I refer once again to Peri Rossi's idealized portrayal of children. By conceptualizing children according to fictional ideals of wisdom and morality rather than social reality, the author creates juvenile characters who are sexually and ideologically sophisticated, yet innocent with regard to the duplicity, hypocricy and corruption which plague adults.

This sexual rendering of children supports a strategy which underlies many of Peri Rossi's erotic depictions: the author insistently indicts the sexual prohibition/repression of the patriarchal social structure by encoding socially subversive expressions of eroticism as harmless and/or innocent. Correspondingly, the children's incestuous desire, although it flouts the social code of morality, appears guileless and natural when opposed to adult corruption.

In an adaptation of Freud's Oedipal model, the short story "De hermano a hermana" from the collection La tarde del dinosaurio, portrays a young boy's incestuous desire as innocent and normal. Surprisingly, here the sister, rather than the mother, is the object of the protagonist's desire. Further, the protagonist views the mother, not the sister as surrogate: "Y sé que hubiera preferido que mi madre fuese ella, mi hermana, y no la otra, tal vez mi madre hubiera podido ser mi hermana y yo no notaría la diferencia" (19). He rejects the mother as an object of desire because she, along with the entire adult world, represents corruption and decay; the protagonist, Alina and Mario, her boyfriend, voice their protests of adult society by secretly hanging subversive posters. Since Alina mirrors the protagonist's youth and ideological views, she becomes an idealized erotic substitute for his mother. Thus, in accordance the Oedipal mold, the boy projects his envy towards Alina's boyfriend rather than sustaining a competition with his father.

The novel El libro de mis primos presents a very different view of incest, marking a contrast between the adolecent narrator's two sexual relationships. Federico first engages in a lightly incestuous relationship with his cousin Alejandra. However, the text specifically applies the title of "incest" to his later sexual alliance with the guerrilla fighter Aurelia. Despite both familial and

sexual ties with Alejandra, Federico's narration reveals that this relationship does not bring him fulfillment. The cousins must maintain secrecy to avoid family conflict; this confers the relationship with an air of furtiveness and guilt. Furthermore, their union is based upon a shared physical obsession rather than emotional or intellectual comprehension. Federico strongly associates his passion for Alejandra with violence and darkness:

> Alejandra...hacía pensar en amores violentos, por el cuarto, en velas nocturnas interminables. Difícilmente se cansaba de hacer el amor... El amor con ella se parecía a la tierra, a cavar un pozo... solamente cortes bruscos de requerimientos cotidianos podían interrumpir su incesante actividad de amar (143).

This passage shows the constant repetition of the sexual act to be reflexive and unthinking. Federico's association of this coupling with "la tierra" conjures images of animal sexuality rather than emotional commitment; their earthy lovemaking appears to be driven mostly by lust. Revealingly, the other explicit parallel that Federico draws to having intercourse with Alejandra is "cavar un pozo," the same terminology that his cousins, the brutal "doctors,"

applied to the sexual torture of the doll in order to confirm her emptiness or "lack."[44]

This obsessive physical passion ultimately leads Federico to become dissatisfied with the relationship. Federico's erotic trysts with Alejandra consume all of his time and energy without affording him intellectual stimulation. As he is heavily committed to the leftist cause, he begins to crave an emotional and intellection companionship which Alejandra, who mirrors the family's bourgeois perspective, cannot provide. He finally abandons Alejandra, along with the rest of the family, to join the guerrillas.

The chapter fragment which details Federico's association with his cousin is titled simply "Alejandra." Federico's narration of his relationship with the guerrilla member Aurelia, in contrast, is labeled, "Incest." This title is highly ironic as the text makes no other suggestion of a blood tie between Aurelia and the narrator. Further, it marks a contrast between Federico's literally incestuous relationship with Alejandra, which ultimately fails, and his highly successful union with Aurelia.

As revealed in Federico's diary, Aurelia is educated and shares his sense of purpose; she brings him happiness

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[44]See page 21.

and fulfillment. In fact, Federico deliberately contrasts the two relationships:

> Con Aurelia fue diferente; cansado y manso, anhelando la luz y la claridad, la caricia dulce... Aurelia descansando, acariciándome la frente, contándome una ecuación de cosmogonías que había descubierto en un libro de matemáticas (145).

While Alejandra evoked images of sexual exhaustion and darkness, the narrator associates Aurelia with rest, light, and learning. This passage portrays Aurelia's tenderness and intellectual compatibility as vastly superior to Alejandra's physical passion.

Federico's consistently positive characterization of Aurelia raises questions about the chapter heading's definition of their involvement as incest. Despite the negative connotations that society confers upon incest,[45] here this term describes/defines the union which proves to be the healthiest sexual relationship in the novel. By linking incest with emotional intimacy, rather than sexual

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[45]Although different cultures vary in their definition of what constitutes incest, sexual contact between two people with close genetic ties is tabued in nearly every society. It is also commonly linked to genetic defects and disorders.

contact between blood relatives, Peri Rossi imbues this term with a positive valuation: incest thus becomes a symbol of closeness, of emotional and intellectual affinity.

As we have seen, Peri Rossi's writing consistently re-evaluates and re-defines socially prohibited forms of sexual expression in relation to the social norm. The author challenges normative sexuality by exposing the violence and abuse fostered by unequal power relations in traditional, heterosexual relationships. For the author, tenderness and mutual respect are the ideals upon which a healthy sexual union is based; this tenet opposes the social perception of heterosexuality as the only "healthy" or "natural" expression of sexuality. To underscore this point, throughout her writing Peri Rossi deliberately introduces instances of non-normative sexuality which, although socially repudiated, prove to be loving and mutually satisfactory. In this way, tabued forms of sexuality such as lesbianism, incest and (homo)sexual contact with children are seen to be healthier and more natural --according to Peri Rossi's guidelines-- than the heterosexual relationships which appear in her works.

Chapter Five

Sexuality, Eroticism and Politics

As we have seen in the third and fourth chapters, Peri Rossi's erotic representations frequently act to highlight other issues examined in the text. We have already explored the relevance of Peri Rossi's sexual depictions to various social concerns, including issues of sex, gender, and alternate expressions of sexuality. However, these social issues have only relatively recently gained recognition as important issues in Peri Rossi's writing; the author's principal focus, at least initially, has been a critique of the Uruguayan military government. Thus, it is not surprising to find that sexuality and eroticism in Peri Rossi's texts also support her political arguments. As Susanna Ragazzoni observes, "Su producción se nutre esencialmente de dos aspectos de la condición humana: el amoroso y el político, que con frecuencia aparecen como una misma experiencia o como dos experiencias paralelas" (227).

This fusion of political and sexual issues undermines a central facet of authoritarian regimes: the imposition of highly traditional notions of sex/gender. As Mary Beth Tierney-Tello observes, authoritarian governments intensify traditional patriarchal values, rigidly portraying sex and

gender roles as natural and beyond question (7). Military regimes legitimize and reinforce this interpretation of sex/gender by artificially separating private (e.g. family) and public (e.g. government) spheres (Alvarez 43). Dissenting views regarding sex, gender roles or sexuality, which are relegated to the "private" realm, are therefore rendered unspeakable.

As we have seen in chapter three, Peri Rossi challenges this repressive system of engenderment by systematically contradicting its seemingly natural interpretation of sex and gender roles. Moreover, by depicting political issues in terms of sexuality, Peri Rossi also exposes the authoritarian distinction between public/private as an arbitrary, socio-political construction. This textual articulation of private issues creates a public platform from which both authoritarian precepts and practices may be called into question. Further, it exposes the issues of power and control which underlie the regime's interpretation of sex, gender roles and sexuality. As Tierney-Tello observes,

> where patriarchal, authoritarian discourses obscure feminine desire, reducing female sexuality to reproduction and maternity, literature by women can uncover the power relations at work in the

> conventional sex/gender system, multiplying the possible paths of desire and broadening the female sexual imaginary (7).

While, as we have seen, the author's conflation of sexual and political issues in itself transgresses authoritarian precepts, Peri Rossi also uses sexuality to directly critique the military regime. In many cases sexuality functions as an allegory[46] or extended metaphor for the Uruguayan socio-political context. This allegorical portrayal of Uruguayan reality entails more than an aesthetic approach: because increasing censureship rendered political topics unspeakable, allegory became a means of expressing subversive ideas. As the author states in her interview with Eileen Zeitz:

> En mi caso, la existencia de la censura funciona como un aliciente para elaborar la metáfora capaz de desbordarla. De una manera u otra, siempre ha existido censura, pero se agrava en los períodos de fascismo ascendente. Eso constituye en mi obra

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[46]I employ the term allegory as defined by Barbara Johnson: "Allegory is a narrative of concrete events, which, upon interpretation, yields a second narrative that is figurative and abstract" (16).

un desafío. Jamás dejaría de abordar un tema porque supiera que está previamente censurado; haría todo lo posible por referime alegóricamente al mismo, y este juego sería muy fructífero" (81).

Although many of Peri Rossi's texts portray sexuality as an allegory for political issues, each has a distinct focus. In the analyses of the following texts I hope not merely to explain the inherent allegories, but to discern how the author articulates that which censureship rendered unspeakable. This allegorical representation thus yields three distinct views of the Uruguayan socio-political context: The eroticized destruction of the corrupt Uruguayan bureaucracy, the military government as sexual/social dysfunction and the military as sexual/political intruder.

5.1 Symbolic and Allegorical Representations

The allegorical complexity of Peri Rossi's work is amply demonstrated in the collection Los museos abandonados, which received the "Premio de los Jóvenes" from Arca Editorial in 1968. According to Saúl Sosnowski, throughout this collection Peri Rossi criticizes the decadent Uruguayan bourgeois class, the incipient military regime and the

forced exodus of Uruguayan citizens through the powerful image of the abandoned museum:

> Los museos abandonados de Cristina Peri Rossi (1941), anuncia desde su título la mutación que pasará de la alegoría a la difuminación de todo plano que desde sus transparencias pudiera omitir la situación, real, efectiva del Uruguay de estos años. Si en 1968... era evidente que la lucha y la muerte regían las calles, cuando [la novela] se reedita en 1974 la muerte y el silencio ya habían iniciado su reino sobre el escenario de enfrentamientos recientes. Uruguay es ahora, en efecto, un gran museo abandonado que cuenta con un vasto exilio... (67).

Within the context of the abandoned museum, the short story "Los juegos" presents a violent sexual relationship which allegorically corresponds to the leftist forces of resistance in Uruguay. This allegory complements and strengthens the symbolism established by the title of the collection: the abandoned museum as an allegory for Uruguayan decadence and political decay. However, while the abandon museum alludes directly to a Uruguayan reality, the young lovers embody a political ideal. Their exuberant,

destructive sexuality enacts the complete destruction of the decadent institution; this parallels the ideals of the Uruguayan guerrilla forces, which aim to overthrow the corrupt bourgeois tradition.

The narration opens with two characters who have become bored and restless in an abandoned museum. Although they briefly entertain themselves in the constructive pursuit of translating ancient runes, they are soon contaminated by the museum's ambience of stultification and decay. To ward off boredom, they invent a "game" to entertain themselves during the endless hours of confinement. This game follows the guidelines of the traditional "hide-and-seek," with the variation that, upon discovering the hidden partner, the protagonist is able to exact the punishment of his/her choice.

During the time that they wrote the translations, the protagonists conformed to the unspoken rules governing the museum: as a place of contemplation, a museum is designed to arouse a respectful awe on the part of its spectators. It exudes an air of solemnity, silence and taboo; the exhibits may be seen, but never touched. Once the protagonists begin their "game," however, they abandon their previously respectful attitude, singlemindedly aiming to demolish the museum, its rules and everything it represents. They shatter the museum's silence with lovemaking and

raucous laughter, ruin historical documents and demolish priceless artifacts.

Moreover, during their very first experiment with this game, the players become sexually intimate. Significantly, this did not occur during their tranquil sessions of translation; rather, it forms a climax to the unbridled destruction occasioned by the game. Correspondingly, their lovemaking becomes yet another expression of violence and destruction:

> Ella marchó hacia mí firmemente, sonriendo por el éxito y la fatlidad de mi juego; cuando estuvo a mi lado, a debntellada, arrancó mis viejas vestiduras con los filos de su boca, y, debajo de los trapos confundidos (o sea, del viejo rey entontecido) no amamos furiosamente, por primera vez desde que nos conocimos... (87).

The narrator underscores the protagonists' subversive intent by asserting that they made love beneath the scattered vestments of "the old, stupefied king" (87). Not only does this sexual encounter rupture the authoritarian separation between political and private issues, but it ridicules and profanes the king, an archetype of sacred authority. Also, because the ideology of the military state intensifies

patriarchal values, their lovemaking simultaneously critiques both authoritarianism and its rigid notions regarding gender/sexuality. As I have shown in the second chapter, Ariadna's actions drastically revise her traditional role in Greek mythology; here she overrides authoritarian delimitations of the female role, displaying both aggressiveness and independence.

The lover's violent interaction may also be seen to directly challenge the Uruguayan government. Like the museum, the Uruguayan political apparatus is decadent and musty; the museum's severe rodent infestation points to governmental infiltration and corruption: the democratic administration under Juan María Bordaberry, proved incapable of action and ineffective in its policies. The military, to which it looked for support, responded with severe repression; this, in turn, provoked a mass exodus. Thus, the Uruguayan government, like the museum's intricate, empty hallways, became bogged down in bureaucracy, frozen in time and devoid of inhabitants.

Within the symbolic context of the museum, the solitary couple appears to call for political action. The violence associated with the their lovemaking here acquires a positive value because it aids to subvert and tear down the old order. This unrelenting destruction of the museum parallels the Uruguayan guerrilla's insistence upon

revolution. For these leftist forces, the old system must be destroyed before renewal may begin. Within the context of the story, this project attains success; the decayed museum crumbles to the ground.

5.2 Sexual and Political Dysfunction

The story "Lovely's," from the collection Cosmoagonías, portrays a very different aspect of Uruguayan reality. Rather than depicting political ideals, it explores the psychological impact of the human rights abuses committed by the Uruguayan secret police. Taken literally, it narrates the neurosis and psychological breakdown of a man who has recently become sexually impotent. On a symbolic level, however, this impotence is directly linked to the military regime, as the protagonist's problem dates from the moment he witnessed the forcible abduction of his neighbors by the secret police. Consequently, the protagonist's sexual problem becomes an allegory for impotence of another kind: the inability of Uruguayan citizens to guard against the unpredictable terrorism of the state.

As a result of the protagonist's impotence, his life is increasingly dominated by stress and neurosis; he is discomfited by any deviation from routine. Further, he experiences a profound aversion to anything phallic: not

only is he unable to make love to his wife, but he is also anguished by the insertion of the car key into the ignition. Since authoritarianism as an intensification of patriarchy is strongly identified with phallic power, the protagonist's impotence, as well as his discomfort with phallic symbols in general, may be read as inconformity with the military regime. Moreover, his increasing paranoia suggests that his problem stems from the possibility of victimhood. The protagonist's identification with the traditionally female role of passive victim, as opposed to phallic aggressor, leads to his emasculation.

This problem eventually leads him to seek professional help. Curiously, as the patient describes the details of his impotence and his neuroses, the doctor also finds himself unconsciously affected by these revelations; he nervously begins to fidget with a pencil which bears his last name. His manipulation of this phallic symbol suggests that he is trying to reassure himself of his own potency, an indication of complicity with the regime. The patient, seeing the analyst's surname, remarks that it is identical to his neighbor's. When the analyst questions him further, he is finally forced to confess how he witnessed, and later psychologically repressed, his neighbors abduction.

The patient's repression of this event is motivated not by trauma, but by self-protection. Correspondingly, he also

imposes this "amnesia" on his wife, another witness to the abduction; rather than rationally convincing her of the need for silence, he temporarily assumes the role of the torturer to force her to deny the evidence of her eyes:

> La llevé bajo la lámpara, como si fuera una prisionera, y le dije: «Tú no has visto nada, ¿me oyes? No sabes nada. Esta noche dormiste sin despertarte. Yo también...No conocíamos a los vecinos...Nunca hablaremos de esto con nadie...No lo sabrás...Lo habrás olvidado» (135).

The protagonist, as a possible victim of political violence, perpetuates this violence in his treatment of his wife. This reaffirms the protagonist's previous association of the phallus with both power and abuse. Just as the authoritarian government arbitrarily kidnapped and tortured Uruguayan citizens, the protagonist here treats his wife as a prisoner, using his authority over her to mimic interrogation.

Nevertheless, the protagonist's seemingly paranoid call for silence is justified the following day; the same officials call at their home to conduct an official interrogation. In response to their questions, the couple nervously asserts that they slept very soundly and did not

know their neighbors at all. Even after the police leave, the protagonist continues to insist upon denial; he invents a story about the neighbors traveling to Germany in order to satisfy his children's queries.

Given the protagonist's emphasis on secrecy, his worries are renewed following this unplanned confession in the psychoanalyst's office. Realizing that he has revealed far more than he intended to the doctor, he attempts to trivialize the account. He remarks, "Ahora lo recordé por el lápiz. De todos modos --dijo-- es un apellido bastante frecuente" (136). As the story ends, he changes the subject to "Lovely's," the pharmacy across the street.

This pharmacy, which occupies a privileged position as the story's title, continuously reemerges in the patient's discourse. Whenever the protagonist's repressed memories threaten to surface, he turns to the visual or mental contemplation of the view from the analyst's window: the familiar gray building with the dead tree, occupying a lot near the pharmacy "Lovely's." Thus, the drug store serves as a medium through which the patient relates his psychological problems to everyday reality.

The pharmacy "Lovely's" symbolizes the split between the protagonist's two simultaneous realities: that of superficial normality and that of hidden, institutionalized violence. This situation is characteristic of authoritarian

government. Commenting on the same phenomenon of duality in Peri Rossi's La nave de los locos, Mary Beth Tierney-Tello observes that: "This 'world split in two' refers specifically to the violence enacted by the military in concentration camps while maintaining a veneer of goodness and justice" (185-6). Hernán Vidal also draws this distinction, referring to "daily life split in two: the visible nation/the invisible nation" in which an extensive network of secret detention centers function behind apparently legitimate facades, undetected by the casual, non-politicized viewer (29-30).

A closer examination of "Lovely's" reveals that, in fact, the pharmacy both shares and symbolizes the protagonist's conflict between superficial normality and hidden atrocities. At first glance, the building presents an innocuous image; as a pharmacy, it is ostensibly a place which promotes healing. As the patient observes "Lovely's" from the psychologist's window, however, he reflects not on healing, but on the decadence and decay that undermines the supposed purpose of the store: the exterior of the old pharmacy is gray and tarnished, its vials of curative herbs are full of dust, and the only apparent sign of life is "un gato durmiendo en la vidriera. Un gato negro y somnoliento" (128). This deliberate specification of the cat's pigmentation and daytime torpor brings to mind the

superstitious association of black felines with adverse fortune, nocturnal activity and demonic power. In this case, the sleeping cat may symbolize the powerful presence of the latent but sinister secret police.

Although the protagonist strongly associates the pharmacy with sinister forces, the building in itself does not constitute a threat. Rather, it serves as a mental cue; whenever the protagonist looks at (or remembers) the pharmacy, his eyes are invariably drawn to the gray building beside it. This invariable association suggests that the pharmacy's mysterious neighbor, rather than the pharmacy itself, may be the real object of the protagonist's obsession. This mysterious gray building is never directly named, but the implication is clear: it is a government building --a police station or a detention center. The dead tree outside suggests torture and death. Within this context, the motive for the patient's morbid fascination with the pharmacy's ironic name ("Lovely's") becomes apparent. The quaint drugstore serves as a backdrop, or perhaps a front, for some very unlovely activities.

The underlying cause of his personal problem, the impotence for which he sought counselling in the first place, also becomes clear. His neurosis, the nervous, unresolved tension which does not allow him to engage in sexual intercourse, is in turn a product of his self-imposed

silence. This generates an endless circle of internal stress. Because his repressed memories tend to surface at unexpected moments, he is unable to trust himself, and thus exerts ever tighter control over the details in his life.

Unfortunately, psychoanalysis cannot solve his problem. The cure for paranoia is rooted in the realization that one's fears are irrational and groundless. The protagonist's account reveals just the opposite: his problem is symptomatic of a social malaise, not a personal one. Also, though he may have gained a certain relief by confessing the trauma he has experienced, the protagonist is well aware of the peril implicit in sharing his secret. He immediately regrets confiding in the doctor and once again suppresses his psychological burden. This renewed denial clearly indicates the failure of therapy; the protagonist ultimately concludes that the doctor is more dangerous than beneficial.

5.3 Authoritarianism as Sexual/Political Invasion

The short story "Sesión," from the collection El museo de los esfuerzos inútiles, also uses psychoanalysis to connect amorous and political concerns. In this case, however, the typical relationship between doctor and patient is inverted; the psychoanalyst discusses his wife's

infidelity on the phone with his client. As the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that this intrusive lover allegorically denotes the increasing military repression of the Uruguayan populous.

Significantly, the doctor is not troubled by the moral issue of his wife's unfaithfulness. In fact, she already has one lover whom he accepts without reservation. This lack of censure blatantly contradicts the military government's rigidly patriarchal attitude toward the family. Tierney-Tello observes that under authoritarian rule,

> women's role is maternal self-sacrifice for the good of the future of the nation (their children), the family sphere is a sanctum where clearly denominated sex roles prevail thus preserving the nation's moral fiber, and sexual relations, needless to say, are confined to matrimonial heterosexuality (6).

This being the case, authoritarian society would seek to blame/punish the wife for this betrayal of her family. The doctor, however, unequivocally blames the new lover, whom he views as an intruder:

> No puedo tolerar su existencia. No la acepto. No

> quiero saber nada de él. Ha venido a turbar mi paz. Es un intruso. Además, ¿qué dirá el primero? No entiendo por qué no ha podido conformarse con un amante solo. Por otra parte, se trata de un buen muchacho. Inteligente, formal, hasta de aspecto agradable. No tiene ningún derecho de hacerle eso. Me consta que él ignora por complete la situación. Hubiéramos podido llegar a ser amigos, aunque yo detesto la química, que es su especialidad (43).

The patient, meanwhile, offers the analyst a very abstract consolation: he assures him that bodies and people do not exist, only functions. Although he maintains a pretense of listening to the doctor's lamentations, his concentration is actually occupied by an evasive "reality," which he earnestly, yet unsuccessfully attempts to capture in a drinking glass. First it slips under the table, then slinks under the bed, where it hides among the dust balls.

This literal attempt to delimit and define reality to within rigid parameters parodies the military regime's narrow view of reality. This restrictive, self-affirming notion of reality is expressed through a rigorously univocal discourse; authoritarian regimes establish themselves as the exclusive producers of meaning by exerting direct control

over all forms of mass media. Andrés Avellaneda, in Censura, autoritarismo y cultura: Argentina 1960-1983, demonstrates how military governments construed plurality of meaning as a threat, referring to the Argentine decree to ban an encyclopedic dictionary because it employed, "a definitely marxist lexicon, through the attribution of meanings to words that, far from faithfully corresponding to the proper signification of the language, tend to substitute these for others that respond to and are typical of that ideology" (200).

Moreover, the patient's futile attempt to confine reality elucidates another motive for the doctor's antagonism towards his wife's lover. The analyst repeatedly associates his rival with the chemical and biological sciences. In his view, every scientific area of investigation shares the common trait of reducing reality to its tangible, superficial properties: "--La botánica, la química, lo mismo da. Una de esas horribles disciplinas científicas que explican el mundo por fuera" (43).

Although the lover is, in fact, a philosopher, the analyst continues to insist that both the lover and the wife approach this field of inquiry as if it were empirically scientific: "ella cree que la filosofía es una rama de la química" (43). In the doctor's view, the lover does not explore abstract notions which govern reality, as his

specialty would seem to imply. Instead, like the military regime, he works to narrow reality, turning abstract ideas into concrete measurements.

In the end, both doctor and patient agree that reality defies such attempts at definition and classification. As is demonstrated by the patient's failed attempts to trap it, the essence of reality becomes more elusive the harder one tries to pin it down. By the end of the story, the escaped reality has become "una diminuta mancha de polvo más oscuro" (47). Responding to this determination, the analyst and his patient subsequently abandon linear logic and standardized meanings in favor of symbolism and word-association as they explore their own reality, beginning with an explanation of the distant-sounding telephone connection:

> --Se trata de la tensión --añadí.
>
> --Un problema físico --argumentó.
>
> --Imposible de controlar desde una habitación -- precisé.
>
> --Especialmente, si la habitación está cerrada y no entra luz.
>
> --Y nadie ha abierto las ventanas.
>
> --Porque en la luz hay algo insoportable.
>
> --Las motas de polvo que comienzan a verse, como una invasión de partículas misteriosas y oscilantes,

devoradoras (45).

This terse dialogue soon veers from the subject at hand, escalating into a confession of psychological fears. The terror evoked by light and dust particles brings them once again to the consideration of the wife's new lover; he, like the "invading" and "devouring" dust, poses a threat to the analyst.

The doctor's description of his uncomfortable meeting with the lover leads to the continuation of their word associations. This time the patient, in his inverted role as "therapist," initiates the fragmentary exchange:

--En la habitación a oscuras.
--No me animé a encender la luz.
--Las partículas invasoras.
--Ni a decirle: «¡Váyanse!».
--Un acto: sus consecuencias.
--Poder deternerlas.
--Negarse al acto, es negarse a las consecuencias.
--Y el otro lo comete.
--Audazmente.
--Con arrojo: odio su valor.
--Sólo existe como contraste.
--No hay personas: hay funciones.

--Y el sometimiento que hace necesaria la existencia de una autoridad.

--Del poder.

--Frente al cual sólo caben dos posibilidades: la rebelión o la esclavitud.

--Pero son intercambiables: poco a poco el perseguidor se convierte en el perseguido. Y el perseguido, en el perseguidor (46).

Again, the doctor's fear of the lover is linked to the unsettling effect of the light and the invading dust particles which assault his home and his intimacy. As the conversation progresses, the significance of this invasion becomes clear: while the analyst has known about his wife's affair for some time, he has refused to take action. His inability to turn on the light indicates a voluntary blindness with respect to her lover. He is similarly incapable of verbally confronting the couple with his anger, as may be seen by the emphatic but unpronounced "¡váyanse!" This passivity ultimately brings unwanted consequences. Although he is afraid to act, the lover is not. The usurper audaciously invades the analyst's house and introduces himself to him.

As before, however, the focus of the conversation gradually shifts to a very different consideration. The

patient once again offers consolation through abstraction: "No hay personas: hay funciones" (46). Following this cue, the analyst proceeds to refer to the lover's invasion of his home in the abstract terms of submission and authority, of control and oppression; he maintains that in the face of this oppression, one's only options are rebellion or slavery. The patient's final response is that these two choices are interchangeable: the pursuer gradually becomes the pursued and vice versa. The analyst answers this affirmation by congratulating the patient on his perspicacity and terminating the conversation, thus validating the patient's conclusion as both legitimate and insightful.

The topic of control and oppression, which dominates the last part of their conversation, may easily be interpreted to refer to a political context, rather than a domestic one. In actuality, the fact that these issues conform the last, and most intense, part of the session, suggests that political oppression, rather than the wife's second lover, has been the central topic all along. Following this reading, the "lover" constitutes a metaphor for the military control, invasion of privacy and destruction of intimacy characteristic of fascist government.

This is consistent with the allegory of a

psychoanalytical session, the point of which is to get to the core of the patient's (or, in this case, the analyst's) psychological problem. According to this analogy, here the subject is ultimately able to reach his goal; he identifies the problem and conceives a solution with which to confront it. This may be perceived in the last lines of the exchange, which indicate that, in the face of an authoritarian government, the only options are rebellion or slavery to the institution. The analyst is apparently satisfied with the outcome which the patient finally proposes: he, the victim of persecution at the hands of the military police, will soon become their pursuer. Although he may at first have passively let this authority, symbolized by the "lover," attain power over him, he will eventually rebel. Having solved this fundamental problem, he closes the session.

Thus, the personal problem of the analyst's wife's sexual betrayal becomes an allegory for the political treason, the Uruguayan military's unconstitutional takeover of the presidency in 1973. Just as the analyst refuses to confront either his wife or the lover, Uruguayan citizens stood by passively while the military came to power.[47]

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[47]Edy Kaufman, the essay, "Political Parties and Redemocratization," affirms that the military intervention initially received some support from the populous, due to the traditional parties' corruption and loss of legitimacy.

However, as suggested by the analyst's consternation with the lover's subsequent aggression, the populous soon began to regret its lack of action.

The military usurpation of power rapidly lead to other, even more radical intrusions. Besides exercising rigid control over all forms of mass communication and maintaining a constant vigilance over the citizens through armed policemen, they also invaded the privacy and security of individual houses. Just as the analyst nervously recounts the lover's unexpected intrusion into his home, the military police subjected the people to secret, nocturnal invasions, kidnappings, interrogations and tortures. The analyst's final resolution to end this tyranny may thus be interpreted as an exhortation to armed rebellion.

This allegory, like that of "Los juegos" and "Lovely's," provides a unique view of Uruguayan reality. Just as "Los juegos" began by symbolically enacting the destruction of the corrupt democratic government and "Lovely's" describes the human rights abuses of the military regime which usurped power, "Sesión" comes full circle by once again inciting political action. He decides to rebel against his oppressor, the lover/military regime.

While the political referents of these stories are powerful, the sexual episodes in which they are encoded are equally so. By expressing female sexuality alternately

through violent game-playing and through multiple lovers, Peri Rossi blatantly contradicts the authoritarian regime's dictates of the female role: that is, marital fidelity and dedication to family. Conversely, the male protagonist of "Lovely's" deliberately shuns his socially-assigned masculine role precisely because of its phallic associations with military authority.

Further, Peri Rossi's connection between sexuality and the Uruguayan socio-political context effectively breaks down authoritarian barriers between political and private realms. Just as the Argentine mothers of the Plaza de Mayo used their private (and socially celebrated) position as mothers to publicly protest the abduction and torture of their children, Peri Rossi also presents sexuality as a highly political issue, protesting against both human rights abuses and sexual oppression. In sum, if authoritarian discourse, as Beatriz Sarlo posits, may be characterized by the reduction of meaning to unidirectional, preorganized lines of thought (40), then Peri Rossi's texts effect precisely the opposite; their sexual/erotic depictions not only critique authoritarian ideology, but revise and open up traditional discourse to yeild a diversity of meaning.

Conclusion

Throughout a literary career which spans more than three decades, sexuality and eroticism have gained increasing importance in Peri Rossi's writing. This prominence of amorous themes has not, however, provoked a commensurate response on the part of literary critics, who have preferred to explore other aspects of the author's writing, particularly her critique of socio-political ills. Nevertheless, Peri Rossi's sexual/erotic depictions strongly contribute to the presentation of these same issues; as we have seen, amorous passages serve to challenge traditional views of engenderment, social norms regarding sexuality and authoritarian government. Thus, this study endeavors to elucidate not only how the author fits into a tradition of erotic writing, but also how she employs sexuality and eroticism to advance specific social and political arguments.

The first chapter of this study examines the social and ideological context in which Peri Rossi's erotic writing is inscribed. The first issue I address is the Uruguayan military dictatorship of 1972-1984. Following a brief overview of historical events, I examine the impact of this regime both upon Peri Rossi's work in general and, more

specifically, upon the critical reception of her erotic themes. Uruguayan readers and critics unanimously embraced the author's narrative, which allegorically repudiated the abuses of the military regime. Peri Rossi's erotic poetry, in contrast, initially sparked severely negative reactions, as exemplified by the outcry following the publication of Evohé. This outcry stemmed from Peri Rossi's defiance of reader expectations on several levels: just as her public was conditioned to expect politically-oriented narrative, it was equally conditioned *not* to expect (nor condone) erotic verse from a woman writer, particularly *homo*erotic poetry portraying woman as both subject and object.

Just as the author defies reader expectations, she also expresses a subversive attitude toward traditional norms of erotic expression. The subsequent portion of this chapter introduces Peri Rossi's break with masculine conventions of erotic poetry. The author's homoerotic verse privileges a woman-centered perspective; at the same time, it employs relentlessly innovative uses of language and erotic images. Finally, I discuss this creative approach to language within a specifically erotic context, clarifying the author's understanding and implementation of such ambiguous terms as eroticism, sexuality and pornography.

The second chapter continues to explore Peri Rossi's subversion of masculine norms of eroticism, this time within

the context of human psychological development and canonically-inscribed gender roles. Peri Rossi critically incorporates theories by Freud, Lacan and Bataille into her work. While accepting ideas that pertain mainly to male development and masculine eroticism, she discards or revises their theoretical premises regarding female sexuality. Peri Rossi also applies a feminist, revisionist perspective to canonical mythology. She assimilates Biblical and mythological women into strictly contemporary contexts, where they perform acts or express ideas which blatantly contradict their traditional roles. By critically revising both psychoanalytical theory and canonical myths, Peri Rossi undermines established notions not only of gender roles, but also of gender difference.

The third chapter explores other means Peri Rossi employs to challenge notions of gendered identity. Through the creation of androgenous characters, irreconcilably ambiguous figures who embody both masculine and feminine traits, Peri Rossi extends her opposition of accepted views of gender to encompass sex as well. As demonstrated by one character's determination to change her sex/sexuality, the author's notion of sex/gender is based on performance, rather than either biological or social dictates.

The author further frustrates social expectations of gendered behavior through characters who refuse to comply

with their traditional gender roles. Despite social conditioning towards beauty, Peri Rossi's female characters consistently reject aesthetic considerations. Similarly, while the author's narrative emphasizes the pervasiveness of the chivalric code, male protagonists surmount the condescending, protectionist attitude toward women that this model of behavior implies. In other instances, female and male roles are juxtaposed; females display attributes generally assigned to males, and vice versa. The protagonists' consistent non-conformity to social gender roles, as well as their ability to become sexually ambiguous at will, constitute both a subversion of and a possible alternative to traditional gender identity.

Just as Peri Rossi questions social norms of gender, she also challenges social norms of sexuality. In the fourth chapter, I address Peri Rossi's use of sexual and erotic depictions to speak out against both socially-condoned sexual violence and erotic taboos. Female protagonists who engage in socially acceptable, heterosexual relationships are often sexually victimized by their partners and/or by other men in a position of authority. Peri Rossi further highlights the irony of this "economy of

sexual slavery"[48] by presenting socially tabued forms of eroticism in an exceedingly positive light. In particular, her writing openly explores the erotic possibilities of lesbianism, while denouncing homophobic social dictates. Yet, Peri Rossi addresses other socially prohibited expressions of eroticism as well. Her erotic depictions consistently favor individual choice and erotic freedom, rejecting such socially-imposed limitations to erotic activity as age or kinship. Both elderly matrons and emotionally mature children are seen to consensually engage in tender, respectful erotic relationships. Neither is blood relation an impediment to erotic liaisons; sexual desire toward parents, siblings and first cousins is represented as "normal." In defiance of social prohibitions, "incest" becomes synonymous with intimacy.

As I indicate in my fifth and final chapter, Peri Rossi uses sexuality to oppose political as well as social oppression. Her sexual depictions undermine the ideological precepts of the authoritarian regimes both by challenging preestablished gender roles and by breaking the authoritarian distinction between public and private spheres. Further, these same sexual episodes serve to

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[48]See Peri Rossi's interview with John Deredita, "La pasión desde la pasión..."; see also Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

allegorically portray different aspects of the Uruguayan socio-political reality. Specifically, a violent sexual game metaphorically enacts the destruction of the old, corrupt political order. In another case, a sexual dysfunction reveals the physical and psychological devastation occasioned by the secret police. Finally, a lover which threatens the stability of a marriage symbolically reflects the Uruguayan military's appropriation of power. In each of the above instances, sexual or erotic depictions surpass their literal meaning to create a richer illustration of a political reality. This, as we have seen in regard to social issues, is characteristic of Peri Rossi's erotic representations. While the inscription of a female-centered erotic discourse in itself counters patriarchal norms, the author uses sexual and erotic depictions to further highlight and critique specific elements of patriarchal/ authoritarian society, forging a complex relationship with a host of other issues.

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