

# **UCLA**

## **Mester**

### **Title**

Woman Scorned: The Silenced Woman of the Latin American Avant-Garde

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7dg900bg>

### **Journal**

Mester, 27(1)

### **Author**

Vinkler, Beth

### **Publication Date**

1998

### **DOI**

10.5070/M3271014511

### **Copyright Information**

Copyright 1998 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

## Woman Scorned: The Silenced Woman of the Latin American Avant-Garde

The avant-garde movements in Western literature of the early twentieth century, both in Europe and the Americas, mark a period of sweeping ideological and formal transformation. This is particularly true of the New World, where the desire for literary innovation was coupled with a powerful new socio-political consciousness. In "La identidad cultural de la vanguardia en Latinoamérica" Magdalena García-Pinto characterizes this consciousness as "cuando comienzan los pueblos que constituyen el todo latinoamericano a tomar consciencia de quiénes son, de las posibilidades que pueden explorarse como pueblos independientes de los poderes coloniales dominantes" (109). The dynamic of breaking away and beginning anew characterizes the Latin American avant-garde. Politically, during this period colonies recently independent from Spain struggled to engender their own national identities and systems. In a similar effort, a new generation of writers rejected bourgeois social values and the Academy sanctioned models of its predecessors, and launched a period of radical experimentation, stridently proclaiming its intention to violate all existing codes in order to raise its own voice, to develop its own literary aesthetic and social code. In an atmosphere electric with possibilities, young Latin American poets eager for change used literary manifestos as a medium for forging their visions of this new reality. They began the development of what García-Pinto describes as "otra consciencia . . . otra factualidad más en consonancia con los proyectos de la nueva imaginación creadora: hay que inventar un nuevo hombre, una nueva mujer, un arte nuevo, una sociedad nueva" (109). It is in the rhetoric of these manifestos that they not only reject the existing literary aesthetic, but also challenge the moral and social codes of previous generations. The writings of many principal male figures of the avant-garde in the Americas present startling new notions of beauty, poetry, and social conduct. However, the images the texts contain of the new woman are ambiguous. Some of these manifestos express a decidedly misogynistic attitude, using femaleness and images of women as pejoratives to condemn and dismiss the values of previous generations, and especially those of the bourgeoisie. Others, notably several foundational texts of Brazilian *Modernismo*, contain depictions of women as active participants in the new society they envision. These generally make

the rejection of the parnassian idealization of the "woman-object" a focal point of their rhetoric. However the new woman they propose can also be read as a recasting in avant-garde terms of what remains an essentially passive, supporting role for women. These portrayals of woman raise the question of the extent to which the "sociedad nueva" proposed by the young men of the Latin American avant-garde was at its core exclusively masculine. An examination of the images of women and the rhetorical use of the female in several of these manifestos in light of the circumstances of two Brazilian women poets of the early twentieth century suggests much regarding this question. It casts doubt on the degree to which the actual woman of the period was supported in her attempt to break out of her traditional role and raise a voice that was truly her own.

Some of the patterns characterizing the rhetorical treatment of the woman in the manifestos of the Latin American avant-garde can be traced to the texts that began the line of avant-garde manifestos: the writings of the Italian Francisco Tomasso Marinetti. In his 1909 "Manifeste du futurisme," generally viewed as the first manifesto of the European avant-garde, Marinetti polarizes his vision of the new world into a good-versus-evil conflict. He casts as positive—new, fast, technological, violent—masculine images: young men in speeding cars, a phallic locomotive penetrating the night, war.

9. Nous voulons glorifier la guerre, —seule hygiène du monde — le militarisme, le patriotisme, le geste destructeur des anarchistes, les belles Idées qui tuent, et le *méprise de la femme*.

10. Nous voulons démolir les musées, les bibliothèques, combattre le moralisme, le *féminisme et toutes les lâchetés opportunistes et utilitaires*. (emphasis mine)

The above passage unmistakably connects the female to that which Futurism scorns and rejects. It also reveals that integral to the exaltation of Marinetti's masculine images is the denigration and violent destruction of the female.

An echo of Marinetti's attitude resounds in the first manifesto of Mexican *Estridentismo*, "Actual N° 1: Hoja de vanguardia. Comprimido estridentista de Manuel Maples Arce," a broadside released by Maples Arce in Puebla, Mexico in December of 1921. Maples Arce's text makes use of the same vocabulary of speed, technology, and violence typical of Marinetti's manifestos, as well as making several direct references to the Italian's ideas.

In "Actual No 1" the only references to women portray them as appendages of the bourgeois establishment, whose values and aesthetic the manifesto categorically rejects. The text declares:

Cuánta mayor, y más honda emoción he logrado vivir en un recorte de periódico arbitrario y sugerente, que en todos esos organillerismos pseudo-líricos y bombones melódicos, para recitales de changarro gratis a las señoritas, declamatoriamente inferidos ante el auditorio disyuntivo de niñas fox-troteantes y espasmódicas y burgueses temerosos por sus concubinas y sus cajas de caudales. (73, emphasis mine)

The language of this passage offers two images of woman. The first is the "señoritas" and "niñas fox-troteantes." These women, no more than silly children, are portrayed as the ardent consumers of an inferior aesthetic described as "organillerismos pseudo-líricos y bombones melódicos." The characterization of these women as "espasmódicas" and forming an "auditorio disyuntivo" conveys their lack of ability to focus and suggests that they are flighty and less than mature adults. The second group is the "concubinas." The structure of the phrase "temerosos por sus concubinas y sus cajas de caudales" equates the concubines and the safes, transforming the former into no more than objects, just another possession of the inferior bourgeois male.

The manifesto continues in a similar vein as it uses a favorite avant-garde image, the streetcar, to distinguish the insipid bourgeois's lack of artistic perception from the superior insights of the *estridentistas*:

Al fin, los tranvías, han sido redimidos del dicitario de prosaicos, en que prestigiosamente los había valorizados la burguesía ventruda de hijas casaderas. (73, emphasis mine)

The existence of "hijas casaderas" appears in this passage as a pejorative used to insult and demean the bourgeoisie. Its tone dismisses the daughters as a worthless burden whose only purpose in life is to marry. These and other references in the manifesto belittle women, dismissing them as frivolous, empty-headed, and generally useless. This characterization of women condemns the whole class, the bourgeoisie, with which the text associates them.

The manifesto's approach toward women becomes even more derogatory later in the text when it metaphorically compares the products of the literary aesthetic that the *estridentistas* oppose to the matter expelled during a woman's menstrual period:

Exito a todos los poetas, pintores y escultores jóvenes de México . . . a todos los que no han ido a lamer los platos en los festines culinarios de Enrique González Martínez, para hacer arte (!) con el estilicidio de sus menstruaciones literarias. (77, emphasis mine)

Once again, the text employs a distinctly female metaphor to degrade the tradition it rejects and seeks to replace.

The manifesto's images and rhetoric thus tend to marginalize women from any positive connotation in the language of *Estridentismo*, conveying the message that femaleness is, at best, superficial and, at worst, utterly deserving of contempt and disgust. The absence of positive female images in the text subtly but distinctly reinforces this message.

The editorial-manifiesto "Inicial" from the Argentine review *Inicial: revista de al nueva generación*, written for the publication's first issue (Buenos Aires, October 1923) and signed by Roberto A. Ortelli, Brandán Carrafa, Roberto Smith, and Homero M. Guglielmini, also uses the association with femaleness to express contempt for their predecessors. The editors of *Inicial*, like the *estridentistas*, associate female images with the rejected literary aesthetic of the previous generation. As part of a long litany of "contras," they oppose that aesthetic to their own call "a todo lo que hay de valiente, decidido y sano en las filas de la nueva generación" (4). They declare themselves "contra los *afeminados* de espíritu, que ponen en verso el gemido de las *damiselas* y hacen ensueños sobre la ciudad futura," and "contra todo lo que hay, en arte, en política de engaño, de impotencia y de feminidad" (emphasis mine). The equation drawn in this last phrase reveals the motivation behind "Inicial's" anti-female stance. These young writers, seeking both literary and political power, use "feminine" as equivalent to "weak" and "impotent." In her study *Lenguaje e ideología: las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia*, Francine Masiello notes the strong identification of "masculine" with the power structures, literary and political, that the "nueva generación" seeks to control. "Inicial's" language becomes a place "donde se convierte al escritor en un ejemplo de integridad viril," and Masiello concludes that "ahora el escritor de vanguardia pide el discurso masculino para sí mismo" (76). The polarization of male-female into good-powerful versus weak-despicable continues the avant-garde tradition begun with Marinetti, wherein the marginalization of the woman and the silencing of her voice become a tool for elevating and empowering a new generation of young males.<sup>1</sup>

The manifestos of the principal Brazilian *modernistas* differ in tone from both "Actual No 1" and "Inicial" and tend to create a rhetorical place for a new woman. Absent from their language is the direct male-good versus female-evil comparison. This tendency probably reflects the critical role female artists played in the Brazilian avant-garde. For example, the forces that were later to produce the 1922 *Semana de Arte Moderna*, the event marking the birth of the Brazilian avant-garde, gathered around painter Anita Malfatti's controversial exhibition of modern art in 1917. The rhetoric of these texts does, however, give reason



to suspect that the male authors do not necessarily envision women enjoying the same radical liberation from social restriction that they seek for themselves.

In 1921, Menotti del Picchia published an early document of Brazilian *Modernismo*, "Na Maré das Reformas," in the *Correio Paulistano*. Like his Spanish American counterparts, Menotti focuses on the image of the woman to embody the charge of superficiality he levels at the parnassian poetry of the previous literary generation: "Na poesia, Ela, que tem mãozinhas para teclados, olheiras de monja, vestidinhos outonais, lábios assim, gestos assado, é revogada por um decreto da estética nova" (189). In this article, Menotti does not present a contrasting image of the new woman, but in "Arte Moderna," the conference he presented on February 15, 1922, the second night of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, he describes in detail an "Eva ativa," a pivotal figure in his contrast of the *modernista* aesthetic with that of the parnassians.

First, Menotti makes clear the *modernista* preference for real, modern women: "Às princesas de baladas dos castelos roqueiros, preferimos a datilógrafa garota. Não queremos fantasmas! Estamos num tempo de realidades e violências" (288). Later in the text, the poet elaborates on this point:

E a mulher? Fora a mulher-fetice, a mulher-cocaína,  
a mulher monomania, l'eternelle Madame!

Queremos uma Eva ativa, bela, prática, útil no lar e na rua,  
dançando o tango e datilografando uma conta  
corrente; aplaudindo uma noitada futurista e vaiando os  
tremelicantes e ridículos poetaços de frases inçadas de termos  
raros como o porco-espinho de cerdas.

Morra a mulher tuberculosa lírica! No acampamento da nossa  
civilização pragmatista, a mulher é colaboradora inteligente e  
solerte da batalha diuturna, e voa no aeroplano, que reafirma  
a vitória brasileira de Santos Dumont, e cria o mecânico de  
amanhã, que descobrirá o aparelho destinado à conquista dos  
astros! (288)

The adjectives used in these passages surround the *modernista* conception of its "Eva" with an air of vitality and assertiveness very different from her parnassian counterpart. She is "ativa," "na rua, dançando o tango," and "colaboradora inteligente e solerte." More ambiguous, however, are the activities that the *modernista* male sees as demanding her intelligence and vitality. She is "útil no lar," but also can be seen "datilografando uma conta corrente," "aplaudindo uma noitada futurista," and she "cria o mecânico de amanhã, que descobrirá o aparelho destinado à conquista dos astros!" In one reading, this con-

struction of the new woman describes a public, working woman, no longer a fragile "princesa" hidden in the recesses of the home. On the other hand, the actions presented as comprising the new female role can be interpreted as rather servile. The woman serves "usefully" in the home and in business. She reacts to the "noitada futurista" by applauding and booing, but doesn't appear to be a presenter in the spectacle. Her airplane flight reaffirms a male victory, and she raises "o mecânico de amanhã," preparing the way for his glory, but apparently not striving to conquer the stars herself. Thus, even her more active role remains substantially passive. The new woman this text describes has exchanged the parnassian piano keys for the *modernista* typewriter keys, but her role essentially follows and supports a male lead. Although the *modernista* manifestos call for radical change, they remain curiously superficial with regard to the particular restrictions the traditional social structure placed on women.

A consideration of the reception of the work of two female Brazilian poets during the early decades of this century suggests that this prevalent depiction of the woman in the manifestos of the Latin American avant-garde goes beyond the merely rhetorical. The topic of Brazilian women poets of the early twentieth century immediately evokes the name of Cecília Meireles, one of the most revered figures in contemporary Brazilian letters. However, despite the stature and importance of her work, Meireles cannot be said to have asserted a particularly female voice in her poetry. In a brief article entitled "Poesia da mulher no Brasil," Brazilian poet and critic Astrid Cabral notes that "a precedência da ordem estética sobre a natural mostra que para Cecília a distinção de gênero era irrevelante. Ela . . . se colocava antes como pessoa do que como mulher, mais atenta para a problemática do ser em geral." Thus, in her work Meireles did not directly challenge the traditional female role. In contrast, in the work of Gilka Machado, a poet who immediately preceded Meireles chronologically, the question of the female condition and the development of a distinctly female poetic voice are critical.

An acute consciousness of the social and intellectual limitations restricting women appears as a recurrent theme from Machado's first book, *Cristais Partidos* (1915). In the poem "Ânsia de Azul," the poet declares:

De que vale viver  
trazendo, assim, emparedado o ser?  
pensar e, de contínuo, agrilhoar as idéias,  
dos preceitos sociais nas tropes ferropéias;  
ter ímpetos de voar,

porém permanecer no ergástulo do lar  
sem a libertação que o organismo requer;  
ficar na inércia atroz que o ideal tolhe e quebranta...

.....  
Ai! antes pedra ser, inseto, verme ou planta,  
do que existir trazendo a forma de mulher. (7)

The poet here alludes to the freedom she desires using the metaphor of flight, reminiscent of the flight of Menotti's "Eva ativa." However, rather than seeking to be "útil no lar," she describes this traditional female space as an "ergástulo" that cruelly imprisons her spirit. For Machado, even the lowest, free-living thing enjoys a better fate than a woman. This yearning for spiritual and intellectual freedom voiced in "Ânsia de Azul" shares much in common with the call for aesthetic and social freedom sounded by the young male authors of many manifestos of the Latin American avant-garde.

Machado further explores the theme of freedom in relation to the female spirit, particularly female sexuality, imprisoned and repressed by societal norms, in the sonnet "Ser Mulher," also included in *Cristais Partidos*. Here Machado develops the idea of the frustration provoked by the conflict between woman's true nature and the limitations society imposes on her. The poem begins by describing the purpose towards which woman is born to strive.

Ser mulher, vir à luz trazendo a alma talhada  
para os gozos da vida, a liberdade e o amor;  
tentar de glória a etérea e altívola escalada,  
na eterna aspiração de um sonho superior; (7)

Later, the sonnet repeats the theme of the imprisonment and subjugation of woman found in "Ânsia do Azul." In this stanza of the poem, the woman's soaring beginning is crushed by the man whom she sought out to be her companion in her life's journey.

Ser mulher, desejar outra alma pura e alada  
para poder, com ela, o infinito transpor;  
sentir a vida triste, insípida, isolada,  
buscar um companheiro e encontrar um Senhor . . . (7)

This betrayal contributes to the overall feeling of frustration the sonnet conveys, that being a woman means "ficar na vida qual uma águia inerte, presa/nos pesados grilhões dos preceitos sociais" (7). Society's restriction of the woman, enforced by the "Senhor," prevents her from striving for the heights for which she, like the eagle, was destined.

Despite this early recognition of the probable futility of her effort, in other poems Machado takes up a struggle that mirrors the call of the avant-garde manifestos to challenge and break with the existing



social code. She lyrically and erotically expresses her female sexuality. In creating daring images for a woman in the early decades of this century, she raised a truly new, authentically female voice.

The year of the *Semana*, Machado published *Mulher Nua*, a collection which includes the sonnet "Eu sinto que nasci para o pecado." The poem presents the poet's dangerous balance between authentic self-expression and social acceptability.

Eu sinto que nasci para o pecado,  
se é pecado, na Terra, amar o Amor;

.....

Filha de um louco amor desventurado,  
trago nas veias lírico fervor,  
e, se meus dias à abstinência hei dado,  
amei como ninguém pode supor.

Fiz do silêncio meu constante brado,  
e ao que quero costume sempre opôr  
o que devo, no rumo que hei traçado. (151)

Machado's poetry became her venue for the expression of sexual feelings that she, as a woman, wasn't supposed to have. Meanwhile, she carefully lead a chaste life, dedicating her days to abstinence.

Machado's balancing act failed, however, and as a young widow with two children, Machado suffered severe consequences for having dared to raise her own, radically female voice, a voice that did not conform to that expected of a "poetisa." Although in 1933 she won the title "a maior poetisa do Brasil" in a contest sponsored by the review *O Malho*, in later years her work did not receive continued recognition. In his preface to her *Poesias Completas*, Fernando Py explains:

Marcada pelo escândalo de su ousadia, sofreu a incompreensão daqueles que só liam retorcidamente os seus versos, julgando-a devassa ou libertina quando quisera apenas reformular umas quantas idéias aceitas sem discussão pela maioria, e explorar, dentro dos limites de sua poesia, as sensações ligadas à sensualidade e ao erotismo, em que aliás foi pioneira. Esse pioneirismo, contudo, foi-lhe bastante funesto. Seu nome desapareceu dos manuais da história literária, ou, quando mencionado, o vem de maneira "condescente," perfuntória, em duas ou três linhas inexpressivas, quase sempre atado à cauda dos "grandes." (XXI-XXII)

Given the rhetoric of the avant-garde manifestos, especially those of the Brazilian *modernistas*, it seems that Machado's poetry and literary "pioneirismo" would have been embraced and supported in its challenge of the bourgeois status quo. However, none of the young lions

of *Modernismo* apparently saw Machado's struggle as connected their own.

The case of Gilka Machado raises the question of the existence of other unknown, or barely known, Latin American women writers of the early twentieth century whose work might contain the voices of truly new women for the new century. The young male writers of the avant-garde in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America focused tremendous energy and creativity on their own struggle to break free from what for them was an oppressive tradition, and assert themselves as new men with new visions for a new reality. Ironically, it seems they were unable or unwilling to understand and support their sisters' parallel and even more arduous struggle. Despite the presence and collaboration of some women in the literary movements that swept the Americas during the 1920s, the avant-garde spoke with a male voice. This voice appears to share with the tradition from which it so vehemently sought to separate itself a fundamental scorn for a female role as anything other than woman-object, woman-helpmate. As was the case for its fathers and grandfathers, it was as if the assertion of this new male voice were dependent on the marginalization and silencing of the female voice.

—Beth Vinkler

Benedictine University

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a study of these questions in the context of the French avant-garde, see Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*.

#### WORKS CITED

Cabral, Astrid. "Poesia da Mulher no Brasil." *Letras e Artes*. November, 1987: n. pag.

García-Pinto, Magdalena. "La identidad cultural de la vanguardia en Latinoamérica." *Identidad cultural de Iberoamérica en su literatura*. Ed. Saúl Yurkievich. Madrid: Editorial Alhambra, S.A., 1986. 107-117.

Machado, Gilka. *Poesias Completas*. Ed. Fernando Py. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Editora Cátedra, 1978.

Maples Arce, Manuel. "Actual No 1: Hoja de Vanguardia: Comprimido Estridentista de Manuel Maples Arce." *Las vanguardias literarias en Hispanoamérica*. Ed. Hugo J. Verani. Rome: Bulzoni, 1986.

71-78.

Masiello, Francine. *Lenguaje e ideología: las escuelas argentinas de vanguardia*. Buenos Aires: Librería Hachette, S.A., 1986.

Marinetti, F. T. "Manifeste du futurisme." *Marinetti et le Futurisme*. Ed. Giovanni Lista. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1977. N. pag.

Menotti del Picchia. "Na Maré das Reformas." *História do Modernismo Brasileiro: I-Antecedentes da Semana de Arte Moderna*. Ed. Mário da Silva Brito. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Civilização Brasileira, S.A., 1964. 187-191.

Menotti del Picchia. "Arte Moderna." *Vanguarda Européia e Modernismo Brasileiro*. Ed. Gilberto Mendonça-Teles. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes Ltda., 1986. 287-291.

Ortelli, Roberto, Brandán Carrafa, Roberto Smith, and Homero M. Guglielmini. "Inicial." *Inicial*. October, 1923: 4.

Py, Fernando. Prefacio. *Poesias Completas*. Gilka Machado. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Editora Cátedra, 1978. XXI-XXII.

Suleiman, Susan Rubin. *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990.