

Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl

Claire T. Solomon  
*Oberlin College*

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### Recommended Citation

Solomon, Claire T. "Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19.1 (2017): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2896>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2896)

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**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**   
**Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (1929-2016)**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
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**Volume 19 Issue 1 (March 2017) Article 6**  
**Claire Solomon,**  
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss1/6>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 19.1 (2017)**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (1929-2016)" Claire Solomon analyzes the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope as an apparatus of capture (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand*). More precisely, her article models how such tropes imply modes of reading anachronistically and metafictionally that decontextualize gestures of resistance and conflate female writers, performers, and characters across time and place. Solomon offers a situated formalist reading of Argentine playwright Salvadora Medina Onrubia's 1929 drama, *Las descentradas*, revealing an avant-garde counterpoint of melodrama and metafiction as an ambiguous alternative to capture.

**Claire SOLOMON**

### **Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (1929-2016)**

As a thought experiment, we might close our eyes and imagine that the contemporary pop trope known as the Manic Pixie Dream Girl (MPDG) consists of a type of time travel. For example: the protagonist of an anarcho-feminist play is dragged off the stage in 1929 and teleported, mid-soliloquy, to a softly lit Hollywood meet-cute. Here, she is suddenly playing a very different role with the same aesthetic raw materials: quirky outfit; possibly holding a mandolin she doesn't know how to play; not sure how she got here. Hijinks ensue. Yet any strange consequences of time travel are attributed to the MPDG's eccentricity.

As silly as this mind game may seem, I propose that the Manic Pixie Dream Girl Trope (MPDGT) can be viewed as an apparatus of capture. The MPDGT scavenges culture for gestures of resistance such that errant, questionable, radical, decentered and otherwise nonconforming femininity is arrogated to its purview. Conflating fictional characters, authors, historical figures, and events, the trope strains off their specificity. Lightly pathological, largely mythic, the character is the latest version of the eternal feminine: any strange consequences of time travel are attributed to the Manic Pixie Dream Girl's intrinsic eccentricity.

Of course, any trope can be viewed as an apparatus of capture—the very notion of a trope presupposes that an individual text, artifact, or phenomenon is resignified as a type. In Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, it "enters the major language" (*A Thousand*, 105-6). The weak bonds of historical context give way to the stronger attraction of the mainstream, which the trope enters as a universalizing heuristic.

Although MPDGT is only the latest iteration of a long history of gender tropes, the author is still surprised to find that her students found historical feminist texts uniquely ridiculous. Feminist protagonists of early twentieth-century experimental fiction, theater, and poetry looked to them like quirky, harmless Manic Pixie Dream Girls. Whereas the category of the avant-garde seemed to explain or justify some texts, experimental writers who dramatized their own marginalization by race, ethnicity, and gender seemed to trigger a different way of reading for identity, which in turn seemed to preclude a sustained attention to form.

If you'll permit me an evolutionary analogy, there are many reasons organisms resemble each other. A familiar example is the monarch butterfly, whose bright orange and black appearance—we were taught as children—warns predators that it was poisonous, while the harmless viceroy imitates its wing pattern and coloring to fool predators. However, a better model postulates that in fact both species benefitted by "co-mimicking" each other (Ritland and Brower, "Mimicry-related"). To see the MPDGT as simply an inauthentic imitation misses the mutual mimicry that is an intrinsic part of the survival of both avant-garde and mainstream, regardless of positive or negative values ascribed to either.

If the mainstream "captures" the avant-garde, then the avant-garde also captures the mainstream. A practical definition of the avant-garde is its attempt to "liberate" aesthetic potential from institutional constraints (Bürger, "Avant-garde" 696), or "take a measure of power" (Enríquez-Loya, "Sustenance...Interview" 13) in the dual sense of the word measure: seizing an amount of power by revealing the hidden truth of power. To some extent, avant-gardes are built to fail: paradoxically, their mainstream success signals their irrelevance (Bürger, "Avant-garde" 705). To "rescue" the avant-garde from the popular by remitting to a deontological notion of quality or appeal to authority is therefore as much of a capture as its popularization.

The MPDGT implies a way of reading that illuminates (by its exaggerated *reductio*) how writers' marginalization becomes a master trope for decoding their writing. It shares key forms and functions with what Anthony Reed dubs "racialized" reading—the ways in which black experimental writing is translated into a set of "properties" used to hypostasize an essential transhistorical black "folk spirit" (Reed, *Freedom Time* 11-12). In order to recover the disruptive quality of experimental historical writing, it is necessary to distinguish it from what it has come to look like in the present.

Like other versions of the eternal feminine, the MPDGT organizes female characters into a master narrative by which political and aesthetic experimentation and innovation is reinterpreted as remitting to an ontologically stable category of unstable femininity, as the MPDGT machine-translates its diverse gestures into the nattering diary of a universal MPDG.



Figure 1: To illustrate the homogenizing effect of the MPDGT on the millennial imagination of historical female figures, Beckett Koretz superimposed the face of actress Zooey Deschanel—known for MPDGT roles—onto Sylvia Plath, Emma Goldman, Rosie the Riveter, a Suffragette, Joan of Arc, Hillary Clinton, a 1930s Spanish *mujer libre* [free woman], Judith Butler and others. Beckett Koretz, *The Lost Boys' Guide*, Oberlin college (copyright release to the author).

I use Deleuze and Guattari's term "capture" throughout this discussion for three main reasons. First, it elides a priori judgments of the value of terms such as homage, cooptation, remake, capitalization, appropriation, recycling, plagiarism, and stealing. Second, it includes both the material and the symbolic: the means of production and the production of meaning. Finally, it understands tools and symbols, product and process to be mutually constitutive: interpretation is understood as a product of its material and symbolic conditions *and* to affect those conditions. Thus, it allows us to talk about life and work while naming this metonymic slippage (Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand* 424-73).

First, I explain how the MPDGT emerged in film criticism and proliferated in pop culture. Second, I put the MPDGT in the "time machine" of deliberate anachronism in order to deduce the processes by which it works. Finally, I offer a situated close reading of Salvadora Medina Onrubia's anarcho-feminist thesis drama, *Las descentradas* (1929) to recover its formal specificity from the tendency to read it as autobiography. I propose that the play decenters both its melodramatic romance and political "thesis" to exceed the limits of gender and genre.

Rabin coined the term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" to describe Kirsten Dunst's character in the 2005 film *Elizabethtown* (2005) in the first installment in an *A.V. Club* series called "My Year of Flops" that ran from 2007-2011. In the now well-known review, Rabin writes: "Dunst embodies a character type I like to call The Manic Pixie Dream Girl (see Natalie Portman in *Garden State* for another prime example). The Manic Pixie Dream Girl exists solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures. The Manic Pixie Dream Girl is an all-or-nothing-proposition. Audiences either want to marry her instantly (despite The Manic Pixie Dream Girl being, you know, a fictional character) or they want to commit grievous bodily harm against them [sic] and their immediate family. As for me, well, let's just say I'm not going to propose to Dunst's psychotically chipper waitress in the sky any time soon" ("The Bataan" <<http://www.avclub.com/article/the-bataan-death-march-of-whimsy-case-file-1-emeli-15577>>).

By definition, the MPDGT exists in the measure that the male protagonist needs her. She has no backstory, no inner life. In a review predating the term, Roger Ebert describes Natalie Portman's aforementioned character as "a local girl who is one of those creatures you sometimes find in the movies, a girl who is completely available, absolutely desirable and really likes you." He adds, "[her] success in creating this character is all the more impressive because we learn almost nothing about her, except that she's great to look at and has those positive attributes" ("Garden" <<http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/garden-state-2004>>).

Her male consort is usually a failure by conventional standards (though the MPDGT appreciates him just as he is). This character has been dubbed the "Grumpy Manic Dream Fellow" (Whitworth, "Rise" <<http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2013/11/rise-of-the-manic-grumpy-dream-fellow.html>>). He may be a perpetual adolescent, or merely a nebbish—timid, weak, ineffectual, producing nothing of value and offering only his grumpy self-expression in exchange for the MPDGT's complete availability. She makes no demands on the nebbish, but has boundless energy with which to power through his rebuffs. She bursts through his gray life in rainbow montages, reminding the nebbish and audience alike of simpler times (milk shakes, the world's largest pencil, Sharpie tattoos, not suffrage, Jim Crow, or the real estate bubble).

In coining the term, Rabin took a jab at the writers who used the MPDGT to hide bad character development and the audience for liking it. Though Rabin mocked the "fevered imaginations" of the trope's creators, who conflated a formal trope with an audience response, and—he imagined—shared the latter's laughable desire, in his mockery he criticizes the trope for hypostasizing a type of girl that isn't real, but also uses it to criticize a real girl who perhaps shouldn't be the way she is: "I once had a

Manic Pixie Dream Girlfriend who induced terrifying *Elizabethtown* flashbacks..At the risk of waxing hyperbolic, it was the single most annoying thing in the history of the universe. It was as if she was trying to bully me into falling in love. That's the essence of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl: She doesn't ask for our love, she demands it. But love isn't enough. She also needs to be romanticized, idealized, fetishized, worshipped, and adored. You know, all the stupid shit young men do. She glares impishly in our direction menacingly with a look that says, "You better fall in love with me, fuckface, or I will open up a big can of joy on that ass" (Rabin, *My Year* 5).

The comic flexibility that allows Rabin to run seamlessly from discussing a character to deadpanning about his real-life Manic Pixie Dream Girlfriend makes it impossible to define the trope as only textual: its definition conflates the textual and the metatextual. Obviously, Rabin is going for comedy, but by overtly contradicting his own definition of the MPDG "as a means to an end, not a flesh-and-blood human being" (3), such that "once life lessons have been imparted, the Manic Pixie Dream Girl might as well disappear in a *poof!* For her life's work is done" (4), he reinforces how the term is really about having it both ways.

What began as a tongue-in-cheek complaint about a stock indie film character has taken on an intertextual pull. Reconceiving film history as an eternal dance of nebbishes and MPDGs, a video by pop culture website *Flavorwire* called, "75 Years of Manic Pixie Dream Girls" went viral showing that the trope of the charmingly unstable ingénue – often attributed to recent indie cinema – actually goes back decades" (Cieplak-Mayr von Baldegg, "A Montage" <<http://www.theatlantic.com/video/archive/2012/07/a-montage-of-75-years-of-manic-pixie-dream-girls-in-cinema/260236/>>). Virginia Pasley expresses bemusement at the trend: "these days, MPDG has come to mean every female role that's comedic or even the smallest bit quirky. In fact it's starting to feel like an undeserved insult, tarnishing even the classics of comedy." A propos of "Wild Things: 16 Films with Manic Pixie Dreamgirls" (Bowman, Hyden, Murray, Pierce, and Rabin. "Wild Things": <<http://www.avclub.com/article/wild-things-16-films-featuring-manic-pixie-dream-g-2407>>), she continues: "Hepburn, an MPDG? Really? I hesitate to argue with someone over his own original definition—but it seems unfair to lump screwball comedy ditzes together with MPDGs. In the film, Hepburn sings love songs to a pet leopard and accidentally knocks over a dinosaur skeleton, yes—but is she manic? Does she save Cary Grant's nebbish character from monotony—or is their pairing just ... funny?" (Pasley, "What, exactly" <[http://www.slute.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2012/03/16/zoey\\_deschanel\\_what\\_exactly\\_is\\_a\\_manic\\_pixie\\_dream\\_girl\\_.html](http://www.slute.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/03/16/zoey_deschanel_what_exactly_is_a_manic_pixie_dream_girl_.html)>).

Yet in 1938, *The New York Times* panned Hepburn—Hepburn, that is, not her character or her acting alone— as "breathless, senseless, and terribly, terribly fatiguing. She succeeds, and we can be callous enough to hint it is not entirely a matter of performance" (Nugent, "Bringing Up Baby" <<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF173FE161BC4C53DFB5668383629EDE>>).

In trying to save a classic, Pasley underestimates the extent to which the trope is only the latest in a long history of defining what is good or bad about women in a way that not only doesn't distinguish fact and fiction but actively conflates them. The classics, we might say, are tropes all the way down. Rabin himself came to regret ever inventing the term, calling it an "unstoppable monster": "at this point in my life, I honestly hate the term... Seven years after I typed that fateful phrase, I'd like to join [Zoe] Kazan and [John] Green in calling for the death of the "Patriarchal Lie" of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope. I would welcome its erasure from public discourse. I'd applaud an end to articles about its countless different permutations. I would welcome its erasure from public discourse" ("I'm Sorry" <[http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im\\_sorry\\_for\\_coining\\_the\\_phrase\\_manic\\_pixie\\_dream\\_girl/](http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/)>).

In Fact, when Rabin returned to *Elizabethtown*—the original inspiration for the MPDG—in 2010, he had already reversed his judgment: the film was not a fiasco, but a "secret success" (Rabin, *My Year* 248). Dunst's character is the "chief agent" in a "conspiracy of joy" (247). She is "the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow" in a "benevolent world" in which "when Jessica Biel dumps you, you literally have your next gorgeous love interest on the other line." He had been "looking at the film all wrong" (245): "it's important to remember that *Elizabethtown* is an American fairy tale. Fairy tales play by a different set of rules" (246). "Crowe wants to show us what life could be like if we were all just kinder, more hopeful, and had better taste in music" (248).

Salvadora Medina Onrubia (1894-1970) was a playwright, poet and political contrarian who has become an icon of Argentine anarcho-feminism. Although her literary work was successful, it has received little critical attention—her life effectively upstaged it, so her experimental dramas are read as political autobiography.

Like many avant-garde writers, Medina Onrubia deliberately blurred the lines between life and work. This non-distinction should, however, be understood to encompass both artistic decisions and a set of social constraints that limited—and to some extent continue to limit—the meaning of her writing to that of a testimonial. Castillo has argued that in Latin American literary history the very existence of female authors before 1980 was denied and repressed as a "scandalous oxymoron" (Castillo, "Figuring" 156); and a considerable corpus of feminist criticism is justly dedicated to deconstructing this oxymoron. The question of the metafictional relationship of Medina Onrubia's life and work is thus not, in this paper, whether it exists, but rather how to balance it with other readings.

A cover story in the magazine *Todo es Historia* exemplifies how Medina Onrubia's life story has been popularized: she was "the wife of the legendary Natalio Botana, director of *Crítica* magazine...famous for her ideology and her arbitrariness" ("Salvadora Medina Onrubia, la esposa del legendario Natalio Botana, director de la revista *Crítica* [...] excepcional por su ideario y sus arbitrariedades" [Abos, "La venu Roja" [3]; all translations mine]). She is "the red Venus," a "beautiful and polemical woman." The words "Bella" and "polémica" mitigate each other, as do "ideología" and "arbitrariedad," decontextualizing both her activism and writing as if they were both merely aspects of an eccentric femininity. Without belaboring the notion of the "male gaze" in a popular magazine, though Medina

Onrubia lived to 78, all the photos of her are as a young woman: like the MPDG, she is "immortally fixed at the physical and mental age of nineteen-and-a-half" (Penny, "I Was" <<http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2013/06/i-was-manic-pixie-dream-girl>>; See also Schwyzer, "The Real-World"; O'Ryan, "8 Quirky"; Sarkeesian, "Tropes").

The juxtaposition of Medina Onrubia's popular fame with the dearth of attention to the formal dimensions of her writing is, ironically, itself a topic of scholarship. Nora Mantelli and María Angeles Sardiello argue that we must allow her works to "interpellate the epistemic canon" and bemoan the tendency for female authors to be regarded "as eternally underage," their "ethereal femininity" "displacing consideration of their literary production" ("Sus cualidades femeninas y sus rasgos etéreos ocupan un primer plano en la crítica, desplazando, de este modo, la evaluación de su producción literaria" [Mantelli and Sardiello, "Salvadora" [126, 128], my trans). In Argentina, there has been recent interest in performing her 1929 play, *Las descentradas*, but these too use the author's image as a selling point, presenting the play as politically transparent quasi autobiographical (Percovich, "Marina"; Soto, "Pasión").

I don't want to overstate *Las descentradas*'s opacity: the work shares many aspects of a political "thesis drama" and in fact uses the conventions of "teatro libertario" (anarchist theater) by baldly stating a political message the so-called "thesis" (see Suriano, "Paradoxes," for a history of the genre). Criticism has tended to explicate Medina Onrubia's anarcho-feminist "thesis" as a primary task: May Summer Farnsworth analyzes the play as a critique of marital dysfunction and women's lack of rights (*Staging Feminism* 64-68); Azucena Joffe and María de los Angeles Sanz affirm that the romantic melodrama is merely the pretext for the thesis, and that the author "strips bare the soul of women" ("Salvadora" 4); Finet reads the play as both the author's "most autobiographical and most avant-garde" ("Salvadora Medina" 335).

The unintended cumulative effect of this trend is that anarcho-feminism, the avant-garde, and the play all seem to mirror each other. Is the avant-garde really synonymous with anarcho-feminism? Is a thesis-drama—conventional since the 1910s—really avant-garde in 1929? If not, what is avant-garde about this particular play?

At least one aspect of the "thesis" was out of step with anarcho-feminism in 1929: the negative portrayal of women's suffrage. By the 1920s, multiple reorientations in Argentine anarcho-feminism had tempered its earlier purism. For example, Medina Onrubia herself supported the socialist feminist Alicia Moreau de Justo in her 1919 campaign for female suffrage (Guzzo, *Las anarquistas* 60). In the play—as we shall see—the main character ridicules suffragists, whom she characterizes as "feas marimachos" ("ugly butches" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* [60], all translations mine). Such a negative view of suffrage resonates far more with the late nineteenth-century anarcho-feminists' refusal to make any demands of the State, distinguishing themselves in fiery terms from the socialist reformists (Molyneux, "Ni dios" 144).

Similarly, in the context of avant-garde, the play cannot be read as merely quoting an existing, offstage slogan, and that the slogan merely means what it says. Medina Onrubia's thesis must thus be understood as creating a dialogue with the audience. As Finet points out, "in its essence, anarchism 'decenters' power, in the same way that Salvadora Medina Onrubia 'decenters' her heroines." ("dans son essence, l'anarchisme 'decentre' le pouvoir, de la même façon que Salvadora Medina Onrubia 'decentre' ses héroïnes" [Finet, "Salvadora" [323]). It doesn't make sense to treat the thesis as though it meant the same thing spoken onstage as shouted at a protest or written in a letter from prison. Similarly, Medina Onrubia's use of melodrama cannot merely be the vehicle delivering the thesis, but must be examined as part of a deliberate aesthetic confusion.

The ostensible purpose of the thesis in a thesis-drama is to state the political meaning of the action. However, rather than explaining the melodrama of *Las descentradas*, the thesis offered at the start of Act Three deconstructs it. Further, it initiates a counterpoint of action and reflection, whereby the main characters' actions contradict the thesis. This deconstruction is not explained by the thesis, nor is the thesis explained by the play's ending.

An initial, rather obvious difficulty in reading the thesis as a call to action is that it is delivered as a dialogue between the protagonist, Elvira, and her best friend, Gloria—including occasional disagreements. A second difficulty is that the thesis is presented entirely in relation to what happens in an eponymous novel within the play, written by Gloria, such that any prescription for action outside the theater must be reconciled with the fact that even within the play the thesis remits to a *mise en abyme*.

As we shall see, once this dialogic and metafictional thesis is articulated, far from pinning down meaning it sends the play off its axis. To analyze the play as a reflection or embodiment of this thesis—subduing the melodramatic plot, as Finet argues, to the political message—misses what is unleashed through the *interplay* of melodrama and critique. As its title suggests, the play itself becomes decentered, such that the main action of the melodrama in Acts I and II careens off in a different direction in Act III. According to Althusser, the decentered structure of Brecht's plays had the effect of "correcting" the melodrama via a sort of "dialectics in the wings" (Althusser, *For Marx* 142-3); *Las descentradas* does its main political move, to borrow Glen Close's phrase, by enacting anarchism on a textual level and refusing to give the audience the answer (See Close, "Roberto" 3).

Before the thesis is presented, the protagonist, Elvira, is unhappily married and bored by polite society. She lets off steam by sulking and playfully berating their servants, and her emotional instability earns her the epithet of "decentered" ("descentrada"). She insists on speaking the working-class dialect of *lunfardo*, annoying the snobs of her milieu, who profess not to understand her. "It's a charming language," Elvira insists, "I've adopted it for my personal use." ("Un idioma encantador. Yo lo he adoptado para mi uso personal" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* [31]). She insists on drinking *mate*—a quintessentially Argentine beverage—to annoy her husband (Farnsworth, *Staging* 65-6). She

flirts with Juan, her best friend's fiancé, Juan, by insinuating that she has denounced her husband to the police (this turns out to be true).

Elvira's "decentered" behavior initially strikes the audience much as it does the other characters: she seems inauthentic, baffling and capricious. However, this inauthenticity is ambiguous: is the character meant to alienate the audience through her posturing, or might her preference for national *mate* and *lunfardo* enlist a knowing complicity with an audience wishing to take sides against upper-class snobbery? Alternatively, the audience may see her as Juan eventually does, which he summarizes with the rich, untranslatable common Argentine slang use of Freud, literally "a vulgar hysteric" ("una histérica vulgar" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* 83]), meaning a vulgar flirt. "Look you're really unstable" ("Mirá que sos desequilibrada"), someone tells Elvira at a party, "you see things like in novels." "Don't you realize," Elvira responds, "the woman I'm talking about only exists in literature?" ("Ves las cosas como en las novelas." [...] "¿No te das cuenta de que la mujer de que yo hablo solo pertenece a la literatura?" [41]).

Regardless of whether the audience initially empathizes with the main character, her decenteredness extends quickly into her relationship with Juan, which in turn extends into the decenteredness of Buenos Aires with respect to the capitals of modernity: "You didn't used to, nor do you now, seem like a woman to me," Juan tells her. "Your voice used to disconcert me. Chatting with you, it occurred to me that you could be a guy. A good pal with whom I could have delicious after-dinner conversations" ("Usted no me hacía, ni me hace, el efecto de una mujer. Su voz me desconcertaba. Charlando, se me ocurre que podía ser usted un muchacho. Un buen camarada con quien podía tener deliciosas conversaciones de sobremesa" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* 31]). Then he bemoans the social impossibility of this:

"JUAN- If only we were in North America...

ELVIRA- And if we were North Americans..."

("Si estuviéramos en Norteamérica..." "Y fuéramos norteamericanos..." [32]).

This impossibility is emphasized when Elvira's husband, López, bursts in on them and falsely accuses Elvira of adultery, and pressures her to sign a confession. This melodramatic misunderstanding reveals the extent of political corruption, the excessive power Elvira's husband holds as a government minister, and emphasizes women's lack of rights (despite Elvira and Gloria's explicit lack of interest in civil rights).

However, the melodramatic misunderstanding duplicates another misunderstanding in progress: Juan has just made his move, right after Elvira rejected him. "I don't love anybody" ("Yo no quiero a nadie") she says, and urges him not to turn their friendship—"a good and noble thing"—into a bad one. Juan leans in: "He goes to kiss her. She, inert, stupefied, gazes into space. But the door opens violently and López [et al] enter" ("Va a besarla. Ella, inerte, entontecida, mira el vacío. Pero la puerta se abre violentamente y entran López [et al]" [Medina Onrubia 52]).

The double misunderstanding also brings two forms of injustice, which Elvira links when she signs a false confession. Paradoxically, this frees her: "ELVIRA – But write, go ahead. Write that I betray him, that I'm nothing but a lie for him. That all of me is hate and lies... That my words, my gestures, my life... All of it, all of it is a lie... [...] Oh, my friend... I'm very calm [now]... I even feel happy... The torture of every day had to end somehow... I won't see him anymore... I'll be able to be "me"... What do I care about the rest?" ("Pero escriba, sí... Escriba que lo engaño, que toda yo soy una mentira para él. Que toda yo soy odio y mentira... Que mis palabras, mis gestos, mi vida... Todo, todo es una mentira... [...] Oh, amigo mío... Si estoy muy serena... Si casi me siento feliz... Si la tortura de todos los días tenía que terminar de cualquier modo... No lo veré más... Podré ser "yo"... ¿Qué me importa lo otro?" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* 54]). By betraying herself, Elvira simultaneously reveals the emptiness of the legal categories involved: wife, lover, friend are meaningless, as is the possibility of justice that—within *Las descentradas*—is elsewhere.

The play's thesis is powerfully placed immediately after this first climax. At the start of Act Three, Elvira and Gloria express—in their own words—their analysis of themselves. Ironically—and melodramatically—it is by understanding herself in political terms that Elvira is liberated emotionally, and able to fall in love with Juan.

The thesis reframes Elvira's "decentered" behavior as a direct result of the repressive social landscape, yet also casts political action as useless. Though we have just seen a direct consequence of Elvira's lack of rights, she and her friend Gloria agree that to give "men's rights" to women would not solve their problems. In Gloria's words: "We are the sufferers, rebels against our stupid condition as dolls in a bazaar... Understand me properly. Not as a woman. We don't want the rights of men. They can keep them... To know how to be a woman is admirable. And we only want to be women in all our splendid femininity. The rights we want are only the ones that our talent provides us..." ("Somos las que sufrimos, las rebeldes a nuestra condición estúpida de muñecas de bazar... Entiéndame bien. No de mujer. No queremos los derechos de los hombres. Que se los guarden... Saber ser mujer es admirable. Y nosotras solo queremos ser mujeres en toda nuestra espléndida feminidad. Los derechos que queremos son solo los que nos dé nuestro talento..." [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* 61]). For Sylvia Saïtta, this passage evokes "one of the central theses" of anarcho-feminism: "its resistance to bourgeois and reformist feminism in its quest to obtain civic and civil privileges." ("su resistencia al feminismo burgués y reformista en la búsqueda de la obtención de las prerrogativas civiles y cívicas" ["Prólogo" 13], my trans). Indeed, the thesis justifies political inaction, consonant with the richest symbolic anarcho-feminist tradition; yet its dialogue also ties the cascading betrayals of the third act (political, social, and interpersonal) back to the metafictional crisis of representation, which complicates its retro-purism.

In essence, Gloria postulates that—as she has explained in her novel—there are "three types of women": housewives ("women of the symbolic crochet" ["mujeres del crochet simbólico"]), suffragists

("those ugly butches" ["esas feas marimachos"]) and those decentered women (*descentradas*), like themselves, who are beyond literary representation:

"ELVIRA – How I've searched in all our literature for a new type, a living being, a woman... And what a fruitless search! Dolls, dolls dolls!...

GLORIA – Dummy! You have to do that... You see, we... if they "literarize" us, for example, my case, yours... all the critics in a unanimous chorus would ridicule the author, they would insult him. They would say that there was no logic in the matter, that the characters were arbitrary, their psychology unbelievable, the devices melodramatic. God only knows what they would say. Wait till you see what they tell me about my book" ("Cómo he buscado en toda nuestra literatura un tipo nuevo, un ser vivo, una mujer... ¡Y qué infructuosa búsqueda! ¡Muñecos, muñecos, muñecos!" "¡Tonta! Hay que hacer eso... Ya ves, nosotras... si nos 'literarizaran', por ejemplo, mi caso, el tuyo... todos los críticos en coro unánime se burlarían del autor, lo insultarían. Dirían que no había lógica en el asunto, que eran arbitrarios los personajes, inverosímil su psicología, folletinescos los recursos. Sabe Dios lo que dirían. Ya versa lo que me dicen a mí de mi libro" [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* [60]]).

The dialogue defamiliarizes the ongoing melodrama—concretely, the budding, ill-fated romance between Elvira and Juan—while simultaneously counterposing to the sad love story the friendship of Elvira and Gloria who are, in this scene, representing themselves. Although Elvira had initially rejected female friendship, complaining to Juan early in the play that conversation with women: "bores me, bugs me, annoys me" ("Me opia, me estufa, me esgunfia" [Medina Onrubia [31]], and despite Elvira and Gloria's declaration that they are unrepresentable, the scene itself represents both the possibility of female conversations and friendship and uses this dialogue to in fact represent and transmit their shared reality. This female dialogue is thus both the refuge in which the *descentradas* can be themselves and also the means of representing themselves. In this way, it is not only that Medina Onrubia retells the sentimental stories that have been told a thousand times, as Saïtta observes, "to contradict their ideological assumptions and reveal everything they have silenced" ("para contradecir sus presupuestos ideológicos y poniendo en escena todo lo que esas historias mantenían en silencio" [Saïtta, "Prólogo" [10]], but is also repurposing melodrama's tropes in a structural way: using the audience's expectations against it, by drawing them in and then alienating their empathy, proposing and rejecting morality and ultimately shirking any satisfying resolution, offering no end to the love story—neither the expected happy ending nor expected tragic one. Instead, the play's melodramatic climax—a triple betrayal—is a culmination without resolution.

Juan turns out to have been still secretly engaged to Elvira's friend Gracia this whole time. Elvira realizes simultaneously that she has been betrayed by Joan and unwittingly betrayed Gracia, and that she has betrayed herself by tethering her happiness to a man, who would only end up being her husband, "like the other one... do you understand? Like the other one..." ("Y sería mi marido, como el otro... ¿comprendes? Como el otro..." [Medina Onrubia, *Las descentradas* [79]]. Elvira accepts her ex-husband's offer to support her financially if she will leave Argentina. Gloria has her own problems: her children were taken away from her long before the play began (but remembered climactically just as she drops off her completed novel at the printer). Together, they decide to flee the country. "We must flee, they've beaten us, the vulgar people have won, the happy people, those who" ("Hay que huir, nos han vencido," Gloria urges, "nos han vencido las gentes vulgares, las gentes felices, esas que" [Medina Onrubia [83]], and her voice ends mid-sentence, without any punctuation, as the curtain falls. Gloria's voice ends mid-sentence, without any punctuation. The stage directions read, curtly, "They cry, embracing" ("Lloran abrazadas") followed by "CURTAIN."

There is more than one way to read this abrupt ending in the middle of a sentence. Certainly, the interruption of the sentence can reiterate the play's thesis that feminine self-expression is socially foreclosed; and Elvira and Gloria's banishment from Argentina is therefore a kind of exile from representation. But how does this account for the fact that it was their own decision to leave? We can equally see Elvira and Gloria as refugees, or even fugitives, fleeing Thelma-and-Louise-style from the very impossibility of representation they delineated in the thesis. Thus, having represented what was forbidden—having effectively staged their own escape from the literary conventions: not content to decry them in the thesis dialogue, they interrupt the play's ending in a metatheatrical coup by stopping the denunciation mid-sentence. This, in turn, can be seen per Althusser as inviting a supplemental participation from the audience, who can finish the sentence with its own interpretation of who is at fault; but it can equally represent a turning away from "those who" have won and back a return to the friendship ("They cry, embracing") as both refuge and representation.

In any of these permutations, the ending remains aporetic. Something is left over that goes unexplained. In this way, regardless of whether Elvira and Gloria escape or are exiled from representation, the dialogue they open through the decentered dialectic of melodrama and metafiction continues after the curtain falls.

The slippery thinking by which male characters in *Las descentradas* misread Elvira, defusing critique into quirkiness, is a useful analogue for the process by which readers of the play are forced to reevaluate their initial interpretation of Elvira's decentered behavior.

As a deliberate anachronism, we could read the MPDGT into the play as my students did: Juan becomes the *nebbish*, initially looking like a good-hearted if sickly man, blooming under Elvira's attention; once she is divorced, free to be with him, it turns out he has been engaged to Gracia all along. The attraction of nebbish to MPDGT is predicated on her unattainability; like the "real life" Manic Pixie Girlfriend—like Rabin's—is a contradiction in terms not primarily because the MPDGT is fictional, but because the girl exceeds the trope's conventions.

By "capturing" the MPDGT, we don't release an anarcho-feminist dream girl from captivity; on the contrary, we release the anarcho-feminist "thesis" from an idealized consensus into a productive con-



tradition: rather than smoothing over the tension between the two terms, the aporetic ending of *Las descentradas* deconstruct its own thesis, suggesting that the true didactic potential of theater is to teach not what to think, but how to think.

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Author's profile: Claire Solomon teaches Latin American and comparative literature at Oberlin college. Her interests in scholarship include cross-cultural comparison of modern and contemporary literary, and cultural movements of the Americas. Solomon's publications include *Fictions of the Bad Life: The Naturalist Prostitute and Her Avatars in Latin American Literature 1880-2010* (2014), "In the Wrong Place at the Wrong Time: Roberto Arlt's *El fabricante de fantasmas* as Minoritarian Cultural Production in 1930s América," *Política Común* (2014), and "Reconsidering Anti-Semitism and White Slavery in Contemporary Historical Fiction about Argentina," *Comparative Literature* (2011). E-mail: <[csolomon@oberlin.edu](mailto:csolomon@oberlin.edu)>