

Who's Pulling the St(r)ing? Gender and Class in Armonía Somers's "Muerte por alacrán"

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Armonía Somers began to publish her novels and short stories in the 1950s and, in the years that followed, received several literary awards from Uruguayan compatriots. Despite their artistic merit, however, her narratives have not received the same international attention as those of Latin American contemporaries, perhaps because of their iconoclastic feminism and dark, cruel humor. A few in-depth critical studies of her works have demonstrated that they challenge patriarchal institutions and traditional representations of masculinity and femininity. According to Potvin, Somers's works "deconstruct all established institutions (art, knowledge, church, law, sexuality, science, psychoanalysis, family, motherhood, etc.) that constitute the pillars of Latin American socio-political foundations" (227). In his study of *Tríptico Darwiniano* (1982), Arbeleche addresses Somers's negation of *lo humano* as the culmination of the evolutionary process and her "destrucción absoluta de la plataforma tradicional donde se asienta nuestra civilización" (151).

The story "Muerte por alacrán", first published in the collection *La calle del viento norte y otros cuentos* (1963), offers a good example of the author's early subversive tendencies and typical narrative strategies that she employed throughout her career. Like many of her works, this tale unfolds in a realistic but unusual situation that is transfigured or filtered by the complex and disturbed internal reality of the primary character whose perspective or voice informs the narration of events. (Visca, 12-13). This narrative strategy explains the presence of both crude reality and antirealist symbolism or allegory in the same text. In "Muerte por alacrán," the author deconstructs the benevolent, idealized image of the patriarchal nuclear family, exposing its hypocrisy and showing that none of its members leads a happy, productive, ethical, or moral life. Against it, she juxtaposes unbridled nature to consider men's conflictive definitions of masculinity and femininity and the ways they are expressed in society. In this allegory, unrepressed male nature, represented by the scorpion of the title, attacks patriarchy, represented by the Günter family, momentarily dissolving its civilized veneer. The family's German surname, the daughter's proper name, Therese, and the family's observance of the British custom of high tea attest to the presence of northern European cultural ties and influences among the power elite. The collapse of institutionalized culture, the text suggests, is rooted in the social class system, and power relationships that try to deny male sexual aggression ultimately impede an unassailable masculine hegemony.

The plot is as follows: in providing firewood to a wealthy family, the truck drivers do not tell the servant who receives it about a scorpion hidden among the logs until the firewood is stowed in the house because the servant's manner strikes them as effete and superior. The servant uses his search for the deadly insect as a pretext to rifle through his masters' bedrooms, revealing their desires and betrayals as well as his own. Ironically, after thus poisoning the household, the scorpion is found to be still in the truck, ready to strike one of the drivers.

The fear of hostile encroachment against the patriarchal home from *the lower orders* is immediately suggested as the delivery men drive up to the Günter summer mansion. Phallic as a caterpillar, they penetrate the two extensions of the denaturalized, domesticated lawn: "Puso el motor en segunda y empezó a subir la rampa de acceso al chalet, metiéndose como una oruga entre dos extensiones de césped tan rapado, tan sin sexo, parecía más bien el fondo de un afiche de turismo" (592). Later, the lawn is compared to a sophisticated tapestry that depicts a hunting scene. Both lawn and garden and tapestries and posters reflect man's attempt to control nature by transforming it into a civilized, ordered, non threatening backdrop for his pleasures. The drivers then question the need for so much fuel during the summer, until they glimpse the huge chimneys, which resemble sentries on a fort: "Hasta que las chimeneas que emergían como tiesos soldados de guardia en las alturas de un fuerte, les vinieron a dar las explicaciones del caso" (592). Large mastiffs appear, marking their territory, also drawn in terms that suggest geopolitical conflict: "Justo cuando

el segundo perro dejaba también su pequeño arroyo paralelo, que el sol y la tierra se disputaron como estados limítrofes, los hombres saltaron cada cual por su puerta, encaminándose a la parte posterior del vehículo" (593). Thus, the initial descriptions of the patriarchal home emphasize social antagonism through references to forts, sentinels, border disputes and the need to control the threat of nature. In aggrandizing the defensiveness of the home and the scale of the conflict, they suggest both allegory and an ironic humor. As in the author's story "El despojo," the main form of all interactions seems to be "attack and defense" (Biron, "Armonía", 19). The house stands as a bastion against transgressive external forces, both isolating and defending the patriarchy from perceived threat. Ironically, the threat comes from *inside*.

The unpleasant realities the family would keep at bay are represented by the scorpion that has sneaked into the firewood. The drivers warn the servant Felipe, who receives the wood, only as they speed away: "¡Eh, don, convendría decirles a los señores cuando vuelvan que pongan con cuidado el traste en los sillones! Hay algo de contrabando en la casa, un alacrán así de grande que se vino entre las astillas" (594). Their potentially deadly indifference and derision of a fellow worker underscore the lack of universal masculine cohesion. They feel no solidarity with either the very rich master or the stiff, elegant servant, who gives directions like an orchestra leader: "...surgió el sirviente, seco, elegante, y duro, con expresión hermética de candado, pero de los hechos a cincel para un arcón de estilo. —Por aquí—dijo señalando como lo haría un director de orquesta hacía los violines" (593). From the drivers' perspective, the servant may look stylish, but he's only hardware and a socket, rather than a prong, at that. Moreover, these tough drivers are not to be confused with delicate stringed instruments. Implicit in the nod and glances they exchange is an imputation of effeminacy to Felipe. The term *don*, a title of respect that would not be used to address someone from the servant class or without a proper noun or surname, is ironic. It reflects the drivers' perception of the servant as someone whose refined appearance and authoritative demeanor are pretentious, unmanly, and inappropriate for a worker who, like them, is marginalized from the center of power. The fact that the drivers are unnamed indicates that they are identified only in terms of the service they provide. The two servants, Felipe and Marta, the cook, lack surnames, again indicating that their identities are shaped by their service to the family and that they have no public life outside the mansion. The lack of markers of individualization clearly denotes their lower status in the patriarchal power paradigm, but the story is mainly narrated from the perspective of the lower echelon, marginalized men. It begins and ends with the drivers' criticism of the rich owners and the stuffed-shirt servant. In their final statements, they gloat over having destroyed the latter and opine that the ostentatiously rich inhabitants of the mansion deserve to die (600). In his study of Somers's works, Perera San Martín alludes to the author's displacement of focalization from the center, for which he coined a term: *focalización al sesgo* (33-34). Focalization in this story, however, not only reflects a stylistic choice but an ideological position by expressing perspectives from the powerless periphery.

Language defines social class as much as wealth, privilege, and position in power relations. Not only can it be used to mock; it also exposes levels of education that mark a difference, for example, between the drivers and Felipe. They hold in contempt the refined and therefore somewhat effeminate servant of the mansion who addresses them with confidence and authority. Subaltern groups develop codes or signifiers to identify and to communicate with each other and to exclude the rest. On the trip to the mansion, the drivers use vulgar expressions and terms that are like a truckers' code: "Tanto viaje compartido había acabado por quitarles el tema, aunque no las sensaciones comunes que los hacían de cuando en cuando vomitar alguna palabrota en código de tipo al volante y recibir la que se venía de la otra dirección como un lenguaje de banderas" (591-92). They express their masculinity not only through their coarse speech but in their delight in disregarding all traffic laws established by masculine authority (592). Their willingness to face death on the road or in the form of the scorpion speaks to their bravado or their brutish attempt to control fear.

In any case, their language and actions *invite* the reader to ponder how men define masculinity and what it means to them to be male in a male hegemony. Biological attributes are not enough; being masculine also entails a set of prescribed attitudes and behaviors, which, according to Biron, include authoritativeness, aggressiveness, self-assurance, courage, and rejection or repudiation of all attributes that might be considered feminine (10-11). The inconsistencies or dichotomies apparent in the drivers' behavior support Biron's observations on the conflictive and contradictory nature of masculinity in patriarchal society. She claims that the patriarchal system validates the manliness of aggressive behavior that violates or transgresses even its own laws. Moreover, the same behaviors and attitudes valued in the power elite's public displays are sometimes viewed as transgressive when performed by men who are marginalized politically, socially, economically, or sexually; hence, the drivers' derision of Felipe's conceit (11). Being biologically male does

not insure loyalty to patriarchal structures nor participation or privilege within them nor bonding with other marginalized male groups.

When the patriarchal realm is breeched, in fact, the patriarch and his nuclear family are temporarily absent, leaving its defense in the hands of the servant. Socio-political allegory is suggested by terms drawn from the political arena to depict state relationships. One recalls, for example, that the ground marked by the dogs' urine is a zone disputed by two bordering states. The drivers refer to the scorpion as contraband; Felipe refers to it as "un embajador de alta potencia sin haber presentado sus credenciales" (594) and "un intruso" (596). Surveying the vast area to be searched, the servant concludes that "el campo de maniobras de un huésped como aquel era inmenso" (595). He cannot think of a viable excuse to postpone it until the family returns at 5:00 P.M. for tea, and the crisis is likened to an epidemic that must be addressed, even if the Minister of Health is away on a trip (595). The agonizing difficulty entailed in maintaining order is reflected in Felipe's view of the home's interior as a jungle, a monster: "Siempre aquel interior había sido para él la jungla de los objetos, un mundo completamente estático pero que, aun sin moverse, está de continuo exigiendo, devorando al que no lo asiste. Es un monstruo lleno de bocas, erizado de patas, hinchado de aserrín y crines, con esqueleto elástico y ondulado por jibas de molduras" (594). His words suggest the latent, savage cruelty implicit in civilization's demands for a prescribed order. Moreover, the unchanging system, his world, is like a great mouth or other elastic, swollen, undulating organ, requiring eternal service; these images are charged with sexual anxiety.

The search for the scorpion motivates Felipe to enter the bedrooms of each family member: the adolescent daughter Therese, the master, the wife. Since the story consistently privileges the view from below, his "quest" fittingly begins in the subterranean area of the mansion – the bowels – where the cook and downstairs maid Marta preside. When he looks at her through a glass of juice she has given him, he finds that she appeals to his "appetite". His position of power down here makes *him* the devouring mouth: "él la miró a través del líquido del vaso. Buena, pensó, parecida an ese tipo de pan caliente con que uno quisiera mejorar la dieta en el invierno. Aunque le falte un poco de sal y al que lo hizo se le haya ido la mano en la levadura... Ya iba a imaginar todo lo demás, algo que vislumbrado a través de un vaso de jugo de frutas toma una coloración especial, cuando el pensamiento que lo había arrojado escaleras abajo empezó a pincharle todo el cuerpo..." (595). Moments later, however, as he rakes through the firewood, and dust and dirt fill the air, he glances again at Marta and sees her in a different way: "Luego miró la cara de asombro de la cocinera. A través del aire lleno de partículas, ya no era la misma que en la transparencia del jugo de frutas. Pero eso, la suciedad de la propia visión es algo con lo que nunca se cuenta, pensó, en el momento en que las cosas dejan de gustarnos" (595). Although Felipe refers to her as the only "elemento humano de aquella soledad", he compares her face, intelligence, and disposition to a cow and feels she is "tan sin alcance comunicativo" that he cannot ask her for aid. She interprets his glance at the floor as an inspection and quickly gets a broom to sweep the pieces of bark "con humildad de inferior jerárquico" (597). While she recognizes the male's superior rank, her servility possibly also suggests his own, and she affords him little comfort.

Transformed into something very different from the elegant butler, he paws through the firewood like a dog in search of a bone. These terms underscore his loss in value due to his failure to protect the home from invasion, his failure to successfully assume the role of the benevolent custodian traditionally assigned to the Patriarch: "Así fue cómo empezó a perder su dignidad de tipo vestido de negro. El polvo de la madera mezclado con el sudor que iba ensuciando el pañuelo, lo transformaron de pronto en algo sin importancia, un maniquí de esos que se olvidaron de subastar en la tienda venida a menos" (595). In the absence of the repressive social authorities, the servant regresses, as represented by the soiling of the starched, white shirtfront with which he was identified by the drivers. The image also dehumanizes Felipe by transforming him into a mannequin, which like the marionette, is a only an inanimate object whose movement from place to place is controlled from without. Felipe, in turn, dehumanizes the maid whom he compares to a cow and bread. According to Picón Garfield, Somers typically uses this type of imagery to emphasize the helplessness, the abandonment or the misfortune of Humanity. (44). Through a complex chain of association, even the image of warm bread is transformed into a mocking, cruel derision of the hapless servant. (44). In the absence of the power that validates Felipe's masculinity and punishes any regressive behavior, Felipe also declines into a state of instinctual sexuality. In each of the bedrooms he subsequently visits, his transgressive thoughts about the transgressive behavior of their owners leap to the foreground.

Felipe knows that pubescent Therese has no fireplace and therefore no firewood, but he starts in her bedroom. He thinks of her pear-like breasts that have just appeared this summer, as he violently tears the

sheets from the bed. He lunges at an imagined intruder among her lingerie "con el asco que produce la profanación" (596). His disgust may be a reaction to the scorpion's violation or his own; since he has watched the girl grow each summer since the day of her birth, there are incestuous overtones. He lays the blame at the door of the ancient madame, nature: "Aquella oportunidad de conmovirse sin que nadie lo supiera era una licencia que la misma naturaleza le había estado reservando por pura vocación de alcahueta centenaria que prepara chiquillas inocentes y nos las arroja en los brazos" (596). He may see nature as scheming female facilitator in league with women to rationalize his behavior, but the phallic scorpion is the direct cause of his penetration. Although disturbed by these feelings, he continues to violate Therese's space by reading her diary, a small, dark book that he improbably mistakes for the scorpion. He reads a passage from the day of her arrival, where she notes that she felt strong sensations all through her body when she hugged him. He drops the diary to the floor as though stung; it remains open, and his mind's eye transforms it into the female vulva: "El hombre dejó caer la pequeña agenda color alacrán sobre el suelo. Justamente volvió a quedar abierta en la página de la letra menuda. La miró desde arriba como a un sexo, con esa perspectiva pensó con que habrían de tenerlos ante sí los médicos tocólogos, tan distinta a la de los demás mortales" (597). His examination of the diary/ sexo reveals the girl's loss of innocence, if not her virginity, in her laments at leaving behind the guys, the dancing, and nine-ingredient cocktails, named for their group of nine. Equally disturbing to Felipe is Therese's noted desire to repeat the sensation of sexual arousal, or the *marea*, she experienced while hugging him by recalling it at night, in bed, listening to a particular record. He tries to distance himself clinically from his almost incestuous desire for the thirteen-year-old daughter of the family patriarch, yet he has invaded the girl's privacy exactly like the scorpion invades the sanctity of the patriarchal home. By placing himself in the space of a gynecologist, he pretends to the privileged power position and disinterested distance of a physician over the girl who is using him for her sexual gratification. However, the gynecologist's power also rests on knowledge of the female body; Felipe's lack of knowledge as well as his forbidden lust for a child is aptly expressed by his barely audible questions: "¿Cómo sería, cómo será en un niña? —masculló sordamente—" (597).

Moving on to the father's bedroom, Felipe ransacks a safe, the combination to which he has been entrusted, again proving himself disloyal to his employer and the patriarchy. He finds documents from Günter's brokerage firm that prove that the master has committed fraud and stolen from his clients. He also manipulated his wife's lover into bankruptcy and suicide. The patriarch's god-like authority rests mainly on his economic power, which he wields to his personal advantage without scruple or solidarity with other men.

The desire for the socially forbidden object culminates in his visit to the bedroom of *la gran Teresa*, the mother. She is far from the pure, passive, self-sacrificing mother of patriarchal tradition. Her room reeks of sensuality, and Felipe reels as he penetrates it, recalling her red hair, her perfumes, and, once, her legs entwined with her lover's beneath the dining room table. By now, his search is frankly destructive. Chaos, he realizes, is the true state of things, not the unnatural, illusory order imposed by patriarchal society. He associates *la gran Teresa* with a delicious natural disorder, symbolized by her unmade bed, that nevertheless threatens to infect: "En realidad, eso de deshacer y no volver nada a su antiguo orden era mantener las cosas en su verdadero estado, murmuró olfateando como un perro de caza el dulce ambiente de cama revuelta que había siempre diluido en aquella habitación, aunque todo estuviera en su sitio. La mujer lo llevaba encima; era una portadora de alcoba deshecha como otros son de la tifoidea" (599). The search reveals that repressed emotions and instincts lurk everywhere, ready to pierce the surface and sting, like the scorpion in the summer mansion.

Felipe's feelings of attraction and repulsion toward the forbidden objects of desire and his disruption of the mansion's order by playing master or dog challenge the patriarchal system from all sides. One of Felipe's last acts, then, is to spread on Teresa's bed the documents from her husband's safe, which are compared to needles and infectious microbes from a sneeze. The conjugal bed is once again linked with infection, as he seeks to sting the marriage. His thoughts echo those of Cristina Peri Rossi's narrator, who laments that his lover will one day marry and become a mother: "she will contract marriage like one contracts an illness, a social disease" ("To Love or to Ingest," 6). Matrimony, as narrowly prescribed by Judeo-Christian Patriarchy, is viewed as deleterious to the social body.

In addition to fluctuating between victim and victimizer, Felipe fluctuates between a civilized human and a beast or insect. During the search, he refers to himself as a dog seeking a bone and a hunting dog sniffing Teresa's scent. He imagines the sensations of the scorpion walking along his lower extremities, leaving his brain and arms free to function normally. Toward the end of the story, exhausted and confused by a search in

which no scorpion has materialized, he says that he will slither or crawl back to the woman-cow who is the only "baluarte de humanidad que quedaba en la casa" (599) The image blurs the border between animal and human and their hierarchical relation to each other. In the end, Felipe decides he can walk like a man, and that one scorpion or all the scorpions of the mansion together are not enough to deter him from returning to the kitchen and enlisting Marta's aid in searching his own body. The identification of the scorpion with the male member is now transparent. The author suggests that the poison that kills social order comes from within and that repression is as destructive as any material threat. That Felipe uses the wife's sexual betrayal of the master and the master's secret revenge to bring down the house shows that these conclusions apply at the highest social level as well.

Until the end, the third-person narrative describes people, places, and events from within the limited physical, social, and psychological perspective of these marginalized men. The opening and closing sentences report the drivers' dialog, while the rest reflects Felipe's visual, spatial, and psychological perspectives. In the last paragraph, however, a third, more encompassing perspective is presented that refocuses events from without. Imitating cinematographic effects, the view of events is suddenly shifted from close up to panorama. The story turns from sequential narration to an accumulation of events that occur simultaneously, involving the returning family, Felipe, the maid, the drivers, and the scorpion. The reader is told what each is doing or thinking at approximately the same time. From an aesthetic point of view, the presentation of events from the perspective of the potential victims struggling to contain the threat heightens the dramatic tension, as the reader identifies with their anxiety over the uncertain outcome. On the other hand, the view reflecting what is seen and known from above allows an ironic twist in the tale. At the very moment the drivers boast of victory over the stuffed shirt and death, the scorpion, described as a marionette on a string controlled who knows where, prepares to sting one of them. Their unawareness makes them helpless victims, but their previous cruelty makes the story a vengeful joke.

In addition to aesthetic motives, such as controlling reader response, creating tension, terror, or irony, the narrative strategies also reveal ideological concerns. Selection of what is presented or voiced in the text is determined by the weaker and lower members of the social hierarchy, until the intrusion of the invisible force from on high who decides when and if to pull the scorpion's string. The adolescent, also at the bottom of the power paradigm, is granted one line of recorded monolog, while the voices of the mother and father are never heard. In focusing events mainly from the margins instead of the center, traditional narrative privilege is challenged. The brief insertion of a different, third perspective that broadens knowledge but still does not access all truths suggests the need to transcend the limiting binary vision of patriarchy in favor of a more encompassing plurality. The need to gather and to synthesize information from multiple points of view is also suggested by the unsympathetic, confused, and uninformed characters, none of whose perspectives garner the reader's trust and sympathy.

In conclusion, "Muerte por alacrán" belongs to a narrative trend that reflects upon patriarchal society's mediation in the construction of gender and power and questions analogies between man and woman and man and state and man and nature. It also questions the nature of narrative reliability and authority by juxtaposing the limited, temporal perspective of biased or uninformed characters with the all-encompassing, spatial perspective of an unseen force. This final voice intrudes a judgment that supports an ironic, allegorical reading of the whole.

This metaphorical account of the intrusion of raw masculine libido into the patriarchal social structure allows the reader to examine the conceptual frames within which masculinity and femininity are constructed. It reveals the contradictory tendency of maleness to express itself through disobedience and repudiation of male authority or laws. It also becomes apparent that class differences threaten universal male bonds and marginalize some men from the exercise of masculine privilege; it is the conflict between the classes that ultimately leads to the crisis in the patriarchal fortress rather than any material threat from without. Men and women must go beyond the binary vision that reduces all interactions to attack and defense. In the end, repression and oppression diminish humanity; the fortress, or "man's castle", limits its occupants and is not a model for individual or collective liberation.

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