

**EN-GENDERING VIOLENCE IN ROBERTO
ATHAYDE'S *APARECEU A MARGARIDA*
AND PLÍNIO MARCOS'S
*DOIS PERDIDOS NUMA NOITE SUJA***

Stacey D. Skar

A great deal of contemporary drama from Brazil inscribes issues of social importance and can be read as exemplary of the proliferation of literary resistance to the most recent dictatorial regime (1964-1978). While the two plays in this study, Roberto Athayde's *Apareceu a Margarida* (1973) and Plínio Marcos's *Dois perdidos numa noite suja* (1968), do offer discourses of resistance to many forms of oppression, a reading of their re-presentation of gender highlights a problematic relationship between the transgression of the heterosexual patriarchal order and the en-gendering of violence. While these plays can be considered socially liberating if read from an economic or political perspective, there has been an almost complete absence of a critical discussion of them in terms of gender politics, whose traditional order they re-produce without question.

For our discussion of the relationship between gender and violence in these texts, it will be necessary to re-define "gender" as a social construct instead of assuming that it is biologically determined. According to Judith Butler:

gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (270)

According to this definition, gender can be read as a performative social construct and would thus be similar in many ways to theater. In this study, my use of the term "gender" will refer to the above definition.

This leads to another necessary clarification. "Masculinity" and "femininity" are essentialist ideological concepts that have been

perpetuated throughout the centuries and manipulated for the oppression of those who transgress their "dictated" roles as male/masculine or female/feminine and therefore threaten the established hierarchical social order. It is not my intention to affirm antiquated binary differences between masculine men and feminine women. Rather, I will discuss the relationship in these two plays between performative "gender" as a fixed social construct and theatrical "roles" that support and/or transgress the binary definitions of "masculinity" and "femininity." It will then be possible to relate the transgressions of socio-cultural expectations of "gender" in Brazil to expressions of violence.

In the first play, Roberto Athayde's *Apareceu a Margarida*, D. Margarida, a primary school teacher, lectures her students in an almost uninterrupted monologue. This oppressive verbal violence has been studied in detail by such critics as Severino Albuquerque. The threatening atmosphere apparent throughout the play creates an ironic tone in relation to the warm maternal environment that D. Margarida states she wants for her classroom:

Para D. Margarida a melhor aula é aquela em que há uma atmosfera de compreensão, de estima, de amor entre os alunos e a professora. Aquela mesma atmosfera de carinho e solidariedade que cada um de vocês encontra em casa no seio da sua família. É uma dádiva da natureza (21).

This supposed desire to express maternal tenderness, a gender expectation of females that is assumed to be "natural," as indicated in the dramatic text, is transgressed continually. This is achieved through both verbal and physical abuse. One instance occurs when Dona Margarida refers to a physical education class: "Uma vez na aula de educação física ela deu um safanão num garoto no lugar errado que aleijou o menino pro resto da vida. Ficou estéril" (33). Not only does this reference confirm the teacher's lack of maternal warmth or even human kindness, but the physical damage incurred, his sterility, focuses on the young man's sexual reproductive capabilities.

D. Margarida even refers to a denial of her own reproduction of heterosexual social expectations. She describes her own school day experience with another female also named Margarida:

A menina Margarida ficava atrás de D. Margarida no pátio do colégio na hora de cantar o hino nacional. Ela ficava *bem* perto de D. Margarida. A menina Margarida se encostava em D. Margarida. A menina Margarida *gostava* de D. Margarida! Vocês compreendem bem? A menina Margarida fazia carinho em D. Margarida. (47)

This subtle reference to what could be interpreted as a lesbian experience enhances the character's refusal to perform female "gender," whose sexual expression according to societal standards would require her to "act" out her sexual desires with men in order to reproduce traditional heterosexual expectations.

D. Margarida refers repeatedly to herself as an object in the third person, and to her own body as a sign of woman to be used as part of sex education: "Não pensem que eu vou me abrir toda na frente de vocês. O Diretor me proibiu expressamente de tirar a roupa! Nem os peitos eu posso mostrar" (23). Her references to her nudity as a sign of her sex appear in repeated negations to reveal her body. However, traditional phallic symbols are openly apparent such as occurs at the end of the play when one of the students opens her bag, dis-covers a revolver among the candy, eats a piece of the candy and leaves the revolver for D. Margarida. This entire process is nonverbal, occurring after D. Margarida has left. Even when she is no longer present, her ownership of the revolver/phallus, out of place in a typical school teacher's possession goes unquestioned by the students.

The discovery of the revolver at the end of the play along with various subtle references to students being sent to the "Director" and never coming back as well as the general silent captivity of her class, placed during performances so as to form part of the audience, serves to highlight the already apparent allegorical implications in Dona Margarida's behavior with respect to the socio-political oppression during the dictatorship in Brazil. As Severino Albuquerque has mentioned, the threatening and repressive atmosphere in Dona Margarida's classroom:

assumes universal proportions, so that her name appears in conjunction with the national anthem (pp. 33,47) as well as with the institutions ('Tradição,' 'Família,' 'Propriedade,' 'Pátria,' 'Igreja,' 'Disciplina,' 'Ordem,' 'Segurança,' coincidentally all

feminine nouns in Portuguese) whose defense the discourse of authoritarianism claims to warrant the very existence of repression. (*Violent Acts* 169)

The behavior of this female teacher is comparable to the violence of the military regime. Understood in terms of the play's performance, D. Margarida transgresses society's expectations of a woman as maternal and conciliatory. Instead, she "acts" as a tyrant. This would serve to heighten reactions against this "performance" of oppression by a public that would not only understand the reference to the "feminine" grammatical gender of institutions such as "tradition," "family," "order," and so forth, but who would also be more shocked by a woman "acting" this way than a man "performing" in a similar way.

The performative elements of gender construction and the relationship of violence to transgression are equally apparent in another contemporary Brazilian play: Plínio Marcos's *Dois perdidos numa noite suja*. In this text, two men, Tonho and Paco, rent a room together with their meager earnings. Instead of sharing the difficulties of their lives in a relationship of solidarity and mutual support, they develop an animosity between them that ends with Tonho killing Paco at the end of the play.

From the beginning, Tonho, a young man from the interior who has family, some studies and plans for a better future, is willing to work with Paco so that they can both improve their marginal socio-economic situation. Paco, on the other hand, continually torments Tonho with insults and bad harmonica music and refuses to accept Tonho's offer of solidarity. From the city, with no family and little education, Paco has learned to mistrust any kindness from anyone. Apart from their individual differences of character, Paco has something of value that Tonho does not, new shoes, and the play centers on the two men's attempt to get the objects they most desire in order to better their economic situation, Tonho's shoes, that he needs to find a decent job, and Paco's flute, which will give him another chance in life as a musician.

Many critics have commented on the violence in this play in economic terms (Albuquerque, Clark and G. de García, Pontes). Part of the aggressiveness that Paco directs against his roommate is a constant questioning of his masculinity. When Paco tells Tonho that the "negrão" at the market is angry because Tonho has taken some of his

work and that he is going to castrate him, Tonho replies that he will talk with the "negrão" and settle the argument without any physical violence. Paco's response to Tonho's peaceful proposition is to question his masculinity: "Você não é macho?" (28). After Tonho resolves his dispute with the "negrão" by paying him off, Paco repeatedly calls him "Boneca do Negrão." This makes Tonho even more desperate and succumbing to the torment of his abusive roommate, he uses an "unloaded" revolver with Paco to rob a young couple. However, even after they obtain enough stolen goods to begin a more positive life, Paco cannot admit any kindness and again refuses to share with Tonho.

In planning the assault, Paco suggests that they should give "special" attention to the woman, but Tonho refuses to harm her. What follows is a questioning of Tonho's heterosexuality when Paco declares: "Deixa de onda. É Boneca mesmo. Agora tive a prova. Não querer mulher é o fim da picada." (56). Tonho and Paco argue until they both accuse each other of never having been with a woman, which would be sufficient "proof" for them that they are "machos." Surprisingly, it is Paco who changes the subject, unable to provide convincing "evidence" of his masculinity, again a performative construct. Later, Paco begins to plan further assaults that are more sexual than material in their objectives:

Daquí pra frente, não vamos assaltar só por dinheiro. Eu quero a mulher também. . . . Eu vou ter uma faca, um revólver e meu alicate. Limpo o cara, daí mando ele ficar nu na frente da mulher. Daí, digo pra ele: Que prefere, miserável? Um tiro, uma facada ou um beliscão? O cara, tremendo de medo, escolhe o beliscão. Daí eu pego o alicate e aperto o saco do bruto até ele se arrear. Paco Maluco, o Perigoso, fala macio pra mulher: Agora nós, belezinha. . . . e derrubo ela ali mesmo no parque. (72)

Paco, fantasizing of his future "performance," does not simply intend to rape the woman for pleasure. His abuse of the woman and of the man in front of her, acted out for her, reaches a sadistic extreme. The added use of weapons, such as the knife, the revolver and the wrench, along with Paco's fierceness towards the man suggest that he may be impotent. Instead of using his own sexual "tool," Paco must rely on other tools to symbolize his masculinity and construct what for him

would be his desired gender.

The use of gestures and objects at the end of the play becomes even more important as the violence between the two men escalates. The actual "performance" of the murder is quite significant. After realizing the robbery has not provided him with new shoes, the symbol of his ability to walk away from his situation and from his unbearable roommate, Tonho is forced to listen to Paco's constant torment. Among other insults, Paco repeatedly calls him "bichona" and decides that Tonho should wear the earrings stolen from the woman. After crying and begging for:

Paco to stop, Tonho calmly takes out the revolver and loads it while Paco repeatedly asks him if he is going to kill himself. When he realizes that he, himself, is the target of Tonho's anger Paco attempts to make amends with his roommate, but it is too late. Besides ordering Paco to return to him all the stolen goods, Tonho forces him to wear the woman's earrings and to sway like a "woman" back and forth while he returns the verbal abuse calling Paco a "bicha." He then murders his roommate and assumes his position as "Tonho Maluco, O perigoso!" (93).

Although this play has a socio-economic message that Plinio Marcos has himself admitted, the violence in this text is directly related to the "performances" of the two men in order to establish and defend their masculinity. Anne Cruz, in a study of Golden Age theater, comments on the critical dialectic surrounding male bonding and homosocial relationships and concludes that "... friendship between males requires that they compete against one another for the affection of women, as well as for the power that they presumably share" (158). In this play, Paco and Tonho's gender is not biologically determined but socially constructed as they attempt to prove to each other and to other men that they are masculine, which they equate with a public demonstration of their heterosexuality. For them, women serve only as objects for a man to realize and to "show," even by force, his heterosexual desire and thus affirm his assumed "position of power" in society.

It is possible to conclude that gender is as much a part of the violent competition between these men as what previous critics have noted as the more obvious difference and cause of conflict between them, Paco's new shoes. The social criticism can then be confirmed as more than an economic problem. Portrayed as socio-cultural prisoners who cannot

escape their marginal position, they are also unable to perform their gender as society would dictate.

There is another element in these plays that further problematizes gender. In each text, violence, whether on an interpersonal or national level, is directly related to an assumed threat of power. In the case of *D. Margarida*, she feels the need to control her class so that they will obey her. Not only is she in a position of power, but her references to possible lesbian encounters is a refusal to reproduce the heterosexual order. The social implications of her performance are tremendous. Her transgression of traditional expectations of "femininity" serves as an allegory for the oppression of a totalitarian government, and as such is intended to incite resistance to what is presented as an unnatural oppression, a woman in power. Violence is both a part of her transgression of imposed gender performance and an indirect result of that transgression, serving to encourage violence against the military regime.

The second play, also written during the violent years of the dictatorship, problematizes "gender" as performance in a different way. For Paco, violence is a means for asserting his masculinity. His obsession with proving his heterosexuality can be read as an overcompensation for his lack of socio-economic power or even as a suggestion of his impotence or inability, according to societal expectations in Brazil, to accept his own homosexual desire. What is most apparent is that in both texts, transgressions of the heterosexual order are performed on the Brazilian stage not as liberations from social oppression but as twisted subversions of the socio-cultural order. While socio-political change is presented as necessary and beneficial to Brazilian society, the heterosexual order and a violent reaction to any transgression of it go unquestioned and are even affirmed by these performances.

Fairfield University

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