

GIRL TROUBLE: GENDER GAPS IN ISAAC CHOCRÓN'S *TODA UNA DAMA*

Edward Friedman

Gender is, one might contend, a relative thing. So, of course, is sexual attraction. Within the dynamic system of combinations and permutations, souls will seek and sometimes find their mates. Writers have navigated this particular *ars combinatoria* in unique and surprising ways. I would like to examine one case of the literary representation of contemporary mores, in order to suggest that the author in question creates a subtle and eloquent apology for tolerance and respect for difference. The subject of the inquiry, "every bit a lady," is, in fact, a gentleman.

Toda una dama, published in 1988, is the fifth novel of Isaac Chocrón, a Venezuelan writer who has gained an international reputation through the success of a number of dramatic works, among them *Animales feroces*, *La revolución*, and *Simón*, and through his notable efforts to promote the national theater of his country.¹ Arguably, the common denominator of Chocrón's artistic enterprise—narrative and theatrical—is an emphasis on marginalization, on alienation, on alterity. The writings explore the trials of those who are distanced from mainstream society on the basis of difference, in religion, political beliefs, gender, sexual preference, and age. *Cincuenta vacas gordas*, chronologically closest to *Toda una dama* among the novels, focuses on a woman's increased alienation from her family—and from the center of current events—as she enters into middle age. Perhaps because as a playwright Chocrón is conscious of the elements of narrative mediation to which he does not have access within that medium, the novels are replete with devices—letters, double discourse, shifts of narrator—which underscore the genre but which, in my opinion, ultimately enhance, rather than intrude upon, the aesthetics and the message systems of the texts. Chocrón converts the protagonist of *Cincuenta vacas gordas* into a detective and into the heroine of a search for love, but the true denouncement of the novel has to do with a woman finding herself. The conventions of other subgenres, the detective story and the romance, both mask and facilitate the process of discovery of the inner woman, the woman shaped by experience and moving—with respect to self and circumstance—from the fear of isolation to acceptance and comprehension of her particular place in the scheme of things (see Friedman).

Cincuenta vacas gordas takes place in Caracas, at a historical moment, appropriately, in which the economic triumphs wrought by oil were giving way to new reality principles. The action of *Toda una dama* is displaced, so to speak, in Washington, D.C., and Chocrón effects a displacement of sorts of the major character, a diplomat by the name of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, whose story is rendered in a subtle and eminently periphrastic fashion. The novel opens with a reference to the death of Alejandro, but the narrative does not move so much to explain the death as to explain what could be called a moment of realization, or a moment of truth, in his life. The author engages the reader by assembling a large cast of supporting players with fascinating stories of their own and by weaving the material into a cohesive whole. As in the case of *Cincuenta vacas gordas*, the novel is built around a mystery, but the revelation of the answer to the question posed is less significant than the narrative path itself. In the earlier novel, the author defers—in poststructuralist parlance—the resolution of the mystery so as to convert the *anagnorisis*, the recognition, into an ironic "otherness," a transgression of the literary norm that nonetheless represents a valid response to the plot stimuli, as it were, and to what has become the overriding story of identity and self-image. The presumed "center" of *Toda una dama* may be summarized as follows: what Alejandro Ponte Vecchio's wife Titina saw immediately preceding his death, which may or may not have provoked his death. I would note, however, that the final revelation does not come as a complete surprise, nor does the narrator go to great lengths to underscore the information that he is providing. The situation is paradoxical, in the sense that, while the narrative seems to deal first and foremost with aspects of human sexuality, the novel hardly tends toward the erotic but instead is subdued, tame, even pure. And the closer one gets to the end of the journey, the more logical this authorial strategy appears.

While it would be possible to categorize *Toda una dama* as a type of "sex comedy," this would be to overlook a clever and complex narrative structure and a narrator (and implied author) who seems far more concerned, I would submit, with the characters' hearts than with their physical urges, despite the variations and the intensity of the latter. The microcosm of *Toda una dama* is the diplomatic community of Washington, where Alejandro Ponte Vecchio occupies the post of *Ministro Consejero*, a prestigious but conspicuously second-tier position, his years of dedicated duty and interest in an ambassadorial nomination

notwithstanding. The narrator offers glimpses of Alejandro in the more detailed portraits of those who surround him, including his wife, his secretary, his chauffeur, his coworkers, and various friends and acquaintances. The twenty chapters of the novel, divided into two parts, reflect a decisive symmetry, for example, between chapters 1 and 11, 2 and 12, 3 and 13, and so forth. *Chocón* seems committed to presenting, in part, a satirical vision of the foreign ministry and of the transposed Venezuelans, whose work load is commensurate (in reverse proportion, of course) with their rank. The nucleus of the office is not the meeting room but the cocktail party or dinner, where one sees and is seen and where contacts of multiple kinds are made. What distinguishes Alejandro from his colleagues in diplomatic circles is a pride in the responsibilities that have been entrusted to him, a professionalism manifested in the diligent performance of his tasks. On a broader scale, what differentiates him from those whose lives are, in one manner or another, bound to his is an innate goodness, a righteousness that borders on purity. Indeed, it is Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, a middle-aged man with a wife and two married daughters, a highly respected minister beloved by his secretary and admired by all but a cynical minority, who is, for better or worse, "toda una dama." What this means—what it signifies—is, needless to say, open to interpretation.

For me, the structural dominant in *Toda una dama* is juxtaposition, not just the symmetrical patterning of chapters but also the delineation of characters who, in each instance, punctuate the elusive qualities—the extramundane chasteness—of the absent protagonist. Titina, his partner in matrimony, is attractive, oversexed, willing to defy the tenets of morality, and even a bit vulgar. La Señora Bustamante, Alejandro's faithful secretary, is cognizant of the incongruity of the couple; in her mind, the wayward and superficial Titina does not deserve Alejandro, the ideal employer, the exemplary statesman, the perfect gentleman. The secretary is a self-made woman, who has rejected the crudeness of her former life (and of her former husband) in order to conform to the lofty standards that she has found in her boss. In essence, Titina has status but neither the dignity nor the scruples that would befit her social rank, whereas Mrs. Bustamante has dignity and scruples but not status. Mrs. Bustamante is the source of uncompromising devotion, the person most disposed to acknowledge the unflagging efforts of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, the incarnation of responsibility and correctness. The points are, according to the secretary, lost on Titina, who drinks too much, who

flirts too much, who on occasion puts the sanctity of her marriage in jeopardy, who—in short—is all too human. Through Mrs. Bustamante, the reader gains a special appreciation for Alejandro, whose modesty and delicacy prevent others from recognizing his true superiority. From a discernibly distinct perspective, the driver Benito conveys an analogous message.

Benito—a native of the Dominican Republic, dark-skinned, with little formal education—is (the reader may note, with a certain facility) a blue-collar version of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio. He is described in such adjectives as "serio, correcto, cumplido, responsable, discreto" (37). He is courteous, polite, amenable to running errands that are beyond the limits of his job description. Best of all, Benito "es una tumba. Hay que ver los desastres que ha presenciado, y nunca los comenta y menos, los repite" (37). Officially, Benito is the chauffeur of the ambassador, but given that his chief often delegates the meeting and entertainment of visiting dignitaries to Alejandro, the minister and the driver have frequent contact, and Benito does odd jobs for Titina. Alejandro and Benito are, it would seem, soul mates, in spite of their dissimilar backgrounds and their somewhat limited direct discourse. There is a definite connection between the two, and, like Mrs. Bustamante, Benito is aware of the rare—the exquisite, the sublime—character of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio.

The tapestry effect of *Toda una dama* unites the yearnings and frustrations, the chaotic existence and the loneliness, the pursuits and the secrets of a wide range of figures. The dramatis personae are linked by their ties to a determined community, a community that would seem to accentuate similitude but which encompasses an extraordinary diversity of tastes, of social standing, and of lifestyles. As the implicit center of this universe, Alejandro negates, to a degree, the imposed hierarchies and the protocols of class consciousness by demonstrating an egalitarian spirit, by maintaining propriety without snobbery, by communicating benevolence and rectitude, at times nonverbally. Not only is he the epitome of tact, but he projects an aura that most accurately may be described as virginal, an aura enhanced by his presence in the narrative through recollection, following his death. Although every incident recounted in the text adds to the depiction of the protagonist, the intricately plotted story of Benito functions as the primary conduit through which to understand—or, in narratological terms, to *focalize*—the paragon of virtue and the enigma that is

Alejandro Ponte Vecchio. Matters of sexuality are crucial factors in the design of *Toda una dama*, but if they are symbols, what do they symbolize?

Unexpectedly, one might argue, *Toda una dama* shows that Titina and Benito become successful—and independent—after the death of Alejandro, she as the manager of a museum gift shop and as a more constructively occupied lady on the go and he as a faith healer, an unlikely substitute for his deceased uncle. Their lives go on, and life goes on around them, but the defining event for them—and for the novel—is, in fact, the interruption of what may have been an authentic defining event, something that perhaps—and perhaps *not*, it must be stressed—could be expressed as “the prelude to a kiss.” Benito has just driven Alejandro to a formal lunch at the French Embassy. On the trip home, Alejandro is more talkative than usual, having imbibed beyond his custom: “Dos buenas copas de cognac y héme aquí, igual a cualquier venezolano borrachín pidiendo seguir la fiesta” (270-71). Noting that no one is home, he invites Benito to come in to select a book that may be of interest to him. What transpires next is presented as follows: “Subieron y Alejandro escogió un volumen de la biblioteca. Al dárselo, Benito comenzó a hojearlo. Los dos frente a frente, ni se miraban ni respiraban. Los aturdió y cegó la luz que entró al aparecer Titina por la puerta. Benito voló de la habitación. Alejandro sintió algo en el pecho” (271). He struggles, in vain, to catch his breath. He loosens his collar but does not cry out. Titina observes him until he collapses, walks over to him, closes his eyes, and calls the doctor. Not much happens here, but the characters and the narrator make it pivotal by calling attention, respectively, to the gravity—the magnitude—of the encounter and to its larger context, a conjectural double life for Alejandro. Titina’s reaction to what she sees is intense, and she sustains an unyielding rancor toward Benito even as she flourishes on her own. The narrator hints more than once—in an undertone that is nevertheless striking—that there may be more to Alejandro than meets the eye. This is paradoxical, in that the scrutiny of his *depth* appears to operate in two directions.

The elusive nature of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio helps to foster the mystique of the person who is so much a gentleman—so refined, so gracious, so decorous, so sensitive, as to become almost untouchable—that, for some, he belongs in the feminine realm, as “*toda una dama*.” This brand of asexuality, or androgyny, contrasts with the ever so casual allusions to a closeted or clandestine homosexuality, and the narrative

provides a fascinating—and always underdetermined—interplay of the pristine side with the covert side of the protagonist. Consider, for example, the contemplations of Mrs. Bustamante—no admirer of Titina—on the ideal mate for her adored boss: "Lo que ella deseaba para el doctor Ponte Vecchio era alguien sensible, cortés, delicado, pendiente de finezas y atenciones. Se sonreía pensando que siempre definía a esa persona hipotética en masculino o neutro, como si fuese un hombre joven, en vez de imaginarse a la persona como una mujer madura" (59).

It is, not surprisingly, Benito who most emphatically utters the title phrase. Benito—who seems decidedly heterosexual, quietly proud of his physical prowess, and yet whose behavior is homophobic in one episode and who becomes the victim (though probably not totally unwilling) of Titina's sexual aggression—uses the epithet in dialogue with Mrs. Bustamante and with his uncle: "... ¿cómo decirselo?, es que el Doctor era toda una dama. Créamelo, tío, más dama que cualquiera de las que usted y yo hemos visto. Eso era: toda una dama" (131).² Benito is the only character in the novel who is capable of fully synthesizing Alejandro's merits, the only character who is able to perceive the tension that lies between the delicacy and the erotic impulse, between the veneer and the core of sexuality. Benito *has sex with Titina*, and she gives him unequivocally high marks. She confides to a friend, "Me he convertido en una vieja ninfómana. . . . Cuando estoy contigo o con otra gente y pienso en eso, en lo que hago con Benito, me considero monstruosa, pero cuando estoy sola o mejor con él, me comporto como perra maluca" (113). But Benito *is in love with Alejandro*, and this love is the antithesis of the adulterous other, the antithesis of animal passion.

Toda una dama relishes in the mechanisms of deferral. The Venezuelans are distanced from their homeland and from their formative protocols. They are lodged in the political capital of the world, in the city of veneer, of public relations, of image makers and spin doctors, and in their own diplomatic circles. External appearances are what count, but no one questions the discrepancy between external signs and internal realities. At the center of this fabricated universe stands Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, whose job requires an aura of correctness amid the incongruities of existence and the debilities of the flesh. The concept of lady-like demeanor is the ultimate example of deferral, the jewel in the crown of meaningful deviation.

So what is Chocrón getting at here? I have referred to the text as a *tapestry* because it presents a broad spectrum of social and sexual mores

in a style that is both parodic and instructive. A key feature of the novel is its deconstruction—a gentle or moderate deconstruction, in keeping with the theme—of labels, of stereotypes, and of surface values. Chocrón brilliantly—and often imperceptibly—separates narrative voice from point of view, thereby complementing character with perspective and allowing the complexity of the discourse to mirror the complexity—and the ambiguity—of the story. *Toda una dama* is not necessarily about latent homosexuality or about the masculine and feminine sides of the human psyche. It may be, more properly, about the construction of gender paradigms and about the inevitable gap between the created frames and the nuances of feeling, of conduct, and, last but not least, of love. The transported Venezuelans, and significant others, illustrate that behavioral frames are made to be broken and that generalizations can miss the marrow of an issue, or of a person. There is a structural richness—a beauty of composition—to Chocrón's earlier *Cincuenta vacas gordas*, which reminds me of Cervantes's refurbishing of established modes of writing into forms that surpass their models. Detective fiction and romance become conventions from which to shape a movement toward self-knowledge, another mode of narrative. *Toda una dama* ultimately has more of an edge, taking, as it does, an apparently random and ambivalent route to the—what other word can one choose?—climax. I do not believe that it is purely coincidental that the *apparent* randomness and ambivalence, as well as the title of *Todo una dama* and a protagonist named Alejandro, seem to echo—to resound amid the intertextual strains of—Miguel de Unamuno's *Nada menos que todo un hombre*. Just as Unamuno describes as spontaneous what is assuredly deliberate, premeditated, and schematic, Chocrón pieces together a series of fragments that, when completed, set forth a portrait of Alejandro Ponte Vecchio, of his society, and of the mysteries of the flesh, never detached from the mysteries of the soul. The narrative thrives on judgment but refrains from final judgment. It may be said that *Cincuenta vacas gordas* is about the ironies of subjectivity, while *Toda una dama* is about the ironies of objectivity. What we see is not necessarily all that is there, nor can our perceptions be fully accurate. Signs can be both helpful and misleading, directing us to the heart of matters or shielding us from true centers.

NOTES

¹ For general considerations of the contributions of Chocrón, see Azparren Giménez (107-28), Castillo (85-122), Hernández (93-133), Klein, Larson, and Rotker. *Chocrón frente al espejo* by the journalist Miyo Vestrini, offers an indispensable background to the study of Chocrón's works.

² Using Titina as a reflector, the narrator points out in chapter 11: "Jamás se le ocurrió que podía serle infiel con cualquier otra persona. Lo consideraba demasiado puntilloso y delicado para cualquier pasión. Si alguna característica predominaba en Alejandro, según ella, era su pasividad, su terror a la agresividad, su parálisis frente a cualquier violencia. Bastaba que el le alzara la voz, por ejemplo, para que palideciera, se mordiera el labio inferior y se encorvara" (152).

WORKS CITED

- Azparren Giménez, Leonardo. *El teatro venezolano y otros teatros*. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1978.
- Castillo, Susana. *El desarraigo en el teatro venezolano*. Caracas: Ateneo de Caracas, 1980.
- Chocrón, Isaac. *Cincuenta vacas gordas*. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1980.
- . *Teatro*. 5 vols. Caracas: Monte Avila, 1981-92.
- . *Toda una dama*. Caracas: Alfadil, 1988.
- Friedman, Edward H. "'Cherchez la femme': El lector como detective en 50 vacas gordas de Isaac Chocrón." *Discurso Literario* 4.2 (1987): 647-56.
- Hernández, Gleider. *Tres dramaturgos venezolanos de hoy: R. Chalbaud, J. I. Cabrujas, I. Chocrón*. Caracas: Ediciones El Nuevo Grupo, 1979.
- Klein, Dennis A. "The Theme of Alienation in the Theatre of Elisa Lerner and Isaac Chocrón." *Folio* 17 (1987): 151-66.
- Larson, Milagro. "Chocrón, Isaac." *Jewish Writers of Latin America: A Dictionary*. Ed. Darrell B. Lockhart. New York and London: Garland, 1997. 76-84.
- Rotker, Susana. *Isaac Chocrón y Elisa Lerner: los transgresores de la literatura venezolana*. Caracas: Fundarte, 1991.

Unamuno, Miguel de. *Tres novelas ejemplares y un prólogo*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1943.
Vestini, Miyo. *Isaac Chocrón frente al espejo*. Caracas: Alenco de Caracas, 1980.