

### Hecate's Delightful Revenge or Gabriela Mistral's "Sonetos-lésbicos:" Refashioning Amorous Discourse in *Los sonetos de la muerte* (1914)

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From their initial publication in 1914, Gabriela Mistral's *Sonetos de la muerte* have been enveloped in intense debate on the identity of the lover to whom they are directed. Critics, who until recently have been predominantly male, have attempted to dig up, uncover, and figuratively unearth-- all performative qualities which uncannily mirror the actions within the Sonetos-- the secret "tú" recipient of her desire. And what these male thinkers found makes for pure sensationalistic fodder: around the time they were supposedly written (1909), there was a suicide of a young man who had in his pocket a note with the name of Lucila Godoy Alcayaga. With a bit of hyperbolic hedging, they pieced together that the note written by Romelio Ureta to the real name of Mistral was his last farewell to his lover, and that Mistral, the supposed suffering lady, wrote her sonnets (and other poems) to pay homage to her one and only love. To add even more zest to the intrigue, this young man's actions resonate with those of a character in a badly written 19th century novel. While attempting to steal money from a cash register to satisfy his alcoholic urges, he gets caught and with no way to mitigate his honor, he commits suicide. The note, the suicide, and the date, all piecemeal clues, have in the end marked these sonnets as tragic and sentimentally romantic. More significantly, they have framed Mistral as the ever suffering poet who repeats her undying love in her poetry to this one poor Chilean paramour.

Recent critical analysis of Mistral's sonnets such as Grinor Rojo's *Dirán que está en la gloria* and Satoko Tamura's *Los Sonetos de la muerte de Gabriela Mistral* have elaborated at length the previous speculations that have stagnated Mistralean studies. "Ella no era así la autora de la tragedia, sino su víctima," remarks Rojo (91). However, the insistence that the sonnets were written by Mistral for her suicidal lover suddenly clarifies so many mysterious gender troubles. As is well known, Gabriela Mistral never married. She never openly revealed a (male) partner in her life, and like her well-known poem, "La mujer estéril," she could be read as a sexually troubled and melancholic woman. Like a terrible chant that is endlessly repeated, the meaning of the sonnets has turned into a curse that has come to haunt her. The heightened interpretation of the sonnets has come to explain her odd or "rara" behavior.

But what if the exaggerated myth surrounding the sonnets was not opposed by Mistral; if Mistral never rejected this reading, and promoted herself as a traditional literary figure (read: heterosexual) and also as a contentious writer who complicated the uses of gender? The sonnets are not straightforward poems on normative love. In fact most of her poems, if they are to have anything to do with love, allow the possibility of going against the heterosexual grain. Many of her love poems hint broadly at a female lover, who for reasons unexplained (society? patriarchy? taboo?) cannot surface "above" ground. Mistral must rely on "Other" spaces, with new meaning and myth, to allow the possibilities of homosexual difference to open up.

As Licia Fiol-Matta and Elizabeth Horan have revealed in separate studies, misreadings are common to Mistral when it comes to gender signification<sup>[1]</sup>. In my view, much of the anxiety caused in reading her has to do with Mistral's use of apostrophe. In many poems, for example, Mistral skillfully avoids obvious referencing to gender marking of either the speaker or the recipient (yo-tú) to confuse the reader so as to lose sight of normative discourse. Apostrophe, in a sense, gave Mistral a means to play into the syntax of patriarchy as well as reveal another language game that highlights her homosexual desire, as some of her initial poems written in Mexico reveal<sup>[2]</sup>. Apostrophe is the rhetorical conceit used when the speaker turns to address an object in place of something or someone else. Two well-known examples of apostrophe in poetry are Wordsworth's "Oh Wild West Wind" and Pablo Neruda's "Oda a la cebolla" ["Cebolla,/luminosa redoma,/ pétalo a pétalo /se formó tu hermosura..."] According to Jonathan Culler, this turn in communication makes apostrophe problematic, for we do not know how or why this peculiar trope may take place; often deception may be at hand (59). However, when gender differences come into play, Barbara Johnson has acutely observed that apostrophe may allow

impossibilities to exist in the logic of grammar. Apostrophe can be used when women must find other ways to speak about forbidden topics such as abortion and women's suffering (640).

Sonnets, especially those love poems which depend upon a certain standardized reading according to Petrarchan or Shakespearean tradition, complicate the amorous affair even more when it is women who are writing the lyrics of love. Jan Montefiore points to the trouble women have in inscribing themselves within a genre that typically excludes them: "Such conventions make the love-poem evidently a problematic mode for women to practice, and not only because of the obvious difficulty of speaking in a form which defines one as muse, not maker (or as Gilbert and Gubar say of Petrarch's Laura, she 'can never herself be a poet because she "is" 'poetry'))" (96). How then to work with the rigors love-sonnets must hold to when the amorous discourse pertains to same-sex relations? For lesbian poets such as Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich, the use of puns, experimental syntax, and ordinary language help to reinscribe the "self" and "other" back into the poem (Rich "Lesbian Continuum" 23-75; Rich "Lesbian Existence" 631-60; Wittig "Straight" 103-111). Homoerotic desire between women exists at the moment when female subjectivity articulates love through syntactical differences and idiomatic expressions of exclusion. Not everyone can take pleasure in the intimate lesbian bond.

If Mistral's *Sonetos de la muerte* (1914) seem to cause anxiety, perhaps it is because she wrote them as a means to paradoxically defy and uphold poetic tradition and gender norms. The poems both include and exclude its readers. On the one hand, we can read a more "sensationalistic" heterosexual interpretation of the poems, but on the other, we are allowed to examine the disruptive power of her strange syntax, much of which pivots upon the sonnets' anachronistic speech acts and odd versification. In the *Sonetos*, Mistral not only challenged the very modes in which sonnets have been written according to either the Petrarchan or the Hispanic tradition (such as those penned by Ruben Darío), but she also rewrote the genre, refashioning it into a kind of "soneto-lésbico." In a sense, she disguised her sonnets in a "male" poetic drag, yet subtly changed the form and function standardized by the traditional sonnet's written practice. In these three sonnets, Mistral demonstrates her adeptness at understanding the ways that tradition works and the rules she purposely breaks to create a new poetic order and gendered mythical space. In them we can see how her progressive rules of versification capture the imaginative dimensions of the beginnings of "Locas mujeres." For it is with the personae of a Hecate-like poet, a deity of the underworld who uses a fluid sexualized syntax to romance a "Persephoned" lover, that we can catch a glimpse of Mistral's transgressive poetic mannerisms.

**Coming Out, Staying Hidden: The initial phase of the *Sonetos de la muerte* (1914)**

In 1914, an unknown poet by the name of Gabriela Mistral won the highest prize for poetry in the competition "Juegos Florales" in Santiago, Chile. The judges, only one of whom knew the identity of the mysterious poet, voted unanimously that the sonnets should receive the prize and be published in the pamphlet with the same name as the competition[3]. Years later a journalist wrote in the magazine *Familia* in 1935 that it came as a complete surprise to everyone that this unidentified poet Mistral had won, since in Chile there were no such thing as women poets ( Munizaga Ossandón 7 ). Even unconfirmed comments by the judges were circulated. Some thought her pseudonym too forthright, almost outrageous, as the writer Armando Donoso claims to have said: " -Pero qué audacia la de esta mujer. Poner al lado de su nombre el apellido de Federico Mistral, el inmenso poeta de la Provenza. . . , ¡qué audacia!" (Munizaga Ibarren 75, 76 ).

Curiously, as rumors go (as is always the case with Mistral), she did not come out to receive the prize but remained hidden on the sidelines watching her poems being read by another male poet. One critic, describing the festivities, fantasizes what may have happened to Mistral:

I a la derecha, ellos, los cinco Vencedores en la justa florida. No; cuatro nada mas [sic]: Gabriela Mistral, la misteriosa i taciturna Poetisa dela lírica tierra de La Serena, la pálida conquistadora de la Flor Natural, ella no estaba. Como mujer, se recató a la mirada turbadora del triunfo. Fué [sic] el ruiseñor invisible de la selva, que trinaba en la penumbra...I, sin embargo, sus "Sonetos de la Muerte" cantaron su cancion alada i de llanto contenido, en la Noche Sagrada, por los labios de Victor Domingo Selva ( Munizaga Ossandón, no p. nos.).

A passing commentary such as this one demonstrates how successful misogynist interpretations have been blocking Mistralean studies, whether it be towards the *Sonetos* or other subsequent poems. Mistral's apparent complicit silence (and "timidity") or lack of presence have allowed others to form a very biased opinion of her and her work. She is, as Gilbert and Gubar have expressed on women writers, "a by-product of male consumption" (522). Yet although it can be said that at a certain time, Mistral "had not entered into history," due to the outlandish commentaries circulated, Mistral reveals in her *Sonetos* playful alternative strategies to not only open up a new female linguistics but an implicit exploration of lesbian identity in her poetics. Behind the scandalous love-intrigue which perpetually surrounded the *Sonetos* hides a different story, a deliberate nuanced poetic deployment on same-sex love. Mistral's *Sonetos* do not yield to an easy reading, but work towards redefining gender roles.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the suicide story functions so well with Mistral's poems is because it tries to unravel the gender relationship between Mistral and her lover. There could be no reading other than a patriarchal one even with the romantic love story reversed in order for the amorous discourse in the sonnets to work by traditional standards. Although Mistral's sonnets have been read as supposedly a woman poet in love with a man, the anonymity of the assumed dead "male" lover drives the poem. Yet as much as this has been the conventional reading, the very fact that it is a woman-poet who upsets the dominant paradigms of love and desire signals that gender roles are in trouble. For nowhere in the three sonnets do we concretely read that it is a male lover whom the poetic "I" has been addressing. Quite the contrary, hints are given that the poet explores intimacy with some "Other" lover.

Problems which have arisen when interpreting the sonnets through years of one-sided criticism have led many scholars on a mad quest to try to find all poems and sonnets related to the ones written in 1914; questions have even arisen over whether *Los Sonetos de la muerte* (1914) are the original poems. The desire to find both the identity of her lover and her reason for writing the sonnets has produced many "copies" of poems. What has been found, along with these three sonnets published in 1914, are ten other poems either with the related title "*De los Sonetos de la muerte*" or "*Sonetos de la muerte*"[4]. To figure out which poems are the "original" ones and which are the "copies" has produced constant critical tension[5].

But the unease caused by pinpointing who or what may be "originals" or "copies," whether it be of sexual preference or gender categories (male, female, gay, straight) mainly provoked (or not) by Mistral's subsequent actions, can be made clearer if put in perspective by Judith Butler's theory of "Imitation and Gender subordination." Butler posits the possibility that homosexuality or lesbianism displaces the normative rules of heterosexual identity when it assumes a ("bad") copy of what traditional sexual discourse declares itself to be. Heterosexual identity cannot accept this imitation and panics the moment when homosexuality performs according to its "norms." Yet as Butler questions, how can one know what the rules of normative sexual identity are when gender markers are not stable? On the contrary, lesbian sexuality does not exist outside of heterosexuality as a faint imitation, but includes and incorporates it; by surpassing heterosexuality, lesbianism becomes the defining "original" sexual identity and heterosexuality (and its subsequent anxiety) a faint "copy:"

Is it not possible that lesbian sexuality is a process that reinscribes the power domains that it resists, that it is constituted in part from the very heterosexual matrix that it seeks to displace, and that its specificity is to be established, not outside or beyond that reinscription or reiteration, but in the very modality and effects of that reinscription? ( Butler 310).

What remains striking in the ways that repetition plays into the investigation of *Los Sonetos de la muerte*, with sentimental games of "copies" and "fakes," is precisely how in keeping to a singular reading, other poems and sonnets seem to be overlooked, especially those lyrics metaphorically revealing lesbian desire. Poems that declare love through "flowery" images, a Victorian conceit which was adopted by female poets like Emily Dickinson (and subsequently by Mistral), mix various forms of address or apostrophe along with "other worldly" metaphors to conflate the boundaries of same-sex love. Such is the case of Mistral's poem, "*Con su retrato*" that opens the collection of the "*Juegos Florales*." Mistral plays with her audience's sensibilities when she identifies the object of her desire as a woman whose picture resembles a flower, that is, the crowned "Queen" of the event, written both in the epigraph and in the poem:

Con su retrato [Spelling and accent kept to the initial publication]  
[A S.M. la Reina de los Juegos Florales de Santiago, señorita María Letelier del Campo.]

¿De qué país de lunas llenas,  
Reina, te fueron a traer?  
¿En qué nevada de azucenas  
te consiguieron recoger?

Qué lirios dieron la cuajada  
para amasarte el corazón?  
¿Que arpa del alma apasionada  
te echó a volar hecha canción [sic]?  
[...]

Si tú lo sabes, di de qué otros  
astros tu casta de esplendor  
viene. ¡Que no eres de nosotros,  
Reina con párpados de flor!

Si el hombre con su lengua basta  
le hablara como a una mujer,  
dile el secreto de esa casta,  
la Vía Láctea de tu ser.

Alguna vez conmigo hablaste,  
Ahora te identifico bien,  
Fué en sueños. Sé que me dejaste  
fragrantes almohada i sien.

Reina de la pestaña fina  
que me ha ocultado tu mirar,  
¡ah! cómo esta agria campesina  
de alma fragosa te va a amar!

Desde tu breve cartulina,  
Reina de la pestaña fina,  
¿no me querrás melificar? (Munizaga Ossandón, no p. nos.).

Although revealing a more enthusiastic effusion of emotion than her *Sonetos*, “Con su retrato” introduces several themes which are explored in the subsequent sonnets. The poet tells of her love for another woman (the Queen) and how their existence and relationship exists in another space (her dreams.) In all the stanzas, the body of the poet’s desire is feminized and sexually represented in flowery images (such as “párpados de flor.”) Flowers are important to the *Sonetos*, for they represent the stolen lover who has been metamorphosed into a flower (‘plantel’) in *Soneto III*. In the poem above, “azucenas,” “lirios,” and “flor” represent a feminine-language that sanctions the poet’s erotic desire. The poet constructs a kind of floral-feminine character from another mythical world (país) with an-Other feminine aesthetic, where “moons,” “stars,” and “secrets” reign between the poet and her beloved “Reina.” Men are not included in the secret language of love and if they are, the ways to speak the right language resides in the ethereal stars above and with the special “caste” of women. The only way to reside in this special space is by lying down on the “almohada” that allows an intimacy filled with “fragrances,” perhaps the very same pillow that resurfaces in the first sonnet of the *Sonetos*. The ambiguous sexual nuances eventually lead the poet to transform a noun into a verb. She predicates “honey” [melificar] to lure her lover into participating in her lesbian game. Thus, the “agria campesina” flirtatiously offers her Queen not only a dedicatory poem, but a suggestion to enter into sexual (inter/d)iscourse as well.

Other poems, such as the sonnet sequence of “La sombra inquieta” ( *Desolación*, 1922) allude to another “flower” whose body becomes delineated in the terrible figure of a woman. As the three sonnets progress, we find the poet desiring this other woman’s figure and wishing it to be buried beneath ground in order not to reveal the bloody hands of her murderer:

I. El estigma  
Flor, flor de la raza mía, Sombra Inquieta,  
qué dulce y terrible tu evocación;  
el perfil de éxtasis, llama la silueta,  
las sienes de nardo, l’habla de canción;

cabellera luenga de cálido manto,  
pupilas de ruego, pecho vibrador;  
ojos ondos para albergar más llanto!  
¡Pecho fino donde taladrar mejor!  
[...]

III. Interrogación  
Cuantos la quisimos, abajo, apeguemos  
la boca a la tierra, y a su corazón  
--vaso de cenizas dulces-- musitemos  
esta formidable interrogación:

“¿Hay arriba tanta leche azul de lunas,  
tanta luz gloriosa de blondos estíos,  
tanta insigne y honda virtud de ablución,



que limpien, que laven, que albeen las brunas  
manos que sangraron con garfios y en ríos  
¡oh, muerta! La carne de tu corazón?" (Mistral, Poesía 38, 39) [6].

Divided into three sections, entitled "El enigma," "La duda," and "Interrogación" these sonnets shadow the *Sonetos de la muerte* in that they begin strongly and clearly with the object of desire nearby, but eventually they purposely lose sight of the beloved as if indicating that something violent or terrible has happened to her. Here, the verb "taladrar" indicates sexual violation or rape, a theme in some of Mistral's poems[7]. By the end of sonnet III, the question of "cleansing" the terrible crime that has occurred is not only posed to the reader but to the poet as well. The poet is just as complicit in the woman's death as others' "hands" are. Likewise, the poet's participation in killing her lover also figures strongly in the *Sonetos*.

**Crossing the Boundaries of Syntactical Love**

When reflecting upon her prosody, Mistral reveals how two lyrical forms had greatly shaped her poetic trajectory, the alexandrine and the hendecasyllabic verse. Mistral credits her interest in both metrics, interestingly, to her family dynamics. The alexandrine (12 syllables or more), she associated with her feminine side, her sister; the hendecasyllabic verse (11 syllables), reverberates in the shadowy figure of her father, a man whom Mistral imagined had written minor verses all his life to her:

La memoria—nada pura a mi edad—me asegura sin embargo y me quiere convencer de un ritmo  
alejandrino que se me emborrachó un día en un dictado de mi hermana, que fue casi única maestra.  
Ese verso no andaba en mi Libro de Lecturas y me hizo hervir el oído y el seso. Creo que me haya  
alborotado solo por nuevo, pues apenas si yo lo usaría más tarde. El segundo ritmo era el de nuestro  
hermoso endecasílabo español [en un poema mandado de su mano y pulso de mi padre, desde su  
provincia]. Me leyeron la hojita de versos que eran *para mí* [sic], por mi nacimiento. (Mistral *Recados*  
II 253).

Mistral divides her meter along sexual lines when she reflects upon childhood memories that decipher her poetic tendencies. Mistral acts as if she were blatantly rejecting her father, when in almost all of her work, she chooses the alexandrine rather than the hendecasyllable as her preferred metrical foot. The eleven syllabic rhyme so associated with the Italianate sonnet has all but disappeared in Mistral's lyrics. As Freud reminds us with the 'fort-da' games which children play to reassure the child's image through the mirror, we can see how Mistral justifies her habits with her past reflections that confirm and deny her own narcissistic tendencies. Grinor Rojo has often stated that Mistral relies on the "Laws of the Father" for legitimating her poetic practice (19-66). While it is true that Mistral uses patriarchal norms to establish herself within a social space of literary tradition, she simultaneously asserts a female language that deconstructs the perceived phallogocentric discourse. Her syntactical language defends new constructions of female sexual power. She does not fall back on the Oedipus complex of "castration" (or negative discourse), but rewrites the myth in what Gilbert and Gubar call the primacy of the mother language: "It is possible then, that the Oedipal moment functions as a repetitive revision of an earlier moment, and that the power of the father, while obviously representing the law of patriarchy, need not be inextricably bound to the power of language" (536).

In addition to Mistral's preferred story of family influence on her scansion, she seems to have taken much of her poetic inspiration from her predecessors such as Rubén Darío and José Asunción Silva. These "modernistas" set the poetic pace by introducing new metric forms to "romanceros" and sonnets. Darío was known to favor experimenting with the metrics of the sonnet, often combining off-beat feet and rhyme schemes, as these verses from his sonnet "Soneto dedicado a Cervantes" demonstrate:

Horas de pesadumbre y de tristeza  
paso en mi soledad. Pero Cervantes  
es buen amigo. Endulza mis instantes  
ásperos y reposa mi cabeza.

In this sonnet, Darío mixes hendecasyllables (11 syllables) with heptasyllables (7 syllables), two metric schemes inherited from the Italianate tradition. The short-long verses give the impression that Cervantes is both near and far from the sad poet. In other poems as well, Darío used the alexandrine verse and its variants (14, 15, 16 syllables).

While observing and closely following Darío, Mistral pushed the boundaries of the sonnet form to refashion it into a "soneto lésbico" which refuses to be pinned down in stable metric forms. At first sight, in the *Sonetos*, she appears to be using the expected meter of the "modernista" alexandrine (14 syllables), but depending on how we want to count the syllables, the sonnets fluctuate between 12 and 14 feet. The swinging meter is particularly important since it heightens the tension the poet creates both in the narrative of the poem and the versification. She wants

the reader to feel ill at ease in the fluid morphability of the poems. The sonnets transgress the rules of traditional meter and the rules of traditional gender discourse. The first line of *Soneto I*, for instance, wavers between three syllabic rhyme schemes. A straightforward reading with the recognized “sinalefa” on the word “en” and the “masculine” (oxytone) stress on the last syllable, takes us to 14 syllables:

Dél ní-chó hé-lá-dó en qué lós hóm-brés té pú-sié-rón

However, when we decide to “cut” syllables, in a parallel fashion to her lover being severed from the land of the living, such as the “he” from “helado” and the ultimate syllable in “pusieron” (known as “rima femenina,” which is normally done with the last multi-syllabic word in Spanish meter), we are not left with 14 syllables but 12. By opening the sonnet to an alternative scansion, Mistral suggests that her sonnets can be read according to two or more discursive modes: either the modernista/patriarchal (alexandrine) tradition or the Other/feminine (truncated alexandrine) meter, or even both.

If Mistral allows multiple readings of her meter form, she does the same with her end-rhyme scheme. Her sonnets do not follow the typical rhyme pattern of the “soneto clásico” found in the Hispanic tradition with the forms of ABBA ABBA CDC CDC, but hinges upon the “serventesio” versification of alternating rhyme both in the quartets and tercets. The alternating verses are apparent in her tercets in *Soneto I*, where the predominating rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD ECF ECF; similarly in *Soneto II*, the last verses read in EAF EAF. If we wanted to ignore the alternating verses in the tercets, which can be done since some of the end-rhymes are imperfect, then we can read them according to traditional versification of EFG EFG.

The whimsical level of choice in her versification gives her *Sonetos* another ethereal quality. They suggest something “other” than what they really are. Are they really sonnets? Are they following a lyrical tradition? As sonnets, they do not conform exactly to the “norm.” And with their transgressive theme or poetic plot, they are highly suggestive of sexual nuances which cross gender boundaries.

The “modernista” project of changing versification patterns to challenge poetic conventions, although radical at that time, can still be characterized as being phallogocentric, especially since it is the gaze of the male poet which fawns upon and desires his female beloved. Even though Mistral was a woman poet, for those early 20<sup>th</sup> century male thinkers, her lyrics upheld the binary pattern of heterosexual love. For this reason her sonnets have been read as a “building up” of tragic loss beginning with *Soneto I* and ending with *Soneto III*. Logically, one would link up all the sonnets together in numerical order. But Mistral was not one to follow conventions, and certainly in these three sonnets we can see that if we are to read them according to their syntactical resemblances, it makes more sense to read the first two sonnets as mirror reflections of each other (they mimic the same alternating rhyme scheme and theme) and the final sonnet as standing alone (returns to traditional end-rhyme scheme and is a completely different poem all together). The order is turned even more upside down when Mistral hints that perhaps *Soneto II* should be read before *Soneto I*. As a “pre-history” to the burial act, *Soneto II* describes the action before she buries her lover in *Soneto I*; In *Soneto II*, she builds up the reasons why:

### *Los sonetos de la muerte*

#### II

Este largo cansancio se hará mayor un día,  
y el alma dirá al cuerpo que no quiere seguir  
arrastrando su masa por la rosada vía,  
por donde van los hombres, contentos de vivir...

Sentirás que a tu lado cavan briosamente,  
que otra dormida llega a la quieta ciudad.  
Esperaré que me hayan cubierto totalmente...  
¡y después hablaremos por una eternidad!

Sólo entonces sabrás el porqué, no madura  
para las hondas huesas tu carne todavía,  
tuviste que bajar, sin fatiga, a dormir.

Se hará luz en la zona de los sinos, oscura;  
sabrás que en nuestra alianza signo de astros había  
y, roto el pacto enorme tenías que morir...

I

Del nicho helado donde los hombres te pusieron,  
te bajaré a la tierra humilde y soleada.  
Que he de dormirme en ella los hombres no supieron,  
y que hemos de soñar sobre la misma almohada.

Te acostaré en la tierra soleada con una  
dulcedumbre de madre para el hijo dormido,  
y la tierra ha de hacerse suavidades de cuna  
al recibir\* tu cuerpo de niño dolorido. \*[para tocar] [8]

Luego iré espolvoreando tierra y polvo de rosas,  
y en la azulada y leve polvareda de luna,  
los despojos livianos irán quedando presos.

Me alejaré cantando mis venganzas hermosas,  
¡porque a ese hondor recóndito la mano de ninguna  
bajará a disputarme tu puñado de huesos!  
(Mistral *Poesía* 66, 67).

These poems embody elements of joy and rebellion. Traditionally the sonnet sequence has been read as fundamentally tragic due to the third sonnet bearing more weight than the first two. However, when not read chronologically or following each other, the first two sonnets clearly can be read as celebratory “eulogies” of both her lover and herself in a time and space that is “Other.” In these poems, the poet yields an unusual power to cross over from the land of the living to the dead. She transgresses rules and boundaries, both by being overjoyed that she is to be buried and by conversing with the dead (tú). Either in or out, from above or below, this poet penetrates unthinkable spaces and boundaries, which most social circles would be forbidden to cross. But if the whole point is that she wants to be with her lover in a secret place, then why not commit the unthinkable and use “necrophilia” as a means to love someone who cannot be loved “above ground” according to social rules? Like that Antigone who commits the socially unthinkable by burying her brother, this poet buries herself and her lover to make a time and a space where, because the space has already been “violated,” nobody else may even think of intruding.

The rebellious impulses which drive Mistral’s sonnets may have reverberations in Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic *chora*. Kristeva’s theory of poetry relies on a subversion of art, language, and history. A raging mechanism to disrupt the modern poetic text, “the *chora* as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality (25, 26). Mistral’s poems, like Kristeva’s writings, seek a certain freedom from civility and social spaces which, through the shattering signification of poetic meter and language, resists and rejects complete intelligibility. Mistral’s zeal to create a new symbolic and spatial order (which leads in Kristevan terms to a search for the death drive), can be understood more concretely when we read *Sonnet II* before *Sonnet I*. In the second sonnet, the poet projects a time in the future when her soul no longer chooses to follow society’s rules or the “rosy path” of men. The first stanza strongly suggests that the speaker wants to pull away from convention; her “cansancio” is wearing her down.

Beginning with Line 5 of *Soneto II*, the poet facilitates the erotic nature of the relationship that she has with her “dead” lover. She speaks in an apostrophic gesture, that she too will be buried in an imaginary space, which the poet calls that “quieta ciudad.” More importantly in this quatrain, she discloses the gender of both herself and her beloved. The poet is that “otra dormida” who alongside the first female sleeper will soon be speaking “for an eternity”. The closing of spatial distance such as the proximity the lovers share underground whether it be “by her side” or as in *Soneto I*, “on the same pillow,” suggest that the speaker and lover are intimate with each other, and they have to be covered in order for sexual nuances to even be played out.

We might notice too that in Line 9, the poet “turns” the sonnet plot around through another speech act that works well with apostrophe. It is a “secret” which the poet may only reveal to her lover. And secrets, though at first hidden, only remain so if nothing is told. She at first hints that the reason she chooses to lie down with her lover is to tell her why her lover’s body may not “mature.” Then in the last tercet, she gives shocking news. The hidden lover has to die. Two possibilities given by the poet hinge not upon the lover’s body or actions, but upon the poet’s (sexual) relationship with her beloved. The first tells that it is written in the stars. Cruel destiny seems to have a hand in breaking their relationship up and allowing the lover to die. But there is something else. There is a “pact that is broken,” and a pact, like a promise is another performative speech act. When a promise goes unfulfilled, language and speech cannot function. In the last line, it seems as though the promise of love cannot be fulfilled according to

the ways of the world. Love or sexual nuance is impossible when the laws of language forbid it to be spoken or are broken. Another space, language, body, and temporal relationship must exist for the promise to be felicitous. It is this “other place” which now is revealed in *Soneto I*.

In *Soneto I*, the tone is jocular, energetic, and festive. It is as though the poet-speaker has been looking forward to the (desacralizing) ritual. Usually funerals are thought of as sad occasions, but this speaker is overjoyed at preparing her lover's burial. The sonnet functions as a whole promise as in *Soneto II*, as if she were whispering to a lover in expectation of an exciting future together. Thus the poet uses the future tense. It lets her imagine that she has magical powers to project that taboo space in an unforeseen time and to redo the burial act which was performed “coldly” by men [L. 1]. Death in this sonnet is equated with seduction and erotic discourse. Figuratively then, it is an-Other space desired by the poet to create what others may see as “negative,” but for her, a different, transgressive realm to help fulfill (a promise of) lesbian desire.

The poet may hint at her reasons to be buried in the second sonnet but explains with further detail in the first. She wants to be placed underground so that she can re-create, re-dig, re-imagine an intimate (or “sunny”) space with her lover in *Soneto I*. When she too eventually falls into the burial space (“que he de morirme en ella”), she tells her lover that she does this to re-accommodate her lover upon the “pillow” and then the “earth.” References to her lullaby poems are recreated here, as is pointed out by Grinor Rojo (73). And in many “canciones de cuna” written by Mistral, we see the poet not soothing the child to sleep, but rocking in a narcissistic way to comfort her own self. In the second quatrain in this sonnet, she places her lover down as a mother would a child. The binary connections in *Soneto I*-- Mother/child, earth/dust, lover/beloved-- all work in a parallel fashion. They lodge in the reader's imagination a heightened sense of intimate passion which one partner acts upon the other.

As in the second sonnet, in *Soneto I* the poet's tercets demonstrate a change in tone and narrative. Now we see the poet being able to move with ease from one space to another. Not quite above ground or below, this speaker floats between the two spaces as if she were a mythical being who had powers to do so. In ancient Greek mythology, the mythic deity Hecate had that extraordinary ability to move from the above world to the lower, without having anybody trap her. As Persephone's keeper, she can move from Olympus to Hades. Similarly, Mistral's poet-speaker is not confined to remaining below ground, even though logic tells us otherwise. She appears to have these supernatural abilities to move from space to space. Here in *Soneto I*, she not only floats but she appears to transgress the “ground” from where her lover is lying to the “figure” of social space of men. Nelson Rojas has commented that the *Sonetos* are in a way a strong challenge to society. They blatantly defy society's conventions (26-30). Lines 9-14 act as if she is creating a new libation for her lover, not to rebury her exactly, but to “trap” her. Almost as if she had promised her lover comfort in the preceding quatrain, in these tercets, she deceives her beloved. She sprinkles “dust of rose” by the “dust of the moon,” and like a magical potion, they imprison her lover beneath the ground.

Her “sweet revenge” then in the last tercet alludes to the reasons the lover had to die in *Sonnet II*. The poet has imprisoned or “killed” her lover (although logically impossible since she is dead and in a future time), to keep her love safe from others and hers forever. Her celebratory “song” which she will sing above ground, almost taunting those who are reading her, is that she can figuratively get away with “murder.” Nobody can contest it, simply because, as is the case with finding the “smoking gun” with homosexuality, it can never be found. The “ninguna” cleverly inserted by Mistral, and read by her male readers as a rival who confirms that her lover must be male, is nothing other than a syntactical ruse in rhyme scheme. “Ninguno” would not work because it would thwart the meter of the end-rhyme. Her love then can never surface above ground, for the poet's aim is much more sinister. She disintegrates her lover from “remains” to “bones.” The lover becomes exactly what the poet had hoped for in the second quatrain and throughout the poem. Like a child who becomes one with its mother, the lover becomes the “rosy” dust that dissolves into the earth.

**Talking Back to God: Pleading for Love's Stolen Object**

Gabriela Mistral's *Sonetos* have been characterized as traditional in form and tragic in theme. Of all of the sonnets written (including those found years later) which typically have been used to “prove” her sadness over the suicide of Ureta, her third sonnet appears to follow this conventional analysis which leads up to her supposed misfortune. It certainly is the sonnet which has caused the most literary trouble. In it, Mistral seems to be constantly changing the recipient of her speech through changes in pronouns and objects. We are unable to see where the original “tú” is and how this love has been taken from her. This is due partly to her immediate transition or change of voice from the preceding two sonnets. But if we are to take the third sonnet as singular and not read it chronologically as a result of the previous two, then we may find a sonnet that ups the ante in transgressing the normal rules of discourse. Unlike *Soneto I* and *II*, where Mistral's application of apostrophe lies as a one-sided dialogue between the poet and her beloved in the typical “tú-yo” form, in *Soneto III*, we see a conflation of voices and pronominal exchanges, which blur the lines between the speaker, her lover, and another addressee, in this case God or a god-



like figure. Most of Mistral's poetry offers rhetorical switches in agency. Here in the sonnets, she changes forms of address, and she does the same with mythology and religion and verb tenses. Her last sonnet emerges as a strange kind of hybrid. At once we see the poet address her lover, then we see the poet speak to a compassionate Christ-like figure who "understands" her mixed-up plight. We no longer see the warm and sunny earth in the previous two sonnets, but another "darker" world echoing Greek mythology and the river Styx. And unlike *Soneto I* and *II*, this sonnet functions in "real" time, beginning in the past tense and continuing in the present, as if the action has already happened and the author needs to make amends. The change in verb tenses, not in the future, makes her sonnet a strange mixture of poetic action.

This intertwining and morphing so common in Mistral's poems, may have something to do with her earnest interest in reading mythology and other religions outside of Christianity. Previous to the writing of the *Sonetos*, Gabriela Mistral had discovered the esoteric teachings of Madam Blavatsky, who had visited South America in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. By 1914 after studying these mystic beliefs while she was in Antofagasta, Mistral became a believer in theosophy. In a letter which she wrote in 1913 on her ideas on this 'religion,' she enthusiastically remarked that:

"...la Teosofía al serme revelada lo fue como la mayor de las sorpresas. ¡ ¡cosa extraña! yo que llebaba a ridículos extremos del cientismo experimental ¡ pedía pruebas a todo con un riguroso espíritu científico, que me había arrandado la fe en todas sus formas, no me negué a creer estas cosas de prodigio que exceden en mucho a lo que creer mana P. ej. el cristianismo...Asisto como una embriaguez a los actos de la naturaleza que son las estaciones ¡ me apasiono de los seres— particularmente de las plantas ¡ los pájaros—con un fervor que es soplo divino" (Rojo 200).

Her fleeting moments of space and time invite an invidious comparison with Homer's "Hymn to Demeter," where Demeter asks Hecate to save her daughter from Hades. In Mistral's sonnet, we find faint shadows of that myth. Mistral appears to suggest that this sonnet is an after thought to characters of the Greek underworld. We can see how her early poems already start to experiment with new constructed spaces connoting a different kind of mythology, a theme with which she will experiment all of her poetic life (as evinced by her "Locas mujeres"):

III

Malas manos tomaron tu vida desde el día  
en que, a una señal de astros, dejara su plantel  
nevado de azucenas. En gozo florecía.  
Malas manos entraron trágicamente en él...

Y yo dije al Señor: "Por las sendas mortales,  
le llevan. ¡Sombra amada que no saben guiar!  
¡Arráncalo, Señor, a esas manos fatales  
o le hundes en el hondo sueño que sabes dar!"

¡No le puedo gritar, no le puedo seguir!  
Su barca empuja un negro viento de tempestad.  
Retórnalo a mis brazos o le siegas en flor."

Se detuvo la barca rosa de su vivir...  
¿Que no sé del amor, que no tuve piedad?  
¡Tú, que vas a juzgarme, lo comprendes, Señor!  
(Mistral *Poesía* 68).

The complete change of voice in the verses poses a challenge in the sonnet, simply because the poet appears to lose track of that unknown "tú" as she directs most of her wrath towards God or Christ. The measures of voice become even more complicated if we are to decipher how the lover was "stolen." In Homer's "Hymn to Demeter," he indicates that Persephone was "snatched" by the hands of Hades. Playing near the narcissus flowers, which she bent down to take, she is abducted to the underworld. Only Hecate and Demeter can bring her back. Part of the Eulisian mysteries, Homer's "Hymn" reconstructs the beginnings of a feminine counter-myth, where women may be able to reclaim their property. In Mistral's *Soneto III*, the poet finds her "sombra amada" gone and in order to reach her, she must plead with the deity in command. Like Demeter who must argue and win her case with Hades, this poet asks God or Christ to stop the flow of death's course to be rejoined with her lover.

The first quatrain begins with a violent gesture of "bad hands grabbing" the lover's life and ends with those same

hands “entering” an unknown pronominal object. The pronoun in Line 4, “él” has been used to confirm that the bad hands (such as “suicide” hands) have violated a masculine life (Romelio Ureta’s). Yet if we return to the myth of the abduction of Persephone, we find that Persephone and the flowers are synonymous with each other. In Mistral’s poem in the previous Line 3, the nursery is filled with “lilies,” the flower associated with the Greek daughter. Thus the last line of the quatrain remains purposely ambiguous. Those hands which snatched the lilies in the nursery (“él”) may refer to Persephone’s mistake at grabbing the flowers or it may mean that the terrible hands of Hades abducted Persephone. Either way, Mistral’s restraint and control of the sonnet allows us as readers to “lose” sight of the perceived “tú” or the Persephone-like lover, just as the speaker has lost her beloved.

Unlike her other two sonnets, Mistral’s second quatrain begins the sonnet “turn” earlier to make use of the irregularities of the projection of voice. Where in *Soneto II* and *Soneto I*, the dialogue was directed in a lighthearted style at the unknown “tú,” in *Soneto III*, the dialogue is vague and defensive. The beloved is nowhere to be found. In her place remains the poet talking to the authoritative “Señor”. Desperate and emphatic, her one-way conversation with God commands him to return her lover to her. The unusual part of the poem begins in Line 5, which assumes that the “sombra amada” is being taken down the “deadly path” of men. Without a proper guide, the poet fears her lover will be lost forever. And yet again, the poet plays with the perspective of time and space. In Line 7, when she commands, “arráncalo, Señor, a esas manos fatales,” she seems to want to stop the action that has already taken place. In other words, she would like to stop both the growth of the “lilies” and “yank” them away, just as she would like to stop those “fatal hands” from grabbing them. She fears her lover is “asleep” and will be lost to her forever.

The poet moves us in her desperation as she remarks how she cannot follow her lover down the pathway. The mixing of metaphors between Christianity and myth interweaves when the lost lover must make a journey down a river. As all who must travel down to Hades encounter, it is the river Styx which cuts the path from the living and the dead. If the poet cannot shout to her lover in the underworld (“no le puedo gritar”), she certainly seems to be shouting at God or Christ. The imperative “retórnalo” demands her lover back in her arms, like Persephone’s Demeter, even though she already knows what fate has in store, that her lover will be “blinded” (or overtaken) by the action of the flowers.

And as if God or Christ had been listening to her, just for an instant, the boat that still appears to be carrying the lover is briefly detained, as told by Line 12. At the end of the poem and the last tercet, we do not know whether the poet has been successful or not in reclaiming her lover. What is certain is that she continues to justify her actions, as if someone had directly accused her of not knowing about “love” or about having “sympathy.” Just as Christ or God knows about “resurrecting” an impossible love back to the living, Mistral makes the audacious plea of bringing her beloved back from the underworld. Only Christ or God can judge her for her transgressive actions.

In very important ways then, the question of who the lover is in Mistral’s sonnets becomes beside the point. The sonnets continually make us as readers lose track of the perceived lover as object and destabilize conventions of heterosexual amorous discourse. Indeed, the sonnets relish a certain fluidity of sexual identities and relationships that rely on “Other” spaces to flourish. In the first two sonnets, the poet speaks of the joy of having to lie with her female lover and eventually bury or “kill” her. The insistence that the lover must remain underground and eventually disappear to turn into mere bones, although a horrific conceit, brings the lover closer to the poet. The eventual “nullification” paradoxically unifies them. In the last sonnet, quite a different reading occurs. Her transgression is to command God or Christ to grant her an unusual love affair. Although she cannot follow the lover completely underground as she does in *Soneto I*, she can bring her lover back through her command of language to a higher deity or order. As if sanctioning a lesbian love relationship, which in any other terms should be “snatched” or “taken” away from her, she counters with her own violent linguistic tack. She talks back and just for a mere moment, she can pretend that her love does not require cruelty for it to survive. Easy answers to a difficult romance do not emerge. Instead, the reader is invited to step outside the patriarchal norms and imagine a new contextualization of what love or desire may possibly mean between two women.

**Notes**

[1] Licia Fiol-Matta persuasively argues how Mistral craftily hid behind her public (and often conservative) persona to lead a double life as a lesbian. Many of her texts, especially when speaking about Indians or women signal Mistral’s anxiety on her own sexual issues. See *Queer Mother for a Nation*. Likewise, in a previous article, Horan demonstrates how Mistral was not a writer who defined herself in one category or another; she had many personae, one of whom showed conflictual responses towards her sexuality and relationships. See “Alternative identities.” [Return](#)

[2] See “El Ixtlazhuatl” and “La Cajita de Olinalá.” In both of these poems, Mistral reveals her lesbian desire by focusing her attention on her voice to a Mexican mountain or a wooden box. In Mistral’s *Antología mayor*. Poesía

113, 216. [Return](#)

[3] Manuel Magallanes Moure, a poet from the same region as Mistral, knew Gabriela Mistral quite well and presumably voted for her to win the best prize for poetry. In a letter she wrote to Moure, Mistral writes anxiously about receiving the prize and about meeting him: "Manuel: Fui sólo por oírlo. No por oír mis versos (los había escuchado leer); no por aquello de los aplausos de una multitud (unos momentos sólo entre la multitud me hacen daño); por oírlo a Ud., por eso fui. [...] No saqué de esa noche sino que una frase de Ud. sobre mis sonetos me abriera de nuevo la llaga central de mi corazón. Nada más" Antología mayor. Cartas 12. [Return](#)

[4] The sonnets studied here have been typically defined as the "first three" of the series on the "Poems/Sonnets on Death." For an in-depth analysis on sequencing and publishing, see Satoko Tamura's *Los sonetos de la muerte*. [Return](#)

[5] Mistral may have played into the furore while at the same time. She displayed mixed feelings about the interpretation of the Sonetos. In an early letter to Eugenio Labarca, she made clear that the fame garnered from the Sonetos involved being grouped with certain male intellectuals with whom she did not want to be associated: "Por eso le decía que los tales J.F. (Juegos Florales) me eran la cosa más odiosa del mundo; me acercaron a luminosos cerebrales que tienen el corazón podrido y que no conocen la lealtad; me pusieron entre ellos y cada vez que entre ellos estoy, quisiera no haber sido nunca otra cosa que Lucila Godoy..." ( Antología mayor. Cartas, 31). [Return](#)

[6] Mistral adds an apocryphal note to the poem. She declares that the poem was inspired by a character written by Alone [Hernán Díaz Arrieta] who "pasó dolorosamente por la vida." [Return](#)

[7] Mistral alludes to rape and violation in some of her early short stories and poems. See Karen Peña's "Violence and Difference in Gabriela Mistral's Short Stories." [Return](#)

[8] In the original poem published in the Juegos Florales, the tone can be read much more intimately, as the words "para tocar tu cuerpo" depict. [Return](#)

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