

Jaime Cruz-Ortiz

University of Oklahoma

**Sabina Berman Revisits the “Taming of the Shrew” in
Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda**

Within the last three decades, a group of irreverent women playwrights have accosted Mexican theatre. These “post-modern parodists” (Bixler 83) include Jesusa Rodríguez, Astrid Hadad, Carmen Boullosa and Sabina Berman. Berman, a four-time recipient of the National Institute of Fine Art’s (IBNA) National Theatre Prize between 1979 and 1983, has become this group’s most popular and successful representative. Her most acclaimed work, Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda (1993) became a popular addition to Mexico City’s theatre in the first half of the 1990s. Critics have generally focused on two aspects of the comedy: its representation of gender and its use of the icon Pancho Villa to comment on the failure of the Mexican Revolution. Ronald Burgess binds these two critical threads with the observation that, “the play portrays the failure (or the death) of machismo and of the Mexican Revolution” (149). Still, the film version of Berman’s play, Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda (1995) released only two years after the original, continues to escape critical attention.

This essay analyzes the alterations the play underwent in its transition from the stage to the big screen. These alterations function along two axes. First, they attempt to strip the work of politicized references to Mexico’s specific history in an appeal to a wider, international audience. Secondly, the gaps left by omitting those sections of the work are refilled with elements that reemphasize the violence associated with the performance of masculinity. Specifically, I analyze Berman’s inclusion of a tale type designated by folklorists as the Taming of the Shrew Complex and her manipulation of that complex.

The change in the title of the play bears witness to Berman’s appeal to a wider audience. In 1993, the original work appeared under the name Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda. It later became Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda in the 1995 film version. Berman has a long history of changing the titles of her plays: Ésta no es una obra de teatro (1979) has also been performed under the title Un actor se repara; Yankee (1979) later became Bill; Herejía (1983) was first titled Anatema and was later staged as En el nombre de Dios (Bixler 83). This particular title change appears to be a gesture of clarification for non-Mexican viewers.

In this vein, Berman underplays or eliminates references to Mexican history that might escape an international audience. For example, in one episode that is narrated and simultaneously acted out, Villa kills a woman because her father is a known follower of

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

Elías Calles. In the film version, Villa murders that same woman not for political reasons, rather because she hesitated in bringing him coffee.

Berman also significantly alters the final scene of the play. In the original, the protagonist Gina disappears completely and her friend Andrea now resides in her condominium. Adrián, the scorned lover and adamant Pancho Villa aficionado, arrives and Andrea convinces him to write a book about her grandfather, Plutarco Elías Calles. This scene is replaced by a sequence in which Adrián chases Gina to her apartment, breaks down the door, and fantasizes about shooting her in the head.

The changes described above de-regionalize the play. They also serve to reinforce the performance of gender, a theme already present in the original according to Sharon Magnarelli. Magnarelli bases her reading of Berman's play on the concept of gender performativity elaborated by Judith Butler in both Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter. The concept argues that identities are the products of citational performances that both repeat and rewrite previous performances of gender. Magnarelli highlights Adrián's desire to imitate and recreate the violent model of masculinity embodied in the figure of Pancho Villa. Those attempts are beset with both frustration and anxiety because he inherits an exaggerated, mythical and unattainable model in the General Villa.

Likewise, Villa also approaches his performance with anxiety. In his first appearance in both the film and the play, Villa visits one of his numerous lovers. She offers him tea. He demands coffee instead. She reiterates the tea will calm his nerves, "Es bueno el té de tila para los nervios [...] Los apacigua" (Berman 30). Magnarelli observes concerning this uneasiness amongst Adrián and Villa as they reenact their gender roles, "the male characters are anxious since their conquest of the object renders that object undesirable (dead, and/or asexual) or, perhaps even worse, powerful" (42).

Whereas the original work emphasizes Adrián's behavior as a gender performance, the film also highlights Pancho Villa as a gender performer. Villa reenacts an older model of masculinity as propagated by the oral tradition called the Taming of the Shrew Complex by folklorists. The complex takes its name from the famous Shakespearian comedy. It normally recounts a version of the following storyline: a young bride is a shrew, which may mean that she is both violent and unruly. The husband shoots his dog and horse for their disobedience. Witnessing those murders, the wife is scared into submission (Brunvand 3). The tradition celebrates the young man's ability to subjugate an indomitable woman as he is often rewarded with wealth and fame. The inclusion of the Taming of the Shrew Complex in the film creates a chain of citational performances. Villa reenacts the complex, which dates back to medieval Europe. He, in turn, serves as Adrián's model.

Many of these citational performances also function as parodies, in that they imitate a model for "comic effect or ridicule" ("Parody," def. 1a). For example, Ismael, Gina's

young lover, presents an idealized version of how one should end a relationship: “Ismael: ¿Qué se enoja? ¿De qué? Si se enoja, entonces le tiras en la cara las rosas y le dices adiós para siempre. Y te vas. Como toda una señora” (Berman 44). Afterwards, Gina attempts to act out Ismael’s suggestion. The result is a comical citational performance that parodies his model. Gina tries to throw the roses in Adrián’s face, but misses, loses her balance and falls. One of her high heels breaks and she has to ask for Adrián’s help to finish the performance, “A ver, quédate quieto ahí cabrón” (47). After he stands still, she throws the flowers in his face, turns around and hobbles away in the rain.

Berman presents another failed citational performance with Adrián’s poor suicide attempt. Incapable of convincing Gina to take him back, Adrián takes on the role of love’s martyr. With this in mind, he runs towards a nearby window and throws himself out of it. Gina completes the parodic scene with the comedic observation, “Pero siempre he vivido en planta baja” (71).

Citational performances, in Berman’s hands, become comical, parodical reenactments that devalue traditional gender roles. Likewise, the Taming of the Shrew Complex undergoes radical alterations in Berman’s film, exposing the model as an artifice constructed around masculine fears.

Superficially, Villa’s episode fulfills most of the requirements of the shrew complex. It presents a man who kills a series of animals to intimidate a woman. Still, that man traditionally attempts to domesticate the indomitable shrew within the context of a marriage. The women of Berman’s play seek to tame Adrián and Pancho Villa through marriage.

Adrián sees Gina’s marriage proposal as an invasive, domesticating project. In the play, he comments, “estás educándome” (128). The film replaces that line with, “estás domesticándome.” In both versions, Adrián expresses his anxiety concerning marriage in the following way: “Tenías que atraparme aquí en tu casa, tenías que comportarte como ‘toda una mujer’” (70).

The men of the Taming of the Shrew Complex fear violence at the hands of the shrew. Her aggressiveness provides the challenge upon which the plot of the tale type is built. Berman reduces that anxiety to the comic fear of marriage and blurs the boundaries between shrew and domesticator. Who are the shrews of Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda? Villa and Adrián both attempt to conquer women with violence. In that sense, they are the traditional protagonists of the complex. The women, on the other hand, try to domesticate their indomitable partners. In which case, they also function as the protagonists of the complex. This confusion of conventional gender roles is another product of Berman’s parody.

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

Normally, the protagonist of shrew tales limits the bloodshed to animals. In this respect, Villa is an actor who takes his role too far. The woman's murder is senseless, especially considering that she had already submitted to his will. Perhaps owing to his anxiety, Villa overacts and destroys his shrew.

Adrián is another failed gender performer. His reelaboration of Villa's model is derailed by his inability to carry out the violence that it entails. He chases Gina to her apartment, breaks down her door, and follows her to the bathroom. He imagines shooting her in the head, but cannot bring himself to follow through with the fantasy. Adrián fails in his citational performances as a martyr of love and as a domesticator of shrews.

In summary, Sabina Berman made several significant changes to her comedy during its translation to film. These changes tend to downplay references that might escape a non-Mexican viewer and establish a chain of citational performances that expose gender as failed reenactments. In both versions of the comedy, Berman presents men and women as failed actors and actresses who attempt to recreate traditional gender roles. Furthermore, Berman strips the cited gender models of their authority and exposes them as botched performances in their own right.

Works Cited

- Berman, Sabina. Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda. México: Gaceta, 1994.
- Bixler, Jacqueline. "Power Plays and the Mexican Crisis: The Recent Theatre of Sabina Berman". Performance, pathos, política de los sexos: Teatro postcolonial de autoras latinoamericanas. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1999. 83-99.
- Brunvand, Jan Harold. The Taming of the Shrew: A Comparative Study of Oral and Literary Traditions. New York: Garland, 1991.
- Burgess, Ronald D. "Sabina Berman's Undone Threads". Latin American Women Dramatists: Theatre, Texts, and Theories. Ed. C. Larson and M. Vargas. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana U P, 1998.
- Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda. Dir. Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardan. Perf. Diana Bracho, Arturo Rios, and Jesús Ochoa. 1995.
- Magnarelli, Sharon. "Tea for Two: Performing History and Desire in Sabina Berman's Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda". Latin American Theatre Review 30.1 (1996): 55-74.
- . "Masculine Acts/Anxious Encounters: Sabina Berman's Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda". Intertexts 1.1 (1997): 40-50.
- "Parody." The American Heritage College Dictionary. 3rd ed. 1993.