

2017

Diana M. de Paco Serrano's Killers: the Challenges of Staging Violence Perpetrated by Women

Helen Freear-Papio
College of the Holy Cross

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/teatro>

 Part of the [Spanish and Portuguese Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Freear-Papio, Helen (2017) "Diana M. de Paco Serrano's Killers: the Challenges of Staging Violence Perpetrated by Women," *Teatro: Revista de Estudios Culturales / A Journal of Cultural Studies*: Vol. 31 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/teatro/vol31/iss31/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teatro: Revista de Estudios Culturales / A Journal of Cultural Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Diana M. de Paco Serrano's Killers: the Challenges of Staging Violence Perpetrated by Women

Key words: violence, trauma, myth, theater by women

Helen Freear-Papio
College of the Holy Cross

Diana M. de Paco Serrano, a prolific and award-winning young dramatist,¹ has made violence an important underlying theme in her plays, violence that takes on many forms, including physical and psychological abuse, suicide and murder. However, what makes the role of violence in de Paco's dramaturgy particularly subversive is the fact that, in many cases, the person committing the violent acts is not a man as one may expect, but a woman. All the plays to be studied here destabilize the traditional narrative of women as the submissive victims of abuse and invite the spectator to actively question these worn-out stereotypes. As Ceballos Muñoz, Espejo Romero and Muñoz Martínez note in their introduction to *Violence in American Drama* (11), there is a long tradition of:

[r]epresenting women in theater through an unfair dichotomy between good and weak, passive female characters, and not so weak or passive feminine creations, but ones who, on account of that, carry the stigma of bad, fallen women. Violence, so common in drama, has never been deemed suitable for female characters, however usual in the characterization of their male counterparts.²

De Paco overturns this dichotomy of good and weak versus bad and strong by highlighting and analyzing the destructive effects of trauma: specifically, the trauma experienced by women at the hands of men, which, in turn, causes the women to retaliate violently. As Dominick LaCapra notes in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (42):

Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel. Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent

¹ Runner up for the 2000 Calderón de la Barca prize for *Polifonía*, winner of the Premio Ciudad de Palencia de Teatro in 2008 for *Obsession Street* and winner of the first Premio Irreverentes de Comedia in 2015 for *De mutuo acuerdo y otras obras menudas*.

² These observations are clearly just as true for Spanish drama.

counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation.

What better vehicle than drama, then, for working through this “disabling dissociation” produced by trauma? Staging the difficult processes through which a victim of a violent event must pass, from the event itself to the reactions it begets in the victim, creates compelling theater; and it is even more gripping when the roles are switched and women are the characters who respond to violence with violence.

Bad and fallen women can be seen in a new light in de Paco’s award-winning play *Polifonía*, runner up for the prestigious Calderón de la Barca prize in 2000. In *Polifonía* de Paco gives voice to Medea, Clytemnestra and Phaedra (all of whom have been treated throughout the centuries as the villains of their stories by patriarchal narratives), as well as to Penelope, the quintessential passive female victim. In her more recent plays, mythological settings gradually give way to modern realities, but the issues around violence persist. *El canto póstumo de Orfeo* offers a metatheatrical approach to a contemporary rewriting of myth, as Ella, inspired by Medea’s story, will kill her cheating husband. In *PCP*³ Berenice/Carmen will reluctantly reveal her role as the assassin of her sexually predatory husband during her unwitting participation in a perverted voyeuristic reality TV show. While in the 2013 play, *Espérame en el cielo...o, mejor, no*,⁴ Rosa can no longer tolerate the psychological abuse she suffers at the hands of her lover and, after long deliberations and rationalizations, finally kills him.⁵ The playwright takes full advantage of complex postmodern theatrical techniques in her theater (e.g., destruction of linear time, fragmented characters in search of their identities and a language that impedes communication instead of facilitating it) to create for her spectators a disturbing vision of a dehumanized, desensitized modern world in which violence thrives, miscommunication reigns and women become killers.

It perhaps should not surprise us that de Paco, a professor of Greek Philology, would choose the revision of classical myths as a starting place for her staging of female violence. She understands the perennial power of myth to captivate and manipulate public opinion and therefore understands the theatrical

³ *PCP* stands for *Programa de chat personalizado*.

⁴ A work as yet unpublished in Spanish but that has been published in English, French and Italian. The play has been successfully staged several times in Spain over the last few years by the theatrical company Espacio imaginado.

⁵ Due to space constrictions, 2013’s *La metáfora* will not be discussed although it could thematically fit within the parameters of this study, in so far as it features a jilted woman who manipulates her equally traumatized dog in order to kill her husband.

value of using famous figures from the past to pass judgment on the present.⁶ As she notes in an interview with Lourdes Bueno, “a través de los personajes femeninos que la tradición nos ha legado, es posible hablar del presente, reflexionar y contestar al pasado y proyectar posibles luces sobre el futuro” (Bueno 2009, 8). María-José Ragué-Arias has also observed how myth is woven into recent plays by other Spanish women dramatists who subvert patriarchal narratives and use mythologies to denounce the mistreatment of women. Ragué-Arias underscores the clear intention in their plays to “denunciar la situación de la mujer en la sociedad actual” (726). In *Polifonía*, Diana de Paco rejects the masculine stories that have held their female protagonists captive for millennia and presents a new version of these myths, one in which women control their own stories and justify their use of violence.⁷

Linear narration is forgone in *Polifonía* as the characters are presented in a mythical, static present and through a series of flashbacks during which they confront their husbands and sons. Penelope, who is described as still being alive, brings the shades of Clytemnestra, Medea and Phaedra into a cell-like grotto in the Underworld with the pretext of keeping them company while she documents their stories on her famous unfinished tapestry. The other three women have all crossed the river Lethe and, as a result, initially have no memory of their past transgressions. However, in the safe space created by Penelope where sorority is fostered, the women will remember their past lives and will confront their male abusers. Here, in these spaces of memory, each woman eloquently justifies her violent acts over the ineffective and narcissistic protestations of the male antagonist. As Wilfried Floeck clarifies, these women “[se] reconocen cada vez más como víctimas de un esposo tirano y de una situación social marcada por un patriarcalismo que las ha obligado a cometer los crímenes y a desempeñar un papel que no han buscado y con el que la sociedad las ha encargado” (17). Medea, Phaedra, Clytemnestra and Penelope reject the negative stereotypes of fallen women with which they have been associated over the centuries.⁸ Instead, they tell inspiring tales of strength, resolve and solidarity. They offer themselves up as

⁶ As I clarify elsewhere: “rather than being curious anachronistic rewritings, Diana de Paco’s new twists on old themes actually recapture and revive the universal function of myth itself. In other words, the representation of these alternate versions of events in *Polifonía* simultaneously reinterprets past patriarchal lessons and reanimates each story’s innate allegorical content for a new audience” (2013, 73).

⁷ As José Henríquez notes: “se trata de víctimas, sin duda, pero son también mujeres transgresoras que rompen el silencio al que la sociedad las condenaba y pasan a la acción convirtiéndose en verdugos de sus agresores; sus razones son claras, nítidas para el espectador actual, pero nos presentan el problema de la justificación de sus acciones en el universo trágico antiguo” (98).

⁸ I shall limit my analysis to Clytemnestra, Medea and Penelope, as they are all killers in *Polifonía*. For more details on the character of Phaedra, see Freear-Papio 2013 and Miras.

role models to future generations by creating a new, equally valid mythology that allows for the justification of violence committed by women.

Clytemnestra's arrival on stage is dramatic and forceful, almost as if she were a high-powered lawyer delivering a compelling closing argument: “(*Se levanta, surge al fondo, se incorpora majestuosa. Su silueta se define casi en una sombra.*) ¡Justicia! De nuevo se habrá de hacer justicia” (57-58). Clytemnestra, as the myth goes, was killed by Orestes, her son, after she and her lover, Aegisthus, killed her husband, Agamemnon, upon his return from the Trojan War. The patriarchal version of the myth comes to us initially from Aeschylus in whose *Oresteia* the death of Agamemnon is presented primarily as a crime of passion; Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon because she has fallen in love with Aegisthus in his absence. Her desire to avenge the death of their daughter, Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to the Gods for selfish reasons, is seen as only a secondary motive. Diana de Paco's Clytemnestra tells a rather different story. The male-centered narrative is subverted and Clytemnestra makes it clear that she killed Agamemnon solely to avenge his sacrifice of Iphigenia for his own political gain and she vehemently negates the idea that she killed him on account of jealousy of his transgressions or out of a desire to be with Aegisthus, as can be seen in this exchange with her son Orestes right before he kills her (80):

Orestes.- Madre, dame una explicación, una sola razón que me haga dudar.

Clitemnestra.- Ifigenia.

Orestes.- No es suficiente.

Clitemnestra.- No hay ninguna más.

Orestes.- Mientes.

Clitemnestra.- Dímelas tú, entonces.

Orestes.- Egisto.

Clitemnestra.- Hijo, no eres justo, te equivocas. Egisto no tenía nada que ver, no he actuado como mujer, no he sido yo quien ha obrado, sino la justicia vengadora ...

Orestes.- La misma justicia que me obliga a mí a

Clytemnestra sees herself as the embodiment of a revenged-based justice, and she is not afraid to die in this pursuit of vengeance.

Neither her husband nor her son is capable of dealing with Clytemnestra's newfound strength. Both Agamemnon and Orestes attempt to force her back within the parameters of the negative female stereotypes that she is so desperately trying to discard. Agamemnon, for example, tries to contain the power of his wife

by painting her as a deranged, hysterical and jealous woman, while at the same time inviting her to behave like a judicious man, just like him: “Clitemnestra no te precipites, que no te ciegue la histeria, sé sensata. Ven, siéntate frente a mí y hablemos como dos hombres juiciosos, no te dejes llevar por tus instintos de mujer celosa, no es el momento, asume la responsabilidad de vivir y entiende que el sufrimiento forma parte de ella” (66-67). Clytemnestra’s response is clinical in its rejection of Agamemnon’s insensitivity and misogyny: “¡Hablar como dos hombres juiciosos! Eres egoísta, hipócrita, y por encima de todo un salvaje asesino, el peor criminal” (67). Orestes fares no better during his verbal dual with his mother. It is obvious that he sides with Agamemnon and believes that his mother killed his father in order to be with Aegisthus. He justifies his father’s sacrifice of his sister, saying: “se vio obligado a hacer lo que hizo, amaba a Ifigenia tanto como tú” (80). He furthermore tells her: “has asesinado a sangre fría al hombre que me dio la vida y que lo único que hizo fue luchar por su patria ...” (81). Again, Clytemnestra is strong and clear in her own defense, believing that she has nothing for which to apologize. She tells Orestes: “Hazlo, no te voy a suplicar perdón, ni espero que te compadezcas de mí” (80). Orestes assumes that his mother, a mere woman in his eyes, would do anything to save herself and that she would, of course, succumb to her son’s eloquent pleadings (81):

Suplícame, madre, pídemelo por favor que te perdone, no seas orgullosa, pídemelo, no podría negarte eso, soy tu hijo [...] cae de rodillas ante mí, llora, párteme el corazón con tus gemidos desesperados. Yo soy débil, te aseguro que no lo podré soportar mucho tiempo [...]. Me iré sintiendo todavía los latidos de tu pecho asustado cerca del mío; sintiendo tu calor, tu perfume, tus besos agradecidos... ¡Hazlo, madre! Te lo ruego.

Clytemnestra refuses to be provoked, responding: “obré como debía y no me voy a disculpar por ello” (81). It is interesting to note that de Paco turns Aeschylus’ version of events inside out by having Orestes demand that his mother beg him for mercy. In the *Oresteia*, it is, of course, a desperate Clytemnestra who begs her son for mercy.

Medea’s crimes are more difficult to justify than Clytemnestra’s eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth concept of vengeance and justice. In the patriarchal myth that tells her story,⁹ Medea is the barbarian sorceress who comes from a strange faraway land¹⁰ and who betrays her family and her country for her lover, Jason. When eventually spurned by Jason, who leaves her to wed Creusa, a Corinthian

⁹ In Euripides’ *Medea* and Seneca’s *Medea*.

¹⁰ As Jones observes, Medea is, “literally, the foreigner, the barbarian, the Other” (xii).

princess, Medea takes revenge first by killing her rival and then her own children in an attempt to make Jason suffer for his infidelity. As Jennifer Jones observes, the Medea of Euripides and Seneca represents a remarkable threat to the patriarchy as she embodies “the havoc women will wreak when they are no longer content to be submissive” (ix) as she has “not only broken the law but has also violated gender expectations” (ix).¹¹ What type of monstrous woman would kill her own children? This is what de Paco sets out to rationalize. Her Medea is a sad, depressed and tragic figure, terribly troubled by what she was forced to do in order to “save” her children. De Paco’s Medea completely rejects any implication that this was a revenge killing, exclaiming: “la venganza es otra cosa, tiene otro sabor, un gusto agrídulce que termina por agradar. No, no se trata de venganza” (*Polifonía*, 61). She posits her crime as an act of pure, maternal compassion.¹²

In an eerie monologue directed to her dead children, Medea explains that she had no alternative but to kill them in order to save them from a fate worse than death (61):

¿Para qué dejaros navegar a la deriva, en medio de la tormenta, si el trayecto es terrorífico y el único final es el abismo? [...] Yo sé lo que os espera porque ya he alcanzado el final. Os amo, os amo tanto que no puedo permitiros una pena que os consuma poco a poco. [...] Veo vuestra agonía, la presiento porque la he vivido; despojados de todo, solos, heridos, inquietos, cadáveres en vida.

Medea insists that she killed her children out of love and makes it abundantly clear that this was a tremendously difficult decision to make: “¿Por qué he de ser yo la que os salve y a la vez os condene? No puedo soportar este peso, me encuentro atrapada en una red de angustia y contradicción, un arma letal” (62).

Medea confronts Jason in a tense and volatile dialogue. He has returned to save his children from Medea’s wrath after she has killed his bride, Creusa, through the gift of an enchanted dress that burned her to death as soon as she put it on. Jason tries to frame Medea as the Other; a violent barbarian whom he tried, but failed, to tame: “eres una fiera indomable, una bestia feroz, ¡vuelve a tu selva,

¹¹ The premise of Jones’ book is to expose “the construction of gender ideology, which marks independent women as criminals and criminal women as monsters” (xi). Diana de Paco’s characters reject the tag of monster through the justification of their actions. Some are independent women (Medea, Clytemnestra), but others (Rosa and Berenice) are more passive, dependent women, yet all resort to violence to free themselves from untenable situations and all come across as sympathetic characters to the audience.

¹² In *Polifonía*, as Domingo Miras observes, Diana de Paco has made maternal love the driving force behind Medea’s actions (97).

Medea!” (85). He curses her: “Yo te maldigo Medea, sufrirás mi persecución y mis torturas. En todas las tierras serás extranjera [...] yo te maldigo Medea, asesina, vas a saber de verdad lo que es la angustia” (87). Medea, like Clytemnestra, refuses to be baited. The more agitated Jason becomes, the calmer and more resolute Medea appears to be. Convinced that her actions were justified, she tells him: “me marchó con el orgullo de quien ha obrado con piedad y por amor. Me marchó para no volver a verte jamás. No ha sido una venganza, Jasón, no te la merecías. Yo no he pensado en ti, sino en ellas. No me arrepiento” (87). A killer convinced that there was no other way to save her children from a life of pain, sorrow and suffering, Medea has rationalized her act of violence as one motivated by piety and compassion.¹³ This defense completely negates the patriarchal view of Medea as a woman blinded by demonic rage and motivated purely by hatred: the old maxim “hell hath no fury like a woman scorned” is not applicable here.

Finally, *Polifonía* ends with the rewriting of the myth of Penelope herself. She has spent most of the play insisting to the others that she only remains in the Underworld to keep them company, to listen to them and to support them, but not because she shares in their history of violence. However, as the play unfolds, it becomes clear that Penelope has also committed a crime and the other women urge her to free her conscience. Phaedra asks her: “¿Cómo termina tu historia? ¿Qué crimen has cometido? ¿Qué desgracias te han atormentado durante tu vida? [...] ¿Qué es lo que te une a Clitemnestra, a Medea o a mí? Vamos, sé sincera” (89). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is the passive, faithful wife who outwits her suitors without resorting to violence while she waits for Ulysses to return. In *Polifonía*, however, this image of a steadfast Penelope is completely shattered. The penultimate scene of the play is a tense and dramatic reunion of the spouses. Penelope immediately goes on the offensive, refusing to accept that the man who has returned is truly her husband: “Tú no eres Ulises. Mi esposo era bueno, compasivo, sincero. Tú eres un tirano que conoce su larga ausencia y se ha querido aprovechar” (95). Not satisfied with just denying him his identity as her spouse, she commits the ultimate act of violence by destroying the Ulysses who is the epitome of the Greek *nostos*. She tells him: “ya no quiero que vuelvas” (96). This is quite a statement given that Ulysses’ myth depends on the parallel story of his loyal wife who patiently waits and wishes for his return. Remove Penelope and Ulysses’ stature as a great Greek hero is severely diminished. Is this death of Ulysses-hero at the hands of his wife purely a metaphorical one? Or, did Penelope actually murder her philandering, violent and cruel husband? Clytemnestra appears to intimate the latter here as she describes the significance of Penelope’s

¹³ As Domingo Miras states, her actions were “una especie de eutanasia, una muerte rápida y digna” (94).

tapestry, which shows: “[...] el final de un Ulises que no volvió y de otro hombre que la condujo al crimen por ser distinto a su ilusión” (99). Either way, Ulysses the hero is dead at the hands of his wife in an act of violence that destroys his myth. All the women of *Polifonía* are not only man killers; they are myth busters, presenting to the audience what could happen if women stand together and support one another. They emphatically reject the patriarchal versions of their stories and present in their stead a new set of woman-centered myths captured for prosperity, written, documented, on Penelope’s tapestry.

*El canto póstumo de Orfeo*¹⁴ of 2009 can be seen as a transitional play within the context of this study: myths still take center stage, but the action transpires in the twenty-first century, fusing ancient mythology and present reality through a brilliant use of intertextuality, madness and metatheater. The protagonist of this monologue is Ella, whose married lover has decided to return to his wife. Ella’s friends have encouraged her to write a novel as a means of catharsis, as a way to get over him, and Ella is determined to produce a story that is both original and interesting, not “una novela de mierda con una historia de mierda, como mil historias de mierda” (86). Ella goes to a conference, hears Medea’s story and begins to identify with the sorceress: “He dejado mi país, me he enfrentado a mis hermanos, he despreciado a mis padres, he maldecido a mis amigos, por él, por éste (*Señala con la cabeza*) que me abandonó tan profundamente que me desgarró el alma” (88). Medea’s love-induced violence serves as an inspiration for Ella’s story. She decides to kill herself and leave her lover a suicide note, explaining that after her death they can be together forever in his dreams without the interference of his wife. Ella’s reasoning echoes Medea’s from *Polifonía*: “yo no me maté para vengarme de él, ni por despecho, ni por desesperación, ni nada de eso!” (87). She continues, “Esto yo lo hago por puro amor, porque ese hombre que ves ahí me necesita y sólo muerta podré acompañarle” (89). Her plans appear to have been thwarted by the wife, who has found the suicide note and has shot and killed her cheating husband.

However, a careful reading of the stage directions fills in the blanks and elucidates the uncanny resemblance that exists between Ella and the wife:

Se acerca. Son iguales. El reflejo de una misma mujer. La que lee, vestida igual, llora en silencio. En la mano derecha la carta. La mano izquierda oculta tras su cuerpo arrodillado. La otra mujer se acerca y se arrodilla frente a ella. Como en un espejo. En escena, no hace falta que haya otra

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the plot of this short play, see Freear-Papio 2014.

actriz, puede haber un espejo y junto a él la carta y la pistola, o simplemente la carta y la pistola (88).

Ella and the wife are one and the same: a powerful psychosis allowing the transfer of guilt from one side of her personality to the other.¹⁵ Ella has created the “grandioso final” (87) for her unique story, and has used love-inspired madness as a tool to justify the murder of her cheating husband, and she does so by assuming the personality of his lover. Ella is not ennobled at the end of her story as are the women in *Polifonía*; she comes across instead as a more pathetic and tragic figure, motivated by a perverse love but doomed by mental illness induced by the trauma of being the woman scorned.

The use of provoked insanity as a destabilizing force within the psychological makeup of a character is a technique that de Paco will continue to exploit to even greater effect in the majority of her more recent plays. In 2010’s *PCP*, or *Programa de chat personalizado*, de Paco uses the omnipresent reality TV show as the backdrop for her tale of sexual harassment and murder. In this particular program, the producers drug the contestants so that they are completely disoriented and then the host, a psychologist, manipulates them to reveal who is guilty of the offense in question.¹⁶ The TV viewers participate by voting on whether or not they believe that the accused is guilty or innocent of the crime. *PCP* is highly metatheatrical in nature. The show within the play is being recorded and commented upon by its producers, Hombre 1 and Hombre 2, who are monitoring its taping from a control booth on the other side of the stage from the female protagonist’s room. The TV audience, the audience of *PCP* the reality show, not *PCP* the play, sees and hears only what the producers want them to, while the theatrical audience sees and hears everything: they are forced to be voyeurs of this perverted drama.

The murder mystery to be solved in this episode of *PCP* is that of a wealthy businessman. The person who will be drugged and who will supposedly reveal the name(s) of his murderer(s) is his widow, Carmen. She wakes up in a cell-like hotel room, a claustrophobic space reminiscent of the grotto in *Polifonía*, and has a long, strange conversation through the wall with a man in the adjoining

¹⁵ As Floeck explains, Ella “huye de la realidad, refugiándose en una esquizofrenia que le da la posibilidad de trasladar el acto criminal a un alter ego que identifica con la amante de su marido” (12).

¹⁶ Hombre 1 tells how the drug they use “desbloquea las represiones y las ataduras psicológicas y provoca la confianza en lo desconocido. Está comprobado que los seres humanos se confiesan más fácilmente si desconocen el aspecto de su interlocutor. Es un hecho empírico. Si no, mira lo que ha ocurrido con las redes sociales en internet. En ellas se inspira nuestro programa. Un chat inducido, digamos. Funciona, ya lo sabes y, si hacemos un buen trabajo, lo emitirán” (65).

room who, unbeknownst to her, is Paco, the show's psychologist. These two characters introduce themselves to one another as Berenice and Nemo.¹⁷ At the prompting of Nemo, Berenice gradually begins to remember the stressful events leading up to her husband's murder. She reveals that he had been accused of being a sexual predator in the workplace, of using his position of power to force himself on two young employees, Chico and Chica, a charge that he denied. As a drugged Berenice slowly starts to recall the past, it becomes evident that she has been severely traumatized by whatever has happened. Nemo, much to the frustration of the producers who want to get to the "big reveal" as fast as possible, takes time to build trust with his "patient." Once Berenice reveals the details of her husband's alleged sexual harassment of Chico and Chica, the show's staff track them both down and bring them to another room in the studio, assuming that they will ultimately be revealed as the businessman's murderers. The rhythm of the play, at first a slow verbal sparring between Berenice and Nemo, soon picks up speed as the audience now also hears Chico and Chica tell their story of abuse, blackmail and despair over not being believed. The climax is reached when it becomes obvious that Berenice is the real murderer, not Chico and Chica.

Nemo tries desperately to stop Berenice from confessing, over angry protests from the producers in the control booth, as he obviously feels terrible about his unwitting role in her demise (69):

Nemo.- ¡No sigas!

Voz en off.- ¡Que siga!

Berenice.- Saqué la pistola, le miré y seguía teniendo esa cara.

Nemo.- Berenice, esto es una equivocación, tú no le mataste, tú no escuchaste las cintas, no pudiste hacerlo, te he engañado, tú no me conoces, no me cuentes esto a mí, te voy a hacer daño, te he engañado.

Voz en off.- ¡Sal de ahí, estás loco, sal y déjala hablar, ahora! (*Él no lo hace, se acerca a la pared, intentando suplicarle, ahora en silencio, que no se condene. Pero ella no le escucha. Quiere terminar.*)

Berenice.- Le apunté y le disparé, un tiro certero. Pum. Muerto.

Berenice, once she remembered what had happened, could not stop the truth from coming out, even if it meant that she was admitting to a crime: the relief of revealing the truth was far greater than the fear of the consequences of her confession. Similar to the cheating husband's murder in *El canto póstumo de*

¹⁷ See Bueno (2010) on the importance of the names of these two characters.

Orfeo, the killing of Berenice's husband was also reactive and unpremeditated. The trauma of having shot her husband caused Berenice to retreat behind a wall of psychosis, no doubt exacerbated by the dubious drugs administered to her by the producers. Berenice, whose real name, as we know, is Carmen, adopts this fictitious identity and uses it as a shield, from behind which she can safely narrate what really happened. By adopting a different persona she is able to process the ordeal more effectively, reliving it almost as if it were an out-of-body experience. Nemo's character is a perfect match for Berenice. He understands the effects of trauma on the psyche and he goes out of his way to create a bond of trust with her. As a result, the audience sees Berenice clearly as a victim, not as a criminal.

Berenice does not justify or defend her actions as did the women of *Polifonía*; instead, she simply describes what happened in a moving and sympathy-inducing way, allowing the spectators to make their own determination as to her guilt or innocence. She reveals to Nemo that she never had control over her true identity; instead she had adopted a societally-prescribed female role: "yo era la esposa modelo. Y una esposa modelo confía en su marido ¿verdad?" (59). Berenice now recognizes that her passivity only served to fuel her husband's ability to manipulate her: "él quería que yo sufriera, que yo me sintiera responsable de sus perversiones" (69). She realizes, albeit too late, that her docility is in part responsible for the pent up rage that ended her husband's life. Had she stood up to him earlier and more often, could the chain of events that led to his death have been prevented?¹⁸ The inner audience of the play, the invisible viewers of *PCP* the reality TV show, have already shown themselves to be incapable of empathy, voting *en masse* to condemn Berenice for the murder of her husband. The questions that de Paco poses to the spectators of *PCP* the play are complex and go to the heart of many of the problems prevalent in today's society: are we, as avid consumers of this type of destructive entertainment, guilty of perpetuating the violence it condones? Who are the true victims in this story? Berenice? Chico and Chica? Society? Nemo is the only voice of reason in the desensitized and dehumanized world presented in *PCP*. He exclaims: "Si hubiera podido, la habría sacado de ahí a rastras antes de que hablara. Y ese jurado popular que se han inventado, todos los que votaron para condenarla, ¿es que no vieron en el programa cómo sufría y no oyeron el testimonio de los chicos?"

¹⁸ Fernández Morales explains the socialization of domestic abuse: "[c]uando un hombre agrede a una mujer con el fin de establecer con ella una relación de poder desigual lo hace apoyado en la socialización de género que define los roles y las jerarquías en la comunidad [...] se siente respaldado por su educación como ser masculino y, por lo tanto, superior — en términos patriarcales — para controlar a un individuo no sólo nacido hembra, sino socializado en femenino" (37). St Joan and Bennington put it more directly: "women are socialized into being participants in their own oppression" (218).

(70).¹⁹ Nemo's criticism of the show's audience is de Paco's wink at us, the play's own spectators, a direct challenge to do the right thing and not to condemn Berenice's actions out of hand. There is no doubt that Berenice is guilty of murder; however, de Paco uses *PCP* to show us again that sometimes the murderer is also the victim and that we should not rush to judgment, nor should we give in to societal "group think" as the studio audience enthusiastically did.

The most recent play from Diana de Paco's body of work that features a woman who kills is 2013's *Espérame en el cielo... o, mejor, no*. This play belongs to a new stage in de Paco's creative process in which she privileges humor over tragedy. She explains: "comprendí que detrás de la risa están siempre el dolor y los problemas del ser humano y precisamente ahí era donde, por una temporada, quería buscar mis nuevos textos. En el humor" (Villán, 77). *Espérame en el cielo... o, mejor, no* is a play formed out of four short monologues all with female protagonists, each broken into pieces and then reassembled to create a new play. Of the four women presented, the one who pertains to this study is Rosa, a forty-something victim of psychological domestic abuse. She lives with her boyfriend Daniel who, due to the lack of a certain hormone, *la pseudolina*, cannot lie. Daniel can only tell the truth, a condition that at first seems humorous but that will be the root cause of the tragedy that unfolds on stage. Rosa, a victim of her own good nature and generosity, first feels profound compassion for Daniel and eventually falls in love with him. She thinks that by caring for him, helping him cope with his affliction, she will conquer her own loneliness, which, in turn, will give meaning to her otherwise emotionally empty life. Rosa tries to help Daniel to manage his illness – they agree that she will ask no question whose answer she is not ready to hear²⁰ – but this happens at the expense of her own sanity as she finds it harder and harder to bear so many painful truths. After months of continual abusive sincerity she finally kills Daniel with poisoned soup and then finishes what is left of it, thus ending her own life as well.

Rosa's monologue, which de Paco creates with a mixture of humor, sadness and irony, is a masterful piece of writing. We are watching a theatrical train wreck. Daniel, unable to tell a lie, gradually destroys Rosa with the devastating power of his words. Although it initially seems that he does possess a

¹⁹ He is devastated by his role in condemning Berenice and goes as far as to call himself "un verdugo cibernético" (70).

²⁰ "Por eso Daniel y yo decidimos que jamás le preguntaría nada que no quisiera realmente saber. Tuve que aprender, aprender a no preguntar, ¿verdad cariño?, por ejemplo: '¿Nene, estoy bien hoy? ¿Te gusta mi vestido? ¿Crees que he metido la pata? ¿Me ves celulitis? ¿Tengo bigote?' ¡Nada de eso! Un simple monosílabo hace temblar nuestra blanda amistad" (21).

certain degree of self-control, Rosa notes as the play goes on that he actually takes pleasure in making her suffer (26):

Él disfruta, es sádico. Lo sé. Goza restregándome todas las verdades que se le pasan por la cabeza para degradarme. Se ha convertido en un desgraciado cretino que encuentra placer en estamparme su carencia asquerosa contra la cara, es feliz haciéndome trizas el espíritu con sus putas verdades. ¿No se controla? ¡Una mierda! No quiere controlarse.

This psychological destruction of Rosa, of her self-esteem and her sanity, is painful to watch. On the one hand we are enticed to laugh at the absurdity of her situation, which she narrates in such an amusing way, but on the other we realize that the severity of her suffering makes such a reaction entirely inappropriate. Daniel criticizes every aspect of poor Rosa's existence: how she looks and speaks and what she does and does not do (94):

mis michelines, mis pechos caídos y tristonos, mis ideas sin fuste y mis torpes abrazos, [...] mis brazos descolgados, mi boca de sapo y mis mugrientas frases anticuadas, [...] mis reacciones histéricas e inmaduras, mis faltas de educación básica, mis horribles recetas de cocina y mi torpe caminar, echar a correr con mis orgasmos de monja reprimida, mis reacciones de adolescente obsesiva y mis vomitivos problemas intestinales.

The repetition of the possessive pronoun in this passage linguistically highlights the extent to which Rosa has internalized these cruelly unattenuated observations. The turning point at which Rosa is irrevocably transformed from a passive victim of abusive psychological truths to the killer of her abuser occurs when she at last asks the fundamental question within any romantic relationship: do you love me? Daniel's reply: "¿Cómo te voy a querer? Eres insoportable, Rosa, lo único que tienes es paciencia" (27). She kills him, ironically, with one of her disgusting homemade soups that he so frequently disparaged. De Paco, once again leaving the question of whether this was a justified homicide to her audience, forces us to see firsthand how systematic psychological abuse is equally as destructive as physical abuse, and that Rosa's killing of Daniel was clearly done in self-defense. The power of language as a weapon is clearly the subtext of this play: the violent nature of Daniel's torturous truths is only exacerbated given that we hear his words through the filter of his victim.

All four plays in this study foreground violence by women as an active response to wrongs they have suffered, whether physical or psychological in nature. This may seem to be an inefficient way to solve this age old problem; however, it is a vital first step. When a woman chooses to meet violence with violence, she is appropriating the language of the patriarchy and in so doing begins to destroy the stereotype of violence as belonging to only “bad, fallen women” (Ceballos Muñoz, 11), a stereotype whose destruction will clearly undercut and threaten patriarchal power. The line between right and wrong, and that between justice and injustice, are blurred in de Paco’s plays, but it is precisely in the space created by the collapse of these dichotomies that women find the courage to fight back. In *Polifonía* we see traditional myths upended and replaced with new narratives of strong, resolute women, capable of carrying out premeditated attacks, who then calmly and rationally justify their use of violence. However, in *El canto póstumo de Orfeo*, *PCP* and *Espérame en el cielo... o, mejor*, no the positive gains achieved in the mythological realm cannot survive their move to a violent, modern world. Here the negative outweighs the positive and abuse leads to violence-inducing psychosis. Instead of presenting her female protagonists as reckless, violent monsters or as meek, passive victims, de Paco simply lets us into their tortured and troubled world so that we can see, through their eyes, the trauma that they have endured. As the women’s tragedies unravel, we spectators are forced to participate in their stories, serving as their judges and jurors. We are not only adjudicating the crimes that we have just witnessed on stage; we also, inevitably, turn our gaze inward, toward ourselves and the society in which we live. Are we doing our part to stop this cycle of violence engendering violence? A close reading of de Paco’s plays seems to suggest that we are not.

Works Cited

- Bueno, Lourdes. "Entrevista con Diana de Paco Serrano." *En sentido figurado* 2 (2009): 5-11.
- . "Berenice o el arte de ocultar la realidad." *Estreno* 36.2 (2010): 29-41.
- Ceballos Muñoz, Alfonso, Espejo Romero, Ramón and Muñoz Martínez, Bernardo. *Violence in American Drama. Essays on Its Staging, Meanings and Effects*. North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011.
- Fernández Morales, Marta. *Los maltratos en escena: El teatro como herramienta en la lucha contra la violencia de género*. Oviedo: KRK Ediciones, 2002.
- Freear-Papio, Helen. "Una polifonía attraverso i millenni. Le voci femminili del teatro di Diana de Paco Serrano." In *Al lume di una luna latitante. Voci dissonanti di donne a teatro*. Milagro Martín Clavijo, Ed. Rome: Aracne Editrice, (2014): 143-171.
- . "Polifonía and *De mutuo acuerdo* by Diana de Paco Serrano: Personalizing the Universal or Universalizing the Personal?" *Estreno* 39.1 (2013): 70-83.
- Floeck, Wilfried. "Introducción a *Polifonía*", in Diana de Paco Serrano, *Polifonía*, Murcia, Universidad de Murcia (2009): 9-21.
- Henríquez, José. "Diana de Paco Serrano y las heroínas de *Polifonía*. Son mujeres transgresoras que rompen el silencio". Entrevista con Diana de Paco Serrano. *Primer Acto* 291 (2001): 98-100.
- Jones, Jennifer. *Medea's Daughters. Forming and Performing the Woman who Kills*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Miras, Domingo. "La tela de Penélope." *Primer Acto* 291 (2002): 90-97.
- Paco Serrano, Diana M. de. *El canto póstumo de Orfeo. En sentido figurado* 2.11 (2009): 84-90.
- . *La metáfora*. In *Teatro breve actual*. Ed. Francisco Gutiérrez Carvajo. Spain: Clásicos Castilla, (2013): 141-154.

---. *PCP. Estreno*, 36, 2 (2010):42-71.

---. *Polifonía*. Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2009.

Ragué-Arias, María-José. Rev. Of Diana de Paco Serrano, *Polifonía* (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2009). *Signa* 21 (2012): 725-28.

St. Joan, Jacqueline & Bennington, Annette. Eds. *Beyond Portia. Women, Law & Literature in the United States*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997. Print.

Villán, José. “Diana de Paco, ensayista y dramaturga: complejidad de un teatro que parte de la tragedia.” *Estreno* 36. 2 (2010): 72-81.

