The Androgynous Mind: Reading Jorge Luis Borges through Virginia Woolf

Audrey Harris Fernández

"Yo he sido su mano…"

Leonor Acevedo de Borges[1]

This article sketches a tradition of feminist writing and thought that paved the way for some of Jorge Luis Borges's most remarkable stories. Beginning with an examination of the Argentine author's literary relationship with Virginia Woolf, it considers *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), both of which Borges translated into Spanish, as precursors to important themes of gender fluidity and female creativity in several of his own stories. It also examines Borges's literary relationship with his mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, who, along with other women who supported his literary production in his later years, deserves to be credited as one of the twentieth century's great literary amanuenses, as well as a translator in her own right.

1 Quote from her memoirs, as dictated to Alicia Jurado (Hadis 263).

Leonor Acevedo de Borges, like Milton's daughters, is one of the great, largely un-credited amanuenses of western literature, a woman without whose dedication and passion for books Borges would not have been Borges. Picture Borges living with his mother, Leonor Acevedo de Borges, almost uninterruptedly (except for his short-lived marriage) until her death in 1975, when she was ninety-nine and he seventy-six. Her husband and Borges's father, Jorge Guillermo Borges, died in 1938. She devoted herself to her son and threw all of her ambition into him. Picture her reading to him late into the night for hours in Spanish, French and Italian with an enthusiasm that often, according to her, surpassed even his own (Hadis 262). Picture them traveling together to his university lectures and engagements, he leaning on her arm and depending on her to take dictation of his stories as his blindness gradually worsened. Picture her performing the important work of transcription by his side, offering opinions on his projects, contributing her own labors, and even suggesting lines when his imagination failed him. She herself was the translator of, among others, D.H. Lawrence's "The Woman Who Rode Away" (1925), William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* (1943), and William Faulkner's *If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem* (1939). Picture Borges, settling down to write for the last eleven years of his life in his own 'room of one's own,' in the apartment on Calle Maipú that he and his mother had shared: the writing study which, according to her deathbed request, he situated in her bedroom, leaving her bed and everything else untouched. Picture him returning to that womb-like maternal space, the study that nurtured his literary output, and symbolically availing himself of his mother's spirit as he continued his literary labors alone. Often Borges and his mother were a writing duo, though he received all the credit. His mother furnished the last line to his story "La intrusa" (*El informe de Brodie*, 1970), which he dedicated to her. Borges also drew on her memories of the geography, idioms and characteristics of the outskirts of Buenos Aires and Montevideo of a not-so-distant past, at the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th centuries, in which he set many of his stories. According to Borges, "Cuando mi madre vivía yo le solicitaba detalles circunstanciales…." (qtd in Peicovich 34). To give an example he recounted that he asked her the name of the flower while she transcribed a story he was dictating to her about General Juan Manuel de Rosas, and

upon receiving her reply he added it into the story. He also remembered an occasion when, while dictating a story to her about Rosas, he had begun to describe the cobblestoned calle Suipacha, and she had swiftly corrected him, that in that era "'todas las calles de Buenos Aires eran de tierra, salvo Florida y Perú, que estaban empedradas.' Y ella me evitó cometer la gaffe de querer empedrar la calle Suipacha en tiempos de Rosas" (qtd in Hadis 34). Famously, Borges began writing speculative fiction (beginning with his first metafictional short story, "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," published in *Sur* in May 1939) after a grave injury to the head in 1938 that caused a dangerous bout of septicemia and left both brain and his writing permanently changed (Hadis 269). In a fascinating detail that provides one of the possible reasons for this remarkable shift, his mother recounts in her memoirs that, the first day he began to feel better, he asked her to read him a passage from a book, any book, and that she chose the science fiction novel *Out of the Silent Planet*, published that same year by C.S. Lewis, and that upon hearing her read, he declared, "Acá estoy… he comprendido perfectamente" (Hadis 269).

The writing of Leonor Acevedo de Borges, as demonstrated in her recently published memoirs, is elegant, precise, and literary. It brims with enthusiasm for life—the same kind of contagious curiosity, love for the *patria* and general optimism and zest that animates Borges's essays, and that makes his writing, as my colleague Paul Cella once commented, "good for the soul"[2]—and is filled with physical and idiomatic details of her *ríoplatense* environs. She describes her honeymoon in Capilla del Monte with Borges's father in the following terms: "las sierras parecían de oro por los espinillos en flor. La gente del campo llamaba 'los mieleros' a los que estaban de luna de miel" (158). Literature was "casi el eje de mi vida," and, underscoring her sense of the living quality of the written word, her books and her female friends are combined in the same section of her memoirs ("Mis libros y mis amigas") (Hadis 62). Among her favorite books, she mentions several that were also acknowledged favorites of her son: the novels of Charles Dickens, the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm,

2 The interests Borges inherited from his father, who had "el afán del más allá," and whose library was filled with books on Buddhism, Judaism, the Kabbalah, the Bible, Hinduism, Chinese philosophy, the Koran, and literature and philosophy from around the world, also indubitably contributed to this quality in his writing (Hadis 153).

and the *Thousand and One Nights*. The last of these features prominently in Borges's semi-autobiographical story "El Sur" as well as his essay "Los traductores de las Mil y una noches." In it, according to Juan Goytisolo, he found his dream of a "cuento circular e infinito" (qtd in Fernández-Santos, ElPais.com). Borges's devotion to the *Thousand and One Nights* was preceded by that of his mother, who describes it in the following glowing terms: "¡qué mundo de delicias, con más vida para mí, más real que la vida misma!" (Hadis 62). The memories of turn of the century Buenos Aires and Montevideo which fill his stories are her memories, and he continued to write about them at his desk in her bedroom after she died. As he later commented about writing there, "I didn't think I had the right [to move the bed]…It's a way of stopping time a little, when I go back there I think that she's in her room…waiting for me" (Borges and Lopez Lecube 122). He wrote from inside her world.

Undoubtedly due to the trainings of his mother and grandmother (Fanny Haslam, who read to him in English when he was a boy), Borges's literary life was filled with intimate formative relationships with women. After falling blind, Borges began collaborating with other female writers, including Alicia Jurado, María Esther Vásquez, and María Kodama. The latter described their writing process as personal and free, and filled with the question-answer dynamic that had characterized his writing relationship with his mother (Castello 227-28). Borges married Kodama just a few weeks before his death and selected her to make all decisions regarding future translations and publications of his work.

Borges also counted among his circle Victoria Ocampo (1890-1979), the legendary founder (in 1931) and editor of the enormously influential literary magazine *Sur*, and of the publishing house of the same name, launched in 1933. According to Leonor Acevedo de Borges's memoirs, Ocampo invited Borges, then twenty-four, to lunch the day after being impressed by his first lecture, "Sobre el idioma de los argentinos,"[3] which had been published in *La Prensa* (Hadis 260).[4] Ocampo helped

3 First given on September 23, 1927, the lecture was published in book form by Editorial Gleizer in 1928.

4 In her memoir, Leonor Acevedo de Borges demonstrates her own astoundingly accurate and far-reaching memory, something her son was famous for, with details such as this one (Hadis 260).

link Borges to the literary feminist movement in Argentina, and it was she who commissioned his translations of *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. Published as *Un cuarto propio* by *Sur* in four installments from 1935 to 1936 (and then as a stand-alone text in 1956), *A Room of One's Own* remains to this day the most widely read version of the text in Spanish. Publishing and reviewing women's writing was an important part of Ocampo's work, and *Sur*, whose last issue in 1971 was dedicated entirely to women, took the dissemination of feminist thought as one of its missions. These were the female milieux important to Borges's formation.

BORGES AND THE ANDROGYNOUS MIND

Many writers have viewed Borges's work in a purely masculine context ("the word that best describes these essays is manly" [Capouya, "Reason"]) or alternately accused him of misogyny (for stories such as "La intrusa"). Some critics see a celebration of machismo in his tales of frontier skirmishes and knife fights, yet stories such as "Hombre de la esquina rosada" and "El Sur" problematize masculinity as much as they glorify it. In each the hero strives to live up to impossible standards of male valor and physical courage, worrying that he has fallen short, and each ends in a fantasy of bravery.

Leah Leone, discussing Borges's translation of *Orlando*, writes that, despite having been anointed the major Spanish-language translator of Woolf, he did not interest himself in gender matters: "la crítica del tratamiento de las mujeres, la duda sobre las diferencias inherentes entre los sexos, la bisexualidad y el travestismo hubieran sido temas de ambiguo interés literario para Borges" (224). Leone's argument overlooks 1) the fact that Borges agreed to translate Woolf in the first place, given that her primary themes are feminism and bisexuality; and 2) his reticence to speak about matters of sex and gender, even if they weighed heavily on his mind. I argue that while Borges was circumspect on gender in interviews and essays, he explored it through fiction.

Herbert Brant, in his article "The Mark of the Phallus," argues that "La forma de la espada" is a veiled account of homosexual desire. Whether or not Borges meant to imply a homosexual relationship in that story is beyond the scope of this paper; Roberto González Echevarría states perceptively that those who question Borges's sexuality "apply Northern concep-

tions of sexuality to a man who, for much of his mature life, found a place in Hispanic society as a *solterón*, or old bachelor" ("Man Without a Life"). The rich exploration of gender roles and deviance, alliances and betrayals, charges his stories with an unexpected eroticism, much like *Orlando*, where the donning and removal of gender roles as though they were garments and the act of creating fiction liberated from the label of "man" or "woman" generate its erotic fizz. Sharon Magnarelli argues that Borges's characters lack gender specificity: "Borges's works (like most master narratives) appear to be genderless in their focus on what is presumed to be that universal unmarked, uninflected (male) body" (5).[5] Yet if all are one, a doctrine Borges repeats throughout his work, how much more life-like and interesting to view that "one" as gender-filled, teeming with passion and confusion, a union and disjunction of male and female, an un-puzzling and combining of gendered elements.

As Nancy Kason Poulson contends in "Del margen al centro: La voz femenina en la cuentística de Borges," the female protagonists in his work are frequently strong, determined, and heroic, embodying qualities considered masculine by patriarchal culture. Mark Frisch goes so far as to contend that Borges opened a door for feminist thought (96). However, Frisch oversteps in making Borges's postmodernism a pre-condition of feminist thought (which predates Borges by centuries). Instead, feminist thought (learned through Ocampo and Woolf) granted Borges permission to write gender-bending fictions and to explore, though covertly, the issue of gender fluidity—an issue that also emerges through his biography. Here I consider him as a man with a fluid gender identity who deeply identified with women and issues of female authorship.[6]

5 I disagree with this comment on two levels: first as it applies to Borges, as explained above, and second as it applies to "master narratives." Many classical narratives, such as the Odyssey, take the quest to forge an adult masculine identity as their focus. In "Emma Zunz," with its resonances of the epic journey tale and confrontation with the monster, Borges subverts this paradigm by feminizing it.

6 The biography *Borges a contraluz* (1989), by Estela Canto, portrays Borges as a man endowed with many feminine qualities, nearly the opposite of the macho gauchos and street fighters who appeared so often throughout his writings. She describes his submissive relationship to his mother, whom, even as an adult man in his forties, he called when he was out late to assure her of his whereabouts and report when he would come home. Regarding Borges's character, Canto describes him as trapped by convention: "Por naturaleza y por circunstancias, Borges era un hombre sumiso. Él aceptaba

Borges's most interesting female characters cross gender boundaries, and a peculiar eroticism emerges in stories where gender roles are exchanged. Consider his little-commented story "Pedro Salvadores," from *Elogio de la sombra* (1969), in which a man's wife hides him in the basement for nine years to save him from imprisonment by the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas. During this time she earns a living for both of them by sewing for the army. She also becomes pregnant with two children, causing her family to repudiate her. All this, despite his increasingly grotesque physicality, which Borges relates as follows: "fofo y obeso, estaba del color de la cera y no hablaba en voz alta" (*OC* 2: 633). This description closely mirrors Estela Canto's blunt evaluation of Borges himself: "regordete... con cara pálida y carnosa... y una mano que, al ser estrechada, parecía sin huesos, floja, como molesta por tener que soportar el inevitable contacto. La voz era temblorosa..." (24) Further parallels between Salvadores and Borges himself are unmistakable: Borges worked in a dark library basement for decades, and his business affairs and personal life were managed by a woman (his mother).

Pedro Salvadores's wife, "fuerte y diligente," maintains a relationship with an utterly passive man whom she hides and protects from the world in the womb-like space beneath the house: "para que no la dejara sola, su mujer le daría inciertas noticias de conspiraciones y de victoria. Acaso era cobarde y la mujer lealmente le ocultó que ella lo sabía" (*OC* 2: 633). As Kason Poulson writes: "La esposa es la intermediaria entre el mundo externo de la cruel represión política y la torre de marfíl (el sótano) de la fantasía imaginativa en la que reside su esposo" (357).

At the end of the story, Borges subtly calls attention to the way that women's contributions to history are erased and forgotten: we know Salvadores's wife only by her maiden surname, Planes, and Borges neglects

el fardo de convenciones y las ataduras establecidas por [su] medio social... No era un hombre convencional, pero sí un prisionero de las convenciones. Anhelaba la libertad por encima de todas las cosas, pero no se atrevía a mirar a la cara esa libertad" (17). She also writes that she offered to have sex with him before marriage, but he wasn't capable: "La actitud de Borges hacia el sexo era de terror pánico, como si temiera la revelación que en él podía hallar. Sin embargo, toda su vida fue una lucha por alcanzar esa revelación" (17). Canto describes his affect as extremely shy and easily embarrassed, in terms that suggest a certain effeminacy: "temía molestar, ser demasiado insistente" (29); "parecía avergonzado... no le gustaba ser entrometido" (29-30).

to state what becomes of her. The story does not comment on this lacuna, but it marks it: the lack of comment highlights the question of who is included in the historical record and who is excluded from it.

Critically unremarked is the subtle eroticism hinted at in "Pedro Salvadores": his wife is impregnated twice in the nine years of his imprisonment, provoking a commotion among her family, who believe she has taken a lover. What emerges is a portrait of a dominant, independent female, supporting the family, impregnated by a silenced and submissive man, to scandalous results. Although Borges leaves out the erotic scene of her descent into the dark basement and the arms of her husband, whom he describes speculatively as "como un animal tranquilo en su madriguera o una suerte de oscura divinidad" (*OC* 2: 633) it looms in the story's silences and elisions, ripe with sexual reversals, taboo and hidden desire. The story can also be read as a parable about the ways in which a masculine spirit may be "housed" within a woman's form. The fact that gender role reversal is always accompanied in his fiction by a sense of darkness and danger ("La viuda Ching, pirata") or else outright violence ("Juan Muraña," "Emma Zunz") indicates his own ambivalence about the theme and its taboo nature for him and his (heterosexual, traditional) milieu.

Borges declared himself a feminist during an interview with Osvaldo Ferrari about his translations of Virginia Woolf (2: 12). He reports in the interview that *A Room of One's Own* did not overly interest him because he already believed in the necessity of rights for women. However, he did express admiration for *Orlando*. An updating of the myth of Tiresias, who was born a man but became a woman, the book's most significant event is the sex change of its writer protagonist.[7] In an interview, Borges praised the novel: "*Orlando* es realmente un libro interesante… un libro muy, muy lindo… es un libro incomparable ya que yo no recuerdo ningún otro escrito así" (Borges and Ferrari 2: 12).

Despite calling *A Room of One's Own* the less interesting of Woolf's works, he appears to nod directly to that text in "Everything and Nothing," from *El hacedor* (1960). Writing about Shakespeare's relationship with his characters, Borges indirectly states that, while Shakespeare's body

7 According to Pericles Lewis, "Tiresias was a central figure in Modernist attempts to explore sexual identity, playing a notable role in Eliot's *The Waste Land*" among other works (30).

is a man's, his soul has the capability to be, like his characters, female as well as male: "Así, mientras el cuerpo cumplía su destino de cuerpo, en lupanares y tabernas de Londres, el alma que lo habitaba era César, que desoye la admonición del augur, y *Julieta, que aborrece a la alondra*... Nadie fue tantos hombres como aquel hombre" (*OC* 2: 295, italics mine).This passage from "Everything and Nothing" appears to echo an assertion by Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*: "Shakespeare's mind [is] the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind… Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the art of creation can be accomplished (114-15).[8]

Borges's belief about his own writing—"que sus poemas y sus cuentos le eran 'dados,' que él los recibía de algo o de alguien, y que la obra de un escritor o de un artista, en última instancia, no depende de ese escritor o de ese artista sino de otra cosa, que lo trasciende" (Borges and Ferrari 9)—parallels this sentiment that the artist is not one but many, or all.

Above I have mentioned a small incident in which Borges apparently borrowed an idea from Virginia Woolf—specifically the idea that Shakespeare had an androgynous mind—and incorporated it into one of his own essays. In this sense, Borges demonstrates the androgenicity of his own textual production, since Woolf's ideas can be found in his writings, her thoughts intermingled in his thoughts. Nora Catelli, in an essay that appeared in this journal, demonstrates that Borges's first description of the aleph in his uber-famous story of the same name is written in the same style—enumerative, written in sentences of similar rhythm and extension, and oscillating between the microscopic and panoramic—as one of the closing passages of *Orlando* (90). That the deep imprint of Woolf can be found in one of Borges's most famous stories—indeed in one of his most famous concepts, the aleph—is a significant example of the androgenicity of his writing, and the deep debt he owes to Woolf (this debt, though, remains infrequently acknowledged, because most readers and scholars don't automatically associate the two writers). Conversely, as Catelli also notes, "Borges *estuvo en Orlando*," in so far as the fact that his translation of this passage incorporates his own inimitable style (90).

8 Critics have noted several interesting connections between Woolf's concept of the androgynous mind and Carl Jung's investigation of the *hieros gamos* (see note 14). See Snider for an article-length Jungian reading of *Orlando*.

I assert here that Borges, under the clear influence of Virginia Woolf, both exercises and illustrates the "androgynous mind," and engages in feminist thought and rhetoric. One of the ways that Borges enters into female experience is through women's historical oppression, which he links to other systems of oppression such as class and political dictatorship: closing the portion of his interview that touched on Woolf, Borges comments, "[A]hora, parece que todos tenemos derecho a la opresión y al jadeo, ¿no?, también los hombres: desgraciadamente podemos conocer ese melancólico privilegio, que antes era propio de las mujeres" (Borges and Ferrari 14).[9]

The questions of femininity and female powers of self-definition make their way into many of Borges's fictions in which the protagonists are women, including "La señora mayor," "Ulrika," "Historia del guerrero y de la cautiva," etc. Of these, I will address two here, both of which examine gender fluidity and female agency: "La viuda Ching, pirata" and "Emma Zunz." The latter in particular considers means and avenues for female creativity: Emma accesses both female and male roles in order to "write" her own history, to modify her "closed destiny."

Two of Borges's Feminist Fictions: "Emma Zunz" and "La Viuda Ching, Pirata"

In both "Emma Zunz" and "La viuda Ching, pirata," a rebellious female heroine fights the patriarchal order by exercising her own agency. It is worthwhile to begin by considering closely "La viuda Ching, pirata" from *Historia universal de la infamia* (1935), a story that makes several references to the "transfiguración" of its outlaw heroine, referring to the way she morphs between gender roles. In essence, the story is about a pirate's widow who, incensed by her husband's murder by the stockholders of his ships, seizes control of his vessel, becomes an admiral, and leads a pirate rebellion against the Emperor's fleet. At the time of her husband's death, she is "transfigurada por la doble traición" (*Cuentos* 31), a transfiguration perhaps presaged by the plate of poisoned caterpillars her hus-

9 Borges was most likely referring here to the military regimes that ruled Argentina during the twentieth century, including the presidency of Jorge Rafael Videla (1976-1981), under whom thousands of dissidents were disappeared, as well as the demoralizing effects of fascist dictatorships throughout Europe and Latin America.

band eats (Franklin, "Close Reading"): like a larva growing into a butterfly, the widow Ching grows into her full power over the course of the story. Her strength comes from her sense of betrayal, which causes her to rally against the Empire that allowed her husband's destruction. She becomes a double of the husband into whose boots she steps, fulfilling her destiny through a transfiguration from wife to admiral and, in terms of traditional roles, from female to male. The new admiral shows herself to be highly capable of men's work, displaying methodical bureaucratic acumen and great skill in regulating commerce as she dictates guidelines for the distribution of spoils. When the widow finally submits herself to the emperor after years of struggle, she gains his pardon and turns to opium smuggling. Corruption reigns both within and outside the social order.

In the introduction to "La viuda Ching, pirata," Borges mentions two other gender-bending corsairs, the pirates Mary Read and Anne Bonney. Borges describes with a certain titillation the flame-haired Bonney's splendid bust, and Ching's oiled black hair that gleams brighter than her eyes; the images call to mind sirens that might adorn a ship's bow. Yet beneath their feminine appearance lie powerful, bellicose personae; these are not just the dancing ship-maids of zarzuelas, but "mujeres hábiles en la maniobra marinera, en el gobierno de tripulaciones bestiales y en la persecución y saqueo de naves de alto bordo" (30). Borges writes that Mary Read "declaró una vez que la profesión de pirata no era para cualquiera, y que, para ejercerla con dignidad, era preciso ser un hombre de coraje, como ella" (30). When Read says a corsair must be "a man of courage," she de-links the word "hombre" from the physical and uses it solely in reference to character, indicating that its qualities may be displayed interchangeably amongst men and women. Anne Bonney too challenges gender roles. When her lover John Rackham is sent to the gallows, she says deprecatingly, "Si te hubieras batido como un hombre, no te ahorcarían como a un perro" (31). The line, as Borges notes, is a variation of the reproach of Aixa, a powerful member of the Nasrid dynasty, to her son Boabdil after his loss of the Kingdom of Granada to Ferdinand and Isabella in the fifteenth century. By linking Anne Bonney, a pirate, to Aixa, a Nasrid queen who defended her kingdom against the Catholic monarchs, Borges illustrates his interest in figures who exist outside the boundaries of hegemony: to those who believe that right is on the side of the social

order, Bonney, Read, and the widow Ching all fall squarely in the camp of villainy. In addition to defying state law, in the eye of patriarchal law they are gender deviants who break the natural divisions between man and woman; consider in this context the proclamation by the Emperor against the widow Ching: "hombres en cuya ropa interior están figurados el fénix y el dragón, hombres que niegan la verdad de los libros impresos.... Violan así las leyes naturales del Universo, de suerte que los ríos se desbordan, las riberas se anegan, los hijos se vuelven contra los padres y los principios de humedad y sequía son alterados" (33). The first notable aspect of this dictum is that it refers to the pirates as "hombres," although their admiral is a woman. Yet it goes on to discuss the perverse nature of these "hombres": they have mythological beasts embroidered on their underwear, and like those beasts, they violate the laws of nature and deny the truth of printed books. Clearly, one of these "leyes naturales" is the principle of gender that the widow Ching deviates from. She has chosen not motherhood and domesticity, nor peaceful compliance and acceptance, but rather action, self-propelled mobility, and defiance.

One of Borges's classical male heroes is a lonely and violent male outsider ("La casa de Asterión," "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," "La muerte y la brújula," etc.) In "La viuda Ching, pirata" however, a woman takes on the mantle of this hero, stepping into a man's shoes when they have been emptied, becoming in a sense his double, deviating from gender norms and traveling to the limits of human endurance. We will see that "Emma Zunz" (*El Aleph*, 1949) is a similar case.

Emma Zunz can be read as Borges's most directly feminist character, one who embodies the idea of female authorship. Not only is Emma the heroine of her crime narrative, she is also the architect of the fictional story-within-the story which she constructs in order to obscure her crime. The story is both about a member of the working class struggling against social immobility and a woman defying social norms in her quest to fulfill her destiny. Emma is a female worker who avenges her father's suicide, which she blames on his firing by the factory owner Lowenthal. Prostituting herself to a sailor—though she is a virgin and horrified by sex—she uses the physical evidence of intercourse to pin rape on Lowenthal and exonerate herself after she murders him. This action is concomitant with a labor strike against the same Lowenthal, and the act can be read as one

of proletarian defiance against oligarchy. If the idea of a female freedom fighter sounds like an anachronism in cultural and literary production of Borges's time, it was. Misogynist representations of the *femme fatale* abounded in *film noir* as well as in popular tango lyrics, at the height of popularity when Borges published *El Aleph* in 1949.[10] Yet in "Emma Zunz," he complicates this notion by tracing the tale of a woman's crime to its social roots, rather than allowing her criminality to condemn her. He allows her, in effect, to create her own narrative of her crime. The moral relativism of the story opens the door to a re-examination of the *femme fatale*.

Not incidentally, the account is based on a story made up by a woman, Cecilia Ingenieros, one of his love interests. One can imagine how Borges must have reacted to the story of Emma Zunz as related to him by Ingenieros: he would have been impressed by Emma's feat of re-writing her own case, constructing the evidence to cover up her own crime. He views and portrays her as a writer. The story illustrates Borges's own attitude toward sex, which runs contrary to traditional constructions of (assertive) masculine sexuality; instead, as Estela Canto's biography attests, he tended more toward what society constructs as a feminine (passive, vulnerable) experience of the sexual world.

Perhaps the moment that most succinctly presages Emma's own "transfiguration"—her crossing of the boundary between female and male and her transformation into the bold, defiant figure she will become—is the moment when she hides the notice of her father's death under a portrait of Milton Sills that she keeps in her drawer. Milton Sills (1882-1930) was a famous American film and stage actor who often portrayed romantic heroes in popular films such as *The Sea Wolf* (1930) and *Paradise* (1926). His mysterious appearance here raises an important question: why is the portrait hidden in the drawer, rather than hanging on the wall, where many young people keep images of screen idols? Sills likely represents Emma's youthful aspiration toward heterosexual love and her idolization of a male romantic hero, which parallels her earlier relationship to her father. Both represent the possibility of protection and security provided by a male figure. Yet the fact that she keeps both the image of

10 Before appearing in book form in *The Aleph* in 1949, the story was published in September 1948 in *Sur*. For a complete examination of misogyny and representations of the *femme fatale* in Argentine tango, see Bergero 195-206.

Sills and the note from her father stowed away in the drawer may represent a willful suppression of those dreams. Instead of marrying a male figure, she will replace him. She will never be a mother or wife: this is the radical choice she makes in the course of the story.

Through the character of Emma, Borges forcefully illustrates the ways in which his industrial society fails both women and the working classes, luring them with promises of prosperity but only delivering poverty and exploitation in the factories. The factory owner Lowenthal allowed her father to take the fall for a crime he committed; subsequent to his imprisonment, Emmanuel and Emma fell in economic status from middle to working class. When Emma accuses him of rape, she is speaking metaphorically. The rapist is a metaphor for the tyrant, who is defined by his desire to penetrate, to appropriate a body politic (Rivera-Taupier 72). In Lowenthal, the tyrant is the capitalist willing to exploit his workers for his own gain. Borges draws a direct link between misogyny and class oppression, suggesting a connection between the proletariat and the violated woman. Though Emma refuses to strike in the factory, she actually, on her own, "strikes" a fatal blow against Lowenthal. In that sense, she can be seen as a leader of the opposition party.

Emma is not just a hero, she is both the writer and protagonist of her own drama. From the opening moment when Emma returns home from the factory and receives a telegram informing her of her father's death, she understands that his death will become her life's central drama and revenge her sole purpose: "la muerte de su padre era lo único que había sucedido en el mundo, y seguiría sucediendo sin fin" (*Cuentos* 263). She spends the rest of the day crying and mentally revisiting scenes from childhood, which are described with cinematic economy in flashes, and reveal that the factory owner Aaron Lowenthal was the real culprit of the theft her father was framed for. Sleepless, she forms a plan that night, which is perfected by the time "la primera luz definió el rectángulo de la ventana" (264). Here, the image of a lighted rectangle brings to mind a rectangular stage or a screen illuminated in the dark.[11] Like a screen director, Emma

11 As Bernard McGuirk points out, the lighted rectangle of the window is just one of the many textual frames that appears in the story, which also include the house in Lanús, the drawer where Emma stows her father's letter and the picture of Milton Sills, the mirrors in which she sees herself multiplied, and the doors and passageways

will shape the unfolding drama according to the plan she formed, turning thought into reality: "ya conociera los hechos ulteriores. Ya había empezado a vislumbrarlos, tal vez; ya era la que sería" (263). From here Borges begins to alternate between Emma's script and what actually occurs, illustrating the ways in which drama alternately is controlled by and escapes the author. On the night she murders Lowenthal, her lips mouth the words she plans to say to him before she kills him. Writes Borges, "Desde la madrugada anterior, ella se había soñado muchas veces, dirigiendo el firme revólver, forzando al miserable a confesar la miserable culpa… Pero las cosas no ocurrieron así" (267). She tells him about the strike and its leaders; he goes for a glass of water; when he returns she shoots him immediately; he begins to curse her, and so she shoots him again. Only once he is almost dead does she remember the accusation she has prepared: "He vengado mi padre y no me podrán castigar…" (268). However, writes Borges, "no la acabó, porque el señor Lowenthal ya había muerto" (268). Emma's desire to enunciate these parting words underscores two important aspects of the story: first, the ritual and performative nature of her act; and second, her creationary role in the story.[12]

In the short essay "Borges y yo" (*El hacedor*), Borges explores his own bifurcated personality, which converts him into two. One is the quiet observer; the other is the actor, the one to whom things happen. Perhaps the clearest evidence that Emma is a version of the author himself is that she is also a bifurcated character. Her demeanor is timid and gentle. She abhors sex and refuses to join in conversations about men. When others in the factory join the strike, Emma "se declaró, como siempre, contra toda violencia" (264). Yet she is perverse; as a murderer she belies a deep-seated anger boiling beneath the surface. Contrary to her pacifist declarations, she resorts to violence. She prostitutes herself despite her fear of men. And like Borges, she is also in essence a writer. As he writes at the

---

through which she traverses along her journey. Convincingly, he associates these frames with the "drawers of the hidden apocryphal texts of non-canonical scripture" and with the quadrangular form of written tablets (192).

12 See McGuirk for convincing connections between what he describes as Emma's re-writing of biblical source texts throughout the story and Helene Cixous's *La Venue á l'ecriture*, in which, according to Toril Moi, "Cixous casts herself… as a prophetess, the desolate mother out to save her people, a feminine Moses… 'I am myself the earth, everything that happens on it, all the lives that live are there in my different forms'" (116).

end, "la historia era increible, en efecto, pero se impuso a todos, porque sustancialmente era cierta" (268). Her view of the world becomes the version that triumphs.

At the end of *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf presents the startling image of Shakespeare's sister rising from the dead to write. The discourse of female liberation is inherently a monstrous one. The female writer is a freak, a rule-breaker, an assassin, self-destined to a life of solitude. She defies the laws of nature; privileging her artistic role over her reproductive one, she upends the question of the female drive. One possible reading of "Emma Zunz" is as a living incarnation of her father Emmanuel, for whom she is named, returned from death to avenge himself through her.[13] Yet McGuirk argues that Emma "moves out of the shadow of her Father… Moving beyond Freudian *sexuality* into active, effective, de(con)structive *textuality*, Emma redresses the inadequacy of Freudian discourse—a discourse she must, however, reenact—all the way to Lowenthal's obscenely bloodied, gaping mouth—in order to re-write it" (200). She is the *hieros gamos*: both male and female. She is not hindered by the rules of propriety or any expectation of how her life is to be lived. She is not limited by forces that would seek to oppress her, because she is willing to exploit them to her own ends. "She harnesses the textual materials of patriarchy in order to subvert it—thus ensuring that the 'rape text' becomes a creative, mother text…" (200).

All of the female characters discussed in this article violate gender roles: they are assassins, pirates, horsewomen, breadwinners, writers, and artists. Their very existence gestures towards the supreme union of opposites. In Jungian terms, this represents their taking on of the creationary role- the incarnational power of the *hieros gamos*, of the androgynous mind.[14] Borges himself, as his biographers have attested, was marked by

13 A similar notion is found in Borges's "Juan Muraña," in which the widow of a famous outlaw kills a man and insists—appears to believe—that it was her husband, returned from the dead, who did it.

14 Discussing the *hieros gamos* in *Answer to Job* (1952), Carl Jung writes, "From the ancient Egyptian theology of the divine Pharaohs we know that God wants to become man by means of a human mother, and it was recognized even in prehistoric times that the primordial divine being is both male and female… The nuptial union in the *thalamus* (bridal-chamber) signifies the *hieros gamos*, and this in turn is the first step towards incarnation" (322). Jung also describes the *hieros gamos* in *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944) as

difference from traditional gender roles. Like Shakespeare before him, he manages to perform the feat, rare in a male author, of creating a "feminine text" (what Helene Cixous calls *l'écriture feminine*) where feminine texts are ones that "strive in the direction of difference, struggle to undermine the dominant phallologocentric logic, split open the close of the binary opposition and revel in the pleasures of open-ended textuality" (Moi 108). Although Borges is celebrated for dissolving binary oppositions in his writings—the borders of place, time, and the individual self—his non-binary approach to gender has been critically overlooked as one of the fundamental keys to his literary genius. Only by recognizing that within this duality lay his power, only by writing with a woman's hand and infused with his mother's spirit, would he be able to scale to the creative heights he did.

Audrey Harris Fernández
University of California, Los Angeles

follows: "the supreme opposites, male and female (as in the Chinese yang and yin), are melted into a unity purified of all opposition and therefore incorruptible" (286).

WORKS CITED

Bergero, Adriana. *Intersecting Tango: Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires, 1900-1930*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2008.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Cuentos completos*. Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2015.

—. *Obras completas*. Vol II. Buenos Aires: Emecé, 2002.

—. *Otras inquisiciones. 1937-1952*. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1960.

— and Osvaldo Ferrari. *En Diálogo*. Vol. 2. Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2005.

— and Norman Thomas di Giovanni. "Autobiographical Notes." *The New Yorker* 19 Sept. 1970: 40-99.

— and Gloria Lopez Lecube. *The Last Interview: And Other Conversations*. Translated by Kit Maude. Brooklyn: Melville House, 2013.

Brant, Herbert. "The Mark of the Phallus: Homoerotic Desire in Borges's 'La forma de la espada.'" *Chasqui* 25:1 (1996): 25-38.

Canto, Estela. *Borges a contraluz*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Espasa-Calpe, 1989.

Capouya, Emile. "Reason without Brutality." *The Saturday Evening Post* 13 March 1965.

Castello, Cristina. "Entrevista con María Kodama: Jorge Luis Borges y su universo secreto." *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* 651-652 (2004): 219-30.

Catelli, Nora. "A propósito de una fuente de Borges: Comparatismo, teoría, tradiciones nacionales." *Variaciones Borges* 31 (2011): 83-93.

Cisneros, Sandra. *A House of My Own*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

Fernández-Santos, Elsa. "La pasión de Borges por *Las mil y una noches*." *El País*, December 16, 2005. elpais.com/diario/2005/12/17/cultura/1134774008_850215.html Accessed March 2, 2022.

Franklin, Kelly Scott. "A Close Reading of Borges' 'La viuda Ching, pirata.'" *Letters Alone* 22 April 2013.

Frisch, Mark. *You Might Be Able to Get There from Here: Reconsidering Borges and the Postmodern*. Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2004.

González Echevarría, Roberto. "Man Without a Life." *The New York Times*, August 31, 1997, section 7, page 10.

Jung, Carl. *The Essential Jung*. Selected and Introduced by Anthony Storr. Translated by R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013.

Kason Poulson, Nancy. "Del margen al centro: La voz femenina en la cuentística de Borges." *Alba de América* 14.26-27 (1996): 353-62.

Leone, Leah. "La novela cautiva: Borges y la traducción de *Orlando*." *Variaciones Borges* 25 (2008): 223-36.

Lewis, Pericles. *Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.

Magnarelli, Sharon. "Literature and Desire: Women in the Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges." *Revista/Review Interamericana* 13.1-4 (1983): 138-49.

McGuirk, Bernard. "Z/Z: On Midrash and écriture feminine in Jorge Luis Borges' 'Emma Zunz.'" *Latin American Literature: Symptoms, Risks and Strategies of Post-structuralist Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 185-206.

Memorias de Leonor Acevedo de Borges: Los recuerdos de la madre del más grande escritor argentino. Ed. Martín Hadis. Con textos de Alicia Jurado. Buenos Aires: Editorial Claridad, 2021.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/ Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1985.

Peicovich, Esteban. *El palabrista. Borges. Visto y oído*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Marea, 2006.

Rivera-Taupier, Miguel. "Emma Zunz y sus precursoras." *Hispanófila* 164 (2012): 69-80.

Snider, Clifton. "A Single Self: A Jungian Interpretation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 25.2 (1979): 263-68. http://www.jstor.org/stable/26282186.

Woolf, Virginia. *Un cuarto propio*. Translated by Jorge Luis Borges. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1956.

—. *Orlando: A Biography*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1928.

—. *A Room of One's Own*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1929.