



## Sex Work, Sickness, and Suicide: Argentine Feminist Theatre in the 1910s and 1920s

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### Abstract:

Salvadora Medina Onrubia and Alcira Olivé represent the first wave of feminist dramatists in Argentina. While their female characters exemplify many traditionally feminine stereotypes, they also defend anarchism and passionately champion women's rights. *Almafuerte* (1914) by Medina Onrubia is set in the tenement slums of Buenos Aires while *La salvación* (1923) by Alcira Olivé is set in a bourgeois drawing room, but the women's experiences in both places are strikingly similar. Both playwrights use hygiene and public health as points of departure for their feminist social commentary. Disease prevention was one of the few topics considered appropriate for women to discuss in the public sphere, since sanitation and care for the sick were considered women's work. Appropriating the rhetoric of hygienists, Medina Onrubia and Olivé, depict patriarchal culture as a dangerous pandemic that threatens the stability of the home and makes women sick.

Feminist playwrights Salvadora Medina Onrubia (1894–1971) and Alcira Olivé (1889–1975) were among the many independent women traveling to Buenos Aires in the mid-1910s and 1920s. Female Argentines from interior provinces comprised the majority of the city's new arrivals after World War I, when the number of European immigrants entering the capital dwindled (Guy 1991: 105). Medina Onrubia, a working-class single mother and militant anarchist, moved to Buenos Aires from Entre Ríos in 1914 and debuted her play *Almafuerte (Strong Soul)* that same year at the Apolo Theatre. Ten years later, Olivé, who lived and worked as a theatre professional in Rosario, brought her melodrama, *La salvación (The Salvation, 1923)*, to Buenos Aires's Marconi Theatre. Each play commented on issues relevant to women, who undoubtedly comprised a significant portion of the new play-going public. Despite an increased female presence in the workplace, women and feminism faced major adversities in the first decades of the 20th century: a restrictive civil code that prohibited divorce and prevented married women from working without their husbands' permission; a political system that denied women the right to participate in elections; and a conservative society that stigmatized working women and equated remunerated female labor with prostitution (Guy 1991: 105). Disease epidemics and a high infant mortality rate also significantly impacted women's social role in the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>1</sup> Since women bore the brunt of domestic duties, women (particularly poor women) became the targets of public health and hygiene initiatives; male medical practitioners and *higienistas* (social hygiene advocates) held women responsible for disease prevention (Lavrin 1995: 100, 103). In this way, social hygiene campaigns brought public awareness to formerly private female occupations, such as childrearing and care for the sick. This provided female activists with a culturally acceptable avenue for participating in civic life and social reform; women could speak openly about public health while still conforming to their feminine roles as nurturers and caretakers. In the late 1900s, women began entering the medical field, joining public health organizations, and participating in conferences on health and hygiene (105–07).<sup>2</sup> Salvadora Medina Onrubia and Alcira Olivé brought the topics of health and hygiene to the stage, skillfully linking disease control to other pressing feminist concerns such as indissoluble marriage, economic inequality, and prostitution. Each playwright dramatizes the suffering female body and draws parallels between physical illness and societal repression.

Medina Onrubia and Olivé chose to write in the style of “thesis drama,” which allowed them to present their political perspectives through debate-style dialogue, archetypal characters, and straightforward plots. In her introduction to the script for *La salvación*, Olivé suggests that female playwrights ought to produce feminist works:

A la responsabilidad del dramaturgo se añadía la responsabilidad del sexo. Sería necesario el esfuerzo constante y tenaz de muchos millones de mujeres para destruir esta montaña de prejuicios que pesa sobre la humanidad con una tradición de siglos: la inferioridad mental de la mujer. (1924: 5)

[The obligations of my sex added to my playwriting obligations. The constant and persistent

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efforts of many millions of women will be necessary to destroy the mountain of prejudices that has weighed upon humanity for centuries: women's mental inferiority.]

Anarchists also viewed drama as an effective means of promoting social change and preferred it to lectures and other forms of public presentations, according to Juan Suriano (2004: 161). Thesis dramatists questioned cultural norms but they also sought to win over audiences. This often meant that playwrights, even anarchist and feminist ones, reassured their public that their reformatory ideas would not interfere with Argentine womanhood, feminine beauty, wifely devotion, and—most importantly—maternal obligations. Actresses renowned for their grace and beauty played the leading roles, such as the wildly popular Camilia Quiroga, and dramatists and theatre companies exalted femininity and assured skeptical playgoers that female emancipation would not lead to the masculinization of women.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the dramatic scripts that purported to support, liberate, and protect women initially constrained female voices and bodies on stage in accordance with perceived audience preference. As playwright César Iglesias Paz (1848–1929) states, in defense of his thesis drama promoting sex education for girls:

[L]a mujer argentina, la mujer nuestra, es la más virtuosa, es la más dócil, es la más buena de las mujeres del mundo, como lo he sostenido en mis comedias, donde si alguna cayó fue por ignorancia jamás por perversidad. (1917:9)

[Argentine women, our women, are the most virtuous, the most docile, the best of all the women in the world, as I have sustained in my comedies, where if one fell it was out of ignorance, never perversity.]



Fig. 1: Salvadora Medina Onrubia

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As a first time playwright and a female author in a male-dominated genre, the pressures on Salvadora Medina Onrubia (fig. 1) were significant. She was a young unwed mother and had moved to Buenos Aires in 1914 from the province of Entre Ríos, where she worked as a schoolteacher (Seibel 2002: 506). That same year she wrote and debuted an impassioned defense of female laborers and an anarco-feminist analysis of capitalism: *Almafuerte*. The protagonist, Elisa, lives in a *conventillo* (tenement housing) and works as a seamstress from home. All of the women in the family labor and struggle in a repressive and unhealthy environment made worse by a cruel, unforgiving, and unattractive landlady named Doña Braulia. Argentine authorities blacklist Elisa's father and deport Elisa's fiancé, a Spanish immigrant named Arturo, when they discover their involvement in union organizing and anarchist political activism. This tragic plot reflects the reality facing poor families in tenement homes, which represented about 20 percent of the population of Buenos Aires at the end of the 19th century (Nari 1994: 35). Political organizing within the tenements was suppressed by the Law of Residence (1902) and the Law of Social Defense (1910), which authorized police to incarcerate or deport individuals suspected of associating with anarchists (Rock 1987: 187). In addition, the Saenz Peña Law of electoral reform (1911) ensured universal suffrage for Argentina's male citizens but excluded women and male immigrants from the voting process (189). Unsanitary living conditions caused further difficulties for conventillo residents. Family members often shared one room for eating, sleeping, and working. A limited number of latrines were used by multiple families and it was common to see dogs, cats, and other domestic animals in the buildings (Reber 2000: 518). Medical professionals warned of a variety of social and physical ailments caused by living in the conventillo. According to historian Marcela María A. Nari, prominent doctors, including the foremost public health advocate, Guillermo Rawson, accused the tenements of threatening three key components of a healthy nation: conventillos impaired biological reproduction by damaging female reproductive organs, hindered industrial productivity by failing to support the health and well-being of laborers, and created social upheaval by serving as a breeding ground for anarchism and union organizing (Nari 1994: 35–40). The authors of popular theatre sketches and tangos saw the conventillo in another light; the patio of the conventillo seemed an ideal setting for depicting the experiences of working class porteños and new immigrants, as Silvia Pellarolo explains:

En este marco escenográfico se presentaba la dramatización del espacio público del patio del conventillo como un laboratorio donde se ponía a consideración del público—formado por representantes de los mismos sectores que se representaba en escena—la elaboración de un nuevo modelo cultural que los abarcara a todos (Pellarolo 1997: 49).

[This stage setting offered the dramatization of the public space of the conventillo patio as a laboratory through which the public—made up of representatives of the same sectors of the population depicted on stage—could observe the formation of a new cultural model that could include everyone.]

Yet women remained on the margins of this new cultural model. Female characters often appeared in *sainetes*<sup>4</sup> and tangos as disease-ridden prostitutes and wayward women (Guy 1991: 141). Perhaps this explains why Medina Onrubia does not stage the public space of the patio, in *Almafuerte*, but rather a more private, more marginalized, space: an interior room/sewing studio occupied primarily by women. She exposes the unsanitary working and living conditions endured by female laborers but she lays the blame for poverty and unsanitary conditions on influences from outside the conventillo.

In the first act of *Almafuerte*, Elisa sews her wedding dress while her sisters and the landlady, Doña Braulia, iron clothes left by bourgeois clients. Elisa and Doña Braulia's physical appearances illustrate their incompatible ideologies. Elisa is well-dressed, clean, and pretty, while Doña Braulia, "debe tener un poco de bigote" [should have a little moustache], according to the character descriptions (Medina Onrubia 1914: 3). Elisa speaks eloquently and enthusiastically in favor of anarchism as she prepares for her marriage to the union organizer, Arturo. Doña Braulia rudely spits chewing tobacco all over the floor and expresses her disapproval of the wedding (4–5). The landlady's masculinized, vulgar, and unhygienic presence conflicts with the heroine's femininity, left-leaning politics, and cleanliness. The feminine delineation of Elisa's behavior and appearance mixed with her progressive politics make her appealing to the prevailing gender sensibilities of anarchists, feminists, and even conventional playgoers. It is possible that Medina Onrubia used these gendered details to make audiences more sympathetic toward the main character and her ideological point of view. Since Medina Onrubia picked a controversial topic, she may have also been concerned with how well the public would react to a politically subversive play written by a woman. As Sarah C. Chambers explains, *fin de siècle* women writers in Latin America "were under ever greater pressure to uphold strict notions of female domesticity" and they also had to contend with the fact that "[m]ale politicians and intellectuals considered it acceptable for ladies to write about 'women's issues' for a female audience but fewer were willing to welcome these authors as full participants in the formation of national literature" (Chambers 2003: 82–83). Thus, it appears that Medina Onrubia sought to reform society's view of anarchism in the tenements while carefully reassuring spectators that their (perhaps larger) fear of gender disorder would not be realized. In fact, the playwright seems to suggest that anarchism preserves good hygiene and femininity, as in the case of the beautiful Elisa, while capitalism deforms it, as in the case of the monstrous Doña Braulia.

Elisa and Arturo's engagement provides the opportunity to place feminism within the context of the anarchist movement, to which Elisa alludes in a monologue:<sup>5</sup> "Para que fuera bueno el mundo y felices las mujeres, debían ser anarquistas todos los hombres" (Medina Onrubia 1914: 6). [For the world to be good, and for women to be happy, all men would have to be anarchists]. Likewise, Arturo lauds the appeal of anarchism as beneficial to women and denounces the state for regarding political activism as a disease in need of a cure:

[. . .] Me perseguirán como si estuviera sarnoso. Vos no sabés lo que es un anarquista, un

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anarquista al que se echa rodar por la tierra con la marca de enemigo [. . .] condenado a rodar siempre perseguido de todos lados porque le temen, porque saben que tiene el cerebro enfermo de razón, de rebeldía, que es la enfermedad que más se pega... la que nunca se cura. ¿Vos te crees que eso es un crimen Elisa? querer libertar esclavos, querer que no haya llagas, que no haya angustias, que no tengan que venderse las mujeres por un pedazo de pan. (16)

[. . .] They will chase me as if I were covered in rashes. You don't know what it means to be an anarchist, an anarchist who is forced to walk the earth branded as the enemy [. . .] always condemned to roam, always persecuted from all angles because they are afraid, because they know my brain is sick with reason, with rebellion, which is the worst of all diseases... one that can never be cured. Do you really think it is a crime, Elisa? Trying to liberate slaves, trying to eliminate pain and suffering so that women will not have to sell themselves for a piece of bread?]

The police persecute Arturo for his political involvement and use the Law of Residence to force him out of the country. This is just the first in a series of hardships that Elisa and her family must endure. Don Mauricio (Elisa's father) cannot find work because potential bosses fear he will continue his union organizing efforts. Julia (Elisa's younger sister) defends herself from her boss's sexual advances and Gurisa (Elisa's older sister) falls ill from tuberculosis. The family members try, unsuccessfully, to support themselves on the small amount of money the women make sewing and ironing. Potential customers fear contracting Gurisa's illness and stop visiting the home. This reflects the attitudes of upper-class porteños who avoided contact with tenement occupants for fear of contagion, particularly in the years following 1882, when German physician Robert Koch proved that tuberculosis was communicable (Reber 2000: 511). According to Vera Blinn Reber, some of the sanitation measures taken by government and public health organizations to combat the spread of tuberculosis in Buenos Aires may have been influenced by upper-class prejudices:

Because of the efforts of the Argentine Anti-Tuberculosis League, the Buenos Aires Municipal Government passed legislation in 1903 which emphasized preventative measures. Such measures included the disinfection of hospital rooms, of public places such as trams and theatres, and the homes of tubercular patients. All public places were to have spittoons on the floor or fixed to the wall. Factory owners were to provide workers with their own drinking cups. Ordinances prohibited the tubercular from selling food or working in restaurants. Although it is not clear how useful these measures were in preventing tuberculosis, they did represent an elitist social agenda. The elite Porteños and public health officials, like their European counterparts, considered the poor incapable of exerting discipline and thus in need of regulation for the public good. (Reber 2000: 519)

In the case of *Almafuerte*, Gurisa's health deteriorates after she and her sisters lose their upper-class clients. When Elisa and her sister can no longer pay Gurisa's costly medical bills, they desperately watch as her illness progresses. Taking advantage of the family's situation,

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Doña Braulia pressures Elisa to have sex with her sister's doctor for money: "No seas loca, hacele caso... la suerte no se encuentra dos veces. ¿Y qué otra cosa podés esperar vos?" (Medina Onrubia 1914:22). [Don't be silly, listen to him... opportunity doesn't knock twice. And what else can you hope for?]. This scenario also has a basis in reality, since "needlework was one of the many poorly paid sources of women's income—and one that often drove them to become prostitutes," according to Donna J. Guy (1991: 139).

Medina Onrubia's dramatic dilemma draws in spectators and invites them to empathize with the woman's plight as she accepts the doctor's proposition. Elisa begins to see her entry into prostitution as the only way to cure Gurisa's tuberculosis and to ensure the family's economic survival. The spectators had been encouraged to appreciate the protagonist's superb display of feminine grace and virtue in the first two acts of the play and they are urged to continue empathizing now, even as she considers prostitution. An internal monologue reveals Elisa's justification for her decision:

Tres mil pesos... una hora... (*mira a su alrededor la horrible miseria*). Tres mil pesos (*ríe amargamente*). Trabajando un año hasta de noche, no gano para comer... con ser mala una hora... (*vuelve a reír*). ¡La vida! (Medina Onrubia 1914: 26)

[Three thousand pesos... one hour... (*she looks at the horrible misery that surrounds her*). Three thousand pesos (*she laughs bitterly*). Working year-round, even nights, I don't make enough to feed myself... but by being bad for one hour... (*she laughs again*). What a life!]

Elisa imagines that Arturo will not only forgive her behavior, but also admire her fortitude:

Debo, es mi obligación... no te faltó Arturo... no te faltó... Te quiero más que antes... más que nunca, si soy más digna de vos... Si vos sufrieras me abrirías los brazos y me dirías bendita" (26).

[I have to, it's my obligation... I'm not untrue Arturo... I'm not untrue... I love you more than before... more than before, since I am more worthy of you... Even if you were to suffer you would open your arms to me and give me your blessing.]

The suggestion is that Elisa not only deserves her fiancé's forgiveness but also his respect for engaging in such a courageous and selfless act. By hinting at Arturo's acceptance and even approval of Elisa's entry into prostitution, the author promotes a radical new value system in which a woman's virtue is independent of her sexual purity. While Medina Onrubia depicts prostitution as the disturbing and regrettable consequence of Elisa's lack of options, she also clearly encourages spectators to respect her and to see her as a morally upright character. Elisa's role as a nurturer and caretaker takes precedence over her chastity. While other fellow anarchists and feminists deplored prostitution and viewed it as a disease produced by capitalism, some, such as María Abella Ramírez (1863–1926), strongly resisted the notion that

the state regulate the sex trade, which she announced in a conference in 1906: “Que la prostitución sea tolerada pero no reglamentada. La mujer soltera y mayor de edad es dueña de si misma: su cuerpo es lo que más legítimamente le corresponde: puede hacer de él lo que quiera, como el hombre, sin pagar impuestos ni sufrir vejámenes policiales” (Abella 1965: 15). [Prostitution should be tolerated but not regulated. A single adult woman is her own master; her body is what most legitimately belongs to her; she can do whatever she wants with it, just like a man, without paying taxes or being bothered by the police].

The setting for all three acts, the conventillo, which the middle and upper-classes feared as infectious and hazardous, is central to the play’s ideological message. Medina Onrubia inverts conventional portrayals of poor women in the conventillos by highlighting the virtuousness of her female characters and by depicting members of privileged classes (doctors, landlords, high society ladies, bosses) as truly immoral and even predatory. Evelia Romano has pointed out that Medina Onrubia’s female characters “parecen no tener otra alternativa que la de entregarse, en cuerpo y espíritu, a las clases dominantes” (2004: 6). [Seem to have no other alternative but to surrender themselves, in body and soul, to the dominant classes]. The mood created by the setting transforms from act one to act three and reflects the female characters’ suffering. Paintings and flower bouquets gave Elisa’s home an atmosphere of “paz y alegría” [peace and happiness] in the first act but disheveled furniture and drab décor fill the room with “una sensación fuerte de angustia y miseria” [a strong sensation of anguish and misery] by the third act when Arturo’s exile, Gurisa’s illness, and the family’s poverty drive Elisa to prostitution. Although Medina Onrubia’s poor female characters are still associated with the conventillo, a series of incidents reveals the role the dominant culture actually plays in the spread of disease and prostitution: The middle-class clients underpay and later avoid the female laborers in the family; the government persecutes and exiles anarchists; the doctor sexually propositions Elisa; and Julia’s employer attempts to rape her. The opening scene of the play, in which the landlady repeatedly spits on the floor of the women’s room, foretells the ways in which the dominant classes will pollute the living conditions of the poor female characters throughout the course of the play. Thus, in contrast to prevailing theatre practices and medical discourses, Medina Onrubia likens political repression, capitalism, and social prejudice to infectious diseases that corrupt the female body and weaken the integrity of the home.



Fig. 2: Maria Gamez.

Although critics from the mainstream press wrote unfavorable reviews of *Almafuerte*, many of them admitted that it was popular with audiences.<sup>6</sup> The anonymous reviewer for *El Diario* objected to the playwright's suppression of action in favor of discussion and suggested that the audience's enjoyment of the play was due only to the popularity of the actress who played Elisa, María Gámez (fig. 2). The review also insinuated that Medina Onrubia's work was not true theatre: "She thought she had written a play." [C]reyó haber hecho un drama.<sup>7</sup> The columnist for *La Mañana* had similar complaints. He remarked that thesis dramas, particularly about anarchism, were rarely authored by women and he advised Medina Onrubia to write in a way that would be "more in keeping with her sex and womanly soul" ("de acuerdo con su sexo y de su alma de mujer"), since he considered social commentary a man's job.<sup>8</sup> These reviewers indicated that most male intellectuals thought it was inappropriate and unladylike for women to write ideological theatre. The anarchist paper, *La Protesta*, was one of the only major periodicals to come out in favor of *Almafuerte*, describing it as a condemnation of the Law of Residence.<sup>9</sup> The dismissive and condescending attitudes of these critics, particularly those from the mainstream press, may have discouraged other female playwrights in the 1910s from writing thesis dramas. Although Medina Onrubia did not produce another play until 1921, she explained in an interview that this was not because of inhibitions but because she was occupied with raising her children.<sup>10</sup> A few years after the debut of *Almafuerte*, she married Natalio Botana, the owner of the prominent newspaper *Crítica*, with whom she had three more children (Abos 2001: 20).<sup>11</sup> Medina Onrubia's comments on how marriage and motherhood delayed her literary production brings to light another factor contributing to the scarcity of women writers at the turn of the 20th century. Even in revolutionary circles, women stayed home and took on the majority of the work involved in

childrearing, allowing their male partners more freedom to realize their political, professional, and artistic aspirations (Bellucci 1994: 64).



Fig. 3: Angelina Pagano.

Alcira Olivé's play, *La salvación*, opened in Rosario in 1923 and in Buenos Aires in 1924. The Pagano-Ducasse theatre company financed both productions and Angelina Pagano (fig. 3) played the lead role. Unlike Medina Onrubia, she had had previous experience with critics and was prepared to defend herself from their inevitable censure. She claims inexperience as a dramatic writer in her introduction to the published script. Although she admits that her first works contained some formal defects, she lashes out at the reviewers who treated her with condescension:<sup>12</sup>

La crítica me molestó con no pocas injusticias: la mayor de todas, en tono de protección blanda y azucarada con que han pretendido ampararme--limosna que agradezco--pero que estoy muy lejos de necesitar--y no acepto--por venir de personas que hasta hoy no han probado superarme en capacidad intelectual, moral o artística. (Olivé 1924: 5–6)

[The critics upset me with more than a few injustices: the worst of which offered to help me, in a soft and sweet protective tone--charity that I appreciate--but I am very far from needing--and will not accept--since it comes from persons who so far have not proven their mental, intellectual, moral or artistic superiority over me.]

Surprisingly, Olivé's outspoken antagonism fades as she continues. She claims that her intentions are to offer subtle recommendations for social change, not to overtly challenge the

civil code. Ironically, she seems to confirm the belief that women should avoid political debates, even though her play has a clearly pro-divorce and obviously political thesis:

Pude a base de este argumento hacer polémica divorcista; se me ha señalado como un error el haber renunciado a ella. Entiendo que para discutir leyes están los parlamentos, al teatro le incumbe labor más delicada: reflejar la sociedad con sus defectos y señalar el remedio con que han de corregirse. (6)

[I could have, based on my plot, created a divorce debate; my having renounced it has been pointed out as an error. I understand that laws are discussed in parliament and that theatre's role is much more discreet: to reflect on society's defects and to suggest how they might be remedied.]

The author may have constructed this introduction in order to denounce male chauvinism while at the same time emphasizing her humility and “feminine” decorum. Her use of melodrama may be seen as an extension of this subversive strategy. By confining her social commentary to the realm of the emotional, the familial, and the melodramatic, Olivé takes on sexism without challenging the gender-coded theatre conventions that associated overtly political plays with “masculine” concerns. This is akin to the “tricks of the weak” that Josefina Ludmer has attributed to colonial women writers, such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who used intimate literary genres, “the letter, the autobiography, the diary,” to examine topics that were otherwise inaccessible to women: “politics, science, philosophy” (Ludmer 1991: 93). In doing so, early women writers force us to reexamine “lesser” literary genres, according to Ludmer: “if the personal, private, and quotidian are included as points of departure and perspectives in other discourses and practices, they cease to be merely personal, private, and quotidian” (93). Similarly, domestic melodramas that explore gender politics and feminist ideology are much more subversive than they first appear. Olivé's strategy yielded positive results from newspaper commentators. A critic from *La Época* applauded Olivé for advocating for feminism without compromising her “femininity”: “La señorita Olivé al defender a la mujer no hace feminismo masculino, sino feminismo y esto no es poco decir.” [In defending women, Miss Olivé doesn't engage in masculine feminism but feminism and that's no small feat].<sup>13</sup>

As in most melodramas, *La salvación's* characters either belong to the side of virtue or to the side of vice. Olivé's heroine is an honorable woman named Cristina who is in love with an equally upright man named Germán. Cristina's righteous uncle, Jaime, tries to encourage and protect the lovers. However, malevolent characters, like Cristina's mother Matilde and her sister Lola, conspire against the couple and force Cristina to marry a rich business owner named Tomás. The play's virtuous characters (Cristina, Germán, and Jaime) prioritize art, literature, and emotions over money and conventional social mores. The villains (Matilde, Lola, and Tomás) choose capitalism, positivism, and social obligations over art and sentimentality. As Eric Bentley explains, the paradigm of good versus evil makes a great

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impression on the viewer of a melodrama: “something has been gained when a person who has seen the world in monochrome and in miniature suddenly glimpses the lurid and the gigantic. His imagination has been reawakened” (Bentley 1999: 40). In the case of *La salvación*, as spectators are drawn into the action, they are encouraged to adopt the protagonist’s perspective and to perceive the role that women are forced to play in society as unappealing, unhealthy, and unfair. Olive’s romantic plot serves as a vehicle for feminist social commentary on the role of women and marriage in the new nation. Cristina’s opposition to her husband reflects the early feminist movement’s opposition to patriarchal subordination and the restrictive civil code. In Act One, an exchange between Tomás and Jaime illustrates the viewpoints that are at odds in the play:

TOMÁS: [...] Cristina no hace otra cosa, toda la vida en la calle. Cuando no es un té, es un concierto, o una amiga que cumple años, o una conferencia, ¡o el diablo!... Receta del médico, es verdad... que se distraiga, que pasee, que la neurastenia se cura así. ¡La neurastenia! ¡Vaya una enfermedad de holgazanes y de inútiles!... Tuviera un par de chicos de cuidar, ya veríamos adonde iría a parar la neurastenia... Y Vd. Tiene parte de la culpa, tío Jaime.

JAIME: Justo, sí. Yo soy el culpable de que su mujer no tenga hijos.

TOMÁS: No digo eso. Me refiero a otras cosas. A las conversaciones, a los libros, a las veinte mil pamplinas que le preocupan a Vd. y que consigue al fin y a la postre que le interesan a ella. [. . .] De dramas y versos estoy hasta la coronilla, y de música, hasta la punta de los pelos. No habla mi mujer de otra cosa.

JAIME: Prueba evidente de que entiende, lo que no le sucede a todo el mundo.

TOMÁS. A Dios gracias. Hay que ser más positivista, hay que tener más sentido práctico...Y eso es precisamente lo que no consigo de mi mujer. (Olivé 1924: 11)

[TOMÁS: [...] Cristina doesn’t do anything other than go out on the town all the time. When it’s not a tea, it’s a concert, or a friend’s birthday, or a conference, or the devil!... Doctor’s orders, I know... she should be distracted, go out, this will cure her neurasthenia... Neurasthenia, that’s a sickness for the useless and the idle! If she had a pair of kids to watch over, we would see how long her neurasthenia would last. And you, Jaime, are partially to blame.

JAIME: Of course. It’s my fault that your wife doesn’t have children.

TOMÁS: I didn’t say that. I’m talking about other things. The conversations, the books, all of the mountains of rubbish that you pay attention to that manage to attract her attention. [. . .] I’ve had it up to here with theatre and poetry and I’m fed up with music too. My wife doesn’t talk about anything else.

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JAIME: Proof that she understands it, which isn't true for everyone.

TOMÁS: Thank God. One has to be more positivist, more practical... And that's precisely what I can't seem to get from my wife.]

Tomás repeats his positivist and *machista* reasoning throughout the play. He fails to acknowledge his wife's desire for independence, referring to her aversion to homemaking as a nervous condition aggravated by intellectual activities. Francine Masiello explains that positivist male authors in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century tended to use the rhetoric of science and social hygiene to exclude women from national discourses:

Hygiene, public medicine, sanitation, and criminology were designed to control the national ego and produce individual subjects both clean of mind and body and free of all traces of barbarism. But science also served to articulate a fear of difference and, supported by evidence amassed from new technologies, applied gender distinctions to the new boundaries separating elite and popular culture. Thus, women were assigned a position as inferior political and civil subjects. [...] Madness as a theme attracted the attention of the sociologists of this generation, who sought to define deviant behavior and give new meaning to exceptional beings. Within this schema, women were situated in the realm of the irrational, outside the sphere of official discourse, while the state became synonymous with reason and progress. (88—89)

By equating female emancipation with mental illness (neurasthenia) and aberration, Tomás clearly echoes the sentiments of those earlier male intellectuals. Olivé, however, presents this positivist male chauvinism as absurd, illogical, and out of sync with modern ideas.

*La salvación* is set in an upper middle-class home, not a conventillo, but Olivé depicts this setting as a sort of high-class bordello. When Matilde scolds her daughter for withholding affection from Tomás, Cristina likens the marriage to prostitution through her sarcastic response:

Sí, tenés razón, mamá. Hay que procurar que Tomás esté muy contento, muy contento... Y eso debo procurarlo yo a fuerza de cariño, aunque sea farsa, pero cariño de cualquier precio. (Olivé 1924:23)

[Yes mama, you're right. I have to make sure that Tomás is very happy, very happy... And I must make sure of it through my affection, even if it is a charade, affection, whatever the cost.]

She repeats these sentiments with more vigor to her sister, Lola, towards the end of Act One: "Para salvarse todos de la pobreza me vendieron a un hombre rico, hundiéndome en la desesperación de un hombre que me repugna!" (24). [All of you sold me to a rich man to save yourselves from poverty, reducing me to a miserable life with a man who repulses me!]. In this way, Olivé likens an institution that conservative society reveres, indissoluble marriage, to one

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that it abhors, prostitution. Like Medina Onrubia, Olivé also shows how repressive social conditions can be detrimental to a woman's health. Jaime recalls how Cristina fell ill after marrying Tomás: " [Cristina se puso muy triste y muy débil de recién casada. [ . . . ] El asco que le tenía" (28). [Cristina became very sad and very frail after the wedding [ . . . ] He so disgusted her].

In Acts II and III, Tomás's obsession with patriarchal power and his disdain for his wife's intellectual development make him more and more aggressive, which further frays Cristina's nerves. Tomás explodes angrily and violently when he catches his wife with books. Cristina acts as though Tomás is destroying a part of herself when he destroys her reading material:

TOMÁS: (*Quitándose los*) ¿No he prohibido que leas?... ¿Volvemos a las andadas?... ¿Cuando aprenderás a obedecerme?... ¿No he quemado toda tu biblioteca?... ¿No sabes que aquí mando yo?... ¡Dame esos libros!... Ya verás que pronto termino con ellos. (*Los rompe*) Así, así, ahora al río, ¡al agua!... (*Los tira hacia afuera*).

CRISTINA: No los rompas, no los tires, yo los quiero, son míos...

TOMÁS: ¿Que no los tire?... Y otra vez te los tiraré por la cabeza... Para que aprendas que aquí mando yo... ¡para que aprendas! ¡Te imaginas que yo soy un monigote! (40)

[TOMÁS: (*Taking them away from her*) Haven't I forbidden you to read?... Are you going back to your bad habits?... Haven't I burned your library? When will you learn to obey me?... Don't you know that I'm in charge here?... Give me those books!... You'll see how quickly I dispose of them. (*He rips them*) Like this, like this, now, to the river!... (*He throws them outside*).

CRISTINA: Don't rip them, don't throw them away, I want them, they belong to me...

TOMÁS: Don't throw them out? Next time I'll throw them at your head... So that you learn that I am in charge here... so that you learn! You must think I'm an idiot!]

Tomás's outbursts cause Cristina emotional and physical harm. In Act III, she stops eating in silent protest, which further aggravates Tomás: "Neurastenia, llantina, dolor de cabeza, dolor de cintura... ¡Claro está, como no te vas a enfermar si no comes nada!... No sé cómo puedes vivir" (45). [Neurasthenia, crying fits, headaches, side pains... Of course you will get sick if you don't eat anything!... I don't know how you survive]. Still, Cristina refuses to see a doctor for her condition and Tomás fails to take responsibility for causing her "neurasthenia."

He continues to disapprove of Cristina's literary interests and begins to suspect that books are making her ill: "¡Las novelas tienen la culpa de tu enfermedad! [...] Una mujer casada no necesita versos: Debe bastarle con el marido" (46). [Novels are to blame for your illness! [...] A married woman doesn't need verses: Her husband should be enough for her]. Tomás tries

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to “cure” Cristina’s illness by lavishing her with money and gifts and separating her from her books: “Todo lo que quieras, pero libros no. Los libros te enferman” (47). [Anything you want, but not books. Books make you sick]. Tomás is unwilling to see feminism as anything other than a mental illness. He ignores the reality that Cristina’s delicate condition actually worsens each time he restricts her freedom. These interactions between Cristina and Tomás illustrate a point that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have made about the origins of those diseases that primarily affect women (such as hysteria, anorexia, and neurasthenia). These critics contend that a society that degrades and demoralizes women inevitably sickens its female citizens: “Any young girl but particularly a lively or imaginative one is likely to experience her education in docility as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is most certainly to be trained to ill health, since the human animal’s first and strongest urge is to his/her own survival, pleasure, assertion” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 54). In *La salvación*, a variety of factors clearly contribute to the protagonist’s ill health: Cristina’s husband refuses her access to books and subjects her to emotional and physical abuse; her mother and sister pressure her to sexually satisfy a man who repulses her; and the Argentine civil code denies her the right to a divorce. All of these stresses manifest themselves as weakness and illness in Cristina’s body.

In the last act of the play, Cristina tells her mother that she plans to run away with Germán. As she elaborates on her reasons, she makes it clear that it is personal freedom that she is really seeking. Above all, she reproaches her mother for having coerced her into sacrificing her intellectual talents and her independence:

Me has esclavizado mamá, ¡me has esclavizado!...Y eso soy yo, un espíritu encarcelado, una mentalidad anulada, ¡un corazón deprimido!...Yo tenía inteligencia y brazos y fuerzas de voluntad para ganarme honradamente la vida, yo no necesitaba dinero para ser feliz... mamá, ¿por qué hiciste que me casara? (*llorando*). (Olivé 1924: 48)

[You enslaved me mama, you enslaved me!... And that’s what I am, a jailed spirit, an annulled mind, a depressed heart!... I had my intelligence and strength and motivation for earning a living honorably, I didn’t need money to be happy... mama why did you make me get married? (*crying*).]

In this way, Cristina explains that her true motivation for leaving her husband is her recognition of self-worth, her desire for independence, her aversion to staying in a repressive marriage for money, and her vision of the patriarchal household as an unhealthy and dehumanizing environment. Each man represents a different choice for the protagonist: Germán embodies the poor but intellectual local artist community, more willing to pay attention to women’s perspectives; Tomás epitomizes capitalism, anti-intellectualism, and patriarchal culture. This scenario bears striking resemblance to the earlier play by Medina Onrubia in which a young anarchist male stands for health and love while a rich doctor represents demoralization and degradation. Cristina’s story, like Elisa’s, ends in tragedy. When Cristina’s mother and sister

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thwart her plans to escape with her lover, she commits suicide by shooting herself in the heart. Thus Olivé, like Medina Onrubia before her, suggests that conservative society jeopardizes the physical and emotional welfare of women and causes them to commit desperate acts.

Medina Onrubia and Olivé played into spectators' expectations by portraying their heroines as weak, frail, and delicate but they also viciously attacked modern patriarchal culture for limiting women's potential and forcing them into prostitution (even within marriage). They used high priority topics of the time, hygiene and health, to draw attention to the unequal treatment of women in the Argentine civil code. These plays portray patriarchal culture as an epidemic that contaminates homes and makes women sick. Rather than demonizing working women and prostitutes, each playwright makes the case that mainstream culture coerces women into sexual servitude by prohibiting them from engaging in the types of activities that would better their lives, such as educating themselves or forming progressive political allegiances. It would be several decades before more radically subversive portrayals of womanhood would appear on the Argentine stage, ones that questioned the notion that women were naturally nurturing, delicate, and naive. Nonetheless, despite concessions made to the public, these plays were progressive, innovative, and even scandalous at the time in which they were written and performed. Hygiene and public health served as points of departure for Salvadora Medina Onrubia and Alcira Olivé to challenge long-standing cultural and theatrical traditions and promote feminist social change in Argentina.

## Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and friends generously offered me advice and encouragement during the creation of this essay, especially María A. Salgado, Beatriz Seibel, Evelia Romano, Stuart A. Day, Adam Versényi, Rosa Perelmuter, Laurence Avery, James Norwalk, and Anitra Grisales. I would like to thank the Fulbright Commission for funding my research trip to Buenos Aires. The Instituto Nacional de Teatro (which provided the images that accompany this piece) and the archives at Argentores were particularly valuable resources. I am also grateful to two anonymous reviewers from *e-misférica* for their thorough and insightful comments.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the transmission and treatment of communicable diseases in Argentina, and its impact on women's roles, see Vera Blinn Reber's article, "Misery, Pain and Death: Tuberculosis in Nineteenth Century Buenos Aires" (2000) as well as chapter three of *Women, Feminism, and Social Change in Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay (1890–1940)* by Asunción Lavrin: "Puericultura, Public Health, and Motherhood" (1995).

<sup>2</sup> Cecilia Grierson, Argentina's first female medical doctor, earned her degree in 1888. Another female doctor, Julieta Lanteri de Renshaw, who earned her degree in 1898, founded Argentina's national feminist party in 1918 (Sosa de Newton 1986: 289, 344).

<sup>3</sup> Camila Quiroga became famous in 1917 for her role as a desperate mother in the hit play *Con las alas rotas (With Broken Wings)* by Emilio Berisso. Decades later she remembered having cried real tears during the performances (Muñoz 1940: 88).

<sup>4</sup> Donald S. Castro offers a concise definition of the Argentine *sainete* in an article about the works of Alberto Vacarezza: "The *sainete* was a short jocular popular theatre play often associated with the cityscape of Buenos Aires and containing musical interludes of tangos and tango dancing. [. . .] Its heyday was in the late teens and 1920s, entering into decline by the mid-1930s. For much of its history, the *sainete* was a reflection of urban life and *porteño* social mores. The most favored setting for the *sainetes porteños* were the patios of slum tenement houses in Buenos Aires (*conventillos* or *casas de inquilinato*) because they brought together all of the *porteño* ethnic types and also cut along class lines" (2004: 127).

<sup>5</sup> The importance Medina Onrubia places on the wedding and her characters' fidelity with one another appears incongruent with anarchist discourse, which tended to denounce the institution of marriage in favor of free love. This may be either an indication that the author did not share the anarchist perspective of romantic relationships or a tactic for gaining audiences' sympathies. No doubt the public was more likely to feel compassion for a "pure" woman forced into prostitution than a promiscuous one.

<sup>6</sup> The following reviews noted audience enthusiasm: Unsigned review of *Almafuerte* by Salvadora Medina Onrubia. 1914. *El Diario*. 12 January: 5; and Starko, Sergio. 1914. Review of *Almafuerte* by Salvadora Medina Onrubia. *La Mañana*, 12 January: 5.

<sup>7</sup> Unsigned review of *Almafuerte* by Salvadora Medina Onrubia. 1914. *El Diario*. 12 January: 5.

<sup>8</sup> Starko, Sergio. 1914. Review of *Almafuerte* by Salvadora Medina Onrubia. *La Mañana*. 12 January: 5.

<sup>9</sup> González, Justino de. 1914. Review of *Almafuerte* by Salvadora Medina Onrubia. *La Protesta*. 13 January: 4–5.

<sup>10</sup> Fernández Curra, “Salvadora Medina Onrubia es una interesante e inquietante figura de nuestro mundo literario,” *Comoedia*, June 16 1927, 22–23. After *Almafuerte*, Medina Onrubia wrote *La solución* (*The Solution*, 1921), *Lo que estaba escrito* (*What Was Written*, 1928), *Las descentradas* (*Decentered Women*, 1929) and *Un hombre y su vida* (*A Man and His Life*, 193?).

<sup>11</sup> After her husband’s death in 1941, Medina Onrubia retained ownership of the newspaper until pressure from the Peronist government caused her to sell it in 1951 (Abos 2001: 27).

<sup>12</sup> Olivé’s other works include *La única verdad* (*The Only Truth*, 1920), *Ana María* (1922), *El mordisco* (*The Bite*, 192?), *La salvación* (1923), *Más que la honra* (*More than Honor*, 1927), *Máscaras y corazones* (*Masks and Hearts*, 192?), *Somos los dueños del mundo* (*We are the Owners of the World*, 1939), *¡Tres maridos, mucho amor...y nada más!* (*Three Husbands, a Lot of Love...and Nothing Else!*, 1945), and *¿Por qué te casaste conmigo?* (*Why Did You Marry Me?*, 1953). She spent most of her life in Rosario, where she established a dramatic arts school (Foppa 1962: 485)

<sup>13</sup> Unsigned review of *La salvación* by Alcira Olivé. 1924. *La Época*, 2 March: 7.

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