

VIOLENCE AND DIFFERENCE IN
GABRIELA MISTRAL'S SHORT STORIES
(1904–1911)*

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Abstract: Gabriela Mistral's uncharacteristic short stories, which she began writing at the age of fourteen, demonstrate the Chilean poet's need to express violence through the brief narrative genre. Mistral wrote six short stories and in all of them she blurs the boundaries between gender and violence. For the sexes to be defined, Mistral seems to use violence as a means to distinguish them. When women suffer through men's actions, both gender performances become more pronounced and defined: women and men exist precisely because of men's harmful actions. A shift of perspective and agency occurs when men fail to recognize their own behavior and blame women for their fate. Both sexes lose their subjectivity (or sexuality) and become so intertwined that their differences are no longer perceptible. The two stories analyzed in this essay are the first story Mistral wrote, "El perdón de una víctima" and her last, "El rival." In both, Mistral demonstrates her wariness to define a norm for heterosexual relationships, while at the same time, she attempts to discern female difference.

In a chapter called "Su secreto" of the much debated *Gabriela Mistral, rebelde magnífica*, Matilde Ladrón de Guevara discloses the key to deciphering Mistral's verses, particularly those violent poetic lines which the literary historian Raúl Silva Castro has defined as "siempre sangre [y] entrañas."¹ In a conversation as strangely casual as the guarded information she is about to reveal, Ladrón de Guevara lets us in on the secret to Mistral's odd verses and unusual life. The truth for Ladrón de

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1. This reference was quoted in Ladrón de Guevara's book (1957, 98), but can be found in Silva's *Estudios sobre Gabriela Mistral* (1935). Silva's book greatly angered Mistral for depicting the language in *Desolación* as strange and obscure.

Guevara is this, that Gabriela Mistral was sexually assaulted as a young girl:

—Hay tantas cosas que contar, Matilde, antes de morir . . .

—Usted, querida, está demasiado bien para mencionar la muerte.

—Pero hay secretos que consumen y, ¿por qué no?, suelen matar. Como soy fuerte, es cierto, si no morí entonces, debo confesarle a alguien, (se lo conté a Laurita Rodig bajo juramento), aquella fatalidad. . . .

—Era un mocetón que visitaba la casa, parece que lo consideraban de la familia y, como yo era una niña desarrollada, un día que me encontró sola, se le desataron instintos bestiales. . . . Fue horrible, parece que lo veo . . . ¿Sé yo misma lo que es o fue aquello? Entonces, Matilde, me pareció todo terminado, la vida misma, todo. (Ladrón de Guevara 98, 99)

For information so shocking, *Ladrón de Guevara* does not further interpret what happened to Mistral. Even Mistral's recollection of these "bestial acts" remains ambiguous. She asks herself: "¿Sé yo misma lo que es o fue aquello?" (Do I really know what that is or was?)² As readers we expect *Ladrón de Guevara* to venture further into the secret discourse on sexual assault and violence, elements of real importance for Mistral's work, especially her poetry. Instead, *Ladrón de Guevara* casts it aside to surprisingly deceive us. At the same time as she reveals Mistral's supposed secret, she manipulates this information to prove or even cover up another. For *Ladrón de Guevara*, the shocking revelation of the sexual act tricks the reader into believing that Mistral was unquestionably heterosexual, that she had rapturous relationships with men. Like writers who speculated on Mistral's love life, such as Sergio Fernández Larraín and Laura Rodig, *Ladrón de Guevara* underscores the feverish way in which Mistral reacted to the men in her life. The sexual assault suddenly becomes the diminished background that heightens the roller coaster sentiments Mistral felt in all her relationships, particularly with men. For *Ladrón de Guevara*, as for others, there can be little doubt about Mistral's mysterious behavior, including her alienation from men that ended in "la herida soledad."³ They interpret her strange and "raro" behavior as a reaction to something in her youth which triggers her own

2. Laura Rodig, Mistral's secretary and friend, confirms that Mistral experienced a tragic event when she was seven (Rodrig 1967, 177). Mistral never seems to deny this, but often emphasizes a "series" of tragic events in her childhood. Perhaps Mistral does this to sidetrack the reader from problems of her own sexuality and the (unspeakable) violence in her past.

3. *Ladrón de Guevara* pretends not to know about Mistral's sexual orientation, yet she leads us to a very suggestive act of intimacy between them, when Mistral confesses to her: "Allí rodeada por los árboles que ella siempre buscó y amó, me hizo confesiones" (100). As if to prove her theory of Mistral's sexual past, *Ladrón de Guevara* also speaks to Rodig and confides to Pablo Neruda, who remarks, "Matilde, tendrás que esperar mucho tiempo, tal vez cuando mueras, para develarlo, pero deberás hacerlo. Escríbelo pronto y guárdalo bien asegurado" (99).

“desbordada pasión” (Ladrón de Guevara 1957, 99). Mistral’s tragic past becomes a constant metaphor not only to confirm her passionate lyrics but also her violent but heterosexual disposition.

Regarding Ladrón de Guevara’s title, I wonder whether we can read Mistral as a “rebelde magnífica,” as the title suggests, whereby violence or violation of any kind can be understood as central to defining her relationships with men. Violence becomes a metaphorical frame or context for reading male-female relationships as either a discourse for heightening “passions” or as a contrivance to be repulsed by them. Difference between the sexes seems unable to exist without violence to delineate them. As Barbara Johnson proposes in her essay on psychoanalysis and female difference, “Is Female to Male as Ground is to Figure?” some women protagonists are defined either through their background or foreground; once they are omitted, they become either passive, submissive, or to an even more extreme, erased. Johnson bases her argument on Douglas Hofstadter’s *Göedel, Escher, Bach*, where difference is a double-edged sword or double reading. Difference and equality between women and men are established either through contrasts and contradictions, enabling us to distinguish men and women from each other, or through an eradication or blurring of the differences between them. How one reads sexual difference is just as important as the ambiguities that gloss over their resemblance. The reading can go both ways:

When a figure or “positive space” [call this “the male child” or simply “the child” or “Oedipus”] is drawn inside a frame [call this frame “psychoanalytic theory”], an unavoidable consequence is that its complementary shape—also called the “ground” or “background” or “negative space” [call this the “girl” or the “other”]—has also been drawn. In most drawings, however, this figure-ground relationship plays little role. The artist is much less interested in the ground than in the figure. But sometimes an artist will take an interest in the ground as well.⁴ (Johnson 1998, 19)

4. Barbara Johnson’s analysis of two stories, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, “The Birthmark” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” demonstrates how male characters attempt to “fix” women into a patriarchal system. Both men in the stories fail when these women refuse to participate and instead, find drastic solutions to their figure/ground predicaments, either by committing suicide (Hawthorne) or by going mad (Gilman): In the Hawthorne story, a passionate scientist, Aylmer, attempts to remove a crimson birthmark from the white cheek of his wife Georgiana, in order “that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw” (Hawthorne 1963, 205). He succeeds in removing the mark, but, in the process, kills Georgiana. In the Gilman story, a woman is confined by her husband, a doctor, to a country house for a rest cure. She begins to focus obsessively on the ugliness of the wallpaper until, in the end, she seems to have become a part of it. The superficial symmetry between the two stories is obvious and suggestive. In both the therapeutic is underwritten by a strong aesthetic investment. In the male writer’s story, the birthmark is an overinvested *figure* inscribed on a page that should be blank. In the female writer’s

In this paper I propose that Mistral leads us to a double reading of her work, where violence frames relationships between men and women. Violence acts either as figure (foreground) or ground (background).⁵ As figure, violence assumes an "active" masculine role: men inflict violence on women, and the male-female relationship disintegrates as women become violated, raped, or mad. Consequently, their differences become more distinguishable. As ground, violence takes a more "passive" feminine role and men are left without responsibility. Men and women's fate is left to unreal forces such as death or destiny. In passivity, violence passes as heterosexual "passion," which increases as the female's differences decrease or vanish. Mistral allows a double reading to confirm sexual differences or annul them. In this way, she invites a completely different analysis of her stories, one that is not dependent on being read only as straight gendered discourse. As Elizabeth Horan (2000, 222) and Licia Fiol-Matta (2002, 3) confirm, to read Mistral other than heterosexually means to obscure the boundaries of normative readings.⁶

In particular, it is in Mistral's short stories where this double reading is most prevalent. Allusions to violence, rape, and repulsion (acted out often as revenge) are strongly suggestive as one reading. Likewise, metaphors for tempestuous relationships that define their supposed desire make for the other. Mistral is not known as a short story writer; in fact, she often "forgets" that she wrote them in the first place.⁷ But as an accompaniment to her poetry, they provide useful commentary as to how to read some of her earlier poems, especially those from *Desolación*, which critics such as Alone (1942, 10), Martin C. Taylor (1968, 93) and Jaime Concha (1987, 49–53) have depicted as bloody and painful.

Mistral wrote six stories in total; they were written as part of a series of articles called "Lectura amena" and "Colaboraciones" from 1904 to 1911. Unlike Mistral's more objective prose poems or texts, some referred

story, the wallpaper is an overinvested *ground*. In the first, the figure *on* the woman-ground is erased; in the second, the woman-figure merges *into* the ground. In both cases, the woman escapes the control of the therapist (Johnson 1998, 21).

5. Here I am substituting Johnson's frame of psychoanalysis for violence.

6. Horan argues that Mistral leads the reader to ambiguous readings of her sexual identity. Mistral's strangeness in life and work performed through a "highly codified language of desire" proposes intriguing and provocative questions of gender (2000, 148). Fiol-Matta equally remarks that Gabriela Mistral was a closet lesbian who masked her homosexuality behind her public and political performances. Her gender crossed the boundaries between her sexual (thus private) and public self: "A *Queer Mother for the Nation* unfolds contrapuntually along public/private lines, demonstrating how Mistral's initial manipulation of the boundaries between the two realms became, in fact, a confounded and confusing blurring—with personal and social consequences" (xxiii).

7. Gabriela Mistral, when often questioned on her early work, dismissed it as childhood experiment.

to as “Recados,” they are tales that all have a female character who must endure suffering, madness, or death, usually inflicted on them by men or malelike protagonists.⁸ Perhaps because they share themes common to folk tales or nineteenth-century stories influenced by Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, these stories are not easy tales to enjoy. Instead, they dislocate the reader into the realms of agony and pain, where sinister meanings and unreal circumstances bring the characters (mostly men) to commit bizarre and unexpected acts of violence.⁹ No serious study of these short stories exists, perhaps because they have been dismissed as elaborate and frivolous.¹⁰ This is an unusual start for a young girl who began her career not as a poet, but as a prose writer at the age of fourteen. Only when Mistral began to travel as a school teacher in Antofagasta in 1912, did her poetry start to dominate her writing.¹¹ After her last story published in 1911, she abandoned the short story form all together.

Mistral’s six short stories appear in chronological order as “El perdón de una víctima,” “La muerte del poeta,” “Las lágrimas de la huérfana,” “Amor imposible,” “Espejo roto,” and “El rival.”¹² In all six of her

8. One could argue that “Espejo roto” and “Lágrimas de la huérfana” do not have male characters which inflict pain on the female protagonists, nevertheless, in “Espejo roto,” the mirror receives male characteristics and inflicts harm on the female protagonist, and in “Lágrimas,” Mistral gives male-like qualities to the wealthy older woman who lets the orphan girl die in the snow.

9. Mistral has often said that she read avidly when she was young, but that she did not follow one style or model of writing. I wonder, though, how much she was influenced by Poe and also by the short stories written by Rubén Darío, both of whom could have provided an interesting influence on her work. She hints at their indirect influence when she tips her hat to one of her mentors, José María Vargas Vila (Colombian radical writer; 1860–1933). He incorporated a number of literary techniques used by nineteenth-century short story writers. See *Aura ó las violetas* (1887); *Emma* (1888); and *Lo irreparable* (1889). Interestingly, many of his male characters find themselves in desperate situations surrounding love, where they are “victims” of their own circumstances.

10. Pedro Pablo Zegers suggests that Mistral may have been experimenting with her own style at that time. She certainly displays a fondness for elaborate themes and complex subjects (Zegers 2002, 17).

11. I have chosen six stories for their complex use of plot and use of violence. Each story centers around a struggle between the female characters and their unstable relationships with other men and (malelike) women/objects. In “La muerte del poeta,” the male protagonist traps the female character because of her “virginity and purity” to pray for him after he is dead. In “Las lágrimas de la huérfana,” the female protagonist dies because a wealthy woman of stature refuses her money. In “Amor imposible” the female character’s best friend must die in order for the heterosexual relationship to thrive. And in “Espejo roto,” the narrator inflicts further harm on herself when she compares the mirror to a (malelike) lover and must be buried along with it. Her curse and pain unfortunately must follow her in the afterlife. These six stories poignantly frame the female characters in harmful situations.

12. The titles and publication dates of the stories are the following: “El perdón de una víctima,” Lucila Godoy A, *El Coquimbo*, La Serena, Aug 11, 1904; “La muerte del poeta,”

stories, Mistral relies on the use of violence to provide the framework to make any sense out of relationships, particularly the "love" between the male and female characters. Mistral reminds us in her poem "Íntima" that "amor es amargo ejercicio." And as readers, we can interpret this bitterness in a two-fold manner. Either we accept that love exists and persists through the (ground of) highs and lows of suffering and pain or, that love is a false concept, a schism brought about by the (figure of) pain and suffering to mark and differentiate sexual contrasts between women and men. For many critics, Mistral's anguished verses represent the former. Little has been written on Mistral's use of violence and much on her interpretation of love. Ladrón de Guevara and others are complicit in this one-sided analysis, perhaps because Mistral even leads us into the trap of heterosexual discourse on love—a deliberate diversion from violence and sexual difference in her own work.

This paper analyzes the first and the last stories Mistral wrote, which are "El perdón de una víctima" and "El rival." They begin and end a narrative cycle where Mistral uses violence to frame gender differences, with the constant usage of the words *victim* and *crime*. These two stories draw attention to the various contradictions that exist between the violent act itself, the victims involved, and the mysterious criminal act. Mistral demonstrates her acute awareness of violence and the law, of victims and crimes committed against them. In these two stories, Mistral uses technical language, so out of place in the genre of the short story, which creates a split between the characters and the narrative framework provided for them, between the gendered subjects and the infelicitous performance of their agency. More importantly, Mistral changes the grammatical function of certain predictable acts to draw attention to the violence itself. She displaces us as she does the characters to make it difficult, almost impossible, to interpret the outcome in a straightforward manner.

EARLY MISTRAL

Gabriela Mistral did not begin her literary career as we now know her—*La Mistral*. Instead, she first wrote under her "orthonymic," or real name, Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, with various variations in between (Soledad, Alguien, Alma).¹³ When Lucila-before-Mistral began to write

L. Godoy A, *El Coquimbo*, La Serena, Aug 30, 1904; "Las lágrimas de la huérfana," L. Godoy A, *El Coquimbo*, La Serena, Sept 24, 1904; "Amor imposible," L. Godoy A, *La Compañía*, *El Coquimbo*, La Serena, Dec 17, 1904; "Espejo roto," L. Godoy A, *El Coquimbo*, La Serena, Mar 18, 1905; "El rival," Gabriela Mistraly [sic]; *El Mercurio*, Antofagasta, Oct 11, 1911.

13. The definition of orthonym was first used by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. He defined his own name as falling under the orthonym and all of his other writing

her first short stories in 1904, she was at that time living with her mother and sister in El Valle de Elqui and working as a schoolteacher in the Escuela de la Compañía Baja. As an active writer, Mistral began to submit her texts to the local newspaper, *El Coquimbo*, and within a short span of time, she became more assertive in her publications. She submitted texts to the newspaper of the Radical Party, *La Voz de Elqui*, and others such as *La Constitución*, *El Tamaya*, *La Reforma*, and *El Mercurio*, where she published the last of her stories in 1911. Most telling during this period is how the previous Lucila begins to experiment with the name of Gabriel/Gabriela/Gabriely [sic] as either a protagonist in her story or as an author of them. Mistral tries on different selves during her early writing career, most notably in ways that provoke a more alternative reading of her own self, one that attempts to subvert notions of a straightforward discourse of femininity or her own heterosexuality. As Horan remarks, “Gabriela Mistral’s earliest publications convey struggle and a sense of tremendous discontent, a being at odds. Writing was at once a relief, a source of danger, and a tremendous effort of overtaking her strange self” (2000, 159).

Mistral does push the boundaries of her own identity as a writer. In a letter to Rubén Darío, written when Mistral was twenty-two, she disguises herself as an old schoolmarm. She masks her youthfulness behind her thin “old body,” an impetus for her aspirations as a writer: “yo, que soi mujer i flaca por lo tanto, i que por ser maestra tengo algo de las abuelas—la chochez—, he dado en la debilidad de querer hacer cuentos y estrofas para mis pequeñas” (Mistral 1992a, 9). Mistral uses this older voice to hide her personal convictions in uncertainties, as her aphorisms demonstrate: “Soy una niña en placeres y anciana en dolores, pero mis pocos años de infortunio los aprecio más que a muchos de ventura por la enseñanza que me han dado” (Zegers 2002, 104). In other aphorisms, Mistral displays her impatience and distrust of men, especially as allegorical failures of history:¹⁴

styles belonging to his heteronyms (primarily Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos). Like a number of early-twentieth-century writers, Mistral experimented with her own pseudonyms. She began to use the name of Gabriela Mistral during the latter part of 1913 and 1914. But it was not until her “Sonetos de la muerte” (“Sonnets of Death”), which won best prize for poetry on December 22, 1914, that she definitively took the name of Gabriela Mistral as her own (Gazarian Gautier 1992, 19, 20).

14. Even though *hombre* means *humankind*, Mistral often gives the term a highly codified and negative connotation. When she criticizes the infelicitous effects of history and philosophy, especially as pejorative actions against feminine subjects (be they the “Patria” or “mujeres”), she seems to imply the masculine performance of “hombre.” She also uses “hombre” as “man” when referring to her own personal deceptions with the opposite sex. Interestingly, when she advocates for change or suggests moments of tenderness, she inserts “mujeres” or subjects which are feminized (See: “La nave y el mar,” Zegers 2002, 173).

En los bosques del Asia se encuentra del tigre la más terrible especie; en el seno de la Patria, halla el hombre, de la Maldad, la especie más infame. El regazo de la madre Patria, no es cojín mórbido sobre el que se descansa plácidamente, perfidias y hostilidades emergen de él como un levantamiento de puñales y cubren su belleza sagrada y adorable como cubren las espinas un tallo de rosas: traidoramente, deplorablemente. . . . (Zegers 2002, 110)

¿Qué es la vida?

—Algo triste hasta la angustia; cómico hasta lo ridículo, hasta lo grave serio; fútil hasta lo despreciable, trágico hasta el horror y hasta la monstruosidad feo: Inspira miedo, compasión, repugnancia.

¿Qué es el hombre en la vida?

—Saltimbanqui, héroe, loco, bestia, idiota: Todo menos un sabio, todo menos un cuerdo. (Zegers 2002, 67)

When depicting men in general, in the guise of other voices of experience such as a teacher or old woman, Mistral repeatedly insults and disparages them. From an early age, Mistral displays little fondness for men. She even blames them for women's economic misery.¹⁵

MADNESS IN THE MARGIN OF THE LAW

The unusual relationship between the male and female characters makes Mistral's first published story "El perdón de una víctima" quite momentous in Mistralian studies. First, this tale mirrors an act of sexual assault, which includes rape. The male protagonist admits to a crime committed against the young girl, one that leads the girl to madness, which makes her unrecognizable when her attacker revisits her. Second, Mistral's text seems to contain resonances of the early twentieth-century penal code.¹⁶ The code appears to follow in step with the actions of the characters, as a faint echo to the plot, specifically because it addresses three circumstances that define rape: if force is used; if the woman has lost her ability to reason; and if the girl is underage.¹⁷ All three circumstances apply to Mistral's story. Whether Mistral intended this legal parallelism or not, the short story seems to refer to the use of penal codes and social customs in place at that time.¹⁸

15. See Mistral's article "La instrucción de la mujer" (Zegers 2002, 98,99).

16. From 1848 to 1921 rape was defined as: "Se comete violación yaciendo con la mujer en alguno de los casos siguientes: Cuando se usa fuerza o intimidación; Cuando la mujer se halla privada de razón o de sentido por cualquier causa; Cuando sea menor de doce años cumplidos, aún cuando no concurra ninguna de las circunstancias expresadas en los números anteriores" (Código Penal 1921, article 361, as cited in Palacios 1921, 9).

17. As a number of legal scholars have pointed out the term "yaciendo con una mujer" has many interpretations, some of which can be interpreted loosely as "being" with a woman or "having intercourse" with her. See José Espinoza Valledor's *Estudio jurídico de la violación* (1956).

18. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Calumny."

The tale begins with a discrepancy between the girl of the story and nature. A young girl [era joven] swings in the trees, and her apparent beauty almost appears to reflect the natural world all around; her eyes are the color of the sky and focus on the lush countryside: “la brisa entonando su suave canción, las flores abriendo sus capullos, el arroyo deslizándose entre la suave alfombra de césped” (Zegers 2002, 34). Then the narrator creates a rupture in the romantic image: “it was not like that” [no era así]. These beautiful objects “did not impress her soul.” Instead “. . . el susurro de las hojas no llegaba a sus oídos y el aroma de las flores que embalsamaba las brisas no deleitaba su mente en aquella tarde” (Zegers 2002, 34). The narrator creates a mystery surrounding her strange behavior, while quickly identifying her: she is Esther, the mad woman of the village [La pobre loca de la aldea]. This woman whose beauty was recognized as being a mirror image of the natural objects around her, has somehow lost her own aesthetic correspondence with nature:

¡Pobre joven! En su mirada dulce y vaporosa, donde se adivinaba la grandeza de su alma pura y hermosa como el despertar de un sueño, vagaba una sonrisa amarga, y su corazón, pobre ave, pobre ave que avanza entre las nieblas de una noche tenebrosa, sostenía la existencia de uno de esos seres muertos, pero con una muerte de suplicio que hace de su vida la de un mártir. (Zegers 2002, 34)

Esther’s appearance, while beautiful, contrasts with the unseemly gaze and smile on her face. Her beauty disguises her own strangeness, whereby her enigmatic smile and fair appearance make her appear otherworldly, almost dead. Here, the pale young girl’s dark hair frames her “sweet but empty gaze” [mirada dulce y vaporosa]. The narrator purposely lingers on her strange appearance to draw attention to her passivity and her madness: “lanzó un profundo suspiro, dejó caer pesadamente la cabeza entre sus manos y después sonrió con esa sonrisa propia de los que sufren de enajenación mental” (Zegers 2002, 34).

This is an important leitmotif, since Mistral will repeatedly invoke the image of a ghostly, half-dead girl in her stories to underscore images of weakness or misunderstanding. Even more curious, read side by side with the penal code at that time, the singularity of the language to describe Esther’s condition gives the story a different perspective. The second section of the terms of the code states that rape is committed in such cases “when a woman lacks reason or is deprived of her senses” [cuando la mujer se halla privada de razón o de sentido por cualquier cosa] (Palacios 1921, 9). As the story progresses, we keep finding Esther in this frame of mind, either resisting or succumbing to the violence.

The reasons for her condition will soon become apparent. A man named Gabriel arrives and kneels before her, almost touching her. He makes it clear that they have “known” each other: “Esther, ángel del cielo, exclamó con su voz temblorosa, me conoces” (Zegers 2002, 34).

He then begins to cry, repentant for past actions, which seem to repeat in this second meeting. His strange manner interrupts the tale, as if his presence and lamentations were supposed to jar the reading. They are as out of place as Esther's condition, although we soon find that each one's behavior, whether a mad gaze or an outburst of hysterical crying, is related. They seem to be strange complements to one another—the woman is silent yet calm, the man is vocal yet hysterical; their behavior and appearance intertwine so closely that it is difficult, even in the last moments of the story, to separate them.

The actions of Esther's stoical madness and Gabriel's passionate outbursts are better understood when Gabriel confesses to a certain atrocity he committed against her. Using a distinct vocabulary consistent with judicial testimonies, he describes the violence as if he had violated the young woman, and he replays his guilt over and over:

Pobre desdichada, continuó con su voz ahogada por las lágrimas, soy el miserable que amargó tus días, aquel que te calumnió arrojando sobre tu honra pura, un enorme horror; soy yo el asesino de tu vida; los remordimientos, royéndome el corazón, me han llevado proscrito por el mundo encontrando a cada paso sólo la imagen de mi crimen. Y aquí estoy, aquí he vuelto siguiendo la corriente de mi destino maldito, envuelto en la ignominia, arrastrando mi existencia miserable sellada con el sello del crimen! (Zegers 2002, 35)

The aggressor's use of certain words heightens the tension and definition of the "image of the crime" [imagen de mi crimen]. In a story about forgiveness, words such as "calumny" [calumnia], "pure honor" [honra pura], "assassin" [asesino] and "ignominy" [ignominia] bring more attention to the violence than to the eventual pardon. The effects of these words emulate the legal proceedings of a defendant confessing to his guilt. In addition to these acts, Gabriel confesses how he has performed bad things with words. He resorts to "calumny," which is the "malicious utterance of false charges," and "ignominy" defined as "disgrace or public shame."¹⁹ After the fact, he feels remorse for performing these violent acts against her. Gabriel admits to being the "assassin" of her life and of her "pure honor." He recognizes that his "deed" is now a "crime." Although never stated word for word, the crime can strongly be understood as rape or sexual aggression. Further proof exists in two other incidents in the story. One such occurrence describes Gabriel reenacting the scene of the crime, with the trees as silent witnesses:

... pero vio que ella tenía su mirada fija en él y le pareció que ésta lo quemaba; le pareció oír su voz, que le maldecía. Sintió al mismo tiempo en el bosque un

19. Mistral even hints at understanding the law in the poem, "La ley": "¡así fuiste en la vida, / santa mujer! La ley interpretaste, / la ley por tantas nunca comprendida: ¡Él te mantuvo, tú le perfumaste!" (Zegers 2002, 194).

ruido misterioso como que los enormes álamos, testigos de esa escena, se desplomaban sobre él; pero era simplemente el grito de su conciencia que le repetía sin cesar “¡Ahí tienes tu víctima!” (Zegers 2002, 34)

Mistral insists upon her distinct and precise terminology. During the early twentieth century in Chile, where rape was understood in terms of euphemisms (*ultraje, invasión, delito, indignidad, engaño*), she was already naming the violence enacted in her first story as a crime, and her male protagonist as guilty of it. To further her case of the scene as a crime, she inserts the terms “witnesses” [testigos] and “victim” [víctima]. Mistral rewrites the script of the crime by having her aggressor suffer for it. The trees that were the cruel observers of the scene change places with the aggressor. They seem to be “tumbling down on him” [se desplomaban sobre él], and the brute force of these words resembles the sexual act of “There you have your victim!” The trees can only be witnesses if there is “a scene” to identify. As if again the penal code that underscores force or aggression were behind the subtext, the scene replayed in and out of his head forces the assailant to endure the guilt inflicted on him.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Chilean law fluctuated widely in defining rape. In *Observaciones al Sistema Penal* (Observations of the Penal System) of 1902, Carlos Barros Hurtado defines the law according to its moral properties. Either a law observes the laws of “nature” or those of “man.” Barros dismisses those acts penalized by man that should be left to nature, such as acts of “love.” In writing about adultery, he states: “Las personas adúlteras no tienen nada que reprocharse en su conciencia íntima. Arrastradas por el amor, que es el hambre de la especie, han ejecutado un acto esencialmente natural a pesar de haber un delito civil” (1902, 7). Defined in the penal code as “violación,” other sources in the early twentieth century took the term more seriously and further elaborated its definition: “Que violar es gozar por fuerza de una mujer, especialmente doncella” (*Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, 1900); “Que es el acceso carnal con una mujer contra y sin voluntad de ésta” (Salvador Viada); “Que es el coito practicado sin el consentimiento de la mujer” (Dr. Puga Borne); “Que es toda unión sexual completa del hombre y de la mujer sin la libre voluntad de ésta” (Legrand du Saulle); “Que es la violencia que se hace a una mujer para abusar de ella contra su voluntad” (Pérez-Esrich).²⁰

20. All of the above are found in M. Fernando P. Palacios’ *Del delito de violación* (1921, 5). The names cited are all men from Chile or France who wrote on the legal aspects of rape and its consequences. D. Salvador Viada y Vilaseca (1843–1904) helped to write the Penal Codes of 1870 and 1885. Dr. Federico Puga Borne (1856–1935) was the founder of social medicine in Chile as well as a well-known politician. Henri Legrand du Saulle (1830–1886) was a pioneer of early psychiatry in France. He wrote extensively on mental disorders and their legal implications. Enrique Pérez-Esrich (1829–1897) was a Spanish

Yet even in cases where enough proof existed to convict the rapist, the rapist was set free. In 1900, sentence case 6263 published in the *Gaceta*, the victim was a ten-year-old girl (Carmen Arancibia) who was found by her mother lying unclothed with the neighbor (Juan Bautista Gutiérrez). Her unconscious state was confirmed by two policemen who came to her rescue. She was then taken to a doctor who proved she had been "deflowered recently." As clear cut as the penal code was in condemning her assailant, the judge found the case inconsistent and discredited the policemen's statements because they had seen the assailant civilized, dressed, and not on top of the victim.²¹

M. Fernando P. Palacios observes these inconsistencies in 1921 when he argues for the woman's right to defend herself from reprehensible acts by men. Judges, as much as definitions, tend to lose all reference to stable signifiers to properly set the law in order. As a result, one judge may set the rapist free, whereas another may condemn the victim. In one rape case, Palacios strongly argues against the verdict. The rapist was set free because the woman was inebriated at the time. Even alcoholism, according to Palacios, is enough to render the woman "hallada de razón o de sentido por cualquier causa" according to article 361 of the penal code. She should not be condemned for her "mala conducta" or her "falta de moralidad" (Palacios 1921, 12, 13).

writer who published a number of *novelas de costumbre* or novels of day-to-day practices. He was also very interested in women who deviated from good behavior, as some of his novels attest: See *La perdición de la mujer* (n.d.) and *La mujer adúltera* (1894).

21. Valparaíso, 7 de Abril de 1900. The text of the case is as follows: Vistos: Pabla Arce de Salinas denunció al Juzgador que vivía en el Cerro Alegre, calle del Estanque número 23, teniendo como sirviente a la niña Carmen Arancibia, de diez años de edad y al lado de su habitación residía el zapatero Juan Bautista Gutiérrez. Como a las 7 de la mañana del Jueves anterior a su denuncia, en circunstancias que su marido había salido, se encontraba ella en cama atendiendo a una hija enferma y la niña Arancibia se hallaba en el patio haciendo fuego. La llamó repetidas veces, sin que le contestara, hasta que se levantó y entonces se cercioró que no estaba en casa la Arancibia, siendo inútiles las averiguaciones que se hizo para encontrarla. A la mañana siguiente le avisó su vecina Dolores Salinas, que Gutiérrez le había anunciado que la Arancibia había llegado al aclarar al patio de su cuarto, trabada de frío y le había socorrido dándole alojamiento en su pieza. Con este dato pidió auxilio a la policía y acompañada del guardián primero Rojas y dos guardianes más de policía golpearon la puerta de Gutiérrez, quien se negó abrirla, empujando una ventana y vieron que Gutiérrez tenía aún en su cama a la Arancibia desnuda y la sacaron en contra la voluntad de Gutiérrez. Agrega que la Arancibia le refirió que el día anterior Gutiérrez la había introducido a la fuerza a su cuarto, la había violado varias veces, donde la tuvo encerrada amenazándola con matarla. Carmen Arancibia le ratificó esa parte de la denuncia y sostiene que Gutiérrez la introdujo a su cuarto a viva fuerza y usó carnalmente de ella en varias ocasiones, encontrándose doncella. . . [Pero] que aún cuando existen en autos vehementes presunciones para considerar a Juan Bautista Gutiérrez autor del delito que le imputa Carmen Arancibia su responsabilidad no está planamente comprobada, y de consiguiente, no puede condenársele como autor de dicho delito (quoted in Palacios 1902, 29).

As remote as these cases are from present-day Chile, modern legal scholars and feminist organizations are rewriting the various applications of the penal code and how women should be defined within it. Their writing has influenced the Chilean legal system with new ways of thinking outside of patriarchal models, especially in male-centered vocabulary, which defines the rape act as if the victim does not exist. As the Peruvian feminist Virginia Vargas argues, "... new feminisms [are] being invented by feminism at the national level, naming that which heretofore had no name: sexuality, domestic violence, sexual harassment, marital rape, the feminization of poverty and so on" (Álvarez et al. 2003, 30).

Gladys Acosta Vargas warns against women's subordination in the penal code where violence has been defined. In terms of rape, she emphasizes that up to the present moment in Chile, the rape act can be dismissed if the victim marries her rapist, since she is "ready and willing" [estar a disposición] (Vargas 1999, 633). Work on rape and domestic violence has been further researched by SERNAM (Servicio Nacional de la Mujer), which has found a direct correlation between cultural behavior and violence. For years authorities have turned a blind eye to domestic and family abuse. Victims have been forcibly encouraged to not complain and to remain silent (SERNAM 2002, 5). Isabel Pailalef urges women to think more cautiously about their role in "provoking" violence. While the violence may not be their fault, they must be able to have the courage to denounce the crime (Pailalef 1994, 4). In more global terms, Luz Rioseco and Solange Díaz analyze the influences of international law on Chile. Sexual violence is a breach of International Human Rights Law and Chile should be monitored by the United Nations and the American systems (Rioseco and Díaz 2002, 98).

In all of these new feminist legal discourses on violence, language has proven to be the most difficult. As Alda Facio and Lorena Fries have stated, language marks women as second-class citizens. Without a change in language, there cannot be a change in culture (Facio and Fries 1999, 47). Similarly, the language of the "rape script" becomes especially important when one needs to find different ways to articulate the rape act. As Gerd Bohner argues, "Language may exert hidden power in the way we talk and write about the fact that a man rapes a woman" (Bohner 2001, 515). In his study, he found that the passive voice was used to either downplay the rape act itself or to give sympathy to the victim (Bohner 2001, 517).²² In her story, Mistral displays a creative use of a distinct vocabulary and grammar that normally would not be used in

22. Similarly, Nina Philadelphoff-Puren argues that U.S. law traps women into a "transitivity system," that is, "who did what to whom," often with bitter consequences since the rapist has disappeared from the judicial act with statements such as "she asked for it" (2003, 49, 50).

the short story at that time. At first glance, her language—strange, morbid, and quite enigmatic—begins to change the script of violence when understood from the perspective of a more technical or “legal” language. She takes the initiative to name the act of violence as a “crime.”

ABERRANT VIOLENCE, AMBIGUOUS VICTIMS

The second scene connected to the crime in “El perdón de una víctima,” relates back to Esther’s madness and her condition immediately after she endures the first act of violence. In this scene, it is the father, and not Gabriel, who appears guilty of the actions committed against his daughter. Because Esther has gone mad, he has restricted her to his property, perhaps to the very woods where the sexual attack occurred, and most certainly to where the second act of aggression will take place, when her attacker will confront “his victim.” Her father is not present for either the first or second violent acts, but he does recognize that Esther has “died a mortal death.” And he expresses his remorse through his own tears and “misty eyes” (Zegers 2002, 34).

It is well known that Mistral’s father left the family when she was three years old. According to Gazarian-Gautier, Mistral’s father was a writer and poet but never could commit to his own family (1992, 4). He lived a life distant from his wife and daughter and had little communication with Mistral even when she became well known. In a letter to her close friend Eduardo Barrios, Mistral declares contempt for her father, especially for having left her to her own defenses. Mistral does not easily forgive him for exposing her to men’s improper behavior:

Hasta ese punto pude llevar la amargura de la vida en mis condiciones. Por eso no puedo perdonar a mi padre todavía. Su falta de ayuda material a la casa la he olvidado; este desamparo espiritual, inmenso este ir sola entre las jentes hostiles i [sic] perversas; diez cosas como la que le he contado que yo culpo solo a esta falta de apoyo moral de un hombre, no la perdonaré nunca. (Mistral 1992a, 69)

In “El perdón de una víctima,” Mistral allows little room for doubt as to what crime is committed. However, she decidedly leaves the status of the victim open to question, since we do not know whether it is Gabriel or the sorrowful father who is at fault. As the story progresses, we find that Esther transfers her “victimhood” onto her aggressor. Her extreme passivity, her silence, and her madness make her incomprehensible, almost monstrous in her lack of definition. It is he who becomes hysterical, vocal, and passionate. She seems to feel no need to speak, since he says it for her, in a role reversal. As Mistral rewrites the rape script, she purposely confuses the agency of both characters. If in the first encounter Gabriel rapes Esther, in the second reenactment Esther and her environment (the trees) are allowed to avenge the initial transgression. As a

result, he now feels her pain. The title hints at this confusion. In the “*El perdón de una víctima*,” the indefinite article *a* replaces the definite article *the*. As the narrative develops, we find both characters are “victims” caught in a no-win situation.

The aggressor’s victimhood is further underscored when he declares that he needs the impossible. He wants her to give him an absolution for his “transgression” [delito] to be able to die in peace, but also, and more importantly, because he does not want to be recognized any longer as a criminal: “Oh! Si supieras, Esther, el peso de mi delito, si comprendieras las horas de remordimiento, si leyeras en mi alma los rayos negros con que llevo escrito en ella tu nombre puro! . . . fui criminal, perdóname o lo ruego” (Zegers 2002, 35).

The aggressor must ask for forgiveness, as if to erase the horrible act, yet the narrator plays a double trick on him. The narrator divulges his name, which is Gabriel, a name given to the archangel of strength and courage, but also of mercy, traits that this Gabriel starkly lacks. Secondly, Gabriel dies before his name can actually be cleared. It remains unresolved whether the victim is Esther in the beginning or the now named Gabriel in the end. Without the full act of forgiveness, the young man becomes a *persona non grata* who is powerless to clear his name, and more importantly, to restore his honor and masculinity. Although Esther readily offers her forgiveness: “Sí . . . murmuró ella dulcemente, tú eres Gabriel y te perdono, que el cielo te perdone también!” (Zegers 2002, 35), she does not give her full absolution. She waits for him to speak, perhaps knowing that these would be his last words. It is only when he cannot respond that she changes the script and renames him, not son of God but “son of crime” and condemns him to live the life he denied her: “Te perdono pobre hijo del crimen, vete, y vive con la vida que me arrebataste” (Zegers 2002, 35). The heavens hear her and do not forgive the horror of the crime. In the end, Gabriel’s efforts are in vain. He becomes not a dead “man” but becomes a “corpse”: “pero horror! Ya era cadáver!” (Zegers 2002, 35)

Mistral’s first attempts with the genre of the short story provoke a series of moral and legal renderings. The broken correspondence between nature and the beauty of the girl at the beginning of the tale leads into an unprecedented violence against her aggressor in the end. Both protagonists are caught in a purgatorial limbo. The case cannot easily close. Esther is unable to escape from her own madness and remains bound to her own aggressor Gabriel. He has not been forgiven and is not given a dignified death. The story, which perhaps should have left us with a hint of redemption or optimism, robs us of the pleasure of the victory of good over evil, beauty over ugliness. More importantly, Mistral’s first story does not take the crime of rape lightheartedly. Both victims, as well as the readers, are left with no choice but to endure the serious side of the rape at the heart of the tale.

READING VIOLENCE INTO MISTRAL'S OTHER WORK

An explanation of the contradictions in Mistral's work could reside in her past as a survivor of sexual violence. As Kendall Johnson has expressed, children and adolescents who have undergone violence or abuse react in ways that are "varied, complex, profound" (1989, 49). Often situations which retain some similarities to the event can bring back the trauma (1989, 41, 49). In Mistral's early letters, her memories of "brutalities" keep inserting themselves as she describes her feelings towards men to whom she is close, such as Manuel Magallanes Moure.²³ As editor of a volume of Mistral's love poems, Sergio Fernández Larrain carefully underlines several excerpts to prove that these "brutalities," metaphors for sexual assault, lead Mistral to have torrid love affairs. He makes us believe in the violence to blur Mistral's sexuality.²⁴ Her "love" for Magallanes Moure can only be masking her desperate and passionate desire. But rather than leave rape as ground in the figure of passionate love, we should reverse the order; by hiding the violence, Mistral diverts our attention from her fear of her own (hetero)sexuality. Mistral dislocates her desire precisely in her repulsion towards heterosexual relationships. She recognizes her retroactive behavior and praises Magallanes Moure for his attempt to help her with her difficulties. As a result, she describes her feelings for him in a sadomasochistic play of contradictions—on the one hand, she agrees to Magallanes's advances, on the other, she cruelly spurns him—particularly when she discusses parts of her past and her inability to perform:

Este no es amor sano, Manuel, es ya cosa de desequilibrio, de vértigo. ¡Y en mi cara beatífica, y en mi serenidad de abadesa! ¡Qué decires de amor los tuyos! Tienen que dejar así, agotada, agonizante. Tu dulzura es temible: dobla arrolla, torna el alma como un harapo flácido y hace de ella lo que la fuerza, la voluntad de dominar, no conseguirán. Manuel, ¡qué tirano tan dulce eres tú! ¡cómo te pertenezco de toda pertenencia, cómo me dominas de toda dominación! ¿Qué más quieres que te dé, Manuel, qué más? ¿Quieres que llegue a estado más lamentable aún que el que te he pintado por la incertidumbre de lo que pasaba

23. Manuel Magallanes Moure (1878–1924) was a Chilean writer, playwright, and painter who formed part of the literary circle, Grupo de los diez. He was also married when he began corresponding with Mistral. Their correspondence appears to have lasted until Mistral left for Mexico in 1922.

24. Darcie Doll casts doubt as to Larrain's commentary in these letters. She demonstrates how Larrain codifies Mistral along normative rules for women at that time. He attempts to prove Mistral's moral conduct in matters of heterosexual love. For Larrain, Mistral had many amorous relationships with men and her correspondence with them only solidifies her proper conduct as a woman, "[él trata de] mostrar la 'verdadera' mujer tras las cartas" (Salome et al. 2004, 188). To explain Mistral's aberrant behavior and violent "love" of men in her letters, Larrain constantly reinforces references to the sexual attack.

en tu predio de alma? *Verdad es, Manuel, que tengo de la unión física de los seres imágenes brutales en la mente que me la hacen aborrecible.*

Cuando hablemos tú justificarás esto que tú llamarás una aberración mía. Pero te creo capaz de borrar me del espíritu este concepto brutal, porque tú tienes, Manuel, un poder maravilloso para exaltar la belleza allí donde es pobre, y crearla donde no existe. A través de tu habla apasionada y magnífica, todas las zonas del amor me parecen fragrantas e iluminadas. *Tu esfuerzo es capaz, creo, de matarme las imágenes innobles que me hacen el amor sensual cosa canalla y salvaje.* (Larraín 1978, 144; emphasis in original)

Mistral's letter traps any traces of a normative sexual self within the confines of violence. She willingly relinquishes control to Magallanes Moure to the point that she believes that he can "wipe" or "erase" the images of her past. But this rewriting actually emphasizes her disgust at all things sexual. She keeps defining sex as "brutal" and "savage," as if she were describing "sensual love" as denigrating. Even if she hopes for her Magallanes Moure to "murder" those thoughts, the horror does not leave her.

Mistral's early letters disclose a double side to her character. On the one hand, she speaks of her honesty, whether it is about her own physical and emotional desire, but on the other, she subverts her own arguments. She makes her own logic more complex, more contradictory, particularly when she discusses her past and her body image or feelings. Raquel Olea emphasizes that Mistral stands out of place as a "dislocated subject" when she writes about herself. Her subjectivity relies upon a push-pull of constant ambivalence (Olea 1990, 8). In a later letter, Mistral undergoes a complete about-face. She writes as if the past no longer exists, as if her relationships no longer matter. In response to a question from Magallanes Moure as to how she is, she replies: "Me pregunta por mi vida. En dos palabras cabe mi estado actual: no sufro" (Larraín 1978, 152). Suffering has been transformed into a cold rationalism. All of her demons and monsters appear to be cured through precisely the same images that haunt her. Her "poison" now becomes her "remedy":

Así era: he pensado, he tenido un momento de lógica fría y me he curado de muchos dolores que eran sencillamente una necedad mantenida con pretexto de hermosa. Me han curado con la maldad, definitivamente . . . Siento en mí un alma nueva. Como la naturaleza es sabia de un modo inconcebible, me dio el veneno de la verdad y me dio el remedio en formas sutiles. Veo con una claridad brutal a los seres, y no los odio; se me han hecho transparentes los procesos de ciertas deslealtades, el manantial de ciertas cosas monstruosas, que yo llamé antes así, y que son naturales y simples. (Larraín 1978, 152, 153)

Her understanding of her past, as this letter and other stories show, relies on a play of juxtapositions: "rationalism-wickedness;" "poison-remedy;" "clarity-brutality;" "monstrous-natural and simple things." Her language performs this play of opposites and transforms even the slightest notions of expectations at the turn of the line, verse, and sentence.

Much of her poetry resembles her short stories where pleasure exists along with torture and pain.²⁵ Women again suffer for men's violence. For poems that repeat women's affliction, it is remarkable that so little has been written on the subject. As Horan remarks on the gender differences in *Desolación*: "The fear of male violence has been strangely overlooked by critics who would rather codify the desire, in these poems, as desire for a male lover and/or child, rather than as a desire for refuge within a community of women" (1989, 451). The poem, "El encuentro" works rhythmically as the tears of the protagonist-female-poet seems to hide behind the supposedly carefree attitude of the male character. As the first poem in the collection "Dolor" in *Desolación*, it displays uncanny parallels to Mistral's first short story, "El perdón de una víctima." There is a meeting in nature between a man and woman. An encounter occurs, and the female character suffers:

Le he encontrado en el sendero.
No turbó su ensueño el agua
ni se abrieron más las rosas.
Abrió el asombro mi alma.
¡Y una pobre mujer tiene
su cara llena de lágrimas!

Llevaba un canto ligero
en la boca descuidada
y al mirarme se le ha vuelto
grave el canto que entonaba.
Miré la senda, la hallé
extraña y como soñada.
¡Y en el alba de diamante
tuve mi cara con lágrimas!

Siguió su marcha cantando
y se llevó mis miradas . . . [sic]
Detrás de él no fueron más
azules y altas las salvias.

¡No importa! Quedó en el aire
estremecida mi alma.
¡Y aunque ninguno me ha herido
tengo la cara con lágrimas!

Esta noche no ha velado
como yo junto a la lámpara;
como él ignora, no punza
su pecho de nardo mi ansia;
pero tal vez por su sueño

25. Her lyrics have been compared to Santa Teresa's, where paradoxes play against themselves to ultimately deny the reality of the self, and subjectivity leaves the reader in a constant play of ambivalence.

pase un olor de retamas,
¡porque una pobre mujer
tiene su cara con lágrimas!

Iba sola y no temía;
con hambre y sed no lloraba;
desde que lo vi cruzar,
mi Dios me vistió de llagas,
mi madre en su lecho reza
por mí su oración confiada.
¡Pero yo tal vez por siempre
tendré mi cara con lágrimas! (Mistral 1922, 58)

To understand the double reading of this poem, one must work from ground to figure, where the tears of the poet stand out against the apparent lighthearted temperament of the man she encounters. The question that must be asked throughout the poem leads us back to her pain: why does she have her face covered in tears? For those readers who place his innocence above her grief, the scenic poem suggests that she suffers because her love is unrequited. However, if we begin with the final verses of each stanza, with the repeated chorus endings as the most important parts of the poem, we see that she has suffered not because of rejection, but because he has taken something—a look, a word, an image—away from her.

The poem pivots between the ignorance of the man walking and the knowledge of the poet standing still—all clouded in a secret that we cannot decipher—and we are left to pick up the pieces. We can assume that this is a love poem (if he is truly innocent) or a poem about unmentionable violence (if her pain is to be believed). Mistral purposely leaves the poem open to a double reading, but adds confusion by casting doubt on the female-poet's interpretation of the past events. Can she truly know what happened? Clues to the poem hinge upon the last stanza where the mother prays and also hides her daughter's secret, "mi madre en su lecho reza / por mí su oración confiada," along with tending to her physical wounds, and previous verses where the daughter denies the "miradas" the man has stolen from her. She cries: "¡No importa!" as if nothing has happened. However, her actions prove otherwise. She appears to mourn her own death by not sleeping, and her pain is such that she wishes to transfer her own suffering onto her aggressor. Mistral's use of "punza," "nardo," "olor de retamas," all suggest a tortuous agony that she would like him to feel, but he is oblivious to the grief caused: "él ignora."²⁶ As Grínor Rojo remarks, transference of anger to inflict

26. In a letter written in response to criticism received by Fedor Ganz, Mistral uses "retama" as a very vile and bitter plant. Mistral often uses herbs, plants, and trees in her poetry as metaphors for pain: "Pero ¡ay!, amigo mío, para llevar en sí esta poesía ha recibido usted tales filos de hacha, ha mascado unas retamas de tal amargura, fue mordido

pain on men repeats itself in the constant usage of certain words in Mistral's poetry (Rojo 1997a, 75).²⁷

The object taken is not clearly known, except in the first edition of *Desolación*: Mistral underlines "y se llevó mis miradas." Sight or the ability to distinguish ground from figure seems important to Mistral's poetry and short stories. In "El perdón de una víctima," she emphasizes Esther's madness through her inability to see. In this poem, the poet has lost her ground and she cannot interpret or even define the object that the man has taken from her. We know that it is something serious. When he crosses her in the pathway and sees her, he becomes somber: "y al mirarme se le ha vuelto/grave el canto que entonaba" (Mistral 1922, 58). Then, her world collapses into a dreamlike quality to then skip to the sharp and cutting edge of the sunrise onto her lachrymose face. The mystery of the event/object keeps the poem in suspense and strange, unreal. These are the very qualities that may define love, but here, they are easily transferable to something more sacred if violated—her soul. At the beginning of the poem, a woman is surprised by the encounter: "abrió el asombro mi alma," and in the middle of the poem, her soul is trembling, not with love, but with fear:²⁸ "quedó en el aire/estremecida mi alma" (Mistral 1922, 59). By the end of the poem, the poet tells us that she will suffer, and if it is her soul that has been taken, she leaves us with no redemption or way out.

This reading may act as a rhetorical gesture, which Gabriela develops to cope with the "brutalities" of male-female relationships, a defensive strategy begun in her short stories and later elaborated in her poetry. She has a tendency to keep the reader guessing at the theme, especially in the context of gender relations, with often contradictory and complex word choice. One reading may possibly be evoked through the ultimate negation of the female self (or soul), a nihilistic imbalance which erases her own sexual difference.

BLINDNESS AND DEATH

In the last story, "El rival," the narrative becomes a pivoting dialectic between Death and the protagonist. Incapable of seeing his fatal actions

de tantas víboras en la ruta, que a pesar de la virtud de resistencia que ha ganado, yo no deseo la experiencia de usted para ninguno de los que quiero: es un pago de cainita, un pago de séptimo infierno" (Mistral 1999, 195).

27. Rojo remarks, "En el mensaje que ese discurso alternativo nos comunica por última vez aislense los verbos castradores de Gabriela, entre los que se incluyen 'rebanar,' 'cercenar,' 'desgajar,' 'descuajar,' 'tajear,' 'mondar,' 'socarrar,' 'devanar,' 'vaciar,' 'consumir,' 'hendir,' 'tronchar,' 'arrancar,' y que no son más que algunos dentro de una cadena más larga y no sólo en *Desolación*, donde se amontonan con casi maniática insistencia (Rojó 1997a, 75).

28. One can interpret the trembling (tiemblar) to explain her fear in: "estremecerse de horror" o "de miedo."

against women, the protagonist loses the discursive battle and points the finger at Death. For him, women's suffering does not exist until Death appears. She is the unreal "monstrous creature" who eventually changes his gaze to let him see his violent actions towards women, which makes him not only lose his reasoning, but more importantly, his masculine authority as well.

Unlike the five consecutive short stories "El perdón de una víctima," "La muerte del poeta," "Las lágrimas de la huérfana," "Espejo roto," and "Amor imposible," which were published in 1904–1905, this last story was published much later, in 1911, and ends Mistral's writing of the genre of the short story. "El rival" is also a much more complex tale than the previous five. It draws upon other narrative elements such as those employed in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Mistral's first story, "El perdón de una víctima" to frame the violence inflicted on the female victims. In "El rival," Mistral's protagonist acts in many ways as Roderick Usher does with his sister Madeline—he drives the woman he loves to death, except it is not just one woman or a "sister look-alike," but three women of the same semblance. In this story as in "El perdón de una víctima," Mistral names the protagonist Gabriel, and like the previous Gabriel, he inflicts harm on women. But this last Gabriel appears to stalk and unconsciously kill the same woman repeatedly. Mistral may have wanted those who read the story to catch the repetitions, that this man's mishaps, while appearing innocent, do not exonerate him from his actions. He must pay the price for his culpability.

The narrator reveals a man split between his outer cursed world, one in which bad luck seems to haunt him, and his inner world driven by a mad desire to pursue the same woman. His only recourse is to invent his "rival" as Death personified. This woman, untouchable and uncontrollable, becomes the cause of his actions. Outside of logical circumstances, she competes against his criminal urges to subjugate women. All of the women who die under his hand are unable to step outside of the patriarchal limitations of Gabriel's control. Their inferior position as women who cannot think or survive on their own only makes Gabriel more powerful, that is until he meets his monstrous adversary.

"El rival" begins with a group of men who meet to tell romantic tales of their immanent rivals. The "enigmatic" Gabriel, a "lover of horror stories," as well as an admirer of Poe and Baudelaire, surpasses the whole group by declaring that his rival is "invisible." His friends can combat their opponents with "swords and guns." In contrast, his enemy is not easily defeated physically with a "pull on the arm or a stomp of a foot." As Gabriel later reveals, his rival is "Death" personified, a far cry from the flesh and blood adversaries of his male companions (Zegers 2002, 166).

From the beginning, Gabriel exonerates himself from bearing any responsibility for the deaths of these women. His bad luck has more to do

with unreal circumstances and events beyond his control. The first of these mishaps occurs early in his childhood. Gabriel's closest playmate is a girl, supposedly given to him by his father "to initiate [him] in the ways of beauty" (Zegers 2002, 167). He learns to respond to the girl's appearance, which surpasses the beauty of the natural world. Not even "roses, clouds, or the orange trees in bloom" can compare to her unearthly appearance (Zegers 2002, 167). Strangely though, her features do not conform to the beauty of a healthy woman, but to that of a sickly woman on the brink of death. As if he were loving Poe's Madeline, this girl is so pale that "su carne tenía transparencia y delicadeza de cristal" (Zegers 2002, 167). This man resists those qualities that usually typify a woman full of vigor and life such as color and spirit and instead desires a woman as sallow and lifeless in beauty as she is ideal in her passivity: "I do not love that expression of life which is passionate and zealous" (Zegers 2002, 167). Her inactive and limp body attracts him, and he confesses that he is powerless over her, that nature had already condemned her to die. Gabriel is quick to wash his hands of loving these ghostly women and more importantly of causing their deaths. When tragedy strikes, he easily finds fault with their weak genetic disposition.²⁹

His girl companion is the first to die by his own hand, but he fails to recognize it. On a riding excursion near the river, he changes course and places her in danger. Instead of helping her, however, his first reaction is to bring himself to safety. When he finds her, it is too late. She is too physically weak to withstand the currents. Even the shallow streams prove too much for her frailty. The strong Gabriel leads the weak girl to death.

The story does not end there. In fact, the twists in this story leave the reader (and the male audience) in a constant state of suspense. Almost as if this incident did not happen, the story begins again. No longer a child, but now a young man finishing his studies, Gabriel moves to the capital and believes himself to be happy. He finds friends, a job, and more importantly, he keeps his past behind him.

This second Gabriel now has a friend, not a father, who introduces another female friend into his life. His friend Roberto Levy presents his sister Lidia to Gabriel. She contains all of the qualities which Gabriel

29. Genetics plays an important role in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." The narrator suggests that the ruin of the house is also connected to the incestuous relationship of the Usher family: "I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people . . . (Poe 2002, 1)."

seeks: "Veintidós años, cuerpo esbeltísimo, rostro aristocrático, enfermiza. ¡Tenía también la palidez que yo adoro!" (Zegers 2002, 168). Curiously, these are the same inherent qualities that describe Gabriel. Similar to Poe's narrator, his friend notices the likeness and becomes disturbed by the fact that they "look like brother and sister." He fears that there is something "wicked" in his disposition and attempts to dissuade the "deadly" Gabriel from the brotherly attraction. Using eugenics as an argument, Roberto persuades Gabriel that he needs "better blood" to strengthen both his health and wealth:

He de aconsejarte, aunque no sea oportuno tal vez el consejo. Cuando tú te cases (si lo llegas a hacer, aun cuando fuera mejor no lo pensarás nunca) hazlo con una mujer de más edad que tú, sana de cuerpo y de espíritu, una de esas mujeres fuertes. Ella te apoyará a ti, no tú a ella. Porque ¿sabes? Yo veo en ti los gérmenes de un mal terrible que viene. Eres sensible como una mujer la que más, tienes exquisiteces más fatales de sentimiento. Por eso te he apartado de ciertas lecturas y ciertos amigos, y hasta de aquellas mujeres en las cuales un cultivo intelectual exagerado ha hecho pobres degenerados. Tú necesitas el contacto perenne de una vida lozana y vigorosa que te comunique su savia proficua y te inocule energías. (Zegers 2002, 168)

Roberto prescribes the antidote to Gabriel's sickness. He must not seek women who mirror his poor condition; rather he should pursue a woman to take control of his life. Gabriel needs someone to support, transform, and ultimately "cure" him of his weak tendencies and implied wickedness. His sickly semblance needs an "injection" of energy to prevent him from becoming trapped in the same degenerate cycle.

Unfortunately, Gabriel ignores his friend's advice and takes action to murder Lidia. He leaves the city, believing that distance and letter writing will secure their relationship. Yet this departure does not prompt a passionate correspondence with his lover but a spiteful response from Roberto. Gabriel receives a letter from his friend that discloses the death of his sister. The departure had proved too much of a strain for her. Roberto curses Gabriel as a warning against pursuing any future romantic relationships: "Amigo, no ames más" (Zegers 2002, 168).

After the second death, Gabriel should have learned the lesson of his fatal actions. Gabriel, however, does not mourn the death of the two women. Rather, he laments the passing away of *his* happiness, which leaves him melancholy and desolate: "Me vi maldito, me sentí fatal a los seres que me querían. Y la lloré largamente, desoladamente" (Zegers 2002, 168). In a third attempt to leave his past behind, Gabriel leaves his career in the city to finally settle in a small village along the Italian Tyrrhenian Sea. But this time, things are different with Gabriel. He accepts his wicked fate, and he plans his third crime in a "dirty pension" near the seaside. Since he no longer can turn away from the double misfortune of his past, he knows that the next woman he meets will be his

"victim" ("Cual yo lo hacía," [Zegers 2002 169]), and that he will be her aggressor.

His third lover fits the physical description of the previous women, "Era como las otras de rostro triste, evocador de etapas dolorosas, y de cuerpo débil. Por eso me atrajo" (Zegers 2002, 169). Nevertheless, unlike the other women, this woman's honor is questioned: "¿Era pura? ¿Llevaba en sí recuerdos humillantes, infamias acaso, toda una vida de vicio tal vez? Yo no sé por qué me fue indiferente esta vez como nunca el honor de la mujer amada" (Zegers 2002, 169). Gabriel begins to justify his actions through her impurity. He transfers his wicked desires onto her, so much so that he notices their resemblance when they walk along the beach "hand in hand, like brother and sister" (Zegers 2002, 169).

Gabriel's blindness to his actions is such that he falsely claims to lose his "ego." By feigning admiration, he enforces his power and rules of love. This time he does not make her change routes or wait for him while he is away. Instead, he makes her endure "exercise" as a demonstration of love: "El ejercicio físico a que la obligaba era enorme. Por mí hacía locuras. Las caminatas por la arena húmeda con los pies descalzos, solían prolongarse hasta tarde" (Zegers 2002, 169). In a familiar pattern, his actions—the supposed remedy of exercise—eventually lead her to die.

But if the prescription of exercise was to add to the romance, the doctor who nurses the woman quickly puts an end to it. He notices that Gabriel's deadly actions have led her to expose her feet and weaken her lungs. Like Roberto, the doctor catches Gabriel's ruse and points his finger at her mad murderer: "Pero qué hace usted amigo? ¿Es que se ha trastornado? . . . En vano, mi amigo, se muere; es por hacerla vivir que la ha matado!" (Zegers 2002, 170). Gabriel then remembers his friend's curse of "never loving again." As Roberto confirms, there is something wicked about him.

THE CRIMINAL OR THE SUCCUBUS

From the last scene of the story, Mistral lets the readers (and male audience) choose whether Gabriel is either an unfortunate recipient of Death's bad luck and circumstance or a "victim" of his own actions as a three-time killer. There are now two sides to the story: Gabriel as victim-ground or murderer-figure. He argues that Death is his rival, and she has taken his lovers away. Alternatively, there is little reason to believe him if, as Roberto and the Doctor claim, he is wicked and mad.

As tradition dictates, a wake is given to the recently deceased. Gabriel volunteers with two companions. At first, we think it is because he watches over her out of duty, but then we learn in horror, that it is to violate her. When his companions leave the room, he disrobes her

to “see her better.” It is not her body he observes, but the gifts that he bestowed upon her, a medallion with his picture on it and a promise ring.

He becomes so transfixed by these gifts on the parts of her body, that his gaze appears to be a necrophiliac desire, a longing for the neck and the other for her hand. In turn, these emotions trigger visions of shadowy forms along the wall, which Gabriel claims are the shadows outlined by Death’s form of a lean woman. She, not he, turns to the corpse and robs him of his precious objects. In a flash, the medallion has been aggressively pulled off of the woman’s neck and the ring taken from her hand. The strength of these actions is such that the dead woman’s torso “still retained the marks of the violence” (Zegers 2002, 171). After this brute force, the protagonist conveniently loses consciousness and blames Death for the actions. However, his friends tell a different story. They are not quite sure how to interpret his “exaggerated state” [veían mi estado de excitación] and think it odd [les extrañó] that the ring and the medallion are missing. They have no choice but to conclude that it was he who violated her body (Zegers 2002, 170).

Mistral leaves the reader to put the pieces together as Gabriel does with his male audience. Once he realizes the seriousness of his crime, Death becomes his “invisible rival” to rob him of any form of love. The violent theft of the two objects that defined his love for this dead woman makes him believe that Death is a jealous woman or a succubus. Death personified refuses to allow Gabriel’s lover to be adorned, just as she does not allow Gabriel to be loved.

A different reading occurs when we reach the end of the tale, when the protagonist appears more dead than alive, more mad than sane: “Al terminar, su rostro estaba desfigurado; sus grandes ojos abiertos miraban hacia la gran parte oscura de la sala, como si ella se poblase de visiones” (Zegers 2002, 170).

He searches the wall for those very visions that stole his lover, to prove that Death’s shadows exist, but it is in vain. The desperate man and his audience interpret his actions as “criminal” (Zegers 2002, 170). Gabriel acts as if he were Robert Usher in the final moments of the story, where shadows and madness frame him for Madeline’s death:

His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. (Poe 2002, 6)

Likewise in “El rival,” Mistral makes specific references to “El perdón de una víctima.” In the first story, the protagonist Gabriel dies unpardoned for the crime committed against his victim. In “El rival,” the protagonist lives to face his actions. If the first Gabriel accepted his

actions, but wanted forgiveness, the last Gabriel cannot ask for an absolution if he refuses to accept responsibility for the deaths and violation of these women. The second and more complete Gabriel must endure the curse of having to repeat the burden of his crime and to bear the pain of his guilt. Mistral's rapist in the first tale now has no choice but to endure the consequences of the acts of violence committed against women.

With this last tale written in 1911, Mistral ends her interest in the genre of the short story. In its place, she writes prose poems, and short essays on politics, history, literature, and descriptive prose pieces. In these two short stories, "El perdón de una víctima," and "El rival," Mistral demonstrates a narrative cycle that inverts masculine and feminine agencies. From a woman who is victimized, to a man who becomes his own victim, and likewise from a rapist who dies from his actions, to a violator who must live with them forever, Mistral challenges the use of violence in male-female relationships.

In her short stories as in many of her poems, Mistral allows for a second reading to occur where women escape from the clutches of men by turning into something beyond logical understanding. To become dispossessed of the male order, they turn into strange and elusive beings who become mad, dead, jealous, or unrighteously cruel. Mistral's short stories display an awareness of cultural and legal practices that demonstrate how the "real" world cannot do justice to women. With the fictionalized transformation of their gendered and traditional roles, women challenge the system that forcibly degrades them. The process by which Mistral undoes familiar strategies of language to open the discourse on violence to highlight women's difference, makes these stories at once provocative and also strangely out of place within early-twentieth-century Latin American literature. In the end, protagonist and writer—Gabriel and Gabriela—both seem to suffer for the violence inflicted on them by their real or imaginary rivals.

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