

## Feminist Politics of Location:

### Staging Sexuality and Violence in the Drama of Griselda Gambaro

#### POLITIQUE FÉMINISTE DE L'EMPLACEMENT:

#### LA MISE EN SCÈNE DE LA SEXUALITÉ ET DE LA VIOLENCE DANS LE DRAME DE GRISELDA GAMBARO

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**Abstract:** The literary reputation of Griselda Gambaro and her masterpieces *The Walls*, *Information for Foreigners*, and *Antigona Furiosa* remain an interest in studies of modern Latin American drama. The playwright and her dramas still draw scholars' attention as they deal with political issues and disputes derived from modern Argentinean history during the military coups and the period of the Dirty War (1976-83), and the consequences—whether social, psychological, representational, and/or ethical-- that were caused by these clashes. Indeed, not only is Gambaro privileged in dramatizing subjects like violence and sexuality that capture her spectators' interests, but she is also distinguished in the way she utilizes staging in effectively dramatizing these topics. This paper aims at exploring Gambaro's techniques of staging violence and sexuality in the aforementioned plays, in the light of the feminist politics of location. In particular, the examination targets Gambaro's recruitment of a signifying code of space, along with notions of absence and presence, altogether comprising a feminist issue of location and power, as argued by major feminist critics such as Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

**Keywords:** Griselda Gambaro; Latin American Drama; Feminism; Theater; Violence.

**Résumé:** La réputation littéraire de Griselda Gambaro et ses chefs-d'œuvre *Les Murs*, *Information pour les étrangers*, et *Antigona Furiosa* restent un intérêt pour les études de théâtre moderne d'Amérique latine. Le dramaturge et ses drames attirent encore l'attention des chercheurs car ils traitent des questions politiques et des conflits issus de l'histoire argentine moderne au cours des coups d'État militaires et de la période de

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la Guerre Sale (1976-83), et les conséquences, qu'elles soit sociales, psychologiques, figuratives, et / ou éthiques - ont été causées par ces affrontements. En effet, non seulement Gambaro a privilégié dans la dramatisation des sujets comme la violence et la sexualité qui captent les intérêts de ses spectateurs, mais elle se distingue aussi dans la façon dont elle utilise la mise en scène efficace de dramatiser ces sujets. Le présent document vise à explorer les techniques de mise en scène de la violence et la sexualité de Gambaro dans les pièces mentionnées ci-dessus, à la lumière de la politique féministe de l'emplacement. En particulier, l'étude se concentre sur l'utilisation d'un code symbolique de l'espace chez Gambaro, avec les notions d'absence et de présence, tout en comportant une question féministe de l'emplacement et de la puissance, comme l'a soutenue par les principaux critiques féministes, comme Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Gilbert Sandra et Gubar Susan.

**Mots-clés:** Griselda Gambaro; drame d'amérique latine; féminisme; théâtre; violence

The literary reputation of Griselda Gambaro and her masterpieces *The Walls*, *Information for Foreigners*, and *Antígona Furiosa* remain an interest in studies of modern Latin American drama.<sup>3</sup> The playwright and her dramas still draw scholars' attention as they deal with political issues and disputes derived from modern Argentinean history during the military coups and the period of the Dirty War (1976-83), and the consequences—whether social, psychological, representational, and/or ethical-- that were caused by these clashes. Indeed, not only is Gambaro privileged in dramatizing subjects like violence and sexuality that capture her spectators' interests, but she is also distinguished in the way she utilizes staging in effectively dramatizing these topics. This study aims at exploring Gambaro's techniques of staging violence and sexuality in the aforementioned plays, in the light of the feminist politics of location. In particular, the following analysis will examine Gambaro's utilization of the 'room' and other related special codes, along with notions of silence and absence, in the light of feminist issues of location and power.

To start with, feminist politics of location need be outlined. In a major essay on the politics of location, Adrienne Rich, a poet and a major feminist critic, has asserted that the core of women's problems is "[T]he arrogance of believing ourselves at the center" (Rich 1984, 223). As such, Rich reflects a deconstructive strain; 'belief' and 'center' are essential domains in deconstruction, pertaining to the authority of the mind and validity of 'truth', the so-called logocentrism. And since this statement represents a woman's recognition of logocentrism, implying a proposed change, it hints at a deconstructive feminist evaluation of space and location.<sup>4</sup> Rich's politics of location target a patriarchal culture that generously assigns spacious fields for men and suppresses and marginalizes the space for women and their creativity. A better understanding of location, Rich might be suggesting, helps women achieve a major position in literary and critical discourse: to attack the arrogance of the male who

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<sup>3</sup> This paper adopts the modern perception of "America" within the framework of hemispheric studies, a concept that transcends the geographical and cultural borders of the USA to include also the cultural production in regional countries, a matter that belongs to the field of transnational studies, particularly that Gambaro's plays consist of theatrical elements that make them open to interpretations transcending the historical or political borders. As Diana Taylor has shown, performance functions as a mediator of communication across borders, articulating a cultural connection (Taylor 2002, 3).

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of the issue of space and location in feminist literary theory, see Al-Joulani 2007. For a conclusive discussion of the deconstructive notion in feminist literary theory, see Al-Joulani 2006. Al-Joulani disputes the generally celebrated dictum that the deconstructive essence of feminist criticism is evidence of its genuine indebtedness to deconstruction. Rather, Al-Joulani argues, the deconstructive nature of feminist criticism is pre-Derridean and, like deconstruction, is rooted in earlier traditions that performed the radical reassessment of Western thought and philosophy. Thus, Al-Joulani concludes by defining a distinctive feminist deconstruction, called 'gynocriticism', to distinguish a positive, affirmative, (re-)constructive, and reformist feminist criticism from a negative, invalidating, non-affirmative, and detonating deconstruction.

colonizes that center, or, indeed, women's need to dominate (be) the literary/critical center rather than arrogantly believing that they do.

Reading Adrienne Rich's poem "Frame", Harriet Davidson presents the essence of feminist criticism and writing as that of questioning location and position(ality). Rich provides Davidson with examples of the female's need for defining her space and time with which to associate the self, an act she considers a feminist tendency towards self-assertion. In this regard, Davidson adopts Derrida's concept of 'spacing' and argues that "[L]ocation entails being some place, not only at the locus of different discourses, but spatially and temporally there" (Davidson and Broner 255). To the contrary, what one finds in feminist theory-- and in Rich's "Frame" -- is the female's need for destroying masculine fences that keep her in a male-made *frame*, a deconstructive attitude that aims at freeing the subject from a temporally determined space and, hence, meaning. This initial deconstruction of space and time is essential for overcoming established patriarchal hierarchical locations of women before achieving self-assertion in a genuinely reconstructed gyno-space. For example, Rich's vision of her space in "Frame" implies negative location: "I say I am there"; she refuses to be *here*. She realizes that the condition for her self-assertion is that of challenging the position and location masculine culture assigned for her. In this case she might be recalling Virginia Woolf's assertion that "as a woman I have no country" (in Rich 1986, 210). Rejecting masculine negative placing of herself has been the essence of the feminist's re-assessment of her location in culture, literature, and literary theory, a prerequisite for re-situating, re-locating, and re-positioning herself in these domains.

In fact this has been a major preoccupation for feminist critics since Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The word 'room' in the title is overloaded with sense, suggesting a place, a space, a location, and a position. It is not a *house* but a private domain in or a *center* of a house; self-protected and contained, secure, and dependent --though imprisoning, secluded, and isolated. In fact, the poetics of such idea of space and location inspired many discussions by later feminists, including Rich. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have addressed the matter so tactfully in *The Madwoman in the Attic* and *No Man's Land*, both titles of which emphasize notions of space and location. The ultimate realization of such approach has come in Elaine Showalter's development of Woolf's interest in a tradition of woman authors -- in connection with notions of space and location --, by recognizing the need for a female critic and a feminist literary theory with its own established tools. Showalter revolts against "a long apprenticeship to the male theoretician," arguing that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Showalter 1986, 130). In other words, theory represents privileged space and location. Showalter's perception of masculine theory in the poetic space of a house recalls Woolf's 'room', seen earlier as the center of the female's needed house or the domain with which to replace the male-center.

In "Women's Time, Women's Space: Writing the History of Feminist Criticism," Showalter attempts to release the female from the constraints of masculine critical space and create a new feminine 'gynospace' with an independent female-center. She wittily unites the ideas of time and space, as in the title of her essay, emphasizing that women's time comes once they have their own space, otherwise they will continue to live in man's space and time, since (whose) time is determined by (whose) space (Showalter 1987, in Benstock 36-7). In *A Literature of Their Own*, a title which echoes Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Showalter traces the development of a tradition of women's fiction from the early nineteenth century to the 1960s and highlights a rich pattern of distinctive female experience in female writers "who were the links in the chain that bound one generation to the next... the continuities in women's writing," through their consciousness of their own distinctive craft of fiction (Showalter 1977, 7). It is this literary world of their own that these and many other feminist critics have attempted and encouraged female authors to establish. Gambaro's drama seems to share in this effort, as the following discussion endeavors to show.

The theatrical space on which violence is acted out in Gambaro's plays echoes the reality of violence that occurred in Argentina during the Dirty War. Giving the performance of violence a realistic spatial reference, Gambaro emphasizes the sensible occurrence of violence in real life during that period. Gambaro uses the theatrical space as a nonverbal element in *The Walls* to reflect the sufferings of Argentines during the Dirty War and to underline that such violence had actually occurred. The first element of cognition encountered in *The Walls* is space. That space is a room or a cell in a house turned

into a prison, or it might be a prison cell camouflaged as a room in a house where a young man has been recently arrested by fault. The theatrical props, the room, and the visual objects inside it, speak out much of the torture and violence imposed upon the Argentineans during the period of the military coups. The theatrically semiotic “Heavy curtains” hiding “what seems to be a window” (15) signifies isolation and the veiling of freedom. Space turns out to be a localization of a feeling, tormenting imprisonment encoded in the place which grows to be an emblem or an invocation of the actual violence to occur, and hence the place becomes a nodal point of reference to violence in the minds of the recipients.<sup>5</sup> That is, such a spatial coding of violence assumes an effective element in the audience’s cognition of the dramatic situation. As such, this is an artistic staging of violence with which our playwright successfully initiates her play. Sherman Stange has commented on the localization of violence, arguing that “To situate violence is to give it a site, a place, or location. It is to locate or place phenomena in terms of their relationships to their surroundings, and in terms of their constituent relationships within themselves, e.g. as the parts of violence to the whole of violence, say, or as an exploration of the modes and themes of violence within the intuited essence of violence” (209). Hence, the space with which the play’s signifying process begins is an essential aspect in the creation of an atmosphere that carries the essence of the message to be delivered, a furnishing of the observer’s mind with an evocative surrounding. Gambaro’s initial space provides such an evocative, perhaps even provocative location.<sup>6</sup>

What strikes in the spatial structure of *The Walls* is that the walls of the room start shaking and moving in on the Young Man until they fall on him (61). Such a dynamic space is made to actively share in creating live situation; it assumes the role of a participant rather than a static and paralyzed decor. As such, Space becomes semiotically functional. In this scene, Gambaro’s localization of torture to occur in a private family domain is emblematic of the domestic sphere transgressed against the people in Argentina by the oppressive agents of the military coups. The visual movement of the walls as they fall on the Young Man reflects on the restrictive policies of the torturer. It might also suggest the danger of individual intellectual endeavors, the walls representing the barriers or limits to which the Argentinean individual’s mind can extend its mental exercise.

It is to be noted that the central character in the play is not a woman and this should not compromise the feminist concerns of Gambaro’s spatial preoccupation. Although a male occupies a position of centrality here, he is nonetheless feminized, a matter that might be clarified by examining Gambaro’s staging of sexual violence. In fact, anti-woman sexual violence is a major preoccupation in Gambaro’s plays, an issue that is staged with care, but with a great attention to location and position, and with feminist concerns. The staging of this type of violence takes various forms, such as the use of, in addition to spacing, such codes as silence, absence, and presence-absence. As for the absence code, it reflects a policy of exclusion. Women are absent in *The Walls* which hence becomes an exclusively male-centered world, one dominated by the “stifling patriarchal powers” that led to the painful maelstrom of violence and torture between “the agents of patriarchy” (Foster 2002, 16). Absented, women are indirectly silenced. Anthony Kubiak, in his analysis of the function of silence in plays acted out on stage, reveals that: “This rhetorical silence-what comes to be called in the postmodern period ‘theoretical terrorism’ – is represented in the theater by the relation between those figures who function as an absence, as an empty screen for the phobic projections of terrorists, and the terrorist who carry out the bloody deeds” (12). Far from theoretical, in Gambaro’s *The Walls* women’s absence and silence codify the real oppression of male-dominated space. This is perhaps the result of masculine oppression which inevitably leads to the dismantling of the masculine house, as feminist critics desired and anticipated.

Nonetheless, women are negatively present, a nonappearance existence felt by the highlighted oppressor’s resort to masculine physical strength and by the rape of men who are hence feminized as the stereotypically frightened and penetrated female. In *The Walls*, the Young Man is such a feminized figure,

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<sup>5</sup> Quotations from Gambaro’s plays are from Feitlowitz’s translations of all works under discussion.

<sup>6</sup> Sandra Messinger Cypress’s exploration of the use of imagery in Gambaro’s plays overlooks the notion of the poetics and politics of feminist space (1975; 1976). Likewise, David William Foster’s examination of the dramatic techniques of Gambaro, once again fails to notice the issue of feminist politics of location (1979). Within the same context, Tamara Holzappel takes the distinction of Gambaro’s dramatic techniques to be an influence of the Theatre of the Absurd.

silenced, frightened by the strength of masculine abductors, and supposedly raped. Accused of being a “villain” he helplessly tries to defend himself but the Functionary silences him verbally (24). Stage directions are emphatic on this power of discourse, whereby the Functionary is “furious” when speaking, whereas the Young Man replies “timidly” (45). Along with the kinesthetic signs of this verbal violence and dominance, the oppressors intimidate the Young man employing physical violence manifested by masculine bodily strength and mounting to sexual violation. Having been intimidated, the Young Man yields to the sexual desire of his jailors, which is never shown on stage but only implied (60).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, Gambaro carefully recruits a discourse capable of evoking visual essences of what is *narrated*, when not acted, in the spectator’s mind. This is evident in the spectacle of the Young Man’s arrest. The terrifying Usher asks the Young Man: “Why would they make you? In any case, it’s not so clear. Did they chain you? Did they drag you by the hair?” (17). Such a discourse is overloaded with sense. Finding it unclear, Usher asks for a language that visualizes (perhaps ekphrastically) what the Young Man told him. The actions disclosed in “chained” and “drag you by the hair” belong to such a required discourse. As such, the relationship between image and word is performative; that is, alternative for performance. In addition, evocative discourse helps the playwright imply or hint at what is *improper* to be performed, as in the case of grotesque sexual action; consider the following case:

Young Man: I . . . I can’t open! The door is locked!

Voice of the Usher (impatient): Come on! You are gone too far! Who gave you so much confidence boy? Not me. Don’t answer! You’ll pay for this! Open up !...

(Again we hear the Usher’s voice, now, gentle and persuasive.) Are you there, Young Man?

Young Man: (voice thin, exhausted) Yes.

Voice of the Usher: (gentle, persuasive) Open up, we’ll talk. I already told you I adore the country, the glorious smell of the country when it rains. (31)

The sexual undertones of this dialogue are not to be overlooked. Along with the sexually penetrative implications of raping the Young Man, there is an implicit suggestion of the seductive nature of the oppressor’s discourse uttered with varied tones, hiding imminent danger and violation behind the seemingly passionate “gentle and persuasive” tone. These implications are further strengthened by the Voice of the Usher’s seemingly nationalistic discourse, whereby another fertility act is brought in the drama of language; rain and cultivation, suggesting such a rite and brought along with the oppressor’s national claims – claims that are definitely refutable—, reflect on the larger issue of the rape of a country/nation, the lay of the land. While women are absent in such a discourse, they are negatively present, at the least, by binary opposition and through stereotypical sexual violation.

A significant constituent in Gambaro’s situating space is the “large painting” (15) which suggests the confinement of art and beauty in the Argentineans’ life, whereby the widespread violence and fear turned their houses into concentration camps. The play further stresses on this notion of the constraints on art. The Young Man is abducted because it is thought that he may be a character in a novel. The Functionary investigates the Young Man: “I could see you all eaten up with worry. What is your name? Ruperto de Hentzau or Hentcau ? You must know the story; there’s a villain in a novel who’s named Ruperto de Hentzau, Better that you are not he” (24). This pertains to Gambaro’s indication at the power of art (literature) in generating social awareness and transformation which threaten the existence of oppressing regimes. Nonetheless, women are present in a further negative manner, the presence-absence code. While Gambaro keeps women away from such a corrupt masculine regime, she brings women within

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<sup>7</sup>. In fact, this implication has been underlined by David Foster who finds Gambaro’s artistic interpretation mirror the historical reality of how the apparatus of torture in Argentina, beginning in the 1930, involves the genital mutilation (usually via the picana, the electric probe) and the rape (via the penis of the torturers, the picana, or other devices) of both men and women, who are equally abused (2002, 17). In this regard, Gambaro’s play and her drama in general fit in the tradition of contemporary Latin American Drama in which Severiono Albuquerque underlines a heavy recourse to techniques, imagery, modes of language, and styles that are “abusive” and “violative” to reflect the modes of torture the military oppressors used against the powerless Argentinean victims during the Dirty War in a manner capable of making the spectator witness or at least imagine the reality of what happened (85).

symbolic inanimate feminine objects such as “the doll” (46). The ‘doll’ represents the terrible status of women under that oppressive patriarchal regime. Like the ‘doll’, women are muted, dumped, and menaced by damage. The Functionary wonders why the Young Man does not damage the doll: “You haven’t smashed the doll so as to assure that there will be beauty in the world, order” (46). Further, Gambaro associates the meaning of the ‘doll’ with art and the position of women writers, especially the anti-regime writers whose works become fossilized and forbidden in Argentina in the Dirty War period (46). In fact, the ‘doll’ is a recurrent motif in Gambaro’s drama. In scene six of *Information for Foreigners*, the spectator’s attention is attracted to a heartbroken mother made up like a doll and carrying a baby in an image of a doll (85), perhaps suggesting how the oppressors think of the people (women and children) as toys to be played with in their game of torture which victimizes even babies. Such a woman (and a child/infant) is as helpless as the doll.

In *Information for Foreigners* Gambaro moves to what Selena Burns calls “an experimental play structure” (40). Without a clear plot or unity of action, the play comprises a complexity of fragmented scenes representing experiments, children games, torture, abductions, and violations of human rights. These scenes lack unity except that they, as Burns reckons, “expose the theatrical nature of these techniques used by those in power to control, persuade and silence” (40). Within this context, Myriam Yvonne Jehenson asserts the relation between art and politics, finding parallels between the dramatic techniques in Gambaro’s *Information for Foreigners* and the mechanisms of Argentina’s repressive regime in the 1970’s.<sup>8</sup> Gambaro’s dramatization of space as a nonverbal medium of representing violence and sexuality is clear in *Information for Foreigners*. In the stage directions, Gambaro hopes that a house with stairways and various rooms could be available (69) for staging twenty spectacles of victimization and different forms of violence. Gambaro’s note, here, indicates how important theatrical space is for serving the performance of the play. The space in this play is structured to keep the audience watching the scenes of torture trapped in the feelings of “confinement of space” (Postma 35). The ideal space recruited in this play is a large house where groups of audience are led by guards to different passages in many rooms where they watch spectacles of victimization and cruelty.

Part of Gambaro’s effort to evoke a sense of incarceration in space, as Rosalea Postma notes, is to break up the large space into smaller rooms with narrow corridors leading to each diminutive room. Postma states that: the already narrow hallways are further restricted by the clutter of lockers of various sizes, each with a louvered door ... At times the guide starts to enter a room, only to find the door locked. As in a maze, when one path is blocked, another avenue must be found. (Postma 37) These narrow corridors, one may suggest, can be seen as the limiting visual fields within which the spectator’s mind is to function and his/her cognition be confined, lead, or directed. Nonetheless, by doing so, Gambaro also breaks the conventional barriers between theater and audience, whereby the spectators are brought to immediately take part in the dramatization process. That is, being overtaken by this initiating space, they become participants in the theatrical activity, a participation activated by a leading dynamic space. The spectators become actively involved in the production and find themselves in a terrifying labyrinth as they are taken to the center of the events of torture and victimization, directed, fully controlled, and sometimes rudely treated by state officials (actors disguised as spectators).

The Guide speaks to a group of audience about one of the actors disguised as spectator: “The son of a bitch. If he was part of the audience, why did he make like an actor? Vanity, vanity will be the end of us all!” (111). Once again, the Guide’s words bring spectator and actor together (‘all of us’) in the drama of violence, as Gambaro attempts to ensure a more active involvement of her audience in the issues of her plays, perhaps hoping for a reaction. The effect of movement and participation through this experimental play would leave the audience trapped in a mixture of feelings. They would be left frightened, tense, nervous, and perceptive of what is happening in their country, and guilty of their passivity toward those people who are daily abducted, tortured, and murdered by state men. As such, the audience is made to live the experience or to re-experience that which the play dramatizes. This reliving of the dramatized phenomenon materializes with the aid of the carefully set initial space, the localization process Gambaro

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<sup>8</sup>. Besides, Sharon Magnarelli underlines a similar attitude, the use of theatrical elements to allegorize Argentina’s military regime, in Gambaro’s *El despojamiento [Strip]* (Magnarelli).

employs to lead her audience skillfully into the domains of her violent world. Diana Taylor addresses Gambaro's end of the play, saying:

Her main response in plays like *Information* is to focus not only on the acts of violence themselves but also on the spectators watching them, on the act of watching... the emphasis on our actions and reactions places us in the position of 'seen object' normally reserved for the actors. This reversal implicates us in the action and calls attention to our role in violence. (1992, 170)

However, Gambaro's choice of the house as a theatrical space is intended to show, as Taylor suggests, that junta's violence and tyranny have eliminated and undermined the boundaries between the private and the public. Junta's system of horror has abolished the existence of any safe place. As Taylor puts it, "scenes of political violence are not limited to prisons and torture chambers but are played out on public streets, in private houses, on human bodies" (Taylor 1997, 127). As such, Gambaro's experimentation with various theatrical modes, in *Information for Foreigners*, adopts, represents, and reflects on the variety of cruelty techniques Argentines arrested by Videla military junta in 1976 were exposed to.<sup>9</sup>

The politics of location are constantly played with in Gambaro's drama. Once again, the room arrests our attention in the ninth scene of *Information for Foreigners* which is initiated by a room lit with rosy light in which two adults are shown disguised as children, with exaggerated makeup (92). The spatial and the visual aspects of this scene are highly symbolic. The romantic undertones of "rosy" along with the adult male inhabitants are perhaps emblematic of wishful thinking, a repressed desire for romance. Nonetheless, the room and the color are feminine and feminist but with eminent threats of a disguised masculine oppression. The adult males' disguise as children yearning for innocence perhaps suggests that the feminine and feminist provide the reasonable, or even imaginary, shelter under the oppression of the state tyrannical system.

Absenting women is at the heart of the Gambaro's theatrical recruitment of newspaper items reporting kidnapping and disappearances. In scene fourteen, for example, the Guide reads a newspaper account of a kidnapping of two couples in July 1971. Ironically, the report underlines the woman's loss of her shoes while trying to escape (112). And the loss of shoes is ironically associated with the loss of shoes in Cinderella's romance (114-115). While the fate of Cinderella is everlasting happiness and romance, the fate of the Argentinean woman is nothing but tragic. Gambaro satirizes the banishment of women to the world of the unknown, or the world of despair. Such disappeared women are denied location and within these suggestive reports they are on the same level as that of the kidnapped. Gambaro's drama brings them back and offers them a place. Gambaro adopts such a kidnapped and disappeared female who, in her drama, claims back her sphere with determination. But her sphere remains far from romantic.

Likewise, the theatrical space in *Antigona Furiosa* calls our attention to the terrifying tactics of terror and torture practiced by the male oppressors. In the middle of the stage, "a pyramidal cage" (135) is placed, and Antigona is hanged from one of its bars. Outside the cage, several café tables are set up, and then two men move in the space outside the cage. The spectator sees a scenic space which may imply an anti-woman masculine domain and dominion. The reference that "Antigona never exited her cage" (135) underscores the physical, psychological, and spiritual confining or annihilating masculine domination of women. But as the play opens, Antigona "removes the rope from her neck" (137) and starts her defiance against the male's authority, the military and the masculine, whereby the spectators are made to recognize Gambaro's use of theatrical space to highlight the female's resistance to the masculine, military oppressors in an attempt to regain her place and establish her identity. Once again, Gambaro's initial staging of space is a violence code, a localization of the play's major preoccupation: masculine violence and oppression. It is in this space that the staged violence to appear in the play is rooted and planted to grow in due course. This early encounter with violence coded in the initiating space prepares the spectator's mind for further violence.

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<sup>9</sup>. For more on this notion in Argentinean (and Spanish) Drama, see Ann Witte's examination of the way in which playwrights can provide an oppositional stand to oppressive political leaders.

Preoccupation with a woman's space and location is part and parcel of Gambaro's retelling of Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone* in *Antigona Furiosa*, a play in which the disappeared and tortured occupy a position of theatrical and thematic centrality.<sup>10</sup> Gambaro fits Sophocles's tragedy while dramatizing the attempts of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to recover the corpses of their disappeared children. Gambaro's embodiment of the torture, torment, and suffering inflicted on the disappeared and their families is situated around the regained body of the dead female Antigona which, right from the very beginning of the play, is brought on stage to never leave it. Such is a regained feminine presence, though with a dead body. Nonetheless, women are also presented as the main grievers, yearning to know the fate of their children and have them peacefully buried, allegorizing "the thousands of bodies that have not yet been accounted for, recovered, or buried" (Wannamaker 77; see also Taylor 1997, 140). Antigona laments her fate saying "Let the laws, these vile laws! drag me to a cave that will be my tomb. No one will hear my weeping; no one will be aware of my suffering. They will live in the light as though nothing were happening ..." (152). Becky Boling assumes that the cave is a signal to the mass graves, or the unmarked tombs of the disappeared who were executed by the forces of the military coups (15). But it is quite interesting that Antigona asks for a grave of her own, a wished-for location or space. The feminist concern is also evident in Gambaro's reference to Shakespeare's Ophelia (in *Hamlet*), with a direct quotation (137). Antigona and the mothers of the missing identify with Ophelia's suffering of patriarchal oppression which draws her to madness (Wannamaker 82).

One may here draw back on Antigona's aforementioned desire to have a tomb of her own which possibly alludes to the women entombed in masculine literature or driven to madness and suicidal impulses, issues of paramount feminist concern. Woolf, in her essay on Shakespeare's Sister, in *A Room of One's Own*, has imagined the existence of a sixteenth-century high-caliber female dramatist named Judith Shakespeare, arguing that Judith would not be equally appreciated as the male Shakespeare because of the dominant sexist criticism of the time, whereby "any woman born with a great gift in sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage... half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (50-51). Ellen Moers has shown that women's literature incorporates such repressed unconscious features which came up in their writing to reveal their notion of their own gender identity as oppressed intellectuals (66). Gilbert and Gubar have developed Moer's point by further revealing how women's literary representations of themselves and their fellow women appear through techniques of evasion, concealment, madness, enclosure, and disease (1979, 77-78).

One may here underline the claustrophobic space of the room that Gambaro's plays emphatically employ. It is to be noted that a room may signify a limited, controlled space which is, nonetheless, confining, restrictive, and imprisoning. It may reflect Gambaro's technique of limiting the spectator's cognition to her main goal: the experience of violence. However, the notion of a room in Gambaro's drama may carry allusions to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and to the aforementioned feminist politics of location. Gambaro's concerns about women are brought forward, as in *The Walls, Information for Foreigners*, and *Antigona Furiosa*, and mounting to her portrayal of sexual violence in *Strip*, within the initiating space of a waiting room.<sup>11</sup> The enclosed space to which Gambaro makes recourse in her

<sup>10</sup>. In *Antigone* the events revolve around the conflict between the oppressor, Creon, and the oppressed, Antigone, regarding the burial of her brother Polynices, who was killed in a fight with the eldest brother Eteocles (Boling 11).

<sup>11</sup>. *Strip*'s initiating space is a waiting room in which there are a few props. Gambaro's minimal reference to the physical set directs the spectators' attention to the female figure with a visual image highly underscored in the play's directions. The woman's wearing of expensive looking clothes and earrings (96) and her exaggerated make up (98) reflect on her helpless attempt to gain confidence by elegant dressing, an effort that fails before the Young Man's authoritative gaze and aggressive actions, though on his first and second entrance he completely ignores her presence. Thus, the presence-absence and the silence codes highly operate, though in a contrasted manner. The woman is the only character speaking on stage; she seems to be the dominant figure. But the male's ignorance of her presence and speech renders her absent and silenced. In addition, the Young Man takes full control and assumes an absolute authority over the woman, whose entire speech and actions are mere reactions to his aggressive gestures. As he takes her shoes, she offers to "bring them to you" (99) and when he stares and points at her skirt she "take[s] off the skirt and hands it to him" (102). The stage directions state that "She takes off her shoe, slowly rolls down her stockings. And then... then..." (103). She behaves as a prostitute before the man who beats her: "I remember that



drama mostly centers around a female, or a feminized male, along with symbolic art objects, such as the 'large painting' or the 'doll', uniting hence the artistic and the feminist.

In conclusion, Gambaro stands unique among the Argentinean playwrights in dramatizing the issues of violence and sexuality. Undoubtedly, she has effectively participated in making the theater articulate the torture, torment, oppression, and victimization the Argentineans had experienced during the Dirty War. Her style of dramatizing these phenomena is remarkably distinguished by using encoded types of language, silence, presence, and absence, altogether functioning within a distinctive feminist notion of signifying space and location. This is an artistry that is skillfully appropriated by Gambaro's dramatic approach, in which the spectators occupy a special interactive stand. Their interactive role, however, is compelled by the dramatist's spatial artistry, and hence a woman (the dramatist) has created a space of her own leadership and centrality.

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time, when Joey had beat me up so bad I couldn't get out of bed, the neighbors calls the police. . ." (101). Despite the female's attempt to gain financial, and consequently social, independence, she nonetheless still functions within the restrictive notion of the female as an object of male sexual desire, a stance that may explain why the female is extremely obsessed with youthful beauty.

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