

(De)Humanizing Humor:  
The Anthill of Life and Politics in the Theatre of Sabina  
Berman

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Against [the old machista habits] I would suggest the following campaign: not to attack customs with the fiery sword of indignation nor with the painful exhibition of tears, but by denouncing their ridiculous, obsolete, tasteless, and imbecile aspects. I guarantee you that we have an inexhaustible source of laughter. And we need to laugh because laughter is the most immediate form of liberation from that which oppresses us, of distancing us from that which imprisons us!

--Rosario Castellanos, "La participación de la mujer mexicana en la educación formal"<sup>1</sup>

...Under the tyrannies of Hitler in Germany and of Stalin in the Soviet Union, humour was driven underground. Dictators fear laughter more than bombs.

--"Humour." *Encyclopædia Britannica*

In his 2002 book titled *On Humour*, Simon Critchley places at the beginning of each chapter drawings by the seventeenth-century French artist and theorist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) that overtly underscore the animalistic traits that are present in human beings,

and conversely, what seems human in animals.<sup>2</sup> By drawing the animals with their traditional characteristics, and human beings with faces that closely derive from the animal features, Le Brun forces the observer to ponder the consequences of possible metamorphosis of any animal to a human being. For example, in one of these puzzling and hilarious drawings, Le Brun presents three images of an eagle's head, followed by three heads of men who closely resemble the eagles. Cleverly, Le Brun is underscoring the frequently unnoticed physical similarities between the features of an animal as it is transformed into a man with an aquiline or pointed nose, a very attentive and penetrating gaze, a frowning forehead, an elongated mouth, and a thick neck, among other similar characteristics. What also surfaces in a parodic way through these drawings is that there is actually not a huge abyss between the physical characteristics of animals and those of humans, and that perhaps there is just as fine a line between their intellectual capacities: between the rational and the instinctual, the historical and the non-historical, the verbal and the nonverbal, the capacity to remember and the capacity to recognize.

The abundance of jokes and hilarious images regarding the resemblance between dogs and their owners suggest that we humans enjoy sharing our lives with beings that remind us of ourselves, with those created in our own (mirror) image.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, it is Critchley's belief that one of the things that make us laugh "is the reduction of the human to the animal and the elevation of the animal to the human" (29). Beyond the comical exchange of identities between humans and animals, Critchley reminds us that humor is human, and humor's capacity to explore what it means to be human can be achieved by ironically placing ourselves on the frontier that separates humanity from animality (29). From this perspective, the category of the human is defined in the light of the connections and misidentifications with animality (29). Critchley's statement that humor "is a universal human activity that invites us to become philosophical spectators upon our lives" (18) underscores the ability of humans to distance themselves from their humanness, and examine critically the boundaries that divide them from animals.<sup>4</sup>

More than a century before Critchley, Henri Bergson, the French philosopher and author of *Laughter: An Essay on the Mean-*

*ing of the Comic*, declared: “The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human... You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression” (9). Significantly, the cover photo of Jacqueline Bixler’s edited book *Sediciosas seducciones: Sexo, poder y palabras en el teatro de Sabina Berman* (2004), parodies this critical distance when we see the Mexican playwright sitting next to her cat and mimicking its posture.

This essay will center precisely on humor in Sabina Berman’s plays as part of a tug of war between familiarity and defamiliarization, and the incongruities that are revealed in the process. As Victor Erlich explains, defamiliarization—that is, placing a known object (or individual) in a new place, and under a new light—allows new meanings to emerge and requires a new understanding of what used to be a familiar object, concept, or person (176-77). To some extent, defamiliarization through humor can be linked to the way in which Dianna Niebylski, in *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women’s Fiction*, reflects on the act of shifting our initial expectations, which she considers one of the most distinguishing features of humor: “Shifting expectations requires shifting one’s presumed center, and moving one’s center forces one to reexamine one’s epistemological and cultural assumptions” (12).

I will argue throughout this essay that while Berman’s plays find their strength and delight in their liminal identities—that is, in their historical, artistic, sexual, political ambiguities—what actually endows them with the power of humor is their capacity to present with depth, wit, and from a new ironic and sometimes grotesque angle, what everyone has already seen, or should have already seen about their past and present surroundings. Not surprisingly, the spectator of Berman’s plays frequently encounters well-known historical characters such as Cortés, the Carbajal family, Molière, Racine, Freud, Villa, and Trotsky, who in turn introduce in a new and iconoclastic light well-known and debated topics such as the Conquest, the Spanish Inquisition, the history of theatre, psychoanalysis, the Mexican and Russian revolutions, machismo, feminism, and neo-liberalism. In one of Berman’s plays, *La grieta* ‘The Crack’ (1991), almost everyone sees the crack on the ceiling but no one does any-

thing about it until the roof collapses.<sup>5</sup> This is a humorous example of Berman's capacity to ridicule bureaucracy and the establishment throughout her theatre, questioning in a caustic way people's conformity and passivity. As Stuart Day proposes, it also exemplifies her willingness to parody neoliberal ideology (89-90), and to critically examine the discourse of theatre.<sup>6</sup> In many of her plays, Berman detours from the familiar—for example, a couple drinking tea in the morning and reading the paper in the first segment of *El suplicio del placer* 'The Agony of Ecstasy' (1978), titled "El bigote"—to arrive at less recognizable and more ironic realities and identities—*El* is an effeminate man, and *Ella* is an a masculine woman who sometimes wears a moustache (403).<sup>7</sup>

In Berman's humorously ironic plays such as the already mentioned *El suplicio del placer* and *La grieta*, and others such as *Aguila o sol* 'Head or Tails' (1984), *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* 'Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman' (1993), *Krisis* (1996), and *Molière* (1999), the audience is frequently confronted with social and political absurdities of the past and present.<sup>8</sup> Most of these plays also underscore the iconoclastic fusion and confusion of historical times and characters, portraying an array of ridiculous voices that constantly clash, and revealing persistent cracks which are never fixed until it is too late. The apparently well-known object, topic, or individual that now occupies a new place and is under new scrutiny not only allows Berman to poke fun at what is "official" and "sacred," but actually opens up a serious discussion about fundamental sociopolitical and artistic issues that have frequently polarized Mexican society. In the case of *El suplicio del placer*, for example, sexual identity and power move from the amorous and sublime to the pathetic and tragic, and vice-versa. In *Aguila o sol* the tragic history of the Conquest alternates with its grotesque and almost comic angles, and in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* Berman parodies the postmodern, neoliberal, and pseudofeminist discourses while the play questions the existence of ghosts, such as Villa, who continue to haunt both historiography and popular beliefs.<sup>9</sup> In the 1996 play *Krisis*, Berman portrays the political scandals and corruption of the Carlos Salinas de Gortari government (1988-1994). Jacqueline Bixler points out in her analysis that the structure of the play "follows the postmodernist esthetics characterized by the broad use of

parody and ambiguity” (“*Krisis* (sic) de Sabina Berman” 123). In a masterful way, Berman explores in *Molière* the nature of theatre as well as her own complex language of communication, while the humor of Molière’s own plays permeates notions of life and politics.<sup>10</sup>

It is within this context of looking at the familiar with a critically ironic eye that Sabina Berman takes recourse to animalistic images as a strategy to question human realities. In *La grieta* the primarily male characters, who work in a public office in Mexico City and who occupy various hierarchical positions, guide a male and female couple that has arrived to sign documents regarding the new jobs they have been offered by the *Licenciado F* (Attorney F). In the midst of an absurd bureaucratic process, the three employees cease their work and begin to exercise in front of a TV with the image of sexy red Lips giving them instructions. One of the Lip’s instructions is that they take a position called “La venganza del perro” ‘The Dog’s Revenge’ where the employees stand on four legs, bark like dogs, and raise their legs as in a position to pee. Obedience is at stake here, and Berman takes this problematic concept to its extremes by requiring the prospective employees to shower, sleep, and eat in an office whose roof is about to collapse.

More significantly, and as part of the playful relationship between the human nature of humor and its dehumanizing angle, Berman compares the individual and collective behaviors and social and political structures of people to those of the ants. The concept of human life as an anthill is definitively not new, nor does an anthill evoke pleasant images, particularly if we have had the humiliating experience of stepping on one. Nonetheless, Berman has, at least twice, made use in her work of this entomological image in order to emphasize the position of the writer inside and outside his/her environment. The first example comes from Berman’s 1999 play *Molière*, where the spectator is confronted with two canonical and opposite theatrical figures of seventeenth-century France, Molière and Jean Racine, who represent the historical antagonism between comedy and tragedy. For Berman, comedy and tragedy are more than two different genres; they are two attitudes towards the world, two different ways of feeling, seeing, and thinking (“Prefacio” 9-10). These opposing attitudes underscore the role that art plays in society and in the political and personal spheres, and conversely, the role played

by the social, the political, and the personal in artistic creation.<sup>11</sup>

In this dramatic piece we see the comedy writer Molière walking in a garden with his contemporary Racine, the writer of tragedies, who is commenting sardonically on the privileged position that the French humorist occupies in King Louis XIV's court. The righteous Racine even compares his "friend" Molière to a king who observes the expanse of his kingdom from high above. But, as expected, Molière responds to Racine's accusations with wit and irony. As he looks toward the ground and spots a group of *Formicas exsectoides*—that is, ants—Molière speaks not of his kingly privileged position in the court, but instead compares himself to an insect—the queen in the world of ants—that ultimately lives inside the ant-hill, sharing her space and life with all sorts of creatures, some quite despicable: "Vive tres metros al fondo, al centro de su ciudad subterránea, rodeada de las hormigas ociosas, los parásitos de lujo los llama el botánico Plinio: es decir la aristocracia." 'She lives three meters deep, at the center of her subterranean city surrounded by lazy ants, by what the botanist Pliny called luxurious parasites: that is, by the aristocracy' (II: 56). Molière does not miss an opportunity to simultaneously provoke laughter and sharply criticize his society by comparing the social, structural, and political characteristics of human beings to those of animals. As Arthur Koestler states, "irony is the satirist's most effective weapon; it pretends to adopt the opponent's ways of reasoning in order to expose their implicit absurdity or viciousness" ("Humour").

Therefore, in contrast to the grotesque image of the opportunistic French seventeenth-century upper class proposed by Racine, Molière perceives himself as a working ant that carries, like every good committed worker (writer) in the anthill, his daily sheet of writing paper in hand (II: 56). He then proceeds to underscore his dual identity as someone capable of living inside the anthill, while at the same time observing it critically from the outside. From Molière's point of view, the artist can never be removed from his world, cannot be isolated from his environment, but nevertheless has to be capable of detaching himself from it as a means to represent that world through his art.

In her 2004 essay "Ser y no ser es la respuesta" 'To Be and Not to Be Is the Answer' the Mexican playwright again returns to the im-

age of the anthill as she meditates on Hamlet's philosophical question, "To be or not to be?":

Para mí la respuesta a la pregunta de Hamlet ha sido siempre:

Ser y no ser. Al mismo tiempo.  
 Estar en el tiempo y estar fuera.  
 Estar en el hormiguero de la vida conviviendo con otros.  
 Y estar observando el hormiguero desde afuera.

For me the answer to Hamlet's quandary has always been:

To be and not to be. At the same time.  
 To be within time and to be outside it.  
 To be in the anthill of life coexisting with others.  
 And to observe the anthill from the outside. (34)

Berman's emphasis on the concepts of inside and outside, being and not being, on duality, contradictions, and on the coexistence of multiple times, spaces, and identities stresses the philosophical, political, and aesthetic dimensions of her art in general, and of her humor in particular. Berman's breadth of angles and her capacity to play with the incongruous and the oxymoronic sheds light on the role played by humor in a world where the central issue is not the polarization or indecisiveness of "to be or not to be," but the ironic answer that one is and isn't at the same time. Not surprisingly, Critchley reminds us that the definition of humor provided by the *Dictionnaire de l'Academie Francaise* (1935), stresses the duality of this term: "A form of irony, at once pleasant and serious, sentimental and satirical" (C72). Or as Critchley himself states: "Humor is often dark, but always lucid." (102)<sup>12</sup>

This spherical and also contradictory notion of the self, of art, and of reality in which everything is at stake, and where the categorical and the authoritative are constantly being dismantled, is portrayed by Berman in a wonderful anecdote about her 1994 play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*. This play, centered on a sexually and socially liberal relationship between Gina, an entrepreneur (*maquiladora* owner) who debates between her independence and her desire for a stable relationship, and Adrián, a morally and in-

tellectually clumsy historian who is writing a book about Pancho Villa and the Mexican Revolution, has frequently been interpreted from a feminist perspective, and the male characters—Villa, among others—have been seen as mostly caricatures. After listening to an analysis of this play in an academic conference, Sabina asked the critic if he had smoked hashish before writing his essay, since she could not see any relation between her play and the critic's interpretation of it ("Ser y no ser es la respuesta" 36). Nevertheless, after her initial shock, Sabina began to think about this and other possible interpretations of her play. To check if other people had similarly conflictive views of it, she chatted with the police officer in charge of security at the theatre where *Entre Villa* was being staged, who instead of guarding the surroundings, decided to watch every single performance since the opening night (36-37). After their conversation, Berman realized that the police officer had done a male-oriented sexist reading of the play, and to her dismay, she realized that it was also a plausible interpretation. It was evident to Berman that *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* "could be looked at from different positions. And just like reality, the people looking at it would see their own reflection; as if the play were a silver sphere that whoever holds in their hands to observe it is simultaneously outside and inside of it" (37).

In this study, I have chosen to look at the silver sphere from the perspective of ironic humor as a powerful resource used by Sabina Berman to examine the nature of human communication, but above all, to expose the serious and even devastating social and political aspects of her culture and ours: machismo, political corruption, sexual violence, sexism, exploitation, historical manipulation, and hopelessness, among other issues. In this tense environment where humor might not seem appropriate, Berman masterfully uses and critically examines it as a means to understand its serious implications and its comic imperfections, both from the inside and the outside.<sup>13</sup>

Sabina Berman is obviously not alone in this task of using humor in the Mexican theatrical scene as a mechanism to uncover and ridicule the absurdities of Mexico's political and social patterns and history. Berman's incongruous approach to humor can be connected to a previous generation of playwrights such as Jorge Ibargüen-

goitia, Rosario Castellanos, Emilio Carballido, and Hugo Argüelles, who had already played with the fine line between the humorous and the pathetic, between the hilarious and the ironic, between the tragic and the comic, symbolized by the interdependence of the laughing and crying masks. A case in point is Jorge Ibarguengoitia's *El atentado* 'The Assassination' (1964) described by the author himself as a "documentary farce." In this play, the author dramatizes sardonically the story of the murder of the newly elected president of Mexico Ignacio Borges (a parody of Alvaro Obregón) by the religious fanatic Pepe (a parody of José de León Toral). *El atentado* successfully dramatizes a profoundly sober historical act with irreverent irony and humor. During the trial, when the Prosecutor asks a waiter who witnessed Borges' murder what were the last words of the president-elect, the audience is probably expecting some unforgettable statement. In contrast, the waiter quotes Borges verbatim: "Estoy muy lleno. No me traiga cabrito, sino unos frijoles" 'I'm too full. Don't bring me *cabrito*, bring me *frijoles*' (III: 344). No explanation is needed to understand Ibarguengoitia's biting humor in the midst of very serious events in the history of Mexico's Revolution, and how it is connected to Berman's ironic stands in political terms. For his part, Carballido, in *Yo también hablo de la rosa* 'I Too Speak of the Rose' (1965) also unmasks with incredible humor the stupidity and clichés of certain analytical discourses, such as the psychoanalytical, insensitive to issues of poverty and injustice.

But it is crucial to single out the Mexican writer who can truly be considered Berman's artistic and philosophical sister, Rosario Castellanos, who, as stated in the epigraph to this essay, recognizes the power of humor:

Against [the old *machista* habits] I would suggest the following campaign: not to attack customs with the fiery sword of indignation nor with the painful exhibition of tears, but by denouncing their ridiculous, obsolete, tasteless, and imbecile aspects. I guarantee you that we have an inexhaustible source of laughter. And we need to laugh because laughter is the most immediate form of liberation from that which oppresses us, of distancing us from that which imprisons us! ("La participación" 31)

In *El eterno femenino* 'The Eternal Feminine' (1975) an extraordinarily witty play in which mythical and historical characters are equally exalted and mocked: Eve, La Malinche, Sor Juana, La Corregidora, the Empress Carlota, Rosario de la Peña, Adelita. Castellanos uses elements of exaggeration, caricaturization, fragmentation, and parody as a means to examine and denounce the serious problem of women's social and psychological subordination to men throughout Mexican history (Meléndez, *The Politics* 123). Both Castellanos and Berman frequently reject authoritative power by transgressing the limits of their humorous discourses.

It should not surprise how rigorously humor has been studied throughout history. For example, in his "Introduction" to *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, John Morreall describes what he considers the three most prevalent theories of humor throughout history. First, the Superiority Theory, held by Plato and Aristotle and promoted until the eighteenth century, proposes that "laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn" (3). Second, the Relief Theory, linked to nineteenth century figures such as Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud—particularly Freud's book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*—, treats laughter as the venting of excess nervous energy (6). Finally, the third theory is considered by Morreall and other critics as the most popular current philosophical theory of humor: "The Incongruity Theory... found in Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and others since, holds that the formal object of amusement is 'the incongruous.' What amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances" (6).<sup>14</sup> To some extent, this notion of the incongruous as a mechanism of amusement can be linked to the concept of defamiliarization, where a crack '*grieta*' creates a distance between what is typically known and taken for granted, and their new angles and interpretations. For example, the ridiculous conversations between the fictional historian Adrián and the historical subject Villa in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* poke fun at the temporal and spatial incongruities of these two characters, and at the crack between their social, political and literary worlds:

ADRIÁN. No le puedo exigir nada, general. Es una mujer pensante. Se gana sola la vida. ¿Con qué la obligo?

VILLA. ¿Cómo que con qué? (*Se toca entre las ingles...*)  
Con el sentimiento.

.....

Porque compartir la vieja, ni madres. Ni la yegua ni el jusil.

ADRÍAN. Por eso perdió el poder, general, por la terquedad de no saber negociar.

VILLA. Al contrario, amiguito. Con estos perjumados no se negocia, se exige, se dispara [...].

ADRIÁN. I can't demand anything of her, general. She's a thinking woman. She supports herself. What can I pressure her with?

VILLA. What do you mean with what? (*He touches between his legs...*) With feelings.

.....

Because sharing the old woman—no way! Neither the old mare nor the shotgun.

ADRIÁN. That's why you lost power, general. Because you were too stubborn to negotiate.

VILLA. To the contrary, little buddy. You don't negotiate with those perfumed guys—you demand, you shoot at them [...]. (III: 61-62)<sup>15</sup>

The dialogue of a contemporary caricaturesque fictional character with a bellicose historical one is comically incongruous, and underscores the disjunction and absurdity between past and present, real and fictional, inside and outside.

In a parallel manner, *El suplicio del placer* and *Molière* are also two vibrant examples of the complex role played by humor in Berman's theatre, in which the incongruities of ideological stands, historical and social perspectives, and views of art permeate their respective worlds. Just as the title *El suplicio del placer* confronts the audience with the incongruities between pain and pleasure, *Molière's* audience is faced with the polarization between comedy and tragedy.<sup>16</sup>

This is obviously not the place to discuss this array of philosophical and psychological approaches to humor. Suffice it to say that even though this essay considers the Incongruity Theory as one

of the focal points in Berman's theatre, Berman's parody of the three theories in her theatre is no less humorous. For example, it is certainly ironic that Berman centers her 2000 play *Feliz nuevo siglo Doktor Freud* 'Happy New Century, Doktor Freud' on one of the authors who exemplifies Relief theory (Morreall 3). When three "copies" of Sigmund Freud are talking to each other, Freud 3 asks Freud to introduce himself, because he doesn't know who he is. When Freud clarifies to Freud 3 in psychoanalytical terms that when a person encounters a stranger the immediate reaction is to relate that person to important people in his or her past, Freud 3 then points to Freud 2 and tells the audience: "Este es un niño altanero y ladrón, como mi hermano menor" 'This is an arrogant and thieving child like my younger brother', while Freud 2 points to Freud 3 and says: "Este es un sonso presuntuoso como mi abuelo" 'This is a presumptuous fool like my grandpa' (v: 26). Parodying the psychological approach can be interpreted then as a strategy of questioning the act of interpretation itself, which is parallel to what Carballido does in *Yo también hablo de la rosa* when one of the professors psychoanalytically describes the train derailment caused by Polo and Toña.

Ultimately, what is at stake is the means and the context within which Berman chooses to underscore humor through the incongruous, that is, through the dismantling of expectations. Berman's theatre thrives in its capacity to explore prevalent topics such as history, feminism, politics, and violence, but what is significant in many of her plays is that these topics are placed within a humorous context as a strategy to create a clash, to stress what seems dysfunctional, not necessarily to make the comic and the serious happily coexist.

Most frequently, Sabina Berman's theatrical production has been characterized by its historical substrate and its confrontation with power. Her iconoclastic and unsparing approach to history is linked to almost all aspects of Mexico's life: the history of Mexico's colonial past, and its revolutionary present; the history of its political, economic, and social disparities and corruption; of sexuality and gender discrimination; of power struggles; the history of artistic and cultural postmodernity and economic neoliberalism; and the history and role of theatre in the sociopolitical arena. Bixler has stated that during the 1980's alone, Berman produced three plays based on Mexican history: *Rompecabezas* 'Puzzle' (1981) centered on the

murder of Leon Trotsky on Mexican soil, *Herejía* 'Heresy' (1983) focused on the inquisitorial persecution of the Carbajal family in colonial Mexico, and *Aguila o sol*, which dramatized important episodes of the conquest of Tenochtitlán ("The Postmodernization" 45).<sup>17</sup>

During the 1990's Berman again deals in many of her plays with historical and political issues linked both to Mexico's past and present, as is the case of *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*. Bixler also reminds us that: "From *Rompecabezas* to *Krisis* (1996), Berman has done her part in demystifying the power of historical and political discourse [...] by exposing the manipulative, capricious, and often contradictory nature of Mexico's master narratives" ("The Postmodernization" 45). Significantly, Berman's attempt to demystify the power of historical and political discourses is frequently achieved through ironic humor, that is, through the act of confronting the expected with the unexpected, the familiar with the unfamiliar, the transcendental with the apparently frivolous. In a recent article published in the pages of *PMLA* and mainly devoted to Berman's *Muerte súbita* (1988)—a difficult play where sexual and psychological violence are portrayed along with a reflection on the act of artistic creation—Vicky Unruh describes the work as "a tale of destruction and loss that is filled with irony and ribald humor" (137), and suggests that the characters' dialogues and actions shift from the comic to the horrific (143), where, for example, Odiseo "spreads humor as much as fear" (144). Unruh precisely begins her summary of *Muerte súbita* with the following description: "By turns comic and deadly serious and set in the present day of its initial staging in 1998, the play's action encompasses a banal love triangle" (138, my emphasis). The significance of Unruh's comments is that while the audience is confronted with violent actions and with profound cruelty, Berman ironically disrupts this pattern by daring to add moments of obscene and irreverent humor.

Although Mexican history is frequently at the center of Berman's plays, her approach to history is not monolithic, as it crosses geographical frontiers. For example, two of Berman's turn-of-the-century plays (1999 and 2000) continue to deal with historical characters and issues, but they move away from the Mexican historical context. Her play *Molière*, which centers on the history of a playwright and his art, takes us to the seventeenth-century France under

the reign of King Louis XIV, while *Feliz nuevo siglo doktor Freud* places us in Vienna in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But this distancing from the Mexican context is merely apparent, since one can recognize both in *Molière* and in *Feliz nuevo siglo* aspects in which Berman forces the (Mexican) spectators to see themselves reflected in the silver sphere, confronting them with their present time and space. In the case of *Molière*, Berman's interest in the role played by two French dramatists in the political development of their nation sheds light on the role of theatre—including Berman's own works—in the political development of the convulsive contemporary Mexican society (see Meléndez, "(In)Genio y figura" 146). As we shall see, Berman's reflection on the coexistence and antagonism between comedy and tragedy in *Molière* becomes emblematic of her own critical perception of Mexican reality and art through the glass of incongruous forces.

Although not every incongruous experience will trigger laughter (Morreall, "A New Theory of Laughter" 130), nor does humor always have a serious function (Critchely 10-11), we recognize in many of Berman's plays her interest in producing humorous effects by surprising us as we are confronted with the unexpected. Surprisingly, even in Berman's 1992 version of *En el nombre de Dios* 'In the Name of God'—a play in which the spectator follows the vicissitudes of a crypto Jewish family and its horrible trajectory to the stake as victims of the Spanish Inquisition—Berman inserts an irreverent and comic scene that clashes with the seriousness of the matter. Between the two acts of this play the audience is confronted with a Chorus that announces the "Pequeña historia de Jesús Baltazar que se hizo judío por buen comerciar y por judío terminó hecho ceniza" 'The brief story of Jesús Baltazar, who converted to Judaism to make big bucks, and because of that ended up turned into ashes' ("Entreacto" 39). Doña Isabel's intention of converting Jesús to Judaism by exposing him to the Biblical writings is comically juxtaposed to Baltazar's sudden acceptance of Judaism with the sole purpose of receiving financial benefits:

DOÑA ISABEL. [...] Shalom.  
 JESÚS BALTAZAR. Sha ¿qué?  
 DOÑA ISABEL. Shalom.

JESÚS BALTAZAR. Eh... Está bien. [...] *Jesús Baltazar, al público*: A mí, la verdad, me pareció mal aquella charla como cifrada pero me la callé porque, quién sabe por qué, al día siguiente mi sueldo se dobló. *Se abre la ventanita de la hacienda y caen monedas de oro, que Jesús recoge*. Andaba yo a todos sitios con el bendito libro aquel entre cintura y cinturón por no dejarlo bajo el catre a merced de tanto ratero y ratón.

DOÑA ISABEL. [...] Shalom.

JESÚS BALTAZAR. Sha-what?

DOÑA ISABEL. Shalom.

JESÚS BALTAZAR. Um... All right.... *Jesús Baltazar, to the audience*: If truth be told, all that talking in code sounded bad to me, but I kept quiet because the next day, who knows why, my salary was doubled. *The hacienda's small window opens and gold coins fall out, which Jesús picks up*. I was going everywhere with that blessed book tucked up inside my pants so I didn't have to leave it underneath the cot at the mercy of all those thieves and robbers [...]. ("Entreacto" 39)

Similarly, Berman makes use of incongruities in her play *Aguila o sol* when the spectator is confronted with the serious events of the conquest of Tenochtitlán in a carnivalesque environment. For example, this incongruity becomes evident in a comic dialogue between past and present in which the nonsense speeches and actions of Cortés comically coexist with the music of contemporary mariachis. That is, in contrast with the well-known tragic vision of the conquest in which the Spaniards gain control over the Aztec empire in a brutal manner, we discover that the narration of this violent event is in the hands of street comedians surrounded by spectators who applaud and laugh at the story of the outrage, thus giving *Aguila o sol* the atmosphere of a circus show (240-42). Sabina Berman's relentless attack against the conquest is ironically enhanced through humor as the clash between these opposite discourses produces a loud explosion that at times can be heard as laughter and others as agonizing sighs. Ultimately, the coexistence of incongruous el-

ements has the effect of disconcerting the audience in much the same way as a tossed coin that flies through the air about to turn up either heads or tails. Who is going to win or lose? Should the participants laugh or lament? In order to unmask the brutality of the conquest and deconstruct political power through humor, Berman uses a strategy of defamiliarization in which, as Henk Driessen states, “common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, or even shocking, contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions” (227).

The artistic, political and economic repercussions of the antagonism between comedy and tragedy in the four-act play *Molière* reveals that Berman uses humor as a powerful tool to question authoritative power. Berman’s *Molière* begins with a prologue by the French dramatist Jean Racine, who tells the audience that King Louis XIV has commissioned him to write a play honoring the recently deceased comedy writer Jean Baptiste Poquelin, alias Molière. In this prologue Racine explains his view of theatre and exalts the virtues of tragedy in opposition to comedy, emphasizing the importance of bringing to the stage “two forces in irresolvable conflict” (I: 17). The play goes on to portray the artistic and personal conflicts between Molière and Racine, and how their divergent philosophical and aesthetic views come to life on several theatrical spaces within the play. The first of those spaces recreates Racine’s historical present after the death of Molière; in the second, Racine retrospectively dramatizes his debates with Molière; in the third, Molière stages his famous comedies, which frequently coincide with events in his personal life; and the fourth and last is the theatrical space of Berman’s own play. This fusion and confusion of spaces and times creates a fast-paced and humorous interplay in which, for example, the tense conversation between the unfaithful Armande and her husband Molière suddenly becomes the rehearsal of Molière’s comedy titled *The Imaginary Cuckold* (1660). Not surprisingly, the stage setting that represents the living room of the house of the cuckold and his wife happens to be identical to that of Molière and Armande’s house (II: 82).<sup>18</sup>

Even when Molière accepts that it is more prestigious to make the audience suffer (I: 42), it is also evident that he is not in-

terested in an incursion into tragedy, and that he continues to see his theatre as an exploration of a person's interior world, of his/her human passions, and also as a satiric view of the members of his society. In contrast, the antagonist Racine sees Molière's works as frivolous, linguistically impoverished, and provocative of low passions, believing in the political urgency to substitute the comic genre for the tragic one. Similarly, Racine's friend, the Archbishop Prefix, believes that Molière's emphasis on entertainment and on mundane pleasures undermines the feelings of religious and national unity that the king should represent and that France should uphold in its struggle to become a powerful empire.

In fact, Racine and the Archbishop propose to weaken Molière's relevance and power by showing that his joy is not a gift from God, and that it is vulnerable to the ups and downs of life. If Molière would lose all his worldly privileges and gifts—fame, money, love, and the favor of the king—, would he also lose his capacity to laugh (I: 30)? From Racine and the Archbishop's point of view it is impossible to write comedies when one is living tragic experiences in daily life. Therefore, their goal is to change France's spirit of frivolity—of which Molière is the emblem and sublime priest (I: 50). To remove the people's masks of happiness and reveal the true suffering face of human beings, they set up a plan to "initiate" Molière in the "mysteries" of tragedy. They do so by revealing to the French comedigrapher that his young wife is being unfaithful to him. But to their surprise, this strategy of "familiarizing" Molière with calamities backfires since his personal tragedies inevitably become part of his acclaimed comedies. Molière recognizes the synchrony and interdependence between the abundant tragedies in his personal life and the pleasure that generates the act of dramatic creation, not only when it is sprinkled with humor and irony, but even when it is enriched by tragic events. Perceptively, the famous musician Jean-Baptiste Lully tells the Archbishop: "Molière frente al abismo seguría riendo" 'Molière, in front of an abyss, would continue to laugh' (I: 31). Ironically, although Racine's tragedies attained enormous prestige, he realizes too late that as part of the Archbishop's political project to destroy comedy, his own role as writer of tragedies ends up being threatened, since the Archbishop considers that all artists are ultimately buffoons.

It is not by chance that Racine cannot understand the power of Molière's last words before his death, *S'il vous plait!* 'If it pleases you' (IV: 161). In his ignorance and bias, Racine does not understand that even in the face of death Molière can laugh. Pleasure, in all its forms—sexual, social, artistic—is for the French writer of comedies a key component of both his theatrical productions and his life. When Molière angrily denounces those who want to kill pleasure, identifying them as representatives of the Devil 'El Espiritu de la Gravedad', the adjectives used to describe this evil figure coincide with those used to describe tragedy: "Es serio, profundo, pesado; pedante, solemne, aguerrido" 'serious, profound, heavy; pedantic, solemn, hardened' (IV: 123).

Racine cruelly suggests to Molière that, since he is very sick, he should die on stage while performing the role of a dying man in his own play *The Imaginary Invalid*, especially because that would make a great tragedy. Even as he confronts death, Molière quickly discards this "advice" with his typical passion for pleasure: "Me entregaré despacio, miembro por miembro, como un amante se entrega al placer..., miembro por miembro, hasta olvidarse... de sí mismo... 'I will give myself slowly, part by part, like a lover gives himself to pleasure..., part by part, until he forgets... about himself'" (IV: 158).<sup>19</sup> Faced with Molière's resilience and unabashed sense of pleasure, Racine finally shouts: "Está bien, maestro. Muérase feliz, sólo por contradecirme [...] Muérase con su frívolo optimismo. Pero por piedad ya muérase [...]" 'All right, Master. Die happy just to contradict me [...]. Die with your frivolous optimism. But please just die [...]' (IV: 159).

When in the preface to the play *Molière* Sabina Berman describes how she was drawn "to the interesting, ridiculous and eternal topic of the enmity between Comedy and Tragedy," she states: "the comic and the tragic are more than two dramatic genres. They are two worldviews. Two ways of feeling, seeing and thinking" ("Prefacio" 9-10). This clash of worldviews between tragedy and comedy in Berman's *Molière* makes it possible to conclude that if authoritarian political power and corruption are linked to tragedy, then comedy and humor should be perceived as antiauthoritarian, iconoclastic, and therefore, pleasurable. That is, if the controversy between comedy and tragedy reveals a great deal about one's own

attitudes towards the world, then Sabina's *Molière* joyfully reveals both the clashes and connections between art and life, and the role played by art in political and social life. It is clear for Berman that these two genres are interdependent, but through the title of her play, one can see who ends up being favored in this tug of war. Like Molière, Berman confronts her audience with painful sociopolitical and economic issues, but always understanding that theatre's representation, even of the crudest reality, is connected to the artistic production of pleasure. At the end of *Molière*, which coincides with the writer's death, the Angel of Laughter, riding on a unicycle, crosses the stage at full speed (IV: 161).

In many of Sabina Berman's plays—*El suplicio del placer*, *Aguila o sol*, *Molière*, *La grieta*, *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*—the Mexican author places her characters, and herself as playwright, both inside and outside the anthill as she constantly highlights the sexual, political and cultural incongruities of the multiple worlds she (re) creates. The audience of her plays is confronted with both humorous and serious clashes between past and present; men and women (with or without moustaches); between the apparent power of the macho man and the apparent submission of the prostitute; between games and acts of torture with or without a gun; between the violent history of the conquest and its carnivalesque dimensions; between Cortés' gibberish and *la Malinche's* pertinent "translations;" between the private and public space separated by a crack that continues to grow, underscoring the crises that proliferate at the slightest provocation.

The use of incongruousness in Berman's theatre highlights the constant tension in her theatrical productions, in which even the most sordid acts are counterbalanced by irony, producing not only surprise in the face of the unexpected, but also pleasure. In Henk Diressen's words:

Humor is both playful and serious, a vital quality of the human condition. What makes humor fascinating and relevant to anthropologists and historians is that it provides clues to what really matters in society and culture [...]. Humor often mirrors deeper cultural perceptions and offers us a powerful device to understand culturally shaped ways of thinking and feeling. (222)

Sabina Berman's use of humor in her plays exposes what underlies reality, that is, both pain and pleasure. As William Alston observes of these two concepts: "Pleasure and pain have usually been regarded as opposite parts of the same continuum" (341). Berman's theatre allows us to see the corroded social, political, and cultural reality of her world while never forgetting that her instrument of communication happens to be art. Perhaps that is why she incorporates in her reflections about society, politics, history, sexuality, gender identity, and art the image of the anthill, where the artist, with her double perspective, like the queen of the *Formicas exsectoides*, is able to interpret the world from both the inside and the outside.

### Notes

1 Unless indicated, all the translations are mine.

2 Charles Le Brun was a "Painter and designer who became the arbiter of artistic production in France during the last half of the seventeenth century. Possessing both technical facility and the capacity to organize and carry out many vast projects, Le Brun personally created or supervised the production of most of the paintings, sculptures, and decorative objects commissioned by the French government for three decades during the reign of Louis XIV. Under his direction French artists created a homogeneous style that came to be accepted throughout Europe as the paragon of academic and propagandistic art" ("Le Brun, Charles", *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*). To see some of his paintings from the *System of Physiognomies* go to: <<http://www.spamula.net/blog/archives/000159.html>>.

3 I invite you to consult a website about the funny physical resemblances between "Dogs and their Owners": <<http://www.christianhomesite.com/funnies/dogs.html>>.

4 About the human condition of humor, Critchely states: "So whilst we cannot say with any certainty whether dogs laugh or not, I think, grant that humour is an anthropological constant, is universal and common of all cultures" (28).

5 The first time I mention a play, I offer publication date in parenthesis fol-

lowed by the English translation of the title. For published translations see works cited.

6 Stuart Day's "La sediciosa seducción de México: *La grieta*," underscores the complex interaction of pleasure and pain in some of Berman's plays: "... *La grieta*, by showing the pain of humor, displays a combination of skepticism and social criticism that is not lost among the anarchic tendencies (tendencies of value to the anti-authoritarian forms described by Lyotard) that can accompany postmodernism" (100).

7 In its 1985 version *El suplicio del placer* was initially divided in three segments—segments which have later been identified as "El bigote," "La casa chica," and "La pistola." In the 1994 edition, Berman added a fourth segment titled "Los dientes," but this one was again deleted in the 2004 edition of her anthology of plays *Puro teatro*. In 2002, Adam Versényi published in translation four of Berman's plays: *The Agony of Ecstasy*, *Yankee*, *Puzzle*, and *Heresy*.

8 Berman's *Molière* was performed in English in Calgary, Canada in 2002.

9 See Stuart Day, "Berman's Pancho Villa versus Neoliberal Desire" and Meléndez, "Marx, Villa, Calles, Guzmán...: Fantasmas y modernidad en *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* de Sabina Berman."

10 In his "*Similia similibus curantur*: La exhumación de lo real en *Backyard* de Sabina Berman," Stuart Day underscores that although this play does not frequently resort to humor—which he considers one of Berman's most recurrent weapons—it is possible to identify in it some of its heterodox and mordant elements.

11 In "(In) Genio y figura hasta la sepultura: *Molière*, Berman y sus asedios al teatro," I center my analysis on the play's characterization of the identity and power of artistic discourse in dialogue with the identity and power of political discourse.

12 In *Humoring Resistance: Laughter and the Excessive Body in Latin American Women's Fiction*, Dianna Niebylski approaches humor in the following

terms: “Throughout this book, I use the term ‘humor’ and the adjective ‘comic’ broadly and generically to refer to a range of discursive strategies meant to provoke an active response from readers who apprehend the incongruity, double-voicedness, absurdity, or hyperbolic nature of the articulation, utterance, or situation” (4).

13 When in Berman’s *Molière* the Archbishop asks the French comedy writer why his plays are spectacles of human imperfection, Molière answers by underlining the need to explore the idea of perfection until it reaches its imperfection (IV: 124).

14 In John Morreall’s collection of essays on laughter and humor, several of the critics center their analysis on the theory of incongruity: Michael Clark, Roger Scruton, and Mike Martin, among others.

15 Although *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* has been translated into English, I am using my own translation.

16 Significantly, Plato had already dealt in his *Republic* with the “mixture of pain and pleasure” (see Morreall 10) as part of what is now called the Superiority Theory. In a conversation between Socrates and Protarchus the former explains that when we see a comedy the soul experiences this mixture of feelings of pain and pleasure. Socrates concludes: “Then our argument shows that when we laugh at what is ridiculous in our friends, our pleasure, in mixing with malice, mixes with pain, for we have agreed that malice is a pain of the soul, and that laughter is pleasant, and on these occasions we both feel malice and laugh (*Republic* 388e; quoted in Morreall 13). No doubt, when in Sabina’s segment “El bigote” in *El suplicio del placer*, *El* demands that *Ella* takes off her moustache allowing some handsome man to approach her and sharing herself with him, *Ella* answers with a clever sophism or double argument: “¿Cómo te atreves? ¿Quieres limitar mi libertad pidiéndome que actúe como una mujer libre cuando soy tan absolutamente libre que no necesito actuar como si fuera libre?” ‘How dare you? Would you limit my freedom, asking me to act like a free woman when I am so free that I don’t need to act as if I were?’ (I: 410). We might choose to laugh at *El*’s ignorance and powerlessness, or at the playful psychoanalytical implications of his and her actions, reactions and responses,

or we can laugh at the fact that *Ella's* proclamation of independence and individuality underlines the incongruous, paradoxical aspects of the messengers and the message(s).

17 In 1992 Berman rewrites *Herejía*, under the new title *En el nombre de Dios*. When this play is reedited in *Puro teatro*, the segment "Entreacto" is deleted.

18 The film *Molière*, directed by Laurent Tirard, premiered in the summer of 2007. Parallel to Berman's *Molière*, Tirard's film merges the French comedigrapher's life with his theatre.

19 This passionate response can be connected to the play's epigraph, which happens to be a quote from Molière himself: "Yo tomo mi placer/ donde se encuentra (y no donde no);/ y si tengo que luchar por él,/ mejor tomo otro placer" 'I take my pleasure/ from where I can find it (and not from where it isn't)/ if I have to fight for it, I rather take another pleasure' ("Prefacio" 9).

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