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The Politics of Parody[1]: Rosa Montero's *Te trataré como a una reina* and Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*

It is almost impossible for observant readers not to think of *Perfume* by Patrick Süskind[1] when reading *Te trataré como a una reina* by Rosa Montero.[2] Both have an unusual device for a novel --the use of smell and scent-- which clearly defines them as postmodern novels in that they take advantage of the paradox of describing the indescribable. Linda Hutcheon underlines this concept by referring to Süskind's *Perfume* as being a text linking "the failure of language to Grenouille's creativity as the distiller and creator of the greatest perfumes in the world, and yet, as readers, we can never forget that we know of this only through the very language of the novel" (Hutcheon 52). Thus Süskind and Montero force the reader to imagine smells in the scentless world of the written word.

Beyond this very inscription is the use of literary tools, such as parody, in order to subvert the metafictive reality. In both novels, this metafictive reality is one in which parody is used in order to deconstruct traditional societal values. All characters in both novels appear behind figurative masks, some using them in order to better their appearance, others in order to hide their own marginality. I argue however that between the two, Montero's novel stands out through its use of parody. Having the female characters 'unmask' the male character is similar to the "decrowning" process explained by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*; where a King loses his attributes, is uncrowned, and eventually put into the position of a servant or a slave[4]. In *Perfume*, the character is left to decrown himself, falling prey to the boredom of omnipotence. Moreover, unlike Süskind, Montero uses writing as a

means to outline a feminine voice breaking apart from the masculine one.

In both novels, the use of parody is extensive, and appears as a subversion of traditional values. In Süskind's *Perfume*, for example, the hero, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, grows up an orphan in 18th century France. He was, however, born with an invaluable gift --his over-developed sense of smell. This olfactory acuteness enables him to make the most delicate perfumes ever invented. In order to reach the purest essence of youth, he kills young virgins so as to capture their scent of innocent youth, their death subverting the value of such youthful innocence. Caught by chance, he avoids his own execution by wearing his latest creation, throwing the crowd into an orgy. Dissatisfied with such an easy victory, he "commits suicide by covering himself with his perfume and walking out into a crowd of people, who tear him to shreds with the insatiable love inspired by his perfume" (Butterfield 403). The novel closes on a bittersweet note when, after having eaten Grenouille, the people "had to smile. They were uncommonly proud. For the first time they had done something out of love" (P255). The subversion appears here under the form of an ironic representation where "parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (Hutcheon 101). Jean-Baptiste Grenouille subverts the pure and beautiful idea of reaching the essence of things by taking it literally and getting rid of the body through murder. He thus legitimizes the research of perfection and subverts it by killing. Moreover, he subverts his own end when he changes the hatred people feel for him into an excess of love through a few drops of his perfume.

Antonio, the main character in Montero's *Te trataré*, is depicted as a failed creator in that he cannot always recognize mixed scents:

> --Numero dos: ámbar gris, lavanda, lilas, de nuevo bergamota, límon de Sicilia, hespérides, narciso tuberoso, jengibre...--dudó unos instantes, olisqueando el papel con avidez--: Ybálsamo de Perú.
>
> --Oh, no, lo siento, don Antonio --se consternó Benigno--No es bálsamo de Perú, sino bálsamo de Tolú. Y ademas falta una nota de angélica (TT45).

The parody reaches a climax when we learn that he is forced to work as a civil servant in order to make a living, and that the person quizzing him is his secretary who needs answer keys to the already prepared scents in order to establish their composition. Moreover, while Grenouille is all the happier when in contact with a multiplicity of scents such as when he first enters Baldini's perfume shop (P68), Antonio violently reacts to Benigno dropping the essences as if physically attacked: "Corrió a la ventana, acosado por la tortura de tanto aroma exquisito, y allí, acezante, acodado sobre el polvoriento alféizar, se creyó desfallecer y sintió su olfato hecho alma y el alma hecha un vahído" (TT50).

The physical body of the characters puts into question the relationship between being and appearance: while Grenouille has the most delicate nose of all time, he is afflicted with several infirmities that leave him with "scars and chafings and scabs ..., and a slightly crippled foot left him with a limp..." (P20). In contrast, Antonio who is fooling himself and others with his delicate nose, has reportedly beautiful hands: "[...] esas finas, esbeltas, sensibles manos de artista" (TT41). So while Grenouille's mask of physicality runs counter to his actual ability, Antonio's mask of physicality aids in the deception, covering his lack of ability --two sides of the same paradoxical coin, both a parody of beauty.

Both novels stress the deconstructive potential of parody by the deconstruction of the traditional or the mythical hero. In her article "La caution du grotesque: Patrick Süskind *Das Parfum*," Elizabeth Guilhamon explains that, abandoned at birth, the future mythical hero is condemned usually after a divine dream. He manages to survive and later on accomplishes great things that enable him to come back to his original land where he can be recognized by his birth parents (Guilhamon 219). Both Grenouille and Antonio experience a double birth: the former after having lived in a cave for several years is born again when he chooses to use his power on the world, the latter after having been very sick and experiencing his sudden 'gift' of smell as a rebirth. However, their greatness is never acknowledged, but rather feared in the case of Grenouille, and parodied in the case of Antonio. The irony reaches its peak when one commits suicide and is killed by an excess of love (Grenouille), while the second is symbolically killed when he loses his sense of smell (Antonio). Neither of them reaches the mythical hero's end: that of acknowledgment of their great deeds, and both are parodies of the traditioal hero.

Art itself, or the ideal it stands for, is also deconstructed. Both characters' sense of beauty is twisted by their motivation in its application. According to Edith Borchardt, "Grenouille's art does not serve a spiritual goal, since his idealism is nothing but a solipsistic narcissism that is completely self-serving in its instrumentalization of his genius for the sake of power and the control of the masses" (Borchardt 99). If he is at first carried away by the scents himself, he quickly realizes the extent of his power when he uses the right ones:

> As was appropriate for the size of the great hall, he had doused himself with perfume, and no sooner had he climbed the dais

> than the aura of his scent began to radiate powerfully from him. He saw --literally saw with his own eyes!-- how it captured the spectators sitting closest, was transmitted to those farther back, and finally reached the last rows and the gallery. And whomever it captured --and Grenouille's heart leapt for joy within him-- was visibly changed (P158).

Rather than an artistic or educational tool, it is here described as a despotic tool: Grenouille becomes all powerful, able to control the emotions of the people at will.

In the case of Antonio, it is used as a means to reinforce his despotism and superiority over his sister (TT75-6) and his secretary:

> --Ya sé que falta una nota de angélica, diantres --barbotó Antonio indignado--: Es que no me ha dejado usted terminar.
>
> --Perdone, don Antonio.
>
> --Y además el error ha sido a causa del tobaco, ¿se da usted cuenta? Ya sabe que los días de prueba vengo sin desayunar y estoy particularmente sensible (TT45).

Both texts subvert the notion of beauty, or as Linda Hutcheon describes it, "the notion of the original as rare, single, and valuable (in aesthetic or commercial terms) is called into question" (Hutcheon 93), and so needs to be looked at from a different angle. While Grenouille can smell and recreate all odors, he does so only for his own selfish, and secret, interests. Antonio, on the other hand, classifies odors as "good" ones --or pleasing to his nose, such as Vanessa's odor during her sexual arousal (TT175)-- and "bad" ones --or displeasing to his nose, such as Benigno's cigarette (TT42). This olfactory classification reflects his vision of society in which different people belong to different levels (he being presumably at the top, while women are at the bottom).

While the power struggle between Benigno and Antonio is a parody of the dynamic that exists in the corporate world, the power struggle between Antonio and women is a parody of the patriarchal structure at work in society. His superior attitude is justified in his eyes by his "gift" to recognize odors while others can only try to take advantage of their "lower" senses such as hearing, seeing and touching. He denies them a voice even if they have themselves developed an individual artistic side, showing a potential for love (Antonia with Damián) or singing (Bella). With such a character as Antonio, Montero uses "parodic strategies ...to point to the history and historical power of those cultural representations..." (Hutcheon 102). She deconstructs the traditional male-centered narrative in order to clearly point out the feminine character, using parody and exploiting its counter effects, but using also the power of masks so as to unmask the masculine character. *Perfume*, being singularly focused on the main character, does not achieve this level of deconstruction. While the potential exists in the relationship between Grenouille and his superior for such a societal deconstruction, the novel leaves this source of parody untapped.

In both novels, the positive attributes of the various characters is contrasted with their actual being: Grenouille may be a genius, but he is a murderer. Throughout the novel, he uses his profession as a mask in order to kill more young virgins and use their scent for his perfumes. Antonio is an attractive man, but he uses his status in society (family background, respectable job) in order to deceive women.[5] While Grenouille deceives the entire population regardless of gender, Antonio mainly strikes women, and a very specific group of women: "[...] señoras acomodadas de media edad sin otra profesión que la de amas de casa, mujeres insatisfechas que se aburrían en la soledad de sus piso y de su

matrimonio" (TT73). Even with his sister, he always distorts situations to his advantage in order to reach his goal such as when he was playing with her as a child:

> Se encerraban en el establo y abrían el portón sólo una chispa, lo justo para que pasara algo de sol. Antonio decía que así se podían ver los huesos de la mano, el mismísimo esqueleto. Pero ella nunca lo vio claro.
>
> --Pero mira que eres burra, Toña, no es que seas más pequeña que yo, es que eres burra --gritaba Antonio (TT13).

While in *Perfume*, most of the characters are a backdrop for the single unmasking of Grenouille, in *Te trataré* many characters reveal what is behind their masks, which are most often used as a way to ide their own marginality: Antonia masks the reality of life in the city she lives in when she tells her mother that Bella "es pianista y da conciertos en un sitio muy fino" (TT63), while she is actually working in a piano-bar in the red light district. Her life is so dull, however, that these make-believe tales enable her to create her own reality. It is the same thing for Vanessa who hides her real name --Juana (TT53)-- in order to play with the exoticism her assumed name carries and thus be able to dream of a better future. As for Poco, he uses the exoticism of a dated postcard from Cuba (1954), the mask of an unlived past, to seduce women. With Bella, it is a game; with Vanessa, it becomes part of a nostalgic dream; with Poco, seduction.

Grenouille is also hiding his marginality as he has no odor of his own. He thus develops masks of human scent for himself in order to break apart from the marginality he is living in:

> As he came out onto the street, he was suddenly afraid, for he knew that for the first time in his life he was giving off a human odor. He found that he stank, stank quite disgustingly. ...and

> his joy was boundless when he noticed that the others noticed nothing, nothing whatever, that all these men, women, and children could be so easily duped...and accept him, Grenouille the cuckoo's egg, in their midst as a human being among human beings (P151 and 153).

With his new human scent, Grenouille is now untraceable, completely hidden behind a scented mask, and can pursue his real motive, which is, in essence, identical to Antonio's.

The same pattern of seeking selfish pleasure is to be found in the attitude of both men. When Grenouille detects an unusually nice smell, he has to possess it through death --by killing the young woman and distilling her scent. When women fall in love with Antonio to the point of wanting to leave their husbands, having won the perceived struggle for dominance, he breaks up with them. In both cases, the means to reach the end does not matter as much as the personal pleasure derived from it.

In the case of women, it is apparent that masks are used in order to fulfill the demands that patriarchal society puts on them. They use masks in order to belong to a world whose values have been chosen by men. Vanessa is the perfect example of this phenomenon: she abandons her own female identity --Juana-- in order to recreate person more fitting of men's expectations. By renaming herself Vanessa, she is completely giving in to the patriarchal structure.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "the abuse and thrashing [in Rabelais' works] are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask" (Bakhtin 196). In the case of Antonio and Antonia, the abuse of Antonio toward Antonia can be seen as a means to reveal Antonia's

real or true self. The new self is she who, after having been betrayed by her brother finds the strength to go to the train station and leave, no longer under his power. The novel ends with an ironic twist as Antonia boards the same train she usually takes to her mother's house, thus leaving the reader with no guarantee that she is going somewhere else.

In Montero's novel, it is the women who take an active part in unmasking the men, such as when Bella finds out about Poco's lies, and thus uncovers his symbolic self: the black wallet in the closet (TT231), or when Bella beats Antonio up in such a way that he has to be hospitalized and as a result looses his sense of smell (TT239). In the case of Antonio and Bella, the abuse can actually be paralleled with what Bakhtin calls a "decrowning" (Bakhtin 198-199), or what we might call an "unmasking."

The internal dynamic of *Te trataré* is elucidated by Antonio's description of his loss of smell in sexual terms, "uná mutilación," "una castración" (TT239). In the end, the female voice has finally been heard (Bella's), and the male voice has not only been silenced but also sexually deactivated, ironically subverting one of the primary powers used by men over women in a traditional patriarchal society, sexual dominance. In *Te trataré*, parody and the unmasking of the masculine character are two ways by which Montero illuminates the feminine character. She also uncovers the feminine character through a specific use of language that is not present in Süskind's *Perfume*, which is written by a male, has a male hero, and has women only as background characters.

In Montero's novel, a multiplicity of voices is present as if to celebrate the difference. In that regard, we have not one model, but several; not one source of power, but a multiplicity of them. While in Süskind's *Perfume* there is one omniscient narrator focusing on one character,[6] in Montero's *Te trataré*, there is still one omniscient narrator,

but one that is telling the story from different perspectives --in that sense, the novel has several heroes depending on the perspective. Many interior dialogues of various characters are brought up by such words as "pensó," or "se decía," and the narrator steps aside several times to reveal the thoughts of the characters:[7]

> --Iremos. Tú y yo, y Vanessa también puede venir, si quiere.
>
> --¿Vanessa? ¿Y por qué Vanessa?
>
> --¿Y por qué no?
>
> Porque era una imbécil. Porque era una extraña. Porque no tenía nada que ver con ellos, con el Tropicana, con el marabú, con el traje cruzado, con las rosas. Pero Bello apretó los dientes y no dijo nada (TT86).

As a result, not only is the female character outlined, she is given a voice. In Süskind's *Perfume*, the female character takes form only through the male voice, further objectified in terms of scents, the reference point of Grenouille who, after his first murder, "could no longer recall how the girl from the rue des Marais had looked, not her face, not her body. He had preserved the best part of her and made it his own: the principle of her scent" (P44).

In Montero's *Te trataré*, through the multiplicity of voices, the feminine character appears under different forms, is defined by different voices, and ends up being perceived quite differently in the reader's mind. Antonia, for example, doesn't appear in the reader's mind as her brother is describing her --hopeless, dependent, stupid-- but rather daring (she is not only masturbating but also having a relationship with a much younger man) mainly because of the shifting of voices. Those shifts in the narration bring up shifts in the creation of language, stressing those who are in fact creating language.

The male language is often the language of power, and as Kathleen Glenn points out: "Writing confers power and traditionally, that power has been granted to men and denied to women" (Glenn 197). In *Te trataré*, language is held by men as the official voice and symbolized by the reporter of the newspaper *El Criminal*. All the interviews play the role of intertexts in the sense that they are not part of the numbered chapters, and are interviews of men (93-95: Vicente Menéndez, 201-204: Benigno Martí, 237-239: Antonio Ortiz).

Ironically, Poco must use the language of deceit as exemplified by the postcard from Trompeta supposedly inviting him to Cuba when it is in fact only an old dream dated from 1954. Poco also uses deceit in the instance of the bolero "Te trataré..." which was destined not for Bella as he led her to believe, but rather for Vanessa. Even Antonio's writing is analyzed as deceiving by Kathleen Glenn who points out that "the reason that his [Antonio's] Julia has vanished forever is that he dropped her the moment he learned that she had resolved to leave her husband for him. But that detail would destroy the poetic prose adopted and so Antonio omits it" (Glenn 197).

Male language is one of the imagination, transcending it and turning it into reality through the use of patriarchal power. It is the language of make-believe used by both Antonio in *Te trataré* and Grenouille in *Perfume*, who, like Marcel Proust living off the taste of his madeleine, are living off former scents remembered as divine: "Julia tiene la piel tostada como el pan. Me deshice en ella sabiendo que podía ser la última vez. Llevaba dioressence. Demasiado típico" (TT74). As for Grenouille, he kills in order to fill his personal 'memory-museum-of-scent.'

Female language on the other hand is the one of creation, "enabling the protagonist to transcend the limitations of the social reality" (Esturoy

6). In creating their own reality women subvert the patriarchal society and its rules. Using parody, Montero constructs her female characters at the expense of male characters. Female characters stand out in the narrative discourse in that they are unmasking and thus deconstructing the male character, perverting the traditional values of the patriarchal society.

In 1988, Nicole Brossard said: "To write *I am a woman* is full of consequences" (Brossard 42), and she couldn't be more right. In novels like Süskind's *Perfume*, women are not only background characters but, moreover, so objectified that they lose their humanity. Speaking of Montero's *Te trataré*, Kathleen Glenn concludes that "the idea that there is no way out for any of the women is forcefully conveyed in the final pages of the novel. Bella is confined in jail, Vanessa in the hospital, and Antonia ...finds herself ...on the same old train that over the years has borne her back to her mother's house" (Glenn 200-201). I would disagree with this idea and rather look at these "confining" spaces as healing spaces.

Not only have these women fought --physically as well as symbolically-- their masculine counterparts, but they are for once in a space not invaded by the masculine character (in isolation, in the case of Vanessa and Bella, and on the way to the *mother's* house in the case of Antonia.) It is unlikely that after having broken apart from the masculine power, they would sink into amnesia and make the conscious decision to silence themselves. While in Süskind's *Perfume*, the woman character is objectified and reduced to a mere scent, in Montero's *Te trataré*, it symbolically castrates and silences the masculine character in order to evolve in a space where writing *I am a woman* would not have the consequences foreseen by Nicole Brossard.

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NOTES

[1]I borrowed this title from chapter 4 of Linda Hutcheon's book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

[2]Patrick Süskind, *Das Parfum: Die Geschichte eines Mörders* (Zurich: Diogenes Verlag AG, 1985). In this article, I will use the English translation of John Woods, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1986).

[3]Rosa Montero, *Te trataré como a una reina* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983).

[4]See "Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais" in Miguel Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 196-277

[5]While the masking can be linked to the carnivalesque as seen in Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* 246, in order to suspend "all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status," the mask is used here by Antonio in an already parodied situation.

[6]There are a few digressions in the first part of the novel that enable the reader to leave behind some of the background characters, such as with Madame Gaillard ("Since we are to leave Madame Gaillard behind us at this point in our story and shall not meet her again, we shall take a few sentences to describe the end of her days" (P29)) or Monsieur Grimal (P86-88). The primary focus throughout, however, is Grenouille.

[7]This style is commonly referred to by French theorists as *"style indirect libre"*

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