MASQUERADE AS EXILE: TÓRTOLA VALENCIA, DANCER OF THE BELLE EPOQUE*

IRIS GARLAND

The feminist interpretation of psychoanalytic theories, such as Luce Irigaray's, that Woman is never the subject, but the object, and thereby disempowered and alienated from any knowledge of her authentic self, has been addressed in the feminist analysis of literature, visual art, and cinema. While feminist theory has foregrounded issues of the body, the expressive «dancing body» is rarely examined by feminist theorists for meanings, or signifiers, of women's subjectivity/objectivity.

At the beginning of the 20th Century a new breed of independent women dance pioneers, such as, Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Maud Allen, riding in the wake of 19th Century feminist ideology, forged a new approach to the art form of dance, casting off Victorian contraints on the female body, and empowering women as creators/choreographers, a role in the dance profession previously dominated by men. The expression of the self and the «natural» body was central to this almost totally feminine approach to dance. What was signified in their dances has been recently examined through aspects of feminist analysis by dance scholars, such as, Daly, Desmond, Francis, and Koritz.¹

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Tórtola Valencia, a dancer of the same era and genre, vividly personified the theories of masquerade, and concomitantly exile, as discussed by Riviere, Lacan, Irigaray, Butler, and Doane, but she has not been cited in the feminist literature, and rarely within dance scholarship.

I do not attempt here to critique the masquerade theory of Riviere, or subsequent psychoanalytic masquerade theorists, but rather to discuss aspects in the specific case of Tórtola Valencia that are relevant to the various interpretations of masquerade. The concept of masquerade as defined by Riviere, the first lay psychoanalyst to use the term, is an overrepresentation of femininity, masking what is deemed as masculine traits: assertiveness, intellectual pursuits, and the desire for power. According to Riviere, this masking is an attempt «to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men.» The case of Tórtola Valencia differs from Riviere’s example, but there are parallels to the masquerade as developed by feminist theorists.

Tórtola Valencia (1882-1955), one of the most intriguing dancers of the early 20th Century, self-invented a colorful background obfuscated in mystery. Claiming to be born in Seville of a union between a gypsy mother and a Spanish nobleman father, Tórtola spoke five languages, all with an accent. There are intimations from her friends and biographers that she was orphaned and raised in London from an undetermined age by a wealthy foster family, although Tórtola herself never mentioned a foster family in her many press interviews. Solrac, her biographer, stated that her parents abandoned her after arranging her guardianship, and moved to America never to see her again. Tórtola gave various versions of her background to the press; for example, that she emigrated to London with her gypsy mother at age fourteen where her mother died, and another, that she ran away from home at an early age to dance in the cafes of Madrid.


3 Riviere, «Womanliness as a Masquerade»: 35.

4 Odelot Solrac, Tortola Valencia and Her Times, NY: Vantage Press, 1982: 1;

José Zamora, an artist who created drawings of Tórtola, stated in an interview by A.D.O., ABC, Seville: 9 Mar. 1955:

«No creo que Tórtola Valencia fuese española. Nunca quiso decir de dónde era. Su padre era un anticuario anglojudío y su madre, según ella, una gitana del Albaicín. [Su acento español] era extrañísimo. Pertenecía a ese clase de personas que son cosmopolitas de nacimiento.»
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where she was discovered. She alluded to attending a boarding school in Paris, and it may be assumed that she was well educated, judging by the many press reports that described her as intelligent, well read, and a thorough researcher of the themes of her dances.

In the early years of the 20th Century the overrepresentation of the western European female assumed two polarized stereotypes: the «New Woman», a product of 19th Century European feminism, caricatured in England by a latchkey (leaving an empty house), a book (scholarly pretensions), and a cigarette (masculine habits); and the femme fatale, privileged in the art and literature of the belle époque, as the amoral, castrating, destroyer of men, driving them to economic and personal ruin.

The femme fatale, with multiple incarnations, was a representation created by male artists and writers, and examples of this archetype appear in ancient mythology and biblical references, such as Circe, Judith, and Salome. Valorized by the Decadents and Symbolists, (for example, Charles Baudelaire, Gustav Klimt, Edvard Munch, and Oscar Wilde) the image was transformed into 20th Century Art Nouveau style, somewhat less blatantly erotic, but no less exotic. Exoticism in the form of Orientalism was a significant element in both literature and visual art of the early 20th Century, and exemplified an aura of mystery in the unfamiliar and the dangerous «Other»; for example, Cleopatra (Théophile Gautier), Salammbo (Gustave Flaubert), Carmen (Prosper Mérimée). There are many versions of the femme fatale, but all incarnations fall outside the domain of ordinary experience, and are not attainable by ordinary women.

Although seemingly diametrically opposed in representation and ideology, the New Woman, a feminist construct, and the femme fatale, «a figment of the male misogynist imagination,» have subversive commonalities: the female is independent, self-

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4 Interview by Emilio G. de Bustillo, El Noticiero Universal, Barcelona: 19 Sept. 1917; Tórtola Valencia Archive, Institut del Teatre, Centre d' Investigació, Documentació, i Difusió, Diputació de Barcelona, Spain (hereafter referred to as C.I.D.D.).
5 Viv Gardner, «Introduction,» in Vivien Gardner, Susan Rutherford, eds., The New Woman and Her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992: 4-5. The «New Woman» is described as:

... young, middle class, and single on principle. She eschewed the fripperies of fashion in favour of more masculine dress and severe coiffure. She had probably been educated to a standard unknown to previous generations of women and was certainly a devotee of Ibsen and given to reading «advanced» books. She was financially independent of father or husband, often through earning her own living in one of the careers opening up to women at the time ... She affected emancipated habits, like smoking, riding a bicycle, using bold language and taking the omnibus or train unescorted. She sought freedom from, and equality with, men. In the process she was prepared to overturn all convention and all accepted notions of femininity.

determined, ambitious, and threatening to the conventions of patriarchal dominance. It is in this context that Tórtola Valencia is situated, incorporating and traversing the territory between both the «New Woman» and the «femme fatale».

It was not unusual for theatrical women of the early 20th Century to invent a mysterious, exotic background. Clément, in her study of the operatic diva, notes that exile is a precondition for fame, in that a foreign identity provides a strangeness that is a «source of [...] mythic power;» the adoptive country and the adoring public provide a «symbolic father,» while opera becomes the family, which demands refusal of marriage, and «no love other than those spectacular loves, meant for display, that are part of their role.»

In a 1911 interview, when asked about her family, Tórtola stated, «I have nobody, neither in Seville, nor in London, nor anywhere...» Exiled from her family and her dubious country of origin, Tórtola Valencia did indeed substitute the theatre for her family as Clément suggests. «My love for the dance is a true vocation. I have had no masters. All my dances are my inspiration, children of a continuing exercise that is my life,» she stated in 1911. In another interview in Cuba in 1917, she said, «The dance is my total life. I would like to die dancing. I would die happy ...»

Tórtola Valencia’s imaginative stories of her origin are suspiciously similar to La Belle Otero (Caroline Otero), a dancer of the same period, who also claimed her mother was an Andalusian gypsy; her father a Greek officer. Illegitimate birth which crossed class boundaries was a popular theme in literature of the early modernist period, for example Pérez Galdós’ 1881 novel, La desheredada, in which the heroine, Isidora, a petty bourgeois cursi (social climber), masks her lowly background with claims to an aristocratic lineage. Tórtola’s aristocratic pretensions aligned her with

10 Ibid.
12 Interview by Kurro Kastañares, «Tórtola ... de Triana», España Libre, Madrid: 6 Dec., 1911. «No tengo a nadie, ni en Sevilla, ni en Londres, ni en ninguna parte ... Sonréímos, dubitativos, y Tórtola lanza una carcajada, que es toda una confesión.»
13 Kastañares, «Tórtola ... de Triana», 6 Dec., 1911. «Mi afición al baile — dice — es una verdadera vocación. No he tenido maestros. Todas mis danzas son inspiración mía, hijas de un continuado ejercicio que era para mi la vida.»
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the cachet of high culture, while the gypsy heritage provided a blood link to the exotic; an intuitive, vital life force associated with the dance.

At age 26 in 1908, Tórtola Valencia ostensibly broke all ties with her foster family and embarked on a theatrical career in the most prestigious music-halls of Europe, effectively obliterating all traces of her true past identity. Initially, she did not intend to make Spain her home. In 1911 upon her arrival in Spain, Tórtola said, «The London public is my favorite. I have unending seasons where I am applauded and showered with attention. In Berlin I am equally fêted. In general, I am better received by non Latin people. For this reason I have worked more in Paris, not intending to tour in Italy, or Portugal, or Spain, until now.»

But her career was soon to take a new turn when she debuted in Madrid (1911) at the Teatro Romea, a music hall which featured café flamenco dancers and vulgar comics. Her esoteric, sombre, oriental interpretation of Danza del Incienso, danced in bare feet and a filmy costume, was received with boos and catcalls. However, a group of young modernistas intellectuals, writers, and artists (for example, Federico García Sanchiz, Jacinto Benavente, Pompeyo Gener, Hermen Anglada Camarasa, Eduardo Chicharro, and Ricardo Barojá), were impressed by her artistry. They arranged a special performance for Tórtola, accompanied by classical music, sponsored by the Academy of Fine Arts, the Circle of Fine Arts, the Ateneo of Madrid, and the Association of Writers and Artists. The elite madrileños attended this special event, and Tórtola Tórtola’s success was complete. Critics agreed that her art was not for the crass multitudes, and could only be understood by the educated classes. Respected Spanish artists painted her portrait (Eduardo Chicharro, Arsenio Miguel Nieto, Ignacio Zuloaga), and she became the muse of numerous poets and writers (Ramón Valle-Inclán, Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent). The critics stressed Tórtola’s thorough research and documentation in museums and libraries that informed her interpretations of the dances of ancient cultures.

Tórtola Valencia’s election in 1913 to the Ateneo of Madrid, the elite cultural academy of predominantly male intellectuals and artists, was a testament to her ambition to be considered as a serious artist. Championed by writer and critic Federico García Sanchiz, the election of a female music hall dancer was at first opposed by the conservative element of the Ateneo. The young modernistas garnered sufficient support

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17 Kastañares, «Tórtola ... de Triana,» 6 Dec. 1911, «El público londinense es mi favorito. Temporadas interminables me aplaude y llena de agasajos. En Berlín soy igualmente festejada. En general, gusto más en los pueblos no latinos. Por esto no he trabajado más que en Paris, no habiéndolo intentado siguiera en Italia ni en Portugal ni, hasta ahora, en España.»

18 Tórtola Valencia claimed that she was the first woman elected to the Ateneo in an unsigned interview, «Half-hours with an artist: Sra. Tórtola Valencia,» Times of Brazil, São Paulo: 28 May, 1921. However, García Martí states that women were admitted as members by the end of the nineteenth century; Victoriano García Martí, El Ateneo de Madrid (1835-1935), Madrid: Editorial Dossat, S.A., 1948: 282.
to overcome this resistance. A cartoon appeared in the Madrid press lampooning Tórtola’s dominating influence over her Ateneo supporters. Titled «Última Salón,» it pictures the flamboyant Tórtola wearing a wild hat, standing with 3 submissive, shrinking male writers, Kurro Kastañaes, Tomás Borrás, and Federico García Sanchiz. Tórtola points imperiously toward an edifice labeled Congreso de los Diputados (government building, such as a congress or parliament), and she says, «¡Amigos mios! aquí no he bailado yo todavía! (I have not danced here, yet.)»

The election to the Ateneo, a tribute of high intellectual and artistic achievement, suggests the ambitions of the «New Woman», although the means by which Tórtola accomplished her goal could be considered as femme fatale strategies; «she was diabolical», according to García Sanchiz, who later claimed that Tórtola was the instigator of her nomination to the Ateneo. Rivière’s examples of masquerade imply a duality in performance of gender traits that alternate between the display of the masculine (defined here as intellectual pursuits, assertiveness, ambition in academia, competitiveness) and the overrepresentation of the feminine (flaunting flirtatiousness, seductiveness, decoratively adorned). Rivière’s female lecturer delivered a scholarly paper at a conference followed by a display of inappropriate female coquetry to diffuse her appropriation of the masculine identity, whereas Tórtola Valencia merged her female overrepresentation with her masculine ambitions of intellectual recognition for her artistry.

Doane states, «[w]omanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed.» In the case of Tórtola Valencia, the mask was never removed. Her feminine overrepresentation included her stage performances, her public image, and her personal style. One of her detractors said, «her major originality consists in appearing in the streets dressed as a carnivalesque maja, creating scandals on street corners, and looking for notoriety [...].» Wherever Tórtola Valencia travelled on tour she carted along her collection of treasures, a lifelong preoccupation, and she adorned her hotel rooms with tiger skins, oriental tapestries, exotic furniture, works of art, and jewelry to create an extravagant and exotic ambience. A perceptive interviewer in New York (1917) observed, «There’s a deeply earnest purpose in her dark,

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22 Unsigned, «Un Fracaso de Tortola Valencia,» Última Hora, Montevideo: 26 June 1921. «Su mayor originalidad consiste en pasearse por las calles vestida de maja carnavalesca, hacer escándalos en las esquinas y buscar notoriedad con recursos de damisela de navaja en la liga, y cédula de identidad reservada.»
star-like eyes when she pauses in her laughter. Something determined, unanswerable, not in harmony with the purple and gold cushions and decorative aspects.»

In Tórtola’s stage roles, she represented the «eternal feminine» as idealized by male writers, poets, and artists. Speaking of her art in 1922, Tórtola stated,

«Those that are knowledgeable, when they have seen me dance, have told me that I am exactly like the paintings of antiquity and the traditional writings. My spirit is there... Because of this, my programs are difficult. At times I am too serious and gloomy. When I am dancing I do not feel like a dancer, but as a master of aesthetics. I desire to teach everyone the eloquence of a woman’s body when she interprets the classical musical motifs with the legends of mystery.»

Included in her vast repertoire was: Ibsen’s Aase (Muerte de Aase), Goya’s Maja (La Maja), Wilde’s Salomé (Salomé), as well as her exotic interpretations of the Spanish gypsy (La gitana), and her various Oriental themes (La serpiente, Danza árabe, La bayadera).

Tórtola’s successful exotic, oriental construction resulted in her self-exile to remote, ancient cultures as an imaginary mistress, thereby exploiting the latent voyerism of the male gaze of the time. Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent’s novela, The Paw of the Sphinx, is dedicated to Tórtola: «[...] before I knew you I had seen you dance before Herod as Salomé, dancing in the desert among the tigers as Cleopatra. You are the dream made flesh.»

Irigaray claims the cost to the woman in engaging in the masquerade is the alienation from her own desire, an exile from herself. The masquerade is an attempt to recuperate desire by submerging herself in man’s desire, but it is a doomed enterprise. The result is the renunciation of her own desire. Although Tórtola Valencia was linked romantically in the press to many aristocratic men, including King Alfonso XIII of Spain, they could be considered as «spectacular loves, meant for display». She reported numerous

24 Unsigned interview, «Nuestra entrevista de ayer con Tórtola Valencia,» La Tribuna, San José, Costa Rica: 1 Sept. 1922. «Los que saben de esto, cuando me han visto bailar, me han dicho que soy exacta a las pinturas antiguas y los escritos tradicionales. Mi espíritu es así, gusta de irse hacia atrás, de arrancarle pedazos de belleza y muere, a lo que ya no existe, a lo desaparecido, a lo que se fue... Por eso mis programas son difíciles. A veces me resultan demasiado serios y tenebrosos. Bailando no me siento bailarina, sino maestra de estética.»
25 Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, La Zarpa De La Esfinge, published in Los Contemporaneos, Numero 320, Madrid: 1915. 20 pp. «Tórtola: tú eres el simbola de la belleza única. Antes de conocerte yo te había visto danzar ante Herodes como Salomé, bailar en el desierto entre los tigres como Cleopatra. Eres el ensueño hecho carne.»
27 Clément, Opera: 30; «Trying to Drive Alfonso Off His Throne,» The New York Sunday American, 16 Nov., 1924, Tórtola is listed and pictured as one of the dancers and singers with whom «King Alfonso has been running about with [...] and neglecting his worthy wife [...]»
suicide threats and attempts by her ardent admirers, but this no doubt was a cultivation of her image as a *femme fatale.* It may be assumed by press innuendoes that she had a prolonged *liaison* with Antonio Roger, a young Catalan painter, who accompanied her as her «representative» during her Mexican (1918) and South American tours (1916, 1921-25). Tórtola never publicly identified her romantic partners, except for Antonio de Hoyos y Vincent, a respected Spanish writer and a marques. Although Hoyos y Vincent was a close friend, he was considered to be a homosexual, and a sexual relationship was unlikely. In fact, he denied intending to marry Tórtola, stating that although he adored and idolized her, wedding Tórtola would be like marrying a tiger.

There are suggestions that Tórtola Valencia was likely a lesbian. Both Riviere and Lacan relate homosexuality to the masquerade. Butler interprets Lacan as presuming «that female homosexuality links from a disappointed heterosexuality [...] suggesting [... a] desexualized status of the lesbian, the [...] absence of desire.» An «adopted daughter», Angeles Magret Vilá, accompanied Tórtola on her last tour to South America in 1929. They lived together as devoted companions throughout Tórtola’s retirement in Sarrià, and until her death at age 72, in 1955. After Angeles’ death eight years later, both were buried together under a single tombstone. Tórtola previously had another «adopted daughter», Rosita Corma, who accompanied her during her 1917-18 tour to North America. Rosita was between 12 and 15 years of age at the time, and the background of her adoption is subject to wildly differing explanations.

28 Unsigned interview, *La Voz de Guipúzcoa*, San Sebastian, Spain: 4 July, 1926, Tórtola recalls Federico García Sanchiz as threatening «...me amas o me mato.» Valencia replies, «Mátame ...pero fuera de aquí. No me metas en líos».


31 Unsigned interview, Hablando con Tórtola Valencia,» *La Prensa*, NY: 17 Feb. 1919; Tórtola mentions taking a trip with Antonio de Hoyos y Vincent, and the interviewer asks, «¿pero... Antonio?» Tórtola responds, «Bah, no; no lo crea usted. Es varonil, muy hombre, yo nunca he observado en el nada contradictorio. La gente hablo mucho y confunda la elegancia y el refinamiento con... otra cosas. El tiene el esteticismo de las ideas...de los sentimientos. Es un ático anacréonico.»

32 «Nuestras interviú: Antonio de Hoyos y Vincent,» *Puerto Rico Ilustrado*, San Juan: 6 Mar. 1926. «No me casare, Ay! [...] Con Tórtola. La adoro, la idolatro [...] Sería capaz de todo por ella. Pero serían las bodas de la Tórtola Esmeralda con el tigre real y [...] la mattría de una zarpada.»

33 Butler, *Gender Trouble*: 49.

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by Tórtola. Whether Rosita’s was a filial relationship, or one with lesbian overtones, is open to conjecture. Rosita’s name was not mentioned in the press after 1918. In the final analysis, Tórtola craved the love and support of a constant companion, but she ultimately turned to a woman, rather than choosing one of her many male admirers.

In conclusion, Tórtola Valencia, intentionally exiled all aspects of her authentic identity within the masquerade, in order to achieve a successful theatrical career based upon representing the prevailing patriarchal belle époque taste for the «eternal feminine», the femme fatale, and the orientalized «Other». Tórtola Valencia created masks of the feminine models available to her within her cultural milieu, and achieved a high level of artistic and economic freedom valued by the feminist «New Woman». In the process, she eroded barriers for future women dance artists.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza la figura de Tórtola Valencia (1882-1955), una de las más interesantes bailarinas de music-hall de principios del siglo XX quien inventó para sí misma unos orígenes misteriosos en los que se mezcla lo «Español» con un pasado ambiguo. Tal como proponen las teorías de la mascarada de Jacques Lacan, Joan Riviere, Judith Butler, Mary Ann Doane y Luce Irigaray, la vida y carrera de Tórtola Valencia recorren un territorio intermedio entre la «Nueva Mujer» y la femme fatale. En ella se mezclan lo exótico y el orientalismo exuberante de la femme fatale con las pretensiones intelectuales y artísticas.

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