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Rare birds and hardy flowers: Mercè Rodoreda's La senyora Florentina i el seu amor Homer
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RARE BIRDS AND HARDY FLOWERS:
MERCÈ RODOREDÀ'S
LA SENYORA FLORENTINA
I EL SEU AMOR HOMER

KATHLEEN M. GLENN

Theater critic Cristóbal de Castro, writing in 1934, described the difficulties facing the female playwright and applied the term *mirlo blanco* to the exceptional woman who actually had one of her works staged successfully (qtd. in O'Connor 462). One such *rara avis* is Mercè Rodoreda: although extraliterary, political factors have played a role in her posthumous good fortune. Rodoreda is, of course, famous for her novels and short stories. The September 1993 issue of *Catalan Writing* acknowledged her to be Catalunya's most important twentieth-century novelist and the best known abroad («Introducing» 49), and she has become a cultural icon for the Generalitat, which enthusiastically promotes her writing. The recognition accorded her is fully justified but somewhat ironic in view of the fact that *La plaça del Diamant*, a novel that has now been translated into some twenty languages, was not deemed worthy of receiving the Sant Jordi prize in 1960.

The work that concerns me here is *La senyora Florentina i el seu amor Homer*, which had its première in October 1993 and was scheduled for a three-month run at the Teatre Romea, Centre Dramàtic de la Generalitat de Catalunya, in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of Rodoreda's death. The play presents special problems in that there is considerable uncertainty as to its date of composition and the degree to which it is a finished work. When she died in 1983, Rodoreda left a number of manuscripts in various stages of completion: the novels *La Mort i la Primavera* and *Isabel i Maria*, published in 1986 and 1991, respectively, and the plays contained in the 1993 volume *El torrent de les flors*. These include *La senyora Florentina i el seu amor Homer*; a brief section of *La casa dels gladiols*, which appears to be an earlier version of *La senyora Florentina*; *Maniquí 1, maniquí 2*; *L'hostal de les tres Camèlies*; and *Un dia*.¹

¹ Montserrat Casals argues that the plays date from the 1950s and subsequently were reworked (see her «Pròleg» to *El torrent*). *La senyora Florentina* incorporates most of the text of «Zerafina», from the 1967 collection *La meua Cristina i altres contes* (*Obres Completes* 2:237-40). Since Florentina and her friends are in their sixties and the

Despite the textual problems they present, the plays are unmistakably Rodoredian. Those who know the writer's narrative fiction will find in her theater familiar themes, motifs, and patterns of imagery, as well as some new elements. As is customary in Rodoreda's work, female characters are the center of attention in *La senyora Florentina* and they are victimized by men, yet in spite of their experiences they remain «innocents.» The protagonist is the «other» woman in a love triangle. What is new is Rodoreda's greater use of comedy, the importance attached to a group of female friends who provide emotional support and a sense of community, and the independence of Florentina and her maid Zerefina, both of whom prove to be strong individuals who reject the men in their lives. Like their creator, they are *rarae aves*. Rodoreda's portrayal of relations between the sexes and among women is the primary focus of my analysis.

Barcelona has long been a source of inspiration for artists and writers.² Carlos Barral, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Juan Marsé, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, the Goytisolo brothers, Esther Tusquets, Montserrat Roig, and Maria-Antònia Oliver have been fascinated by the city, as was Rodoreda. It is the backdrop for much of her fiction, and the titles of two of her novels feature specific locales: *La plaça del Diamant* and *El carrer de les Camèlies*. The Sant Gervasi district, where she was born, is the setting for *La senyora Florentina*, and the time is around 1915.³ Thus the city evoked in the play is the Barcelona of Rodoreda's childhood, the period that in later years she remembered

the age of Rodoreda's protagonists often parallels that of their creator, born October 10, 1908, it is possible that she worked on *La senyora Florentina* during the late 1960s or early 1970s. In a May 1973 letter to her publisher, Joan Sales, she mentions a play that is «en bastant mal estat... Té tres actes, però és molt diferent de to de les altres» (*El torrent* 13). On the relationship between *La senyora Florentina* and *La casa del gladiol*, see *El torrent* 43-45. It should be noted that *La sala de les nines* (based on some of Rodoreda's stories) and *L'hostal de les tres Camèlies* were performed in 1979, and the one-act *El parc de les magnòlies* appeared in the literary magazine *Els Marges* in 1976. Much of Janet Pérez's discussion of the problems posed by the incompleteness of the two novels that were published posthumously is applicable to Rodoreda's plays. Since we do not know whether the published version of *La senyora Florentina* is definitive, comments on its style have to be provisional, even though language was an obsession with Rodoreda. Her correspondence with Sales reveals the care with which she chose each and every word. In one letter she affirms that «Jo, quan escric, no fait res gratuït, tot està rumiat i calculat» (quoted in Casals 316). In another, apropos of Colometa's language, she writes that «procuro tant com puc dir les coses d'una manera diferent de com es diuen. Si de vegades em serveixo d'un tòpic és per fer riure o per emocionar, no per manca de recursos» (quoted in Casals 212).

² *Ideas* '92 devoted its Fall 190 issue to a study of how the city has been portrayed in contemporary literature.

³ The playbill situates the action in 1922, but Florentina's statement in Act III that she was born in 1855 and the description of her as about sixty point to an earlier date.

as the happiest of her life and associated with innocence. Her nostalgia is evident in references to the Rambla, the Plaça de Catalunya, and the peaceful neighborhood where Florentina and her friends reside. The action is set in Florentina's living room and occurs on a fall evening, three or four months later, and one week later still. This is not, however, the typical *comedia burguesa* nor does it seek to inculcate supposedly eternal values or defend family, home, and marriage (see Oliva 105, 131). The highly conventional form of a drawing-room setting and division into three acts separated by lapses of time frames an innovative content. The traditional symbolism of the seasons, with autumn indicative of old age and winter of death, is modified by the idea of new beginnings implicit in the main characters' break with the men in their lives and the announcement of Zerafina's pregnancy. While houses are often symbols of the oppression, isolation, and enclosure of women, in this instance private, domestic space is more nurturing. The brazier that occupies the center of the stage provides warmth and is a source of visual humor when Homer and Zerafina stumble over it and bark their shins. The balcony overlooking a garden speaks of communion with nature and is a means of communication with neighbors. By lowering a basket from a window of her upstairs apartment, Zoila requests the loan of an onion and delivers Florentina's birthday present.

Rodoreda had first-hand knowledge of marginality—as a woman, as a Catalan who moreover wrote in Catalan, as a supporter of the «wrong» side during the Civil War, and as one who was ostracized by some members of the exile community because of her relationship with Armand Obiols. This experience of multiple forms of exile—geographical, political, linguistic, and moral—was frequently reflected in her fiction and commented upon in interviews, as when she remarked to Montserrat Roig that «escribir catalán en el extranjero es lo mismo que querer que florezcan flores en el Polo Norte» (37). Rodoreda's female characters, as a rule, are not integrated within society but exist on its outskirts, as does Cecília Ce, and they are not greatly concerned with political or historical events. The problems of their daily existence are too pressing, and it is the everyday life of her characters that Rodoreda portrays. The most memorable of these characters are women. In a December 1, 1961 letter, Obiols comments that «sempre t'expresses millor, i vas més a fons, quan el protagonista és una dona» (quoted in Casals 263). Rodoreda creates the impression of oral communication in her prose, and we feel that we are listening to characters speak, that they are talking to us. Several short stories, including «Zerafina», are one-way dialogues or dramatic monologues in which we hear one side of a conversation, with the person ad-

dressed remaining silent. Rodoreda's gift for «escriptura parlada» (*Obres Completes* 1: 14) is basic to the theater, which by definition relies on spoken language.

The titular characters of the play form an odd couple. *Florent* in Catalan means «flowering, in flower; flourishing, prosperous,» but Florentina is a flower past her prime and her prosperity is relative. Although she owns the house where she lives and derives income from the rent paid by Zoila and Júlia, she also gives lessons in piano, voice, and declamation and has to put up with obnoxious pupils and difficult parents in order to support herself. Homer, despite his name, is not a man of epic adventures or heroic odysseys but a shopkeeper. There are in reality two Homers, the flesh-and-blood individual and the idealized Homer who is Florentina's creation, a figment of her imagination: *el seu amor*. The disparity between the two is immediately visible to the audience/readers. Short and fat, with dyed moustache and black wig, Homer is hypocritical, callous, self-serving, condescending, and a dreadful cheapskate. Long ago he and Florentina were sweethearts, but he married another woman and for years has led Florentina on, visiting her on Friday evenings, playing on her sympathy, and borrowing but not returning her money. This particular Friday he fails to return her welcoming kiss, declines her offer to fetch his robe and slippers, and instead asks her to sew on a button for him. This is the reason for his visit. While she gets him a drink, he strolls around the room, examining the furniture, testing the solidness of the walls, and reflecting aloud that this is a fine piece of property and it would be even more valuable if several more floors were added. It is apparent that Homer's intentions are less than honorable and that his delight that Florentina «té el ronyó cobert» (58) is strictly selfish. A woman more experienced than she would see through his complaints about how his wife does not understand him and treats him badly—an old story—and would be suspicious of his excessive praise for his virtuous son and saintly daughter. The guileless Florentina, however, believes Homer's every word and assures him that she regards his children as her own and would do anything for them. He is, of course, banking on that. Homer's sense of superiority is clear when he pooh-poohs Florentina's concern about crime in the neighborhood («Ah, les dones!... Les dones... Sempre esporuguides per alguna cosa» [49]) and scoffs at her compassion for the hard-working Zoila («el treball la distreu. Què faria, si no treballés?» [58]). His smug acknowledgment that Zoila is not as fortunate as Florentina, who has her Homer to look after her, evokes the image of Quimet. Before Homer departs, he makes Florentina a present of two candles from his shop. While

she is moved to tears by this thoughtful gesture, Júlia is blunt in her assessment: «Quina misèria» (60).

Homer does not appear in Act II, but he is on everyone's mind. The news of his wife's death raises the question of whether he will at last ask for Florentina's hand. Her faith in him is shaken by the discovery that the woman he used to refer to as «aquell escardot» (59) and Perpètua jokingly compared to «un carrabiner» and «una geganta amb mantellina» (69) was a good woman. Homer's assistant tells Florentina that he is convinced Senyora Eulàlia died of grief and worry about her son's gambling debts, her daughter's vanity, and her husband's philandering.

Florentina's conversation with Homer in Act III is a study in contrasts and contains some of the most poignant moments of the play. He, dressed in mourning, keeps bursting into tears, and Florentina plies him with glass after glass of brandy. Homer alleges that on her deathbed Eulàlia begged forgiveness for having made his life hell. Even though he may indeed have been impressed by his wife's death and the realization of his own mortality, he is playacting for Florentina's benefit. When he comments that he used to think that one day he and Florentina would be free but he now wonders if they ever can be, she responds with an emphatic «Jo sí» (120). She realizes that she has spent her entire life waiting and hoping without knowing exactly what she was waiting for. She has dreamt of a garden filled with flowers and shady paths along which she could stroll in the afternoon, but that dream is no longer possible. There are, she recognizes, gardens with paths that lead nowhere.

This interview, for Florentina, has been tantamount to seeing someone die before her eyes: «He vist morir una pero na devant meu» (124). She lights the candles Homer brought her in Act I, calls her friends, and recounts to them «la vella història de senyor Homer i de la senyora Florentina» (125). She has summoned them, she explains, to celebrate the burial of «un venedor de ciris i estampes. Res més» (126). *El seu amor* has ceased to exist. Florentina then writes to her lawyer, instructing him to demand immediate repayment of the money she loaned Sr. Homer Cisquelles some ten years ago and she drafts a new will that leaves everything she has to Zerafina. By using his full name and speaking of herself in the third person, Florentina distances herself from Homer and the woman she used to be. Her reference to *la vella història* signals recognition that she has been a character in the all-too-familiar tale of a married man who for years deceives a woman he has no intention of marrying. She now intends to take control of her life. In the final moments of the play Zerafina's supposedly dead boyfriend, Migueló, appears and asks her to marry him, but she refus-

es and orders him never to return, stating that she doesn't like men. Besides, she is now a woman of property.

Zerafina has come a long way since the fall evening she entered Florentina's life. When she walked on stage in the first act she was a simple-minded girl, «innocent i lenta» (47). She arrived seven hours late because she had got lost in the big city and when she asked directions, somehow ended up at the zoo. She then strolled along the Rambla, where a man invited her to have a drink with him—Florentina is appalled—and finally found her way to the house. As for her past history, previously recounted in the story that bears her name, it is one of exploitation, although Zerafina appears unaware of the extent to which she has been mistreated. The favorite sport of the fourteen-year-old of the first family she served was to make her stand in the middle of the hall. He then would take aim and kick her so hard in the rear that she would be catapulted some five meters while he yelled «gol!» Zerafina did not protest because, after all, he was her employers' son and she was only a servant. She fared no better at the hands of Miqueló, who used her as an ashtray. As she lay beside him he would flick the ashes from his cigarette into her navel and amuse himself by pulling the hair in her armpits until tears came to her eyes. Zerafina's manner of speaking—she is *papissota*—and her country-bumpkin air are a source of humor, but the events she narrates so matter-of-factly are horrifying, as is the way that she has been reduced to the status of an object for others' pleasure. Though she and Florentina differ in age, education, and social class, both have been taken advantage of by men, the servant more flagrantly, the mistress more subtly.

Their fate is shared by Júlia and Zoila. The former's married life has been a disaster. She has had to support her husband, who used to tie her to their bed so she could not run away, and the two fight like the proverbial cat and dog. One of their more violent arguments leaves her with a black eye. Júlia urges Florentina not to commit the folly of marrying Homer and ending up with a man who snores, hogs all the bedcovers, and smokes first thing in the morning. Her grim picture of marriage is obviously based upon her own experience. Zoila's luck with men has not been much better. She was briefly married to a gambler who committed suicide after ruining her financially, and for almost thirty years she has had no word from her son. Like Júlia, she thinks Florentina too kind for her own good and at times is tempted to spank her and strangle Homer. Perpètua's tale is different. Unlike the others, she was happily married but widowed at age thirty-eight, and she has had to fend for herself. She owns a boarding house and derives much amusement from her boarders, including the

elderly pear-shaped man who exercises on the balcony every morning and stuffs himself with cookies in the privacy of his room. When she wins 100,000 *duros* in the lottery, she puts a tidy sum in the bank and invests the rest in property. This is a canny, worldly-wise woman who is well able to take care of herself and certainly does not need a man to watch out for her. Not one to mince words, she scolds Florentina for wasting the best years of her life on Homer instead of sending him packing. Energetic and with an enormous zest for life, Perpètua organizes a pastry and wine party to celebrate her winnings and the death of Homer's wife, and kicks up her heels and after repeated toasts, sings a ribald song.

Comic relief is relatively rare in Rodoreda's novels. Although *La senyora Florentina i el seu amor Homer* has its tragic side and the comedy is often bittersweet, the play is rich in humor that ranges from the very broad, almost farcical, to the subtle, and is visual, verbal, and situational. I have already mentioned Zoila's lowering and raising of the basket and characters' stumbling over the brazier. In Act I the doorbell rings some nine times as Homer and each of Florentina's friends arrive and there are several «no-shows»—occasions when Florentina goes to the door but finds no one there because at the last minute Zerafina has gotten cold feet and hidden. The latter's speech and antics are often humorous, as is the behavior of the four tipsy friends. In the written text, Florentina tells Zerafina to give a pastry to one of the piano students; in the staged version the boy gobbles handfuls of sweets. When Miqueló shows up and insists the he wants to marry Zerafina, the following exchange takes place:

MIQUELÓ: Però si jo em vull casar...

ZERAFINA: Erez mort i no havièz d'haver tornat.

MIQUELÓ: Jo no ho sabia que fos mort.

ZERAFINA: (a totes): Éz méz tozut que una mula. (130).

Zerafina is, in effect, a descendant of the *graciosa* and her closing words remind us of the ending of many a Golden Age play: «Tot éz comèdia. . . A la noztra zalut. Fora d'aquezta caza, tot éz comèdia» (132). As is frequent in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theater, the servant's love affair echoes that of her mistress, but on a lower level, and the plot line that focuses on Zerafina is a comic parallel of the main action.

Rodoreda's play is well constructed, and Act I is a model of exposition. The opening scenes introduce the titular characters and show how one-sided their relationship is. The subsequent conversation among Florentina and her friends informs us of the background

of this relationship as well as offering glimpses of the lives of Zoila, Júlia, and Perpètua. The concluding dialogue between mistress and servant gives additional examples of men's mistreatment of women and allows the actress who plays Zerafina to display her talents for comedy. The situation is complicated in Act II by the death of Homer's wife, the question of whether he and Florentina will marry, and the latter's discovery that Homer may not be the man she thinks he is. Act III resolves the uncertainties with a dramatic decision on the part of Florentina and a humorous one on that of Zerafina.

A house with a garden is the preferred setting for Rodoreda's novels, as Arnau notes (114). Apparent in the play is the writer's nostalgia for the paradisiacal garden from which she was expelled at an early age and to which access is no longer possible. Flowers are mentioned repeatedly. A vase of artificial irises stands on the table in the living room, and in Act III Florentina brings home a bouquet of fresh flowers. Zerafina talks of planting carnations, bellflowers, a pumpkin vine, and perhaps even a cherry tree in the garden, and Florentina, as we have seen, uses *el jardí* as a symbol of happiness and tranquillity. Another important symbol is the bird, associated with freedom. The birthday hat made by Zoila is topped by *un colom* with outstretched wings, as if in flight. It is perhaps emblematic of Florentina, the genteel, aging spinster who is slightly ridiculous but nonetheless, touching long poised for flight but weighed down by Homer's empty promises.

During the play Florentina's friends refer to her as *pobra*, *pobreta*, *pobrissona*, but after her interview with Homer she rebels: «No em diguis pobra Florentina que no sóc pobra» (125). Her days of waiting and hoping in vain are ended and she refuses to be pitied. Zerafina in the last moments of the play underscores the independence of all these women: «Aquí zom zenyorez zolez i zom molt felizez, i delz homez enz en ben refumen. . . Totz elz homez zou igualz i totz prometeu cozez que dezpréz no compliu» (129-30). Whereas in the first act they were worried about burglaries and afraid of being alone, by the end of the play they have realized they are able to care for themselves and stand together, in solidarity. The mysterious soap vendor who earlier was seen lurking about the neighborhood turns out not to be a thief, and with that discovery their fears are allayed. Near the beginning of the third act Júlia asserts: «Entre totes som fortes. Fem un bon nus» (114), and the conclusion reaffirms this. While the play presents a bleak picture of male-female relations, it offers a positive image of these women and their capabilities. Their strength of character is in marked contrast to Homer's weakness, and they are able to derive happiness from simple pleasures: a glass of wine, a piece of pas-

try, a bit of gossip, a kiss on the cheek or a hug from a friend. They are innocents, like those other characters for whom Rodoreda declared her affection: «Els personatges literaris innocents desvetllen tota la meua tendresa, em fan sentir bé al seu costat, són els meus grans amics. . . . Colometa, Cecília, el jardiner, Armanda, Eladi Farriols, Valldaura, són, cadascun a la seva manera, personatges innocents» (*Obres Completes* 3: 32). Critics have called attention to the centrality of alienation, solitude, and lack of communication in rodoreda's work (Vosburg 420), but they are mitigated in this play by the deep affection, companionship, and dialogue shared by Florentina, her friends, and Zerafina. These women are spirited survivors.⁴

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