FEMALE TRAUMA AND TABOO:
INCEST IN SILVIA MOLINA’S CIRCUITO CERRADO

Andrea Byrum
Professor of Spanish
Edgewood College
byrum@edgewood.edu

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In her article “Inventions and Transgressions: A Fractured Narrative on Feminist Theatre in Mexico”, Kirsten Nigro states that a history of feminist playwrights in Mexico is by necessity “fractured” because of long periods of silence, either because women were not writing or they were unable to stage or publish their plays (137). She puts this story in the larger context which Jean Franco outlined in her book *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico*, which describes the plight of women in modern Mexican culture as “a master narrative where women either are not emplotted at all, or are emplotted according to an experience or definition not their own.” She says that Franco’s book focusses on those “momentary deviations or eruptions that briefly open up spaces in that other story that works so hard to keep women out” (137). Nigro’s analysis then goes ahead to concentrate on the 1976 staging of Rosario Castellano’s *The Eternal Feminine* as a new direction for Mexican women playwrights whereby they “dissect and deconstruct the institutions and social practices that ‘make things the way they are’, ... to open up spaces where women can position themselves as agents of action and social change” (138).

This is the cultural context for Silvia Molina’s first and only drama, *Circuito cerrado*, published in 1995 and performed in 1996. In it, she is chronicling one of Franco’s eruptions. She is emplotting the Mexican woman in a daring way not often found in Mexican literature and writing in the framework of the fractured narrative of feminist Mexican theater as outlined by Nigro. She is opening up a space where a woman both as a playwright and as a character can bring about a transformation in Mexican society.

Many Mexican women playwrights have deconstructed patriarchy, showing female characters in rebellion against the oppression and violence which have subjugated them for so long. Sample plays are Carmen Boullosa’s *Cocinar hombres* and *Aura y las once mil vírgenes* and Sabina Berman’s *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, just to name a few. In another article, Kirsten Nigro has noted how “this new feminism can help explain why since the 1970s much theatre written by women in Mexico has tended to focus on the particular rather than the general, on the local rather than the national, and on couples rather than families” (“Theatre, Women, and Mexican Society” 59).

In her one-act play, Silvia Molina dissects Mexican patriarchy in a bold way, but unlike some other feminists, she concentrates on the family rather than on a couple. Nigro herself (part of the same quote as above) has stated that many feminist playwrights shy away from the family because “it is the symbol par excellence that official rhetoric has long associated with the state.” Molina focusses on the family because she is broaching the most taboo of all topics, incest. She is inviting the implicit analogy of the family and the Mexican state. Like other writers, she sees the family as a microcosm of the nation, and the house/private/personal as a lens through which to view the nation/public/political. In a telephone conversation in February 2000, Silvia Molina told me that she sees the family
dynamics in *Circuito cerrado* as a metaphor for those who are in power in Mexican society at large. The power play going on in the family mirrors the power play going on between Mexican authorities and the people.  

Though Molina’s *Circuito cerrado* can be read on two levels, as a play about an individual family but also metaphorically about the Mexican state, Molina’s emphasis is definitely on the particular rather than the general. That will be the focus of this paper as well. Any more metaphorical interpretation must come after first having a clear reading of the individual level. Furthermore, the reading I am giving, which concentrates on the dramatic techniques, is most revealing at the level of the family.

All this is related to Silvia Molina’s other literary works, for her chief concern has always been to discover the secret past of a family and how this discovery impacts a female protagonist’s search for identity and, by extension, how it sheds light on modern Mexico’s secret past and true identity.

In this endeavour, Molina joins many other Mexican writers of the second half of the 20th century in dedicating their literature to expose the lies in the official history espoused by the Mexican state. These writers want to “break the taboo” and discuss what is not supposed to be discussed. As Carlos Fuentes has said, “art gives voice to what history has denied, silenced, persecuted.”

Indeed, Molina herself has used this phrase of “breaking the taboo of the official story” when talking about her intentions in writing about the Mexican historical figure Serrano in her novel *La familia vino del norte*: “I wanted to show that Mexican writers of my generation grew up with an official story, taught at school, and everything not in it was taboo. I wanted to tell the other part of the story, the one not told, to break the taboo of the official story, to tell what is not told in the history books” (García, 121-122). In her later novel *Imagen de Héctor*, she searches for the true identity of her own father, and in her newest novel *El amor que me juraste* the main character investigates the secret past of her parents.

But *Circuito cerrado* is a play, not a novel, so it is interesting to note how this unofficial story is communicated through drama. When I asked Silvia Molina why for the first time she had decided to write a play, she said that she was not sure, that she simply did not see conveying her message in prose (telephone interview). I think that it was her writer’s instinct at work. In this boldly unique contribution to contemporary Mexican theater, she has brilliantly exploited theater’s potential to act out the painful process of a female breaking the silence surrounding a taboo, and she has chosen the most universal of all taboos in the most sacred of Mexican institutions: family incest.

Severino Albuquerque, in his book *Violent Acts: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre*, has a chapter called “Representing the Unrepresentable.” Though he is referring to another context (the theatrical representation of torture), the phrase is quite
apt for the artistic representation of incest. Theater offers elements of representation that narrative cannot; it allows for the visual representation of a process which will have a direct and immediate impact on spectators.

In fact, one of Molina’s innovations for Mexican theater is to bring incest “out of the closet” in Mexican society and to “politicize incest survivorship”, the latter a term used by critic Rosaria Champagne to describe how an incest survivor differs from an incest victim by exposing that “incest’s impetus and consequences are in the public structure of society” and by refusing to remain silent “she speaks up and takes every opportunity to ‘make political’ incest experiences since silence would condone the social order of the law of heteropatriarchy” (2). Later in our analysis, we will see if the woman in Circuito cerrado is fully successful in her denunciation.

To contextualize the incest theme in recent Mexican literature, we should mention Inés Arredondo’s short story Río subterráneo, published in 1979 and recently the object of much interest by critics. In the introduction to her English translation Underground River and Other Stories, Cynthia Steele has observed that Arredondo’s “disturbing, original vision of the human condition, gender and power relations in northern Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century makes her one of Mexico’s significant writers” (xvii). She describes Arredondo’s central obsessions of erotic love, evil, and perversion, and how other women and the extended family are accomplices in the evil treatment of young female protagonists.

This quote from the female narrator of Río subterráneo is illuminating as she depicts her role in breaking the silence by talking about incest:

Voy a hablar de lo otro, de lo que generalmente se calla, de lo que se piensa y lo que se siente cuando no se piensa. Quiero decir todo lo que se ha ido acumulando en un alma provinciana que lo pule, lo acaricia y perfecciona sin que los sospechen los demás. Tú podrás pensar que soy muy ignorante para tratar de explicar esta historia que ya sabes pero que, estoy segura, sabes mal. Tú no tomas en cuenta el río y sus avenidas...No has estado tratando, siempre, de saber qué significan, juntas en el mundo, las cosas inexplicables, las cosas terribles, las cosas dulces. No has tenido que renunciar a lo que se llama una vida normal para seguir el camino de lo que no comprendes, para serle fiel.... Yo tengo destino, pero no es el mío. Tengo que vivir la vida conforme a los destinos de los demás. Soy la guardiana de lo prohibido, de lo que no se explica, de lo que da verguenza, y tengo que quedarme aquí para guardarlo, para que no salga, pero también para que exista. Para que exista y el equilibrio se haga. Para que no salga a dañar a los demás. (Arredondo 39-40)
This describes the similar burden that the character Rocío feels in Molina’s play, which exposes the pain of a traumatized daughter/sister returning home to break the obscene silence surrounding the dysfunctional family’s unhealthy relations. Rocío is another “guardian of the prohibited” whose destiny is determined by others, but who dares to talk about “the other” which is usually kept secret. In writing about incest, Silvia Molina joins other writers of what Karen Jacobsen McLennan calls a “literature of extremity”, and in so doing she is exposing “the familial, social, and cultural collaboration that has turned women’s testimony about incest into a secret history.”

The play’s title reveals the brilliant dramatic trope which Molina has chosen to represent the trauma of incest: a closed circuit. To more fully appreciate how well chosen this image is, both as a clinical description and an artistic representation of trauma, let us study the topic of trauma further.

First, the classic definition of trauma is “the result of exposure to an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people’s coping mechanisms” (Appelbaum, 243). Trauma has recently attracted a great deal of attention, from a broad range of disciplines such as psychoanalysis, literary criticism, history, and film studies. Cultural critics studying literature and society use trauma to analyze the tumultuous events of our time. It seems that we all have suffered severe psychological injuries and are trying to cope as best we can.

Particularly relevant for our analysis of Circuito cerrado are three studies on the topic of trauma in contemporary culture. In her book Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth mentions that the Greek word “trauma” originally meant an injury inflicted on a body, but that later in medical and psychiatric literature and in Freud it became a wound inflicted on the mind (3).

In his study Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud says that the wound of the mind is not, like the body wound, a simple and healable event, but an event that, like Tancred, is experienced too soon to be fully known and is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor... Trauma is the story of a wound that cries out ..., trying to tell us of a reality or truth not otherwise available. This truth can’t be linked only to what is known, but what remains unknown in our actions and language....

Trauma is the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event that isn’t fully grasped as it occurs, but returns later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. (3-4, 91)

The second study, the book Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties by Kirby Farrell, sees the concept of trauma as shaping some of the central narratives of the late 20th century -- like the war stories of Vietnam vets and apocalyptic sci-fi movies. He explores the uses of trauma as an explanatory tool during periods of overwhelming cultural change. He sees contemporary issues (like PTSD and the public’s
panic over child abuse) as cultural tropes, and he studies their literary and cinematic narrativizations.

Here is his description of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder, especially relevant for our study of *Circuito cerrado*:

Traumatic stress...is a shock or freeze that leaves the stress unassimilated and induces changes in the central nervous system. In effect, the short circuit [emphasis is mine] imprints the triggering event, leaving the victim in a state of neurological hyperarousal and vulnerable to distress that may emerge long after the crisis is past. (6)

Please keep in mind the imagery of “short circuiting” as a consequence of trauma.

A third pertinent study is Kathleen Vernon’s illuminating article “The Trauma of History/ The History of Trauma: Plotting Memory in Jorge Semprún”, in which she describes the “uncontainability of trauma” as a topic -- how it defies and compels conceptualization. She analyzes how the response to and memory of trauma are managed --or not-- in the individual, between the survivor and second-degree witnesses, and across cultures (157). Vernon studies how the Franco-Spaniard Semprún “translates trauma” as a recurring theme in all his works and how he employs post-war cinema’s technique of “psychic mimetism” to reflect a traumatized character’s mental processes (158, 159, 166).

Silvia Molina’s treatment of trauma in *Circuito cerrado* reflects many of the ideas outlined in these three studies. She “translates trauma” into drama, showing how the memory of trauma is uncontainable, affecting the individual victim and others around her. She demonstrates how the trauma resulting from incest causes a “short circuit” in people’s minds and behaviors and how trauma is the story of a wound that cries out, that returns later in flashbacks and other repetitive phenomena. Molina’s dramatic trope is perfect: incest is a closed circuit because a dysfunctional family is a closed unit, not allowing family members to leave and not allowing outsiders in. Her characters’ movement and dialogue represent a continual “short circuiting” of the truth, as she transfers to drama film’s technique of “psychic mimetism” to visually act out on stage the disrupted mental processes of trauma victims. She makes “psychic mimetism” a performative strategy. Molina concentrates on the female trauma suffered by the protagonist Rocío, so the audience watches as she and indeed the whole family act out their pain.

Let us now analyze in detail Molina’s dramatic techniques for representing the traumatization resulting from incest and ultimately from tyrannical patriarchy, where we will be reading the aftereffects of incest as texts, just as incest survivors learn to do. My goal is to highlight Molina’s considerable talent as a dramatist. She very much fits into the description of the creative playwrights outlined by Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas in their 1998 book *Latin American Women Dramatists* -- those women using theater not only to comment on their world but also “to bring change, using theater...
in a cultural politics of resistance.” In line with other feminist playwrights (even if Molina does not consider herself a feminist), she is “exploring gender roles, laying bare male flaws, investigating masculine and feminine space, and especially rescripting societal taboos” (Larson and Vargas, xix). Silvia Molina should be recognized for daring to write about incest and a dysfunctional family in the male-dominated field of theater, to create a truly new chapter in the “rewriting of the family”, as posited by Jean Franco (Chapter 8).

This paper will analyze trauma and incest as a theme and a dramatic principle. It will study the circular discourse and theatricality, as theme and technique. It will highlight the particular performative strategies our playwright has so brilliantly employed to make a Mexican audience or indeed any audience hear/see/and feel the trauma suffered by a Mexican female incest survivor, and the trauma suffered by all the adult children subjugated for years by a domineering father. We will focus on the “power plays” within this family which inevitably lead to the strong victimizing the weak and the subsequent inability or refusal by most of the members to face reality.

In doing all this, I hope to give this play the due attention it has not received from critics and, in some small way, to answer Sandra Cypress’s call to make more visible the achievements of Latin American women dramatists and Sue Ellen Case’s call for more analysis of performative strategies in women’s theatre.

We will begin by surveying the key features of Molina’s theatricality of trauma. The scenery and characters’ actions in the first scenes establish the audience’s perspective on the family and the strange dynamics at work within the family. As the curtain rises, the stage directions indicate that the spectator is to get a view of this family behind closed doors. We see the back of an old colonial house in Mexico City and “a very Mexican patio” surrounding the house. The stage directions dictate that “the spectator should see without difficulty through the windows the inside of the kitchen and the living room” and that in the living room there is “a television which the public should be able to see easily when it is turned on” (7). A car parked on one side of the patio is a spatial displacement suggesting something is awry in this family. On the opposite corner are swings and a table with chairs. Thus, the scenery arrangement is significant, allowing action to be going on both inside and outside the house, forming a “circle” of action as characters move around and as the spectator’s gaze moves back and forth.

The first scene has Rafael coming out of the house, whistling nervously, with pinzers and screwdrivers in his hands. He takes the radio out of the car, fixes it, and reinserts it. The symbolism of this invasive procedure will become clearer to the spectator later. Once the radio is fixed, we hear a rumba music, but Rafael has to turn it off because “El señor Rafael”, his father, is coming down stairs to watch his favorite soap opera.

The father and his watching television are crucial dramatic elements. The television functions throughout the play as a mediator or channel of communication amongst the family members, and between the play and the spectators. The indirect communication and the emotional distance characterizing the family are portrayed
theatrically by the father, whose face is never seen throughout most of the play, as he passively watches his soap opera on television. Silvia Molina told me that for the father the life of his children is a soap opera, indicating that he refuses to see reality (telephone interview). Throughout most of the play, the father never comes out of the house, and no one is ever seen talking to him. In fact, most of the conversations heard are those outside the house, on the patio, as if only outside the house can real communication take place.

In the first part of the drama, the soap opera the father watches on television is what is occurring in the patio between Rafael and his sister Rocío, who has returned to the family home to visit her family. The father’s domination is shown theatrically by his use of the all-powerful remote control, to change channels as he wishes. The television is the medium through which the father finds out what is going on with other members of the family, especially when he overhears conversations about dark family secrets. Here Silvia Molina is brilliantly employing a metatheatrical tool to dramatize a difficult, highly charged subject which resists representation.

The dramatic trope of the family as a “closed circuit” is beautifully crafted and is actually an appropriate image for a dysfunctional family which psychologists describe as one where the “borders are too enmeshed”, forming too tight a unit. There are only five characters appearing in the play, and four of them are family members (the other being Toña the maid who acts as a mediator). All the family names start with the letter “R”: Rafael father and son, one daughter/sister with the similar sounding name of “Raquel”, and the other daughter/sister Rocío, the victim whose name symbolizes innocence.

The character’s movements in the play are circular, as they go from the outside patio into the kitchen and living room. Eventually all the characters are involved in the circular movement as they change places with each other to talk and interact, circling around the secret topics which are taboo in this family.

All the characters’ lives are defined by the family circle. In a direct reference to a “closed circuit”, Rocío warns her sister Raquel that if she does not leave the family she will be trapped inside the walls of the house, a “closed circuit” (39). All the siblings have tried to get out of the closed system, but have failed. They are trapped in the “power play” exercised by their father. In the absence of a mother, Raquel has become the “stepmother” (as Rocío calls her), playing out her role of keeping everything in place and smoothing over any possible disharmony. Raquel has relinquished any desire for a life of her own so that she can care for her father. Carlos, a brother never seen in the play and only known through others’ reference to him, is still living at home but supposedly is going to move to Guadalajara to start a new life now that his wife has divorced him and he has lost his job.

Rafael, also still living at home, unbeknownst to Rocío, is an alcoholic who has sent away his wife and children (for a reason which becomes clear later). Rocío is the only family member who has actually left the house and is now returning, but her family’s damaging influence has caused her to lose a partner and a child. She claims that she is
leaving for Canada, but admits that it is hard to get out of the family circle because she is still emotionally involved: “[La familia] Me importa más de lo que crees. Me duele. Me lastima. Me produce sentimientos encontrados: como pena, coraje, lástima, odio...” (14). She must confront her brother Rafael to talk about the incident of incest from years before, if they are ever to have any peace.

The rich discourse, reflecting the communication patterns of a dysfunctional, traumatized family, is characterized by a “short circuiting” of the truth whenever a character tries to confront reality. The audience sees acted out what psychologists call a “disturbed intrafamilial communication.” There is always some kind of interruption or disconnect which breaks off the conversation. Often this is indicated in the stage directions by the word “transición”, to signal a family member’s changing the subject to evade the truth, or by the word “interrumpe” when one family member cuts off another’s line of conversation. This discourse mimics the avoidance symptoms which most traumatized survivors experience. It also depicts the “power play” amongst family members as they compete to control the discourse.

We will use one particularly effective scene to show this disturbed discourse. As Rafael and Rocío try to broach the forbidden topic which haunts them both, their conversation is full of interruptions, changes of topic, and non sequiturs.

Rocío: ¿Y cuándo regresan Flor y...?

Rafael: (Interrumpiendo.) ¿No se te antoja una cubita? Ahorita te la preparo. Con mucho hielo y un poquito de limón. (Transición.) ¿Viste salir a Carlos?

Rocío: Lo estuve buscando. Me dijeron en su oficina que ya no trabaja allá. En su casa nomás no contestan; iba a decirle que...

*Pasa Toña cerca de ellos.*

Toña: (Interrumpiendo. Se refiere a los refrescos.) ¿No que no tenía dinero, “señor Rafael”?

Rafael: (Se vuelve a verla negando con la cabeza. Señala el coche. Señala la canción.) ¿Por qué se ha de hacer lo que “ella” quiera?

Rocío: En esta casa siempre se hace se que “ella” quiere.
Es la madrastra.

Toña: Es la única que ve por tu papá. No seas injusta, Rocío. Si no fuera por ella, esta casa andaría de cabeza. Sólo ella...

Rocío: (Interrumpiendo.) ¿Cómo ves a mi papá?

Toña: (Moviendo la cabeza.) ¿Todavía no entras?

Rocío no contesta.

Toña: Pos...bien. Con sus achaques. Normal a su edad. Con el mismo genio. Y eso quiere decir que está bien.

Rocío: ¿Y tú, Toña?

Toña: Un día de éstos agarro mis trapos y me largo. Ya verás.

(17, 18)

Listening to this verbal “power play”, the audience senses the complicated emotional subtext of love, fear, hostility lurking beneath the characters’ words and actions. Each person vies to control the conversation either to discuss or to avoid certain topics, and every topic is seen as an opportunity to point a finger of blame at another. As is often the case, at the end one person vows to escape from this unbalanced family.

In other scenes we see that the interruptions can come from outside --the telephone, a doorbell, music, one person yelling to another-- or sometimes a given character has an interior “short circuit”, starting to say one thing but then saying something else. Other times a character’s words do not match his/her actions.

At times a character echoes the patriarchal discourse dominating the household. In this masterful example of “psychic mimetism”, Rafael reveals his confused thoughts as he explains Carlos’s divorce:

En realidad no quería divorciarse. Se me hace que Rosa...(pausa) no aguantó más la inestabilidad. Eso. (Transición.) Rosa se puso exigente, y mi papá...(Transición.) Se portó rebien; pagó el departamento y lo puso a nombre de los niños, y le está ayudando a Carlos con la pensión. Después de todo son sus nietos.

(19-20)

Rocío’s discourse is particularly interesting as she struggles to find her own voice. In this touching speech, another impressive example of “psychic mimetism”, our protagonist bravely stands up, faces the living room where her father is, and tries to proclaim her independence. Yet at the same time her words reveal her mixed feelings:
Tú tampoco entiendes, Rafael. No puede decir “como si nada”. Si eso no es nada... Me tiene que aceptar como soy. (Voliéndose hacia la sala y subiendo la voz.) Tiene que verme... No-soy-la-misma. No puedo estar aquí como si nada. Soy distinta; soy “otra” distinta a la que él cree. Soy yo; un ser independiente. No necesito que nadie apruebe mis actos. (Baja la voz.) Aunque me gustaría que lo hiciera. (Transición.) Soy una mujer. Si me equivoco, me equivoco; y ya. (Pausa.) Que volviera como si nada... ¿Regresar? Ya no podría regresar nunca. (Transición.) ¿Tú regresarías? (21)

However, as the drama progresses, Rocío gains confidence and she speaks the words she must to set herself and her siblings free.

The family members also use lots of vague referents, to form an ambiguous discourse, mimicking the oblique communication typical of people in abusive relationships. Rocío keeps referring to some “they” who destroyed her chances for a happy marriage. The spectator often has a hard time following the plot because the specifics are not given: exactly who had an accident while Rocío was pregnant?, why exactly did their mother die?, and was it possibly a suicide?

Now that we have surveyed the theatrical elements, let us focus on the three pivotal scenes in the play so we can actually see and hear the performative strategies in action, as our playwright intended. The plot development is circular as the drama precedes through a series of discussions, always between Rocío and another family member. Rocío, the incest survivor and her father’s favorite, is the catalyst, the one most wanting to break the taboo of silence around the family’s “dirty secrets.” After the initial exposition scenes, the play is structured around these three scenes: when Rocío and Rafael discuss the past incest, then Rocío and Raquel discuss how they are all trapped in the family circle, and finally the climactic confrontation between Rocío and her father. It is important to note that the dramatic structure links incest to the larger family unit and ultimately to patriarchy’s role in creating an incestuous relationship. Following the electronic “closed circuit” at the heart of this play’s imagery, after numerous “short circuits”, Rocío does finally succeed in forcing a discussion of the family secrets and of inching closer to the “truth”, but this eventually causes the latent violence to finally explode.

The long scene between Rocío and Rafael is characterized by a series of interruptions, as they act out the painful process of facing the incest episodes. In the beginning the spectator does not understand why Rafael is so nervous and what exactly is the topic both he and Rocío keep circling around, but it gradually becomes evident.

The rich discourse and theatricality Molina employs brilliantly represent the ambivalent behavior that those involved in incest actually exhibit, both wanting and not wanting to re-experience the traumatic event. Re-experiencing and avoidance are two
clusters of symptoms which traumatized individuals actually have, as diagnosed by psychiatrists, and Molina has masterfully captured this behavior in her characters.\textsuperscript{11} Rocío, and somewhat Rafael, also exhibit the broad range of emotional aftereffects of sexual abuse: depression, self-blame, rage, terror, mistrust, fears about control, intimacy difficulties, and self-destructive behaviors (Quina, 143).

Rocío starts by saying that she really did not return home to cause trouble (which is partially true). Rafael immediately interrupts her (this is the stage direction given) to blurt out “I need to talk with you,” then just as quickly changes the topic to talk about the soft drinks he has bought them. The two of them sit in the swings, visually taking on the role of children as they subconsciously try to come to terms with their traumatized relationship during adolescence. They talk about the ruined life of the absent Carlos and his hopes for escaping to Guadalajara, and Rocío comments “Aquí lo van a retener. Quisieran tenernos a todos”, referring to the dysfunctional family’s not allowing individual members any freedom (19).

At this point, the stage directions indicate that the father, inside the house, is watching the television intently. Evening falls, and the conversation becomes more intense as Rocío and Rafael move closer to the forbidden topic. The father changes the channels but cannot avoid listening because the patio scene is on all the channels. Thus he is forced to see his children’s lives, even if he is seeing them as a soap opera.

After other interruptions and armed with a bottle of rum, Rafael and Rocío finally confront their incestuous relationship. Molina uses an interesting metatheatrical device to show simultaneously the incest scene from the past and its re-experiencing in the present. Rocío and Rafael go out of the view of the television and sit in the darkness, back to back; the spectator sees only their silhouettes and can only vaguely make out their movements. Raquel, who has come into the living room to join her father to watch television, desperately tries to find them on the screen, but all she can see is the empty patio. Rocío begins by articulating the fear and yet the necessity she feels to face the incest: “Aunque nos dé miedo. Es algo que siempre me dio verguenza siquiera pensar. Si hablamos de eso, lo vamos a olvidar...Nos enseñaron a no decir las cosas. No está bien” (27). Rocío blames “them” -- her parents?, Mexican society? -- for not teaching her and her brother to speak the truth. Rafael agrees that it is necessary to talk about two things: what happened “that night” and about Antonio Fernández. The stage directions say that Rafael’s "discourse is ambiguous because he does not want to tell the truth about either one of these things” (28). Neither the spectator nor Rocío understand why Rafael wants to talk about Antonio Fernández, but later on we surmise that it has something to do with the “big trouble” Rafael is presently involved in.

Then the stage directions indicate that the audience will experience two opposite versions of the incest: one seen on television and the other described by Rafael and Rocío.

Raquel estabiliza la tele en una escena donde se verá que se abre la puerta de una recámara. Entra un muchacho que distinguimos sólo
Through this metatheatrical tool, Molina is portraying the difficulty or refusal by trauma victims to clearly remember what happened in a moment of terror. Rocío and Rafael’s version is not the same as the t.v. version, plus their version gives each’s point of view and motivation -- whether accurate or not -- while the television version just gives the actions. Raquel and her father see just the television version, while only the audience sees both versions and is therefore in the best position to compare what probably really happened with what Rocío and Rafael remember or will admit.

Viewing the actions on the television, the audience sees a scene starting out with a playful sister-brother embrace of consolation, but then gradually their movements turn erotic and violent. Meanwhile, Rafael and Rocío reconstruct their individual feelings at that point in their past. After her mother’s death, Rocío had just returned from being in a hospital, where her father had sent her. She felt left out and all alone, while the male family members were all together. This is a vivid picture of male domination of females in a patriarchal family. Interestingly, while Rocío remembers her own suffering (incest), she also remembers her mother’s, hinting that her mother may have committed suicide, an idea which Rafael rejects.

Rocío says that when her brother embraced her “that night” that she was only trying to console him because she either thought it was a dream or that their father had beaten Rafael. At the same time, the television screen shows the couple’s moves becoming more suggestive until the male finally rips off the female’s top and she’s exposed nude. On t.v. the two figures separate, while on the patio Rafael and Rocío turn to face each other -- an interesting theatrical device to show how the two versions are opposite and perhaps suggesting that subconsciously Rocío and Rafael recall what actually happened, even though they quickly cover it up. Rocío blames herself, as an incest victim often does, saying that she was stupid and naive. On t.v. the girl tells the boy to leave -- then the t.v. goes blank and Rafael turns his back on Raquel. The father uses the remote control to “componer” (adjust) the picture until the patio is empty. He does not want to see any more.

At this point, Rafael uses the classic scapegoat technique; he blames the victim, saying that Rocío had seduced him. This is a miniature “power play” between Rafael and Rocío: she says that she had the right to go naked in her own house in front of her brothers while he says that she was provoking them.

There is another interruption at this key moment -- a bell in the kitchen which Raquel is ringing to summon Toña, and one can imagine, to cut off the conversation. Rafael is now “desperate”, saying he was confused, trying to blame his actions on the
death of his mother. But Rocío says that this is not fair; that their mother died and the family treated Rocío harshly by putting her in a hospital where she felt isolated. What the males of the family saw as seduction she says was only her trying to be part of the family again.

One last interruption totally stops the conversation. Raquel turns on the light in the kitchen and screams for Toña to come. By the end, the audience sees that Rafael and Rocío still have completely different interpretations of what happened: Rafael is in total denial again, saying that “nothing happened that night” and Rocío saying that “that night separated us.” The two walk off stage hand in hand, the father turns off the television and leaves the living room, and Raquel screams “Toña”, making her another scapegoat.

So though she has at least named the evil deed by bringing up the topic of incest, Rocío has ultimately failed: she never totally gets Rafael to admit what happened, nor does she herself totally accept responsibility for her own actions, and the father has again “turned off” the reality of his own children.

In the next crucial scene, the action moves inside the house, into the kitchen. The audience can now see more clearly because Raquel opens the curtains. Rocío tries to get Raquel to face certain ugly truths about the family and especially about their mother’s role in letting such an unhealthy atmosphere develop. First, much to Rocío’s surprise, Raquel tells her that Rafael is living at home. Rocío retaliates by attacking Raquel, saying that she does not have to stay home to care for her father and urging her to leave the house, “the closed circuit”, before it is too late (39). Rocío says that Raquel is just like their mother, always playing the victim, and blames her mother as much as her father for damaging their children’s lives by “not teaching us to face life” and by controlling their every move (40). Basically, Rocío is saying that Raquel has an Electra complex, rejecting all men because they are not her father and doing absolutely everything to prevent violence from breaking up the family. Thus, Rocío has blamed her mother and her surrogate mother as accomplices to the males in creating too tight a family circle.

Finally, amidst this heightened unrest and emotions spinning out of control, comes the climactic scene: the patriarch appears on stage. The characters move in a circle: Rocío leaves the kitchen to go into the living room where the audience sees, but cannot hear, what appears to be an argument going on between her and Rafael. On the television, the screen shows what is happening in the kitchen, where the father enters to talk to Raquel and Toña, who are preparing supper. Carrying wine and food, he is oblivious to all that is going on around him, talking cheerfully about how nice it is that all his children have come home so they can have a nice party, just like the old days. Raquel tries to make him see reality: that Rocío is leaving home for good, that Carlos has lost his job and family, and that Rafael has lost his family too. But her father ignores her.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Rafael is becoming increasingly agitated: “Rafael se queda allí, caminando de un lado a otro. Sacalabotella y bebe. Se muestra angustiado. Inquieto. En la televisión aparece siempre el mismo programa violento o distintas escenas
de violencia” (45). Then Rafael switches the channel so the action from the kitchen appears on screen -- this creates a circular movement. The radio music reflects the mood of the family; Raquel turns on a station of tropical rumba music, but Rocío switches it to a somber baroque tune. Rocío and her father coldly greet each other with a kiss.

By this point, the disjunctive discourse amongst the family members has reached a climax, as shown by this exchange about the simple topic of preparing supper:

Raquel: *(A Toña.)* Pon la mesa en el comedor.

Toña: *(A Rocío.)* ¿Cuántos lugares?

El Padre: *(A Rocío.)* ¿No te gustaría cenar en el patio?

Raquel: Rocío ya se va, papá. *(A Rocío.)* ¿Verdad?

Rocío: No es mala idea, papá. Hace mucho calor para estar allá dentro, pero..

El Padre: *(Interrumpiendo: a Toña.)* Lava dos copitas. *(A Rocío.)* ¿Qué tal un poco de vino blanco? (46)

This is verbal “power play” at its best, as Raquel tries to shut out Rocío, but Rocío and the father ignore her and then the father cuts off Rocío. Ostensibly they are discussing supper, but the audience feels the violent subtext.

The car in the back yard becomes a physical symbol of the emotional and psychological displacement in the family. The car will not go away, so the father has to deal with it. He wants Rafael to move the car so they can eat on the patio, and this is Rocío’s opportunity to bring up to the father that Rafael has a big problem: that they had better keep the car hidden till “they” decide how to handle the situation. Raquel, sensing the tension, asks Rocío to leave, but Rocío replies with a direct reference to the violence that she hopes erupts: “¿No sería bueno que una explosión nos liberara o nos matara a todos de una vez?” (48).

It is significant that the father and Rocío go out to the patio to talk. She has been able to open up the closed space of the house. The father is uncharacteristically “derrotado.” Meanwhile Raquel is with Rafael in the living room, and the audience sees Rafael’s violent gestures as he almost hits her. But finally Rocío has her chance to talk directly with her father. He says that he thought he was correct, but she says he should have ended the “state of siege” long ago (note another image of circular imprisonment). She says that he was worse than a military man, making them all live constantly in fear of him. She tries to get him to face the grim reality of all his children, which he has caused, and especially to see that Rafael has an immediate, serious problem:

Rocío: *(Interrumpiendo.)* Tienes razón, no vine a hablar de mí.
Se trata de Rafael. *(Transición.)* No se atrevió a decirte. Pero de todas maneras va a estallar la bomba. Tus cuatro hijos hemos fracasado, papá. No somos lo que pretendes. Nunca has querido ver la realidad.

*El Padre se levanta y camina. Rocío lo sigue camina a un lado de él.*

El Padre: Resulta que yo soy el culpable de todo.

Rocío: No he dicho eso, papá. Nosotros también.

El Padre: Embaracé a tu madre antes de casarnos. Yo no quería atarme a ella tan...

Rocío: *(Interrumpiendo.)* Es demasiado tarde para comenzar por el principio, papá.

El Padre: Me hacías falta, quédate conmigo.

Rocío: Me voy a Canadá, papá. *(Transición.)* Pero se trata de Rafael.

El Padre: ¿Canadá?

Rocío: Ni siquiera me has preguntado cuál es el problema de Rafael, papá. Nunca quisiste saber qué nos pasaba. Arreglabas las cosas por encima. ¿Nunca se te ocurrió pensar por qué Rafael se robaba los ceniceros de cristal cortado, las charolas de plata, las figuras de lladró? ¿No pensaste que su alcoholismo era serio? ¿No era extraño que si a un hijo tuyo “no le faltaba nada” cometiera esos hurtos, se perdiera en la ilusión del alcohol? ¿Nunca pensaste que la mitomanía de Carlos dejaba de ser una puntada, “qué imaginación, qué fantasía de este muchacho”, y era un problema más hondo? ¿Nunca se te ocurrió que era muy raro que Raquel no pudiera relacionarse con ningún hombre? ¿Nunca pensaste que odiaba a todos los hombres por el desprecio y el miedo que te tenía? *(49-50)*

This is all too much truth for the father to accept, so the inevitable violence finally bursts out: he slaps Rocío. Later he says that he “lost control”, but she says that is exactly how he is. She valiantly tries to stand up to her father, to win in the “power play”: “No me voy a quedar callada como mi mamá...Sólo nos enseñó a bajar la cabeza, a aceptar los golpes” *(51)*. Then she sits down; the stage directions say that “Se ve incrédula ante la situación, ante la realidad: El Padre no quiere saber nada de Rafael. Parece vencida” *(52)*. Rocío is defeated. She bravely tried to get her father to see reality, but he absolutely refuses.
She shatters all remaining illusions, telling her father that Carlos won’t be returning and telling Raquel that her harmony is now totally broken. While the father is grumbling about how Carlos won’t last three days in Guadalajara, Rocío, at the height of her trauma, screams out: “Los judiciales andan buscando a Rafael” (53). She turns to leave, but looks back and tells her father to get prepared. Then everything happens rapidly: the door bell rings, Toña leaves to answer it, Rafael in an agitated state comes out from the interior of the house, lines appear on the television screen, and the father sits down “derrotado” on one of the patio chairs. Rafael, from the door of the kitchen, says to Rocío, “son ellos”, and Rocío walks toward Rafael. While the stage goes dark, a rumba music can be heard (53).

So outside forces have had to intervene: the law has had to come to establish order over a family out of control. It is ironic that only a stronger authority can dominate the authority figure of the family patriarch. It seems that Rocío will help Rafael, which is both a sign of forgiveness and support but also may draw her back into the family circle.

In conclusion, a final analysis of Molina’s brilliant dramatic trope of the closed circuit will lead us to an over-all interpretation of the play and especially an interpretation of its metaphorical level: what is the play saying about Mexican patriarchy at large?

The answer lies in a closer look at Molina’s treatment of the dramatic space in which her characters move and in which their “power play” is acted out. The male model of space is physically closed, clearly defined, and hierarchical. The image of the “closed circuit” is a male model of space, and Molina has dramatically visualized for the audience the stifling and pathological effects of this closed space on all the family members.

But at the same time she has shown that the closed circuit can be and has been broken: through the characters’ movements and their discourse, new female spaces to the outside and to truth have been opened up. Rocío has used her voice to speak up and control the verbal power play with her siblings and her father, and thereby she has opened up a new, freer space. All the conversations going on outside the house have broken up the closed circuit, so that eventually such frank conversation can go on even inside the house. By the play’s end, the father leaves the house to hear Rocío’s truthful description of patriarchy’s destructive effects on them all. Her scream forever shatters the vicious circle, as outside agents move in.

Of course, the play’s real force and ultimate interpretation must be found outside the play itself, in its strong impact on the audience who has witnessed the incestuous circle and its painful yet necessary break-up. Even though Rocío feels defeated, the audience has another view. For them, not only the taboo of incest but also the taboo of talking about it have been broken in Mexican society. Molina has exposed a literally and symbolically incestuous Mexican patriarchy. Most notably, she has used theater itself as a vehicle of change, implying that theater can help Mexican society cope with the trauma whose root cause is patriarchy, not only in a family, but also in society as a whole. Molina
is proposing that Mexican society cope with its national trauma step by step, starting with naming the trauma in public and facing its damaging consequences. The final ominous threat of some strong outside force needing to intervene to “put the house in order” could be her way of pressing on Mexicans the need for them to take care of their own inner affairs -- be it in the family, the government, or the country as a whole -- before the law, or worse yet, the United States intrudes. Historical events have shown that late twentieth century Mexico is in crisis and that its citizens are traumatized. Circuito cerrado metaphorically depicts this trauma and calls for an emotional and immediate response by the Mexican public.

Mexican literature, and especially women playwrights, almost always have a dual focus -- the personal and the political. Silvia Molina is using the “power play” of the family as a metaphor for the “power play” at the national level which is now wreaking havoc. But she has joined many other Latin American playwrights in making the ultimate “power play” by manipulating drama’s potent elements in order to act out a living, crying wound right before our very eyes. Once the trauma is exposed, the healing can begin.

NOTES

1 The edition used of Silvia Molina’s Circuito cerrado is indicated in the “Works Cited.”
Via an e-mail to me, Silvia Molina indicated that this play had been represented twice: in May 1996 at the Teatro de Santa Catarina at UNAM and again in September 1996 at the Sala Julián Carrillo de Radio at UNAM.

2 Silvia Molina was kind enough to give me a brief interview by telephone on Feb. 26, 2000. I asked her if she saw this play as a metaphor, and she said yes. She said the play is about searching for the truth and about “el juego del poder”, “power play.”

3 In the e-mail sent to me by Silvia Molina, she included this quote from the program for the second representation of her play, in September 1996: “Silvia Molina aborda en Circuito cerrado las relaciones de dominio y sometimiento, de poder y debilidad que se dan en una familia, como metáfora de un país o de un gobierno. El autoritarismo del padre conduce a los hijos al borde de la destrucción o al momento de buscar la liberación, la independencia y el desarrollo personal. Excepto Rocío, la más joven, la que se ha ido de la casa y vuelve sólo a enfrentar a sus hermanos con el padre, o al padre con los hijos, todos viven el infierno de la casa paterna a cambio, tal vez, de las camisas planchadas, la sopa caliente, un techo seguro o la compañía.” This quote supports the idea of the play being about power and the relation of the strong and the weak, both in a family and as a metaphor for the country.

4 Karen Jacobsen McLennan has compiled a valuable anthology of women’s incest literature, entitled Nature’s Ban. She says that “the subject of incest belongs to the literature of extremity”,
coming from Carolyn Forché’s description of “the poetry of extremity” written by “those who endured events beyond normal experience, such as atrocity, world war, and the Holocaust”, pp. 6-7.

The other quote cited in the text of my paper is from Ellen Bass, author of The Courage to Heal, and is found on the back cover of the McLennan anthology, in her favorable comments about Nature’s Ban.

5 Kathleen Vernon, in the Introduction of her article “The Trauma of History/ The History of Trauma: Plotting Memory in Jorge Semprún”, gives an interesting overview of the wide interdisciplinary interest in the topic of trauma. She mentions the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra, Lawrence Langer, and Eric Santner as examples of the “uncontainability” of this theme, p. 157.

6 The book Latin American Women Dramatists, edited by Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas, is an excellent source of information. In their introduction, they outline four categories of concerns for these playwrights: Theatrical Self-Consciousness, Politics, History, and Feminist Positions. Silvia Molina fits in all of them except History.

The quote found in the text of my paper was taken off the back cover of the book, and the idea about the playwrights using theater to “comment upon their worlds” is from p. xxiii.

7 For another study of discourse and theatricality, as both theme and technique, see Sharon Magnarelli’s article “Maruxa Vilalta: Una voz en el desierto” in Larson and Vargas Latin American Women Dramatists. Though our studies are different, we share similar interests.

8 The play Circuito cerrado has received very little attention from critics. Lady Rojas Trempe has analyzed some of the general features of the play, in the “Apéndice” to the 1995 publication of the play, but she did not focus on the dramatic techniques.

I read about Sandra Cypress’s article “¿Quién ha oído hablar de ellas?” and its call for more visibility for the Latin American women dramatists in Kirsten Nigro’s article “Theatre, Women, and Mexican Society: A Few Exemplary Cases in F. Dauster’s Perspective on Contemporary Spanish American Theatre.

In the Introduction to her book Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre, Sue-Ellen Case laments that most articles written on feminist theatre still analyze textual rather than performative strategies. She calls for more to be written on theories of performance, or performative elements, p. 2.

9 Jeri Doane of the Yale Psychiatric Institute writes this in his article “Parental Communication Deviance and Offspring Psychopathology”: “One attribute of the family that has been extensively studied is the role of disturbed intrafamilial communication in families with a psychiatrically ill member. Disturbed communication can be conceptualized in a myriad of ways. Families in which there is a real paucity of any kind of verbal communication could be construed as deviant, as are families in which blatant hostility and conflict are pervasive”, p. 937. In general, this describes the disturbed and conflicted communication patterns of the family in our play.

10 It is interesting to note how accurately Silvia Molina has translated the clinical symptoms of trauma to the theatre. For example, the avoidance symptoms typical of traumatized individuals, as described by psychiatrists Paul Appelbaum, Lisa Uyehara, and Mark Elin in their book Trauma and Memory. They write that the avoidance symptoms are “efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or
conversations associated with the trauma; efforts to avoid activities, places, or people which arouse recollections of the trauma; and an inability to remember an important aspect of the trauma”, p. 228. These symptoms could describe the discourse of Rocío and Rafael and other family members as they evade the painful topics they want and don’t want to talk about, causing the “interruptions” and “transitions” in their discourse.

11 Again, Appelbaum et al write that “traumatic events seem to leave indelible memory traces” and that “some individuals find significant meaning in ‘not forgetting’ their trauma”, p. 226. “Traumatic memories are often recalled with extreme clarity and perceived as highly accurate,” p. 227. Rocío and Rafael are re-experiencing their traumatic episode and may think they are remembering it accurately, but through the television the audience sees an alternative version which may more likely represent what really happened. This traumatic re-experiencing, coupled with avoidance, is theatrically portrayed by Molina in this play.

12 Though Molina’s stage directions are somewhat oblique, the “erotic and violent” movements acted out in this scene clearly suggest an act of incest, as found in most definitions; for example, this one from the Psychiatric Dictionary, ed. Robert J. Campbell: “Sexual congress between male and female who are blood related, such as between mother and son, father and daughter, brother and sister, or among cousins. In recent years, the tendency has been to broaden the concept to include any sexual contact, or any behavior that is designed to stimulate the victim sexually, including touching, oral-genital contact, showing erotic writing or pictures, or making suggestive comments”, p. 359.

13 Myra Gann, in her article “Masculine Space in the Plays of Estela Leñero”, has studied spatial politics (in Larson/Vargas Latin American Women Dramatists). She writes that Leñero “is concerned with the way people stake out, protect, and share essential spaces, struggling to protect themselves from the power exerted by others within and because of those spaces”, p. 235. She states that one of Leñero’s plays “shows us that apartments, houses, or ‘homes’ in general, in spite of the commonplace view that they are places for women, correspond more closely to the male model of space than to a feminine one: they are physically closed and clearly defined; ...hierarchies are inevitably established in them; and, ..., they can actually make a woman more vulnerable to domestic violence by making it easier to locate her.” This image of a space in which power plays are acted out and the male model of space as being closed have particular resonance for Molina’s play.

WORKS CITED


------. E-mail to Andrea Byrum. 3 March 2000.


