MARÍA FÉLIX: THE LAST GREAT MEXICAN FILM DIVA:
THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEXICAN FILM, 1940-1970

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ABSTRACT

In my project, I analyze the star text of María Félix (1914-2002). In spite of her prolific film career of 47 films and her memorable image in the media, the scholarly treatment of her films and larger star text has been limited. As vintage film magazines and Mexican melodramatic comics attest, Félix was very visible and her personal life was scrutinized as her “real-life” self played out characteristics from her *mala mujer* film persona—her multiple husbands and lovers, her relationship with her son, and even her wardrobe choices.

I analyze many of her films and her image in other forms of media such as *fotonovelas*, trade magazines, and her biographical sources in the following chapters. Her star image is powerful and far-reaching and presents an alternative model of Mexican womanhood from the beginning of her film career in the 1940s through (and even beyond) her last film in 1970. The star text of María Félix is a site that registered tensions between modernity and the traditional at a particular moment in Mexican history. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought many changes to society as warfare destabilized the family and disrupted the region. After the war, the Revolution became institutionalized as the government attempted to put into practice the goals of the Revolution. From the 1940s and throughout 1950s and 1960s it was a time of increased
industrialization and urbanization as people migrated to the cities to find employment, as it became increasingly difficult to support a family through farming. These social tensions registered in her films and star text are in relation to women’s changing roles as Mexican women gained more political freedoms, including national suffrage in 1953, and began working outside the home as the nation became more industrialized and urbanized throughout the 1940s and subsequent decades.
Dedicated to P
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Solo he sido mujer con corazón de hombre.”

At the funeral of María Félix (1914-2002), who passed away on her birthday on April 8th at the age of 88, even the president of Mexico Vicente Fox paid his respects to the fallen diva saying, “As an artist, she gave everything to Mexico” (Gamboa 67). Controversy followed her, even beyond the grave when she was exhumed as family members suspected foul play was involved in her death. When I mention to my Latin American colleagues that my thesis treats the film career of Félix, her name brings instant recognition as they recall having seen her dominate the screen in ¡Doña Bárbara! or having heard of her controversial relationships or know the song “María Bonita.” Félix is an icon of gender performers as her likeness, along with that of other divas such as Mae West, Carmen Miranda and Cher, is brought to life by Brazilian drag queen performers who state, “truthfully, it is not easy for a woman to interpret a diva” (Borges).

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1 “I have only been a woman with the heart of a man.” (Todas mis guerras 27)
2 “Como artista, le dio todo a México.” (Gamboa 67, my translation)
3 “Na verdade, não é fácil para uma mulher interpretar uma diva.” (Borges, my translation)
In my project, I analyze the star text of María Félix. In spite of her prolific film career of 47 films and her memorable image in the media, the scholarly treatment of her films and larger star text has been limited. While Hershfield has done extensive research on Dolores del Río in her study *The Invention of Dolores del Río*, Félix was also an international film star, working in France, Italy, and Spain⁴, yet her star text remains largely untouched. As vintage film magazines and Mexican melodramatic comics attest, Félix was very visible and her personal life was scrutinized as her “real-life” self played out characteristics from her *mala mujer* film persona—her multiple husbands and lovers, her relationship with her son, and even her wardrobe choices.⁵ Félix recognizes this image even as she states that she “did not try to be an angel because a halo is necessary for that but she was not the devil in the form of a woman” that she was made out to be.⁶ She notes in her autobiography that she has been accused “of kidnapping her own son, of murdering her secretary, stealing an emerald necklace that was actually a wedding present, of having married a man for his money, of being taking lovers for publicity, of lesbianism, and even being a drug addict” (18).⁷


⁵ She was famously criticized for wearing pants while in mourning for her recently deceased husband Jorge Negrete.

⁶ “No pretendo ser un ángel porque para eso se necesita aureola, pero tampoco soy el diablo en forma de mujer.” (*Todas mis guerras* 18, my translation)

⁷ “Durante mi vida he sido acusada del secuestro de mi propio hijo, del asesinato de mi secretaria, del robo de un collar de esmeraldas que se me dio como regalo de bodas, de haberme casado con un hombre sólo por su dinero, de ser amante de otro con miras publicitarias, de lesbianismo y hasta de ser adicta a las drogas.” (*Todas mis guerras* 18, my translation)
analyze many of her films and her image in other forms of media such as fotonovelas, trade magazines, and her biographical sources in the following chapters. Her star image is powerful and far-reaching and presents an alternative model of Mexican womanhood from the beginning of her film career in the 1940s through (and even beyond) her last film in 1970. The star text of María Félix is a site that registered tensions between modernity and the traditional at a particular moment in Mexican history. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought many changes to society as warfare destabilized the family and disrupted the region. After the war, the Revolution became institutionalized as the government attempted to put into practice the goals of the Revolution. From the 1940s and throughout the 1950s and 1960s it was a time of increased industrialization and urbanization as people migrated to the cities to find employment, as it became increasingly difficult to support a family through farming. The social tensions registered in her films and star text are in relation to women’s changing roles as Mexican women gained more political freedoms, including national suffrage in 1953, and began working outside the home as the nation became more industrialized and urbanized.

Stars

What is a movie star? The word “star” has a variety of uses as a noun and a verb. One of its primary meanings is “any one of the many celestial bodies appearing as luminous points in the night sky.”8 When used as a metaphor in the term “movie star,” it suggests something above the earth, i.e. above the normal mortal plane of

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8 I consulted the Oxford English Dictionary.
existence, pertaining to the gods and the heavens, and having a divine status. The literal star is luminous just as the figurative “star” shines in the darkness of the movie theater, larger than life and above the viewers in the audience. An interesting secondary use refers to “the pagan belief that the souls of illustrious persons after death appear as new stars in the heavens.” Although, movie stars do not have to be dead to be a “star,” the association with illustrious persons is present. Stars are transcendent beings; as those who move beyond the mundane cares of the world. When used in the figurative sense, the “star” is “a person of brilliant reputation or talents”, shines in society, or is otherwise outstanding. The star is often used as a symbol to indicate work that is well done, as in the “gold star” a child might receive in school or the stars that rate restaurants and hotels as well as a star that is worn as insignia in military decoration that denotes knighthood or officer status. By applying the label of star to an individual, it suggests excellence and high status.

In addition, the concept of star also holds the idea of influence as in astrology where the stars hold sway over human affairs and affect the destiny of individuals. In more recent times, many movie stars and other celebrities become involved in politics or charities. Former President Ronald Reagan began his career on the silver screen. Jane Fonda continues to be spit upon by Vietnam veterans for her bold war protests. Arnold Schwarzenegger, body builder, star of many action films, is now governor of California. Certainly he is able to influence some human affairs. But even when the “star” is not literally a political leader, many stars voice opinions on the way one should vote in elections or on certain issues in efforts to sway their audiences’ opinions. On
the level of the market, stars affect consumers, influencing them to see certain films, to purchase certain products and services by their image in advertisements, product use in their films, or other more subtle means of persuasion. Although Félix did not seem to be involved in the more political aspects as these more recent stars have been, her image was used to sell cosmetics, hair coloring kits, and lingerie.

French film critic Ginette Vincendeau defines “stars” as “celebrated film performers who develop a ‘persona’ or ‘myth’, composed of an amalgam of their screen image and private identities, which the audience recognizes and expects from film to film, and which in turn determines the parts they play” (viii). Numerous magazine articles and interviews about Félix use phrases including ‘persona’ and ‘myth’ that point to this ‘amalgam’ that film scholar Ginette Vincendeau describes. She states regarding the public interest of stars’ “private lives;” “It is assumed that audiences are fascinated by every detail of their marriages, affairs, children and homes” (22). Certainly this was the case with Félix as news about her “private life” was circulated in trade magazines and even used to promote her films. For example, the film *El rapto* (1954), an adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew* discussed more fully in the second chapter, was promoted using the married relationship of the two stars (Félix and Jorge Negrete). Although Vincendeau’s analysis provides insight into the nature of the movie star, it is necessary to look into discursive systems that allow the star to be created in order to develop a more complete picture of Félix’s star text.

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* For example, King quotes Paz saying “she has become her own persona” 140. The cover of *Proceso* refers to a story about Félix “El mito y la máscara” The cover of *Cambio* states “el mito continua”
Much of the scholarship on stardom has focused on Hollywood stars so a caveat is needed as we analyze Félix’s star text. While there are certainly similarities between the Mexican and Hollywood film industries, there are many differences despite the fact that many who worked in the Mexican film industry during its Golden Age (1938-1956) often began their careers in Hollywood. The key differences for our purposes pertain to the studios, their composition and funding, and their relationship with stars. Latin America did not have the same kind of major studios such as Warner Bros. or Paramount found in Hollywood. The film industry in Latin America did not have these “vertically integrated” companies that Hollywood had that controlled production, distribution, and exhibition. The typical pattern of film production more closely resembled a “cottage industry,” that is “small production companies that remained in existence for short periods of time perhaps the duration of one or two movies,” funded by both state and private sources (King 147). Since the smaller companies only made a few films were made each year, the scale of production was smaller. This type of industry did not have exclusive contracts with their actors and actresses as their Hollywood counterparts did. As film scholar John King explains that though “we cannot talk of stars as managed systems, we can certainly chart the importance of stars to film production in the 1930s and 1940s, especially in the ‘big three’ Latin American industries, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico” (147). Félix was not

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10 Directors Roberto Gavaldón, Chano Ureta, René Cardona, Tito Davidson, Gilberto Martínez Solares and notably Emilio Fernández, credited “not only for bringing international attention and artistic glory to the Mexican motion picture industry, but also for defining a school of Mexican film” “spent time in Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, and learned their trade there as actors extras and technicians (Tierney 226, 227; Garcia Riera 1: 27-31)
under the same type of contractual obligation that her Hollywood counterparts were. In fact, it seems that she had a certain degree of control over dialogue and even plots, particularly in her later films.\textsuperscript{11}

Nevertheless, as there has been no monographic study of the Mexican star system or of any other Latin American industry during this period, a brief view of the Hollywood star system provides a necessary reference to analyze Félix’s star text. Although the star system depends very much on the culture in which the movies are produced, there are a number of similarities across cultures. Félix was not known as a “star” until her third film \textit{Doña Bárbara} (1943) and afterwards her image was seen in the trade publications, in interviews, and other forms of publicity throughout her life and even beyond. After she became a star, her earlier films became popular as well. For example, her first film \textit{El peñón de las ánimas} (1942) was the subject of part of the 1957 \textit{fotonovela} series. An executive of a major studio in Hollywood when asked about stars states, “you need people to feel something when they see you on the screen” (Svetkey and Weiner 26). Félix’s star text certainly made people “feel something.” Love or hate, her continued success in the cinema proved that audiences wanted to see her.

Throughout Félix’s career, she continued to play roles that showcased her strong independent image, particularly within the genre of melodrama. Even in films that seem to be against type, her “personal charisma” and talent were elements that went

\textsuperscript{11} Enrique Krause states in the introduction to \textit{Todas mis guerras} “It is known that María Félix, above all in her last films, made changes to dialogue and even plots to her taste. [Se sabe que María Félix, sobre todo en sus últimas películas, ajustaba los diálogos e incluso la trama a su gusto.]” (15, my translation)
into the casting decision. For example, in *Río Escondido* (1947) Félix plays a
schoolteacher commissioned by the Mexican president to bring Revolutionary ideals to
a small town still overrun with corrupt local authorities. Film scholar Susan Dever
states, “Fernández’s choice of Félix—so long identified as a ‘savage man-hater’—
works especially well to underscore the transformation of the independent woman to
dutiful charge of the state” (59-60). King states, “Félix is a quintessential star. She
was, in the words of the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, ‘an independent woman in a
country where women over the centuries were destined to be nuns or whores. She
presented herself as an independent woman, who owned her own body” (149).

Film scholar Richard DeCordova outlines the emergence of the U. S. star system
in his text *Picture Personalities*. He examines previous histories of the star system and
gives more credence to the view that stars are the product of vast machinery. However,
he cautions against taking this view to the extreme. He explains, “The star system does
not produce stars the way that a factory produces goods. The system is rationalized,

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12 An example of Félix *not* being cast for those same attributes is Matilde Landeta’s *La Negra Angustias*
(1950) in which Landeta cast María Elena Marqués (who played Marisela in *Doña Bárbara* (1943) as the
brown-faced mulata *general*. She states, “Everyone thought that I was going to cast María Félix or
someone of that stature; but it would have been absurd, because Rojas González wrote his novelization of
the life of a female Zapatista colonel who lived in the mountains of Guerrero, north of Acapulco. She
was a small, slim, and dark woman who smoked cigars and spoke roughly, […] María Félix was a
beautiful woman from Northern Mexico—the most beautiful woman on earth that I know—but, she is not
representative of the Mexican woman, who have never been like the notable specimen that Félix is. The
little shepherdess that became a colonel is more like María Elena Marqués [T]odo el mundo pensó que
iba a seleccionar a una María Félix o a alguien de esa envergadura; pero hubiera resultado absurdo,
porque Rojas González escribió su novela novelando la vida de una coronela zapatista que vivía en la
Sierra de Guerrero, arriba de Acapulco. Era una mujercita chiquitita, flaca, prieta, que fumaba puros y
era mal hablada, […] María Felix era una norteña muy bella,—la mujer más bella que conozco sobre la
tierra,— pero no es representativa de la mujer mexicana, que nunca ha sido como ese ejemplar que es
María. La pastorcita que llega a ser coronela es más María Elena Marqués” (Trelles Plazaola 222).

13 King quotes from Carlos Fuentes in an interview he conducted with him.
but it is not geared toward producing a standardized product in the usual sense of the word. It produces a product that is in fact highly individuated—the individual star” (9). The star system is complex and involves many elements, which may sometimes seem opposed. For example, although the star is an individual, what can be known about the star is limited by the system that makes them a star. DeCordova explain, “Typically, the individual qualities and actions of the star (whether real or trumped up by press agents) enter quite readily into the system of discourse whose primary purpose is to differentiate stars while keeping knowledge about them within certain bounds” (10).

DeCordova is primarily interested in the discursive practices involved in the star system that produces the stars. DeCordova explains, “The discursive organization of the star system is comprised of both a set of positions from which statements about stars can emerge and the statements themselves” (11). This discursive organization is a paradigm through which the star is perceived as a star. DeCordova explains how the star’s identity as a star is produced within these discursive practices;

These discursive practices produce the star’s identity, an identity that does not exist within the individual star (the way we might, however naively, believe our identities exist within us), but rather in the connections between and associations among a wide variety of texts—films, interviews, publicity photos, etc. The star’s identity is intertextual, and the star system is made up in part of those ongoing practices that produce the intertextual field within which that identity may be seized by curious fans. (12)
Although DeCordova is primarily concerned with the discursive practices that make up the star system, the “economic identity” of the star is equally significant. DeCordova explains, “The star could become the point of an economic exchange only by virtue of its identity as constructed in discourse. Thus, the star simultaneously changed the status of film as discourse and commodity” (11). Part of the function of the star is the capacity for selling, not just the films in which they star, but also the fan and industry magazines, and other products. For example, Félix’s image as a star sells not only her films, series of *fotonovelas* and the magazines about her life but also beauty products such as make-up and hair coloring kits.

To address the complexity of this notion of stardom and its functions, film scholar Richard Dyer has proposed the term “star text.” It is a term coined by Dyer to point to the idea that the film star is larger than just the roles played in movies. It includes all forms of their image in popular culture and is a way to talk about what the vehicle of the star’s body brings to a film or to other public appearances. Dyer explains that a “star image is a constructed personage in media texts,” not just in films but in all forms of media (*Stars* 97). The star text includes her filmography—what types of characters she played, the plot and visual elements that make up the film—as well as other forms of media in which her image appeared, such as fan magazines, books, *fotonovelas*, television interviews, and other appearances.

According to Dyer, the rhetoric of “authenticity” is a key aspect of any star text as we are encouraged to believe that the star is a real person with whom we can identify. Dyer explains that “[it] is the star’s really seeming to be what he/she is supposed to be
that secures his/her star status, star quality or charisma.” Although this concept of authenticity may seem to go against the grain of commonsensical notions of the star, Dyer explains that authenticity is “both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies” (A Star 133). Authenticity—the idea that her on-screen characters coincide with the “real-life” actress—helps to make Félix a star. As magazines attest, the actress in “real life” was the *mala mujer* who appeared on-screen—from her love life to her clothing to her “masculine” hobby of horse racing.

Dyer’s notion of authenticity allows stars to have such a powerful mediative function. Cultural essayist Carlos Monsiváis, explains, “one didn’t go to the cinema to dream, but to learn” (cited in López 510). Dyer’s theory that “authenticity in one area guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies” has important social effects given films’ didactic function in Mexico in the first part of the 20th century during a period of urbanization when people from rural areas were confronted with the norms of urban life. When Félix’s *mala mujer* characters are punished through catastrophe or are reformed, it is as an example of the consequences of what happens when women stray too far from the feminine ideal of womanhood—the image that López describes as the suffering mother. On the other hand, in the end, as Dyer suggests following Molly Haskell’s arguments it is not the ending that the audience remembers but the representation of the strong woman. Not only that, but fans remember her “real life” persona as indomitable—a fact that allows for alternative readings of her films. The value of her powerful star text is certainly born out in the
cameo appearance in *Si yo fuera millonario* but also in the trade magazines and fan magazines. As Octavio Paz, quoted in King, states, “María Félix is a very strong woman who has had the bravery not to conform to the macho ideals of women. She is free as the wind” (150).14

Why study the 1940s-1970? It is a key period in the transformation of gender roles and a point in time when the Mexican film industry played a key role in the articulation and dissemination of social norms and mores. Film critic Joanne Hershfield in her study *Mexican Women in Mexican Film from 1940-1950* suggests that during this period “the social positions of women in Mexico were being reinterpreted within the post revolutionary discourses of nationalism” (8-9). I would suggest that this reinterpretation of women’s social position did not stop in the 1950s but continued to be an issue in later decades. However, the shift was fraught with tensions and the cinema played an important mediating function. Mexican women gained the right to vote in 195315 but as historian Julia Tuñón Pablos states, “they were repeatedly told to be very careful in exercising this right so as not lose their femininity or to forget their traditional roles as wives and mothers” (105-106). Félix’s films from the late 1950s and early 1960s registered these social tensions by playing with gender roles and, given their


15 According to Julia Tuñón Pablos in her *Women in Mexico: A Past Unveiled*, this move was done because the state needed this type of legal equality among individuals and because developed nations had already given women the right to vote. (105)
immense popularity, raise important questions about what roles women and men
should play in a post-Revolutionary Mexico. An examination of Félix’s films and her
star text reveals these didactic elements that intend to show consequences of women’s
“misbehavior”—that is, non-conformance to social ideals—and thus reveal social
tensions regarding “woman’s place in Mexican culture and national identity.” As
many of her films, including a group of films dealing with the Revolution, are
considered to fall in the genre of melodrama, an analysis of these Félix films allows for
further “investigation of the representation of women, female subjectivity, and desire,
gendered critical categories, and the role of women as cultural producers and
consumers” (López 505). This project investigates Félix’s star text and how she
becomes the archetypal mala mujer and questions and problematizes gender roles in
Mexican post-Revolutionary society through her prevalence and popularity in the non-
traditional roles she played.

Anne Rubenstein discussion of the binary comprised of modernity and tradition
proves useful when discussing Félix’s star text. Rubenstein’s Bad Language, Naked
Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico
deals with the rise in popularity of comic books and how they played a role in the
development of a stable, legitimate state. Her text indicates that the representation of
women functions as a register for larger socio-cultural tensions being played out in
Mexico during a period of modernization, specifically what were women’s roles in a
modern state. Rubenstein explains that “beginning in the 1920s, it was the explicit

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16 From Ana López’s discussion on the role of the melodrama (505).
project of at least some of Mexico’s leaders to create a modern national culture by supporting mass media and high culture, controlling education, constructing a revolutionary mythos, and intervening into some aspects of everyday life from cuisine to transportation” (41). Rubenstein proposes that a “new national culture did develop after the Revolution, but it had two faces” and each required the other (42). The first dealt with “modernity, progress, industrialization, and urbanity” while the second dealt with “tradition, conservatism, rural life, and Catholicism” (42). Though these two facets may appear directly at odds with one another, their existence was mutually dependent. One could not think of “modernity” without thinking of “tradition.” These two facets of national culture “developed in dialogue with each other over gender, work, and nation” (42). Within this context of developing two discourses that made up national culture, Rubenstein examines two stock feminine figures—the revolutionary girl or *la chica moderna* who plays a role in the “construction of the discourse of revolutionary modernity and nationalist progress” and the “traditional woman” who exists “in relation to her family and for whom self-abnegation is the only possible route to power” (9-10). Rubenstein states that in forms of media production, including comic books as well as cinema, “the discourses of modernity and tradition formed primarily around the representation of women” (46). With this in mind, it becomes even more important in developing an understanding of Mexican national culture to investigate the star text of Félix and how it registers the social tensions that take womanhood as a backdrop in negotiating national identity.
Hershfield’s text *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Woman* is central to gender studies in Mexican film for her analysis of the representation of women in cinema. She states “these films and their portrayals of femininity may be seen as products of, evidence of, and narrative responses to the material and psychic crisis permeating the Mexican nation” (133). Hershfield, in addition to a selection of other melodramas, analyzes *Río Escondido* (1947) in comparison to *María Candelaria* (1943) in one chapter regarding “Cinema, Woman and National Identity.” She also compares *Doña Bárbara* (1943) and *Susana* (1950) in her final chapter “*La Devoradora*: The Mexican Femme Fatale.”

Hershfield is well-known for her investigation of the representation of women in Mexican film as well as her analysis of Dolores del Río and her star text, including her film career in Mexico and the U.S. While Hershfield’s work is certainly key in addressing issues of gender in Mexican film studies, it is limited in both its scope—she focuses on the decade from 1940-1950—and because she is attempting to get a broad overview of gender issues during this time. My study will encompass a greater time period, covering Félix’s film career from 1943-1970 and beyond at her post-film star text and instead of a broad view, I focus on a particular image—Félix’s star text—and how it reflects social tensions over gender roles.

**Chapter 1 Starring María Félix: The Star Text**

In this chapter I discuss the consolidation of Félix’s star text. Of particular interest here is her film *Doña Bárbara* (1943) as it helped shape Félix’s star text from that point forward and defined everything about her persona, the way she dressed, the
way she treated men. Cultural essayist Carlos Monsiváis notes in his “Mythologies” regarding *Doña Bárbara* that Félix “became something unheard of: a woman who controlled her destiny. The process was so dynamic that spectators still remember doña Bárbara, the mistress of the plains, and have forgotten all about Santos Luzardo, the presumed victorious bearer of civilization so languidly represented by Julián Soler” (122). When she reprises that role in a cameo in *Si yo fuera millonario* (1962), nearly twenty years later, she does not even need to wear the pants that made her famous because her image is so recognizable that it has become shorthand for her entire star text.

Finally, I compare two forms of medium—a *fotonovela* from 1957 *La vida deslumbrante de María Félix* that tells the “true” story of Félix’s rise to fame in a fictionalized graphic novel serial and the film *La Estrella Vacia* (1958) that casts Félix in the role of a film star. The film, though not strictly biographical, does have a number of similarities between Félix’s life and the protagonist of the film, the fictional film star Olga. Both of these texts address the issue of career woman and motherhood and suggest the desirability of motherhood as a vocation over working outside the home, suggesting that the seemingly glamorous life of the movie star is fraught with difficulties as both the Félix of the *fotonovela* and Olga of *La Estrella Vacia* regret their choices that curtailed their experiences as mother. According to her biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo, Félix states that she was not drawn to motherhood and found the birth experience to be horrible and later miscarried because of an accident on set. Yet, in the
fotonovela, the film, and magazines from the 1950s and 1960s all suggest that she wished she could have been a better mother.

Chapter 2: Taming Félix: The Theme of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* in 1950s Mexican Film

The story of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* centers on gender roles as the male lead undertakes the task of molding a rebellious, independent woman into a submissive (at least on the surface) wife, reinforcing patriarchal order. In this chapter, I analyze Shakespeare’s play and other sources with respect to how gender issues were addressed in an analogous period of social transformation in order to contextualize these films. In this chapter, my analysis of these Mexican film adaptations of the *Taming of the Shrew* deepens our understanding of Félix’s developing star text. Star text is a significant aspect in these films and it is interesting that half of these films, including *El rapto* in which she plays opposite her “real-life” husband Jorge Negrete, star the actress known for her independent ways both on- and off-screen. Although my study revolves around Félix and female roles, it is noteworthy that Pedro Armendáriz stars as the “tamer” in three of the *Shrew* films, two of which with Félix. In a story that seems to focus on the female character and her transformation, masculinity is foregrounded.

Several of Félix’s films are re-telling of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* and were accompanied by a number of other films (not starring Félix) that also told the tale of the *Shrew* and her “taming.” Significantly, I noticed that there were six films between 1943 and 1956, clustered around the year when Mexican women gained national suffrage in 1953. The questions are raised: What types of social anxieties are
reflected in these films? What was happening in Mexico that foregrounded these anxieties over gender roles? These films include: Doña Bárbara (1943, Fernando de Fuentes, starring Julian Soler and María Félix), Enamorada (Woman in Love 1946, Emilio Fernández, starring Pedro Armendáriz and María Félix), Cartas marcadas (Marked Cards 1947, René Cardona, starring Pedro Infante and Marga López), El charro y la dama (The Tramp and the Lady 1949, Fernando Cortés, starring Pedro Armendáriz and Rosita Quintana), El rapto (The Abduction 1954, starring Jorge Negrete and María Félix), Canasta de cuentos mexicanos [Basket of Mexican Stories (La Tigresa [The Tigress]) (1956, starring Pedro Armendáriz and María Félix).

Chapter 3: Sending Félix off to War: The soldadera and performance of gender

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 is a frequent favorite on the Mexican silver screen and Félix finds herself many times in the cinematic time machine. Surprisingly, she sometimes picks up a gun along the way to lead men into the battle for civil and property rights. Then again, perhaps it is not so surprising after all because the historical Revolution was a time of great social upheaval as lives were disrupted by warfare itself as well as the need for much of the populace to be involved in the struggle. There were, in fact, women who did pick up arms and join men on the battlefield, often times as camp followers—cooking, transporting equipment, providing sexual services to male soldiers—but occasionally they became leaders. In film, the soldadera usually appeared as a secondary or tertiary character, who was marginal to the main action of the male soldiers. She was depicted as a camp-follower and praised primarily for being a helper to the male soldier and for the sacrifices she made to become a mother for a
new generation of warriors. Félix’s films are the primary exception to this rule\(^\text{17}\) as her character is competent in some traditionally masculine roles. However, by the end of the film she must submit to patriarchal authority (La Cucaracha), although that includes, by the 1950s, entering the workforce (Juana Gallao) or be destroyed (La Generala).

This chapter examines in particular La Cucaracha (1958), Juana Gallo (1960), and La Generala (1970) that are perhaps some of the most interesting and subversive of Félix’s films in the way that gender is performed. These films set during the Revolution serve an allegorical function and point to new models of womanhood as it became more necessary for women to join the workforce to support the nation’s industrial projects and economic growth during the time in which the films were produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, by foregrounding the constructedness of gender, there is a subtle suggestion that an individual’s physical sex is not tied to gender roles in society, including career choice and interactions between the sexes. Ultimately, patriarchal order is enforced as the only appropriate choice for national industrial and economic progress even though Félix’s star text allows for alternative readings of the films.

**Chapter 4 Bedding María Félix: Sex and the Movie Star**

Félix’s roles often included the representation of a sexually promiscuous woman. The image of the sexually promiscuous woman, particularly in the form of the

\(^{17}\) Another exception is Matilde Landeta’s La Negra Angustias (1950) which depicts a soldadera as a leader.
prostitute or “working girl” allowed concerns about women in the workforce to be addressed in a different way than in the soldadera films. In this chapter, I analyze two groups of films. In the first group, Félix portrays a *femme fatale* type in the 1940s. This group includes: *La mujer sin alma* (1943), *La devoradora* (1946), and *La diosa arrodillada* (1947). These films are actually more subversive than the second group of films from the late 1950s and early 1960s in that her character portrays out-of-control female power and is capable of destroying all types of men. These films are concerned with loss of masculine power and the distorting nature of female power run amok as they deal with concerns raised by modernity and urbanization. Her characters are “broken” in some way by the end in order to alleviate male fears.

In the second group of films, Félix portrays the sexually promiscuous woman but she seems to be seeking redemption and restoration to patriarchal order. These films from the late 1950s and early 1960s reflect changes in society as modernization and urbanization became more accepted. Women in the work force were accepted as long as they continued to submit to patriarchal authority and maintain their roles as mothers. These films include: *La Escondida* (1955), *Miércoles de ceniza* (1958), *Flor de mayo* (1959), *Café Colón* (1959), *La Bandida* (1962), and *Amor y sexo* (1964). Of these films, there is a distinct subgroup directly related to Félix’s *soldadera* films from approximately the same time period. In these films *La Escondida* (1955), *Café Colón* (1959), and *La Bandida* (1962), Félix’s character take on feminine roles during the Revolution—mistress and prostitute—still a “working girl.”
Conclusion

Félix’s star text provides a way to examine Mexican society during times of increasing industrialization and modernization. Tensions between the traditional and the modern, particularly in gender roles, are played out on Félix’s body as a nation struggles to define itself in a modern world. An analysis of Félix’s star text problematizes the representation of women in Mexican film. It is my hope that this study will pave the way for further cultural studies of the time period and of Félix’s and others’ films.
CHAPTER 2

STARRING MARÍA FÉLIX: THE STAR TEXT

Para estar encima del mundo, no necesito caballo.\(^{18}\)

In this chapter, I am chiefly concerned with the development and portrayal of Félix’s star text. I analyze some key moments in her film career alongside other elements that make up her star text, including an arc in a fotonovela series, which depicts her transformation into the screen goddess. I examine her role, in the film that made her famous, Doña Bárbara (1943) and a reprisal of that role nearly twenty years later in her cameo appearance in Si yo fuera millonario (1962). I do not use the phrase “made her famous” lightly—Doña Bárbara is the film that forms a significant base to her star text as we shall see. The interwoven elements of her cameo appearance in Millonario—the cover of the magazine and her appearance in the dream sequence—point directly to her iconic status. A third film La estrella vacía (1958) casts Félix as a film star that sacrificed everything for her career. The film, although not intended to be biographical, deliberately had many parallels with Félix’s off-screen life.

\(^{18}\) Her image on horseback at the opening of Doña Bárbara is powerful but she does not need a horse to elevate her stature to be on top of the world. In an interview that biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo records, the interviewer mentions that her image on horseback in film is stupendous, saying it looks like she is looking down on everything from on top of the world. When the interviewer suggests that it is because she is higher up by being on horseback she states, “To be on top of the world, I don’t need a horse” (34-35). “Cuando en una película monta usted a caballo, se forma una imagen muy estupenda. Es como si en vez de mirar desde un caballo, mirara desde la cima del mundo. --¿Eso parece? --Sí. --Así será. --¿Será, también, porque el caballo la eleva aún más? --Para estar encima del mundo, no necesito caballo. Pero será. (34-35, my paraphrase)
These films deal with the process of modernization in Mexico at different time periods and Félix’s star text functions as a register for larger socio-cultural tensions, particularly regarding women’s roles in society. Félix’s star text shows a shift in the representation of women reflecting this shift in women’s roles. In Doña Bárbara and La estrella vacía, in particular, her body is used to critique modernity’s risks. In the first film, her character is acknowledged as desiring, strong and independent yet these characteristics are punished and undermined in a variety of ways within the text of the film and a different model of womanhood—submissive, feminine, and supportive of her man—is idealized in the figure of Bárbara’s daughter Marisela. In La estrella vacía, Félix’s character is a beautiful ambitious woman of humble beginnings who achieves great professional success, but as result, experiences immense personal suffering; she sacrifices a child and refuses to marry her true love for the sake of her film career. Like La estrella vacía, Si yo fuera millonario illustrates the consolidation of Félix’s star text and the way in which she epitomized non-traditional womanhood. In the latter film, Félix appears in a cameo role as la Doña herself in a dream sequence. She is seen as desirable, strong, and powerful although ultimately not “real” and remains unattainable when the dreamer awakes.

Although their approach varies, all three films deal specifically with tensions between modernity and tradition, particularly with respect to women’s changing roles and foreign influence on the Mexican nation. Doña Bárbara is set in Venezuela19 in the

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19 It is based on the Venezuelan novel by Rómulo Gallegos and notes specifically in the prologue of the Mexican film that it is a Venezuelan story.
past and treats issues of male authority in land ownership and control. The characters are paired up (Doña Bárbara-Marisela; Santos Luzardo-Lorenzo Barquero) to show the positive and negative sides of gender roles. The foreign influence, as represented by the Don Guillermo—the “tiger hunter”—takes a back seat. On the other hand, both *Estrella* and *Millonario* are set in the “present.” The story of *Estrella*, in a critique of the Mexican movie industry, emphasizes gender roles with title star “Olga Lang” giving long monologues, wishing she were like other women with children and family. The story of *Millonario* emphasizes the corruption of a multinational company, its main story being a comedy about traditional values triumphing over the greedy multinational corporation, thus bringing foreign influences to the forefront. Félix’s character serves in *Millonario* to bring out the tensions surrounding gender roles. She presents a different image of womanhood that is desirable yet unattainable in comparison to the protagonist’s other female suitors who only want his access to money and power.

In addition, I examine selected issues of the *fotonovela* *La vida deslumbrante de María Félix* [The Dazzling Life of María Félix—1956-1957]\(^{20}\), an ostensibly biographical account of Félix’s life that pays particular attention to how she became the way she is. Each episode of the *fotonovela* is a short graphic novel with most of its thirty-two pages having two frames, an upper and a lower frame; although on some pages the frame is the entire page. The images are sepia-toned and the faces appear very realistic, almost as if they were photographs, while the bodies, clothing, and background are in a hand-drawn style. In this chapter, I analyze a brief arc (1957) in

\(^{20}\) The story arc discussed in this chapter is from 1957.
which she is “discovered” by the movie producer Fernando Palacios for a role in the film *Aventurera*. This particular arc addresses the issues of professional life versus family life for women as it traces the transformation of Félix into the screen goddess.\(^{21}\) This arc deals with tensions over modernization, particularly concerning women’s roles in the workforce. Félix is seen working as a receptionist in a doctor’s office that specializes in cosmetic surgery. After she is “discovered,” another actress who had wanted the role that Félix was offered demonstrates animosity towards her. Félix suffers from the physical demands of becoming a star and falls ill, only to begin to recover as she hears from her son, from whom she has been estranged, and steps back from working so much. This arc parallels the cautionary tale for career-minded, ambitious women presented in the film *La estrella vacía*. Modernity brings great risks to traditional gender roles and, thus affects traditional family values. The *fotonovela* permits a fuller analysis of Félix’s star text in addition to, yet interconnected with her films, by permitting a look at the broader popular culture production.

**Doña Bárbara**

As mentioned in the introduction, Carlos Monsiváis notes in his “Mythologies” that in *Doña Bárbara*, Félix “became something unheard of: a woman who controlled her destiny. The process was so dynamic that spectators still remember Doña Bárbara, the mistress of the plains, and have forgotten all about Santos Luzardo, the presumed

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\(^{21}\) Although I only had access to a small selection of the *fotonovelas*, I was able to look at three more or less complete arcs. The first of which is Maria in a relationship with a married man, the second is the Palacios/Aventurera arc, and the third is the development of a love relationship with Jorge Negrete in the making of her first film *El peñón de las animas* (1942). The last is discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.
victorious bearer of civilization so languidly represented by Julián Soler” (122). *Doña Bárbara*, based on the Venezuelan novel by Rómulo Gallegos, is a story of the modern—represented by Luzardo—taming the traditional—represented by Doña Bárbara, yet there is a twist. On the one hand, the film explicitly codes Doña Bárbara as the land, tradition, superstition and yet, at the same time, she represents the antithesis of the traditional woman. She embodies the negative aspects of both tradition and modernity. Her disappearance at the end of the film allows the best aspects of both to triumph and order and progress reigns.

Because Félix’s character is female rather than male, the story functions as a cautionary tale about women’s roles in modernity—step too far from the traditional ideal of womanhood and chaos reigns. Félix’s Doña Bárbara is a strong character—with elements coded as masculine such as her split skirt, sexual appetite, phallic weapon, and manner of riding. Cultural studies scholar Anne Rubenstein describes the plot of the film in the following way: —Doña Bárbara is “an ‘unnatural’ woman rancher who will not submit to male authority; who finally decides to disappear into the plains so that her daughter can find happiness by marrying a neighborhood rancher” (650). Although the title character will not submit to male authority, according to Rubenstein, she is granted agency within the narrative by deciding to disappear in order to allow her daughter the happiness that comes from submission to the traditional role for women. Her sexuality is clearly modern—she is a sexual being and desires men sexually. Her sexuality springs from the virgin/whore polarity that is, in Mexico, represented by the
Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico and Malinche, Cortés’ translator and lover.

Bárbara’s ties to the Malinche archetype are visible in a flashback at the beginning of the film. When young, her first love was killed and then she was gang-raped which led to her bitterness and hatred of all men. This device here suggests that she is not an ordinary woman, a recurring theme for her characters. It is interesting to note that within the narrative of the film, the men who kill a man and rape her do not seem to suffer from any consequences for their violent acts yet Bárbara is clearly condemned within the narrative for even considering violence—she must disappear at the end of the film. The rape also serves to identify Doña Bárbara with Malinche. Essayist Octavio Paz calls Malinche—Córtez’s interpreter and lover—la chingada or the violated one (86). According to Paz, Malinche is both credited and blamed for giving birth to the Mexican people, a race of mixed ancestry of indigenous and Spanish blood. While for Paz, the Malinche archetype is passive—the violated one—for Hershfield, the Malinche archetype is “an active but destructive, negative figure: the temptress, la devoradora, the devourer of men” (Mexican Cinema 15). These are the same words used to describe Doña Bárbara. When she appears in this flashback, Bárbara’s hair is loose and fans about her face in the breeze from the surface of the water. She wears a peasant style blouse that displays her neck and shoulders. She is seen lounging about the bridge of the boat. She is the tempting siren. She is not a virgin, as she chooses her lover. When he is killed, she is brutally abused by the same men who kill her lover. It seems as though she is punished for her “provocative”
clothing and behavior. Thus, the film’s opening sequence suggests that the consequence for not being the “suffering all-forgiving saintly-mother” ideal of traditional womanhood is to turn into a “horrible creature”—the devourer of men.

Malinche is often thought of as a traitor, the woman who betrayed Mexico by “allowing” herself to be seduced by Hernán Cortés. Malinche worked with Cortés, playing a key role in the Conquest of Mexico, giving him information about the different indigenous groups and translating for him, yet later he forgot her and married a Spanish woman when Malinche ceased to be useful even though she bore his children. Her image is re-worked in a variety of contexts that cultural studies scholar Sandra Messinger Cypess examines in her text on the image Malinche. The image of Malinche suggests that Mexican women in general “are to be blamed for all the iniquity and imperfections in their world” (155) “despite their real lack of power in patriarchal society” (156). Doña Bárbara, however, seems to fit Hershfield’s interpretation of the Malinche archetype as an active figure. Doña Bárbara’s power is coded as destructive within the narrative of the film as Félix’s character is primarily responsible for the chaos and disarray that Santos encounters when he returns from the city to his family ranch. She contributes to the corruption of the local government as well as that of the other ranchers. Her very presence seems to invite crime and chaos. Her betrayal of traditional values regarding gender roles seems to be the root cause. When she leaves, order and prosperity reign.

Doña Bárbara’s character goes beyond her origins as Malinche—she may start out as *la chingada* but throughout the majority of the film she does not exhibit the
passivity that Paz associates with la chingada but is instead a more active figure, held responsible for the chaos of the region. She runs the ranch El Miedo (Fear) and keeps moving boundaries to increase her holdings and rustles cattle, using the corrupt officials to her own ends—or perhaps is even the cause of their corruption. Unlike the character of Doña Bárbara, La Malinche, according to Paz, is passive to the point of abjection, she has no agency: “she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust. […] This passivity, open to the outside world, causes her to lose her identity: she is the Chingada. She loses her name; she is no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness” (85-86). Although within the narrative of the film it seems that Doña Bábara’s identity is fragmenting, she retains agency in her decision not to kill Luzardo and to fade into the background. She does not lose her name or truly disappear; her name is remembered as is made evident in the opening of the film itself wherein the sailor guiding Luzardo down the river tells him the story of the fearsome Doña Bábara in the narrated flashback mentioned earlier. Doña Bábara may be gone but she is not forgotten. Now consider that the role of Doña Bábara is the role that made the actress María Félix famous, i.e., the role for which she is remembered and in fact gave her a name—“la Doña”—by which her fans remember her, the role that she reprises in her cameo in Si yo fuera millonario. Although she may be associated with la chingada and Malinche, she transcends them.

In many ways, the character of Doña Bábara casts a negative light on tradition, albeit not on traditional gender roles. Not only does she represent the chaos and corruption of traditions that hold back the order and progress that modernity brings but she also represents a cautionary tale that the order and progress promised by modernity are only possible if traditional gender roles are maintained by controlling female sexuality and women submitting before male authority. Tensions regarding
tradition and modernity are reflected in the character of Doña Bárbara. She represents the seductive risks of both tradition and modernity. In this next section, I examine film techniques as well as narrative elements that help to demonstrate these conflicting elements in the character.

On the one hand, Doña Bárbara represents the negative aspects of tradition on a number of levels—wild, untamed, corrupt, greedy, and superstitious. The opening sequence equates her with the untamed land—she sits astride a horse majestically superimposed over her domain. She uses corrupt administrators and moves boundary markers to increase her holdings. Her goal is take over as much territory as possible by any means necessary.

Witchcraft is associated with superstition and the negative aspects of tradition, especially in contrast with orderly, scientific progress. She practices witchcraft to have power over men and it seems effective, as she gets her way with weak men and then leaves them ruined. Her spell incorporates Catholic imagery as she takes a photograph of Luzardo and places it upside down on an altar. She takes two statues of saints and turns their backs towards the photograph and then lights three candles in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Her servant, however, identifies the names of demons she invokes in her ritual. The narrative device of witchcraft also serves to undermine her power by suggesting that the natural order is that men would have power over women and she is only able to overcome that order through supernatural means and the help of evil spirits. When faced with Santos Luzardo’s strong masculinity as he assumes authority in the area, her spell fails to control him and she breaks the spell herself after an encounter with his masculine (and proper) authority.

Her promiscuous and destructive sexuality, on the other hand, represents the negative potential of modernity if gender roles become dislodged from patriarchal norms. Bárbara uses men and then discards them, leaving them ruined, not unlike she and Malinche were used and tossed to the side. She controls her own sexuality, choosing her lovers and the terms of the relationship. She desires men both at a sexual level and at an economic level where they might be useful to her as she strives to obtain more power. At the beginning of the film, her lover is Balbino Paiba, the corrupt administrator at Santos Luzardo’s ranch but when he ceases to be useful to her upon Luzardo’s return, she casts him aside. She rejects his offer to make their relationship official through marriage because that would indicate submission to a patriarchal order.
Lorenzo Barquero was a previous lover with whom she had a daughter Marisela. He was ousted when he no longer served her and was left as a broken drunkard.

The only man powerful enough to contain her excessive sexuality is Santos Luzardo. When Bárbara begins to desire Luzardo, her identity begins to fragment. She becomes more feminine in her appearance by letting down her braids and opening her blouse, even wearing a dress at one point. She finally breaks her own “controlling spell” by restoring Luzardo’s photograph on her altar to an up-right position. Luzardo’s male modernizing power is consolidated by showing that he is more powerful than her superstitious female magic. A demonstration of his masculine power occurs when the two talk as their men round up the cattle to make sure each has their appropriate animals. She had just previously prepared her spell and fully expects that Luzardo will fall to her will. Yet, the shot composition suggests otherwise. Luzardo stands next to her as she is seated on a bench. He sets one leg up on the bench so that Bárbara is faced with his masculinity as they speak—his groin on the same level as her face. The framing of his body above and her upturned face clearly indicate his dominance over her. Her female power, while it seems to affect him somewhat, causing him to appear flustered, fails to dominate him. After this sequence, the film suggests that her identity starts to fragment—as she begins to talk to herself and seems to be split in two.

Her daughter Marisela becomes La Doña’s feminine opposite after Luzardo transforms her—she wears dresses, lets her hair down, rides her horse sidesaddle and is chiefly concerned with pleasing her man Luzardo. She represents the ideal of traditional womanhood under the influence of Luzardo’s appropriate masculinity. Prior
to her taming, she was shown with dirt on her face, wearing rags and barefoot, and speaking in slang. I use the word “taming” because it is specifically referenced within the dialogue of the film. One of Luzardo’s men shows him the white horse he has tamed for Marisela and comments that he is not the only one good at taming (domar).\(^22\)

The end of the film consolidates patriarchal order as necessary for modernity. In this scene, Doña Bárbara takes up her (phallic) revolver—her last symbol of illegitimate power—and goes to kill Luzardo. Doña Bárbara represents the negative side of modernity and changing gender roles—if the woman controls her sexuality and gains economic independence and personal power then, not only is she essentially doomed, but there is a negative ripple effect throughout society and nothing is as it should be. In this scene as she holds her revolver out to kill Luzardo, she sees Marisela and him together and is reminded of what happened to her when her first love was killed and all the subsequent pain and bitterness and cannot go through with it. Marisela represents the ideal side—the woman is trained properly in the traditional submissive role and all is well in society. When men and women maintain traditional gender roles then order and progress are possible. In this scene, Marisela and Santos Luzardo are framed in the open doorway inside a well-lit house. It seems to be the picture of domestic bliss. She is seated, gazing up at Santos Luzardo standing almost protectively above and behind her. The images of Doña Bárbara as a young woman, gazing up at her lover are superimposed over the image of Marisela and Santos Luzardo in a lapse dissolve that

\(^{22}\) In the following chapter, I shall further analyze this taming in the context of a series of films adapted from Shakespeare’s play *Taming of the Shrew*. 

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conflates the two relationships. The shot composition suggests that each young woman is at a similar point, in love with a man but with the possibility of his loss looming.

In this key scene, Doña Bárbara is in the dark, behind a fence and tree, on the outside looking in at the couple. The shot-reverse shot serves to highlight the contrast between the two images. Doña Bárbara cannot join in the domestic bliss and she cannot stop it from happening. She is powerless before the image of the ideal heterosexual relationship with a dominant man and submissive woman. She drops her revolver to the ground and disappears forever. She gives up her phallic symbol at last but she either cannot or will not conform to the ideal of the proper woman. Her disappearance is somewhat ambiguous and it could be interpreted two ways—either she is destroyed or chooses to disappear. Marisela, on the other hand, conforming to the more traditional ideal of womanhood, lives “happily ever after” at the side of her modern man Luzardo, civilizing the plains. In the closing moments of the film, the couple stands together and is superimposed over the landscape in a sequence that echoes the opening with Doña Bárbara astride her steed. The difference is that here, Luzardo has tamed the chaos-bearing wild woman and brought civilization to the land—symbolized in the fences that order the territory so that boundaries are made clear. Throughout the film Bárbara’s identity becomes increasing fragmented as the masculine and feminine elements fight within her as represented in the textual elements of the film such as the broken mirror, costume changes, talking to herself, and finally shedding her symbol of power (dropping her gun).
La vida deslumbrante and La estrella vacía

I turn now from the film that made the actress a star and now examine fictionalized versions of her transformation into a star in a series of fotonovelas—La vida deslumbrante de María Félix [The Dazzling Life of María Félix] and the film La estrella vacía (1958). The two different texts focus more on the process of becoming a star, emphasizing the changes in the actresses’s life rather than a particular film. The fotonovela’s story that ran from January and February 1957 (issues 46-51), Félix is the protagonist in the adventures of her fictionalized life. Her “real” life is worthy of being the subject in weekly installments of popular entertainment. The story that I discuss here deals with Félix being “discovered” by the movie producer Fernando Palacios. The overarching concerns here seem to be professional life versus family life for women in modernity, a concern that parallels those in the film La estrella vacía, a film that premiered one year later in 1958. Although the film Estrella is not intended to be a biography of Félix, there are a number of parallels between her life and her character’s life. Taibo explains that when the casting decisions were made for Estrella, Félix was cast, in part, because she is “an extraordinary example of will, a woman who has done everything she can to achieve her goals” (221).23

For each of the fotonovela issues—46 (January 18, 1957), 47 (January 25, 1957), 49 (February 8, 1957), 50 (February 15, 1957), and 51 (February 22, 1957)—Félix appears prominently on the cover. In all but issue 51, she appears alone in close-up, in a glamorous pose, frequently with a flower. In contrast, for the cover of issue 51,
her image appears with the image of her young son Quique to note the reconciliation between her and her son and her parents. It is interesting to note that a similar image would appear seven years later in 1964 on the cover of a *Life en español* magazine. The article was entitled “Relato Maternal [Motherly Advice].” The photographs and article focus on her son—her role here is as his mother, offering helpful advice for his developing career. Here in 1964, she plays the mother. Her image also appears on the cover of a 1961 issue of *Life*, which is cited in *Si yo fuera millonario* (1962). In this earlier issue, she appears alone on the cover and the focus is the development of her own career. These different magazine covers are representative of the tensions over gender roles—career woman versus mother.

Both the *fotonovela* and the film *Estrella* focus on an exceptional woman as she is entering professional life as a film actress. Both share several key themes dealing with contemporary womanhood such as motherhood, femininity, sexuality, careers, and female friendship. Both the *fotonovela* and *Estrella* play out on the body of woman, specifically the body of Félix, the concerns about defining gender roles and societal changes that modernity brings

Addressing concerns over urbanization, both Félix of the *fotonovela* and Olga of *Estrella* come from small towns and left their families to go to the city to work where they are “discovered.” The *fotonovela* shows Félix being “discovered” by film producer Fernando Palacios while she was working as a model in a plastic surgeon’s office and he offers her the lead role in the film *Aventuera* (an actual cabaretera film

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23 “María es un ejemplo extraordinario de voluntad; una mujer que ha dado todo lo que se puede dar para
from 1949 that does not star Félix). Félix is drawn to the idea of stardom. “The possibility of becoming a great movie star continued attracting me with an irresistible force” (46:18). In *Estrella*, Félix’s character Olga Lang is “discovered” when she works as a model in a fashion show. Her glamorous beauty is emphasized as she models a long, dark fur coat with a white lining and she wears a black cocktail dress with a multi-strand pearl choker and black gloves. Her photos then appear in magazines and later she signs a contract. Both the *fotonovela* and the film show the protagonist as an exceptional woman—she stands out from other women particularly in her appearance. Olga reiterates throughout the film that she “always knew she was different from other women.”

The issue of motherhood, as it is addressed in both the *fotonovela* and the film, is perhaps one of the most provocative aspects of Félix’s star text as it is able to embody the tensions between work and motherhood brought to the surface through modernization and urbanization. In the *fotonovela*, Félix has a child but she is not his caretaker; she is working on her career in the city. However, when she falls ill, the voice of her son is the only thing that can cure her. The doctor explains that medicine cannot cure her completely. She needs to have a powerful motive to live, a hope. The film producer Fernando vows to find it. Quique, her son, takes the initiative and calls her. There is reconciliation between her son and her family. She promises to visit with him soon and begins to take her medicine and recover. She now has a reason to live—not her career but her son. The *fotonovela* positions Félix as a mother, thus fulfilling escalar una meta.” (221, my translation)
the traditional woman’s role. Because the *fotonovela* is presented as the story of the “real” María Félix, it tempers the *devoradora* aspect of her star text.

*La estrella vacía*, premiering one year after the release of that particular story arc in the Félix *fotonovela*, examines the struggle between professional and personal fulfillment in similar ways—albeit with a slightly less sympathetic heroine. When the protagonist Olga discovers her pregnancy, she sacrifices the child “just as she would have sacrificed anything that got in her way” as she explains within the film. This decision haunts her for the rest of her life. In a telling scene, she stands in front of her closet pointing out the furs and jewels she has acquired and says, “I’m finished. I have nothing. Women envy me for my jewels and furs but I envy them for their children.” She then decides to start over in Spain but in a tragic plane accident, dies an “empty star.” Both texts seem to indicate that the working woman’s seemingly glamorous movie-star lifestyle has its drawbacks, primarily because it proscribes motherhood. The films encourage pursuing motherhood as the only true means of fulfillment for women. It is far more desirable and meaningful to have a child than to have a career.

Both Félix of the *fotonovela* and Olga of *Estrella* are shown to have trouble with female friendships. It seems that ambitious women who do not conform to traditional ideals of femininity are unable to form lasting friendships and will work against each other. In the *fotonovela* Mirta, a jealous rival for the coveted lead role in the film, tricks María into believing that the producer is just trying to make a fool out of her. Félix falls for the deception and decides to change addresses so that Palacios cannot find her but,

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“La posibilidad de convertirme en una gran estrella de cine, continuaba atrayéndome con irresistible
luckily for Félix’s career, a boy sees what is happening and offers to take him to her new place. She is violent and slams the door in Palacios face. Palacios discovers Mirta’s deception and makes a public announcement on the radio that he has chosen María for the part. The radio announcer states, “The movie-going public is anxious to get to know María de los Angeles, a country girl with the face of an angel and the future of a radiant star” (47: 23). The emphasis on Félix’s origins as a “country girl” speaks to urbanization. Mirta, “la pseudo estrella” [the fake star] throws things about her apartment, getting crazier and crazier (47: 26).

Olga’s friend in Estrella is Teresa (Rita Macedo) and the two young women start out together, the same age, moving to the city to make their living—again emphasizing the negative aspect of urbanization. Teresa falls into alcoholism and prostitution as Olga begins her modeling and film career. The film equates Olga’s movie career and position as a “kept woman” and Teresa’s prostitution as it shows us that the two make their money from men. Both Olga and Teresa express an “unseemly” desire for professional fulfillment outside of motherhood and are “punished” for this transgression. Teresa attempts to commit suicide and Olga visits her in secret during her convalescence so that no one will know of their relationship. Olga fears that that her star image would suffer if it were known that she was the friend of an alcoholic prostitute. Teresa’s near death experience causes her to re-evaluate her life and she is able to recover only to end up mourning Olga’s death instead. Olga has gone too far,

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fuerza.” (my translation)

25 “El público aficionado al cine está ansioso de conocer a María de los Angeles, una provinciana con cara de ángel y futuro de radiate estrella.”
cutting herself off from her family and friends for the sake of her career. She does not even return home when her mother is dying and her father notes that Olga is not a happy person, even though she expected to find fulfillment in her career. Her glamorous movie star career cannot fulfill her as a woman. Olga refuses her father’s offer to stay home and not return to the city by saying that she would miss all of the “comforts”—materialism has taken the place of the family leaving her ultimately empty.

Both “Félix” and Olga, although exceptionally beautiful women, must undergo a transformation process to become a star. A star is a construction and both the fotonovela and the film draw attention to its constructedness. To a degree, both texts suggest that “stardom”—used as a metaphor for the working woman—is artificial and thus the desire for professional fulfillment is just as artificial. Underneath her star persona, Félix is just a normal woman who likes beans and meat and wants children. Episode 49 of the fotonovela deals with María’s transformation into a star. In the issue, she started her preparations to become a movie star with make-up artists and hairdressers that made-up her face but Palacios wanted a more natural look and ordered simpler make-up. She started classes on how to move with Arnaldo. Classes on speaking (a lá My Fair Lady) with Palacios who she now calls Fernando. She has to go to daily exercise classes “to stylize her figure” and eat a special diet—carrots and milk. María complains that she wants meat, bread, and a lot of beans. As an article in Bitch Magazine explains, an appetite for food is often indicative of sexual appetite

26 “para estilizar mi figura”
(Wovsaniker 60). In other words, María expressing a desire for more food is expressing her sexual nature.

In *Estrella*, Olga’s process of transformation is not dwelt upon as much. Of particular interest though is the artificiality of her star image. Early in the film, she attends a bullfight and receives flowers from the matador. Unfortunately, he is severely injured when the bull gores him. Her publicists are afraid that she will be seen as unlucky and not be able to get work because of this so they arrange for her to appear as the bullfighter’s fiancée. She dresses in black and has photographers and reporters follow her to the hospital where she kisses his forehead and brings flowers to him. She puts this performance on even though his mother is in the room and her lover is one of the reporters. Both texts emphasize a need to put on “false” appearances as part of the construction of the star.

The *fotonovela* does something that the film does not really treat. The *fotonovela* deals with Félix’s image as somewhat masculine because of her personality. Her rival Mirta give her some advice. “Haven’t you noticed, Fernando, her hands are too big and ugly” (49: 14). Mirta continues with her “advice,” suggesting that María’s voice is too masculine and that she should try to be more feminine. Mirta tells María, “Why don’t you try to modulate your voice? Of course it’s not your fault that your voice is so masculine and roaring.” María is shaken. (49:15). María displays her

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27 “*tus manos son demasiado grandes y feas*”

28 “¿Por qué no tratas de modular tu voz? Claro que tú no tienes la culpa pero es tan hombruna, tan ronca... ¿no crees, Fernando, que debía ser más femenina?”
body and shows that she is an attractive woman. “I’m going to film those scenes showing my legs like this.” María shouts and lifts her skirt to mid-thigh to show her legs. The upper frame has her legs in close-up, her upper body is out of frame (49:17). María then drags Mirta off to the ladies’ room. Fernando did not dare interfere. María locks the door so that no one will interrupt. María punches her to prove the ugliness of her hands. María asks her if she’ll continue with her jokes (burlas). Mirta says that she will stop. Perhaps this scene in the fotonovela somewhat subversively suggests that all the effort in producing a “false” sense of ideal feminine beauty is ultimately unsustainable.

On the other hand, María’s unfeminine outburst is just as damaging. Her anger and violence has its consequences; she cannot continue to be unfeminine. When she returns home, she doesn’t feel well now, her anger burns her inside. The doctor says that too much work and a too-strict diet have made her severely anemic but she is young and should recover. The doctor goes to order medication for her. Fernando comes to realize that he loves María, the woman, not just his “discovery.” Earlier in the fotonovela, Palacios demonstrates that he recognized her “true” beauty when he ordered the make-up artists to remove the too heavy make-up.

La estrella vacía deals with Olga’s sexuality with greater depth than the fotonovela. Olga has many lovers and husbands while María of the fotonovela refuses Palacios’ advances, saying that she does not love him and feels that he is more her protector and father-figure. Olga’s first lover in the film is Luis, a newspaper reporter.

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29 “¡Esas escenas las voy a filmar enseñando las piernas…! ¡Así!”
She refuses marriage with him, in spite of her love for him, because she desires her freedom; she does not want him to tell her what to do. Unfortunately, she is “punished” for this decision. Subsequent lovers/husbands are abusive, cheat on her, and treat her as their property by telling her what to do. In one instance, she and Federico, her sponsor, are being chauffeured and both are smoking. He takes her cigarette and tosses it from the window while he continues smoking his cigar, stating that he wants everyone to know that she is his woman. She is merely a kept woman now. Olga had thought that her career and the money she earned would allow her to live an independent life but she was deceived. She sacrificed the relationship with her true love as well as the life of the child from that relationship for the sake of her career. She has lost the only true means of fulfillment as a wife and mother because of her desire for professional fulfillment.

The fotonovela was intended or at least marketed to allow readers access to the “real” María Félix. In that light, it raises questions, such as: Why was it important to show Félix as a reconciled mother and as less sexually active? How did that “authentic” portrayal influence how her movie were understood? Presumably the same audiences would have enjoyed both the fotonovela and her films so I wonder if the differences in the representations changed audiences perceptions or if it allowed individuals to choose the story that fit their personal world view better.

*Si yo fuera millonario*

Twenty years after her first appearance as La Doña, Félix reprised her role as Doña Bárbara in her cameo in *Si yo fuera millonario* (1962), a film that also deals with tensions between tradition and modernity. The film seems to play on her star text to
bring up issues of changing gender roles. Her appearance is short, interrupting the narrative regarding the larger concern about foreign influence in Mexican society. By the 1960s, Mexico had undergone significant modernization and made great economic and industrial gains. It is interesting that this film is part of a group of films from the early 1960s that served as a vehicle for foreign comedians, in this case Amador Bendayán (García Riera 247). Ironically, Mexican Félix who played a Venezuelan in *Doña Bárbara* now serves to bring a Mexican audience to the Venezuelan comic actor in a Mexican production.

The story of the film shows the death of millionaire Johnny Belíndez, the chairman of an international company—coded as North American through the use of English—who did not leave a will regarding the running of the company. The company officials embark on a search for his nearest surviving relative and discover Hugolino (Amador Bendayán). Hugolino is a comic actor down on his luck, and the company sends several young women to him, trying to get him to choose one to marry so that they might control the company again. In this comedy about upward mobility, Hugolino is not the typical hero. He is bumbling and small of stature. Even his name is a diminutive. As detailed below, Félix’s cameo serves to further underscore his masculine inadequacy. If Félix’s character has not been as central in this film to negotiating the tensions between modernity and tradition as in the previous texts, she nonetheless represented the epitome of modern womanhood.

The cameo is an interesting intertextual moment, incorporating her image in film as well as in print media. Her image first appears in the film as a photograph on the
cover of a magazine entitled *Espectáculos* [Spectacles] in Hugolino’s home. It is the same photograph that had appeared on the cover of the 6 February 1961 issue of *Life en español* in which she narrated her “fascinating life.” The magazine article in *Life* included interview questions, photos from her childhood and her life as well as production stills from her films and portraits of Félix “in character”—for example, her image as “Juana Gallo” reflected infinitely in a set of mirrors—“Mária Félix forever” if you will. The actress then appears in a dream of the protagonist Hugolino who is being stalked by several women. The scene is set as he gets a temporary reprieve from several women fighting for his attentions. He reclines on a couch to read the magazine and falls asleep dreaming of meeting Félix. She appears in the flesh to him as *La Doña*—her persona from the film *Doña Bárbara*. Though she does not wear Doña Bárbara’s split skirt—instead wearing an elegant white gown, she speaks to him in her low voice, commanding him as Doña Bárbara might. Her star text is so well established that she does not need to wear pants to signal the audience of her identity. Her beautiful feminine appearance contrasts her low “sergeant’s voice” and commanding presence. He even responds at first as if he were “Santos Luzardo” the civilizing hero returning from the city to tame the wild plains. *La Doña* examines him as if he were a horse—not unlike she was examined by Emilio Fernández’s general in *La Cucaracha*.

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30 This is similar to her cameo role in *Reportaje* (1953) in which she first appears on-screen in a shapeless white nightgown, a sleeping mask over her eyes and her hair in net. The audience is “in” on the joke—they would have recognized her immediately from the sound of her voice.

31 Taibo mentions that her speech patterns are described in the newspapers and notably by Carlos Fuentes as this “sergeant’s voice.” Félix responds, “if sergeants were like me, there would be millions of volunteers in the armies.” [Si los sargentos fueran como yo, habrían millones de voluntarios en los ejércitos.” (225)
(1958). She looks at his body from all angles ordering him around saying she is searching for a “companion” or lover. She finds him suitable and orders him to kiss her. She stands in her effulgent gown waiting for Hugolino to attend to her. He attempts to kiss her but is he too short; he cannot reach her mouth, even standing on tiptoes. She looks down at him wondering why he has not kissed her yet and sees his physical shortcomings. She then lifts him up, placing him on the couch so he can reach her. He leans out to kiss her and falls. He awakens with his face planted on her photograph of the magazine cover.

Within the dream sequence, gender play is highlighted. For example, in addition to the opening role-play with Félix as Doña Bárbara and Hugolino as Luzardo, she initiates a second role-play as “Romeo and Juliet.” She asks him if he is familiar with the drama and in his hurry to affirm his knowledge of Shakespeare, he “confuses” the names, saying Romea and Julio before correcting himself. Here the suggestion is that gender is part of the performance. Her presence is masculine enough that he feminizes himself.

Félix acts both as the object of desire—it is she who appears to him in his dreams as he struggles with the attentions of the young women who are after his money and not his person—and as a desiring subject. She looks over Hugolino in her search for a “companion” and orders him to please her physically. She is larger than life—standing head and shoulders above Hugolino—and physically very strong—able to lift the man up onto the couch. Within the dream sequence, it is her desire that rules. Although she wears the lovely white gown, sparkling in the glamorous lighting, in the
sequence she adopts the mannerisms of her Doña Bárbara character with her speech patterns and low voice. It certainly indicates that what is remembered from the film Doña Bárbara is the strong, independent, sexual personality of the majority of the film and not the ending where she loses her power, and disappears, never to be heard from again. The dream, however, must end. Although Félix’s star text is seen as desirable because of her commanding presence, ultimately it is still just a dream and as such, unattainable.

Of the many women desiring Hugolino, only Félix’s dream woman appears to have agency but it is false because she only appears in his dream—she is not real. As the narrative of the film represents tensions between modern and traditional value systems, all of the members of the international company end up dead and a character coded as campesino—tradition embodied—in his costume and hair cut with several children turns up to inherit the money. In the end, Hugolino returns to the stage and tradition wins out over modernity. A possible interpretation of the film suggests that even though Félix’s star text is enjoyable, it is ultimately unattainable and impractical in the “real” world.

Conclusion

Each of these films and other appearances in media form part of Félix’s star text and point to how it is constructed, particularly as the latter three texts illustrate the consolidation of her star text. La estrella vacía and La vida deslumbrante underscore the effort that it takes to be star. However, the fotonovela goes further to suggest that underneath her “star” persona, Félix is just a normal woman who likes beans and meat.
and desires motherhood. The *fotonovela* as well as the 1964 *Life en español* cover article exemplify film scholar Richard Dyer’s argument about how the very notion of stardom depends on the promotion of a sense of authenticity that exists “behind” the glamorous façade.

Each also points to tensions about changing gender roles in modernity. Modernity as well as tradition both have their negative aspects but traditional gender roles anchor the shifting societal values. Félix’s star text becomes the site upon which these tensions are discussed. Her star text can represent the negatives of both traditional and modern values. Within film narratives these negative aspects must be shown as negative and her character is punished. A common thread throughout these examples is the issue of professional life versus family life for women. It seems that the professional woman—the career-minded ambitious woman—coexists uneasily with a more traditional model of wife and mother. The only true means for female fulfillment is through traditional roles as wife and mother these narratives suggest. Seeking fulfillment through professional development only leaves one “empty.” Félix’s star text—particularly in terms of her “masculine” femininity—changes over time. In *Doña Bárbara*, it is represented explicitly while in *La vida deslumbrante*, it is a minor plot point. By the time *Si yo fuera millonario* premieres, her star text is so recognizable, just her image is enough to recall what was explicitly indicated in *Doña Bárbara* through her actions and costuming. Even dressed in the beautiful and very feminine gown, her strong personality shines through. As we turn to the next chapters, we shall see how this star text is played out in different types of films spanning Félix’s
career and how it is used to work through tensions between modernity and the traditional as modernization and urbanization take place in Mexico and as women gain more political rights and freedoms. Félix’s star text registers, in particular, conflicts about changing gender roles and often seems, at least within the narrative structure, to provide lessons for appropriate femininity for the time. However, there is pleasure for the audience in the spectacle of Félix’s star text with its depiction of “masculine” femininity.
CHAPTER 3

TAMING FÉLIX: THE THEME OF SHAKESPEARE’S *TAMING OF THE SHREW* IN 1950S MEXICAN CINEMA

“¿Qué opina el ‘Indio’ Fernández del machismo?

Por México, por nuestro sexo, deberá continuar,

porque de lo contrario podríamos no ser mexicanos.32

There are several Mexican films that are influenced by the English playwright Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) *The Taming of the Shrew*. As Shakespeare scholar Eddie Sammons notes, “As a ‘a battle of the sexes’ comedy, this play has its attractions for the filmmaker not interested in a direct screen version” (142). The following films contain elements of the play: *Doña Bárbara* (1943, Fernando de Fuentes, starring Julian Soler and María Félix), *Enamorada* (Woman in Love 1946, Emilio Fernández, starring Pedro Armendáriz and María Félix), *Cartas marcadas* (Marked Cards1947, René Cardona, starring Pedro Infante and Marga López), *El charro y la dama* (The Tramp and the Lady 1949, Fernando Cortés, starring Pedro Armendáriz and Rosita Quintana), *El rapto* (The Abduction 1954, starring Jorge Negrete and María Félix), *Canasta de cuentos mexicanos* {Basket of Mexican Stories (La Tigresa [The Tigress]) (1956, starring Pedro
Armendáriz and María Félix). Although *Enamorada* is widely acknowledged as Mexico’s version of *The Taming of the Shrew*[^33], María Félix has taken on a number of roles in which she specifically plays a shrewish woman who is tamed. María Félix stars in four of these seven films, although in *Doña Bárbara*, as I have discussed, it is María Elena Marqués’ character of Marisela who is “tamed”. Pedro Armendáriz stars in three of the seven films, twice with Félix. These films were produced between 1943 and 1956—a time frame directly before and after women gained the right to vote in national elections in 1953, in part because of the activity of feminist political groups. The story presented in these films is very much about gender roles—as much about masculinity as about femininity.

A key difference in the films starring Félix is that her “shrew” character is not just the daughter of a rich man as in the original Shakespeare play and the other shrew adaptations under discussion. Her characters are landowners and managers of working ranches. In addition, although all the shrew characters express sexual desire, Félix seems to bring that expression to the most visceral level—her gaze looks over the male leads and she becomes visibly agitated when denied sexual release. Furthermore, Félix’s characters express a more ambiguous submission that might be more accurately interpreted as an act that fools the male character. Certainly, Félix’s star text was never “tamed.” Her star text further undercut the apparent taming and submission of her

[^32]: “What does ‘Indio’ Fernández [director of *Enamorada*] think about ‘machismo’? For Mexico, for our sex, it must continue, because if it doesn’t we could not be Mexicans.” (Taibo 100)

[^33]: See Dever’s *Celluloid Nationalism* where she calls *Enamorada* “Fernández’s 1946 nationalization of *The Taming of the Shrew*. 

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characters within these films. As biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo discusses, “Félix is part of a history of independent woman who accept being domesticated on screen, but only on screen; they live out their private lives as they desire”\(^{34}\) (196).

Shakespeare scholar Diana Henderson, in a discussion of waves of adaptations of the source play in the US during different time periods, points out that “the clustering of filmed *Shrews* correlates with those decades when feminism has induced conservative responses and when the media are actively encouraging women to find their pleasures in the home” (150). To understand how the play reflects these social tensions in Mexico surrounding changing gender roles, it is useful to look briefly at the historical context of William Shakespeare’s (1564-1616) play *The Taming of the Shrew*. It was written between 1590 and 1594 and first published as a folio in 1623. England was, at the time, ruled by the powerful and articulate Elizabeth I, who had succeeded her half sister Mary I. They were the first queens to rule in their own right in England. Shakespeare scholar Stephen Orgel suggests that the desire for an orderly succession and the feeling that as women, Henry VIII’s daughters could be “managed” much as the child king Edward VI had been manipulated, contributed to their accession to the throne (144). Notice that one of the themes of the play *The Taming of the Shrew* is that shrewish—read strong and independent—women could be controlled. Orgel, noting the relationship between gender roles and authority in Shakespeare’s England, states in his

\(^{34}\) “Mary Pickford hace “La fieraella domada (The taming of the shrew)” en el año 1929 e inaugura la serie de mujeres independientes que aceptan ser domesticadas en la pantalla, pero sólo en la pantalla. […]No parecian importarle a la “Doña” estas concesiones cinematográficas, mientras pudiera seguir haciendo lo que le ‘diera su real gana’ en su vida privada.” 196)
introduction to the play that “one of the first acts of Mary’s rule was the formal declaration that, for legal purposes, she was a man” (144). Mary’s declaration not only points to the relationship between gender roles and authority but might even subversively suggest that the body’s sex and an individual’s gender role are not necessarily connected—an idea that twentieth-century feminists scholars such as Judith Butler explore in detail.

Also of note was the issue of parental control over marriage at this time. Prior to 1604, a twelve-year old woman could legally enter into a marriage contract—which meant she could negotiate her own marriage by eloping or marrying secretly at twelve years of age. Daughters were considered “valuable pieces of disposable property” in that they could be married to form alliances with rich and powerful families (145). Since this was a subject of much debate, in 1604, the age of consent was raised to twenty-one, which increased the paternal control over daughters—she would be unable to negotiate her own marriage until she was twenty-one. Within this context, it is easy to see that the play is part of “the on-going debate throughout the early modern era about the place of women within the patriarchal system” (143).

This play of Shakespeare never seems to have been out of the repertory, as Orgel notes, and was revised and rewritten to appear in various forms throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (143). In the early 20th century, it was adapted for the silver screen in several countries. Shrew adaptations have been very popular for filmmakers, both with an eye to adapt the play directly and to use elements of it on film. For example, Shrew is one of the earliest talking films in Hollywood starring married couple
Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks in 1929. The late 1920s in US history was a time during which women were politically active in movements such as women’s suffrage and prohibition and I am reminded of Henderson’s observation on the correlation between shrew adaptations and conservative responses in the media to feminism.

Regarding the casting of the Pickford-Fairbanks film, Shakespeare scholar Margaret Loftus Ranald explains, “a frequently used gimmick […] has been casting the principals with actors known to be married to each other, thereby mitigating the apparent cruelty of the play” (320). At the time, these two actors were already well-known for their roles in silent films and Shakespeare scholar Robert Willson, Jr., explains that “the movie going public was eager to listen to talking actors, especially those they already felt they knew from watching them in silents” (19). Note the importance of the star text here—the audience derived pleasure from seeing and hearing their favorite stars because they already felt that they knew them. In a telling statement, Willson explains, “To some the battling lovers of Shakespeare’s comedy might have been seen as mirroring the real-life relationship of the stars” (19).

Dyer’s concept about authenticity—that is, the stars’ seeming to be who they really are—is an important aspect in the formation of star text. Their roles in the film are expected to reflect their actual relationship. Since the audience at least partially believes that the on-screen relationship is true to life then the taming becomes a wish-fulfillment fantasy in which the shrewish woman can be tamed. The 1953 film-version of the musical Kiss Me Kate drew this out by its structure of a play-within-a-play in
which the leads of the *Taming of the Shrew* play are supposed to be “real-life” battling ex-spouses according to the context of the framing story of the musical.

While casting a “real-life” couple as the leads, many shrew adaptations displace the setting to another time; either Renaissance Italy—the time period of Shakespeare’s *Shrew*—or another time. This temporal and spatial displacement allows a controversial topic to be addressed with a little bit of distance while at the same time, by using a contemporary couple to address those issues, it makes those issues more urgent and relevant to the audience.

There seems to be a particular need to cast popular stars in the lead roles of the *Shrew* adaptations to help make the message of appropriate gender roles more acceptable and accessible. One famous example was Franco Zeffirelli’s 1967 adaptation that cast “terminally quarrelling real-life lovers Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor” (Ranald 322). Feminist Shakespeare scholar Margaret Loftus Ranald explains that “as with the 1929 [Pickford-Fairbanks] film, the primary reason for the production was exploitation, this time of the tempestuous and often bibulous passions of Burton and Taylor. Audiences cared less about Petruchio and Kate than their real-life embodiments. But where Fairbanks and Pickford projected domesticity, on and offstage, Burton and Taylor flaunted their *Anthony and Cleopatra*-induced love affair and its quasi-‘Egyptian unpredictability’” (322)\(^\text{35}\). The timing of this film is significant as well. The late 1960s was a time of US civil rights and feminist movements and I am

\(^{35}\) Burton and Taylor were cast in the romantic lead roles of *Anthony and Cleopatra* and their relationship was seen as similarly tempestuous.
again reminded of Henderson’s observation that the shrew appears again in media as a conservative response to feminism. Ranald explains,

The drums of the women’s liberation movement were sounding loudly, the first salvo in the conflict having been fired in 1963 by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. And in unexpected numbers, white, educated middle-class women responded. They wanted more social, economic and sexual freedom, and that was the sentiment to which the 1967 *Taming of the Shrew* appealed.

(322)

When María Félix stars as the shrew character opposite her real-life husband Jorge Negrete in *El Rapto* (1954), in addition to the political issue of Mexican women’s suffrage at the time, the real-life relationship of Félix and Negrete must have been in their audiences’ minds when they saw the film. Félix is quoted in her biography by Ignacio Taibo that “Jorge Negrete hated her, seeing her as a new arrival who was full of vanity, he upset her” (15). Taibo offers his opinion, suggesting that after they married in 1952, “there are those of the opinion that she was taking vengeance for all the humiliations she suffered while filming *El peñón de las ánimas*” (17). Testifying

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36 Ranald describes the book, “There [Betty Friedan] announced to an astonished masculine world that intelligent, educated women were not content with the American familial dream of several children, a commuting husband, a house in the suburbs and everlasting domesticity.” (322)

37 “Jorge Negrete me odiaba, yo diría me aborrecía, me veía como una recin llegad llena de vanidad, yo me revolvía muy fuertemente, me decía; estos no me van a aplastar. Fueron unas semans terribles, terribles…” (15, my paraphrase)

38 “Cuando años después Jorge se casa con María, hay quiences llegaron a opinar que ella está vengándose de todas las humillaciones que hubo de soportar durante la filmación de *El peñón de las ánimas*.” (17, my paraphrase)
to the strength of the public’s desire to see more of this couple’s tempestuous relationship and perhaps even playing on their roles in *El Rapto* (1953), there is in the 1957 series of *fotonovelas*—*La vida deslumbrante de María Félix*, an arc dealing with the beginning of the Negrete-Félix relationship as they work together on Félix’s first film *El peñón de las animas* (1942). The development of their relationship takes center stage in this storyline and it shows certain shrew-like elements such as sexual tension, physical deprivation, and arguing. An example of the sexual tension between the two actors is represented by their fictional counterparts in chapter 55 of March 22, 1957, as the two are being filmed for their first on-screen kiss. The *fotonovela* presents it as their first kiss ever (apparently they had not rehearsed it, according to the fiction of the *fotonovela*.) She is reluctant to kiss him at first, fearing that his kiss will be startling and electrifying “Perhaps I thought that his kisses would be as shocking as he himself was” (page 5, my translation). 39 The *fotonovela* makes the reader wait in suspense from the beginning of the chapter for six of only thirty-two pages before they finally kiss. The kiss is worth the wait as the fictional Félix narrates that the kiss blew her mind: “In that instant that his lips touched mine and, in spite of the fact that I went out of my head again, I stayed still under the pressure of his fingers” (page 6, my translation) 40

39 Tal vez pensé que tus besos deben ser tan chocantes como tu persona…” (page 5, my translation)

40 “En aquel instante sus labios tocaban los míos y a pesar de que volví a alejarme mi cabeza quedó nuevamente quieta bajo la presión de sus dedos.” (page 6, my translation)
A story in the fotonovela illustrates the arguing and physical deprivation that play on the “shrew” story presented in El Rapto. “Félix” is hungry and lost alone in the forest after she and Negrete had a fight while out walking on their day off from filming. These fictional representations in the fotonovela of the two stars seemed designed to reflect their “real-life” relationship, described in contemporary media as “tumultuous.” When the two marry in 1952 uniting the “most beautiful woman and the most handsome charro,” it was a “national event that made all of Mexico happy.”

In addition to her real-life relationship to Negrete, Félix’s star text as a strong, dominating woman seems to be a factor in the casting of this and other Mexican Shrew adaptations—Félix seems to need to be tamed. She needs to conform to the male power structure. Taibo states that “another value of the film itself, consciously used, was the idea that it was time for someone to subdue and tame María […] but María was not going to be subdued and tamed by a society that was already tired of an aggressive and capricious woman” (172-173).

For the Renaissance audience, Orgel speculates that the greatest pleasure would have been the idea that a shrewish woman could be successfully managed, even though it was doubtless seen as a “fairy tale” (143). Despite the way the play seems to promote

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41 From Félix’s official web site.

42 “El día de la boda se convierte en acontecimiento nacional, los mexicanos están contentos, la mujer más Bella y el charro más guapo, se casan el 18 de Octubre de 1952.” (quoted on Félix’s official web site)

43 “Y como un valor ajeno a la propia película, pero manejado conscientemente, la idea de que ya ha llegado el momento en que alguien someta y dome a María. La película, sin embargo, a pesar de los esfuerzos de todos, va a negar la realidad; María no va ser sometida por una sociedad ya harta de una mujer caprichosa y agresora.” (172-173, my translation)
the training of women to be wives—including not questioning the husband’s ‘right’ to use physical means against his wife—there are subversive elements. For example, first Katherine’s “energy, resilience, and individuality” show her to be “a worthy adversary in a battle that the history of patriarchy rendered unequal” and, secondly, the “degree of disguise, misrepresentation, and playacting” required to woo her show that “marriages cannot simply be arranged” (146). In addition, the end result of the “taming” seems to be that Katherine will outwardly conform and gets what she wants by “pretending to be pliable” and “telling her husband what he wants to hear” while inwardly she maintains her own beliefs and feelings (145).

This subversive element is acknowledged in some modern productions and film adaptations by Katherine’s wink when she gives her concluding “submission” speech to “the headstrong women” at the banquet and explains that a “woman owes her husband the same loyalty a subject owes his king” (Shakespeare 247). For example, in the 1929 Hollywood adaptation, Mary Pickford as Kate “after pronouncing the word ‘obey’ […] in close-up, winks broadly at her sister Bianca, signaling her awareness that the rhetoric she speaks is only that. If men must have women preach so, she will gladly comply, as long as her ‘sisters’ know that she doesn’t believe a word of it” (Willson 27). This gesture, however, is not employed in the 1967 Franco Zeffirelli adaptation. And, yet, as Shakespeare scholar Jack Jorgens explains, Taylor’s Kate sneaks out of the room after her “submission” speech to make him begin the chase anew while Petruchio triumphs over the losers of the wager (146). The speech itself is played “straight,” surprising both director Zeffirelli and husband and co-star Burton (Henderson 156). In fact, as
Henderson explains, Taylor performs the speech without irony and without any lead-in request from Petruchio, which serves to “naturalize Katherine’s assertions as her own spontaneous feelings” (156). In fact, as Shakespeare scholar Elizabeth Schafer states, “historically Katherinas have moved from unambiguous submission […] to a whole range of subversive and complex readings,” particularly in regard to the performers’ tone for this speech (34). There seems to be a wide range of interpretive possibilities in the productions and film adaptations, from the surface compliance of Pickford’s Kate to the apparent, if brief total submission of Taylor’s Kate’s.

Thus, given the frequent use of such techniques, it is noteworthy that none of the Mexican adaptations employ a “submission speech.” In each of them, the “shrew” character seems to enact her submission to her “tamer” and patriarchal authority rather than talk about it. In addition to eliminating the subversive potential available in this speech, this choice serves to underscore the naturalness of the taming and the resultant submission.

Another way that the shrew adaptations help to naturalize the taming is to make the taming story the whole story of the film. In the 1623 The Taming of the Shrew, the story of Katherine’s taming by Petruchio is not the whole play—it is the play within a play. It is framed by a joke that an unnamed lord plays on the character Christopher Sly, a drunken beggar. Sly is dressed in the nobleman’s clothing and convinced through playacting by the true lord and his servants—including a boy actor dressed up as Sly’s “wife”—that Sly is an “amnesiac aristocrat” (Orgel 144). The story of Katherine and Petruchio is a play enacted to entertain Sly. The ending of The Taming of the Shrew is
left open-ended in that, Sly never returns to the action, since he has no further action or
dialogue after Act 1, scene 1. By not returning to the framing scenario of Sly and the
playacting joke, “the interpolated entertainment utterly abolishes its frame, and becomes
the play itself” (Orgel 144). The disappearance of the frame story makes *The Taming of
the Shrew* a bit of an anomaly within Shakespeare’s career and drama generally in that
the metatheatrical device of a play within a play—which Shakespeare uses in *A
Midsummer Night’s Dream, As You Like it, Hamlet, and The Tempest*—is left hanging,
without returning to the frame story. There is, however, a different extant version of
the play *The Taming of a Shrew (a instead of the)* from 1594. Although there is some
disagreement over the precise nature of the quarto text which Shakespeare scholar
Elizabeth Schafer mentions, among the several differences between *The Shrew* and *A
Shrew* is that the latter “keeps Sly onstage commenting on, and occasionally interacting
with, the characters in the inner play until he finally falls asleep at the end of what
would be 5.1 in the Folio. Sly is then returned to the alehouse where Lord first found
him, and wakes up to find he is no longer a lord, but convinced that he now knows how
to tame a shrew, a naïve confidence which is not shared by the audience” (2). Schafer
notes that if the frame story is retained, as it is in *The Taming of a Shrew* version, then
Katherine’s final submission speech is subverted or at least undercut “by returning to
Sly and his foolish idea that the inner play indubitably demonstrates how to tame a
shrew” (36).

In fact, the entire frame story generally disappears from most film adaptations,
including all of the Mexican ones under discussion, so that the “taming” story
becomes the whole story. Without a framing story, the gender issues raised within
the “taming” part of the story become more central. Additionally, the use of a
framing story suggests that Katherine’s dutiful submission “remains contained within the frame as a moment of wish-fulfillment, never to be achieved by Sly or any other husband” as Werner explains (72). By not using a frame story, shrew-taming becomes a “culturally desirable and realistic goal” (Werner 73). In addition, when the opportunity for subversion provided in the submission speech is eliminated and the shrew character enacts her submission, her submission is naturalized, making the submission seem to be a natural result of the actions undertaken in taming.

What is a “shrew”? The term *shrew*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, literally refers to a small, insectivorous, mouse-like mammal with a pointed snout, popularly held to be poisonous or otherwise injurious—sometimes blamed for injuring or sickening livestock. The figurative use of the term *shrew* is generally held to be “a transference of meaning […] accounted for by the superstitions as to the malignant influence of the animal.” The term, in this sense, used to be applied to all “things of evil nature or influence; something troublesome or vexatious” including men as in “a wicked, evil-disposed, or malignant man; a mischievous or vexatious person; a rascal, villain” or the Devil or even malignant planets. The word shrew could even be used as a verb meaning to curse. The cure for “shrew-stricken” animals was to drill a hole into an ash tree, seal a live shrew within, and then take a limb from that tree and gently apply it to the affected animal.

The figurative meaning of the term *shrew* seems to have narrowed and from Shakespeare’s time forward, *shrew* has referred to “a woman given to railing or scolding or other perverse or malignant behaviour; frequently a scolding or turbulent wife.” It is interesting to note that the cure for animals believed to have been affected by a shrew’s powers is to seal the shrew in a tree, presumably forever, and use the limbs of that tree for the cure. Looking at the origins of the term from a 21st century feminist
point of view leads me to consider the similarities of sealing the woman given to “malignant behavior” and trapping her into marriage to control her—in a sense, forcing her to channel her strength for the benefit of the one entrapping her. In several of the Mexican adaptations, the woman is explicitly compared to a horse who must be tamed (domar) in order to prove useful to its master. Shakespeare’s play, as well as many of the adaptations that we shall observe cast a sister, either figurative or literal, opposite the shrew character for comparison.

In the play and the films, the shrew character is generally a strong-willed woman who expresses what she thinks and feels, often in an abusive or violent fashion—that is, nagging or scolding. The “shrew” was considered the worst possible kind of woman. The shrew may use physical means to express herself such as flailing or throwing things but these are often presented as ineffectual—the “tamer” merely brushes off her attempts. Another common aspect is sexual desire that the shrew displays which the husband will use against her if possible. The male lead of the play intends to tame the “shrew” in order to turn her into an obedient and pleasant wife—meaning that she obeys her husband without question, does not raise her voice in anger or even express her own opinion. Often the “taming” involves physical discipline such as food and sleep deprivation and even violence, which is mostly presented on-screen as spanking and/or threats of violence. Félix’s shrew characters are interestingly enough not spanked by her “tamer,” although she is subjected to threats of violence and physical deprivation.

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44 I can’t help noticing the animal metaphors used to describe women—women need to be “managed”—a term that has its roots in horsemanship—directing a horse through its paces. In addition to the horse and shrew, the OED mentions sheep in that “sheep and shrew are contrasted as types of wives of opposite characters” with the sheep being the desired character.
Despite the title of the play suggesting that the story is about the female title lead, it is just as much about the male lead. Shakespeare critic Sarah Werner states, “Despite the fact that it is Katherine who shifts from being an unmarried shrew to a submissive wife, the play is more the story of Petruchio, her tamer. She gets fewer lines than him, no soliloquies, few asides and little or no chance to explain her apparent change in temperament” (70). In this sense, the play, as well as its film adaptations, is as much about masculine gender roles, despite the educational message training independent women to be dutiful wives. The Mexican film adaptations present an idealized image of masculinity. The male lead is strong, intelligent, desirable and generally in a position of power, sometimes as a landowner or a military leader, and is able to fulfill the “compensatory fantasy of a socially underprivileged male,” by taming the strong-willed woman (Werner 73). Pedro Armendáriz plays the tamer in several of these Mexican films—an international star with high box-office appeal, known for his romantic leading roles. Film scholar Joanne Hershfield identifies Pedro Armendáriz as a “new kind of charro hero” who “embodies the unsullied revolutionary ideal, a man on the side of the people who cares about and fights for justice, liberty, and civil and agrarian rights against the evil hacendados” (Ramírez Berg, quoted in Race 92).

According to the Mexican Movie Database, Armendáriz “embodies the essence of

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‘Mexicaness’ better than any other Mexican actor.\textsuperscript{46} Both Negrete and Armendáriz were top stars during their time, bringing to life the Mexican leading man in many of their films.

As a lead in to a more in-depth analysis of the \textit{Shrew} films starring Félix, it will be useful to briefly analyze other sources of similar stories. Shakespeare’s play certainly is not the only source material that registers social tensions over changing roles. The story of Pygmalion is about a man who creates a woman who fits his (often-contradictory) ideals. The fantasy behind this myth matches that of the \textit{Shrew}—that is, that the female is imperfect on her own—not fulfilling the conditions demanded by patriarchal order—and requires male intervention. The second part of that fantasy is that the male is capable of making those interventions. Now, as we re-examine \textit{Doña Bárbara} (1943), I turn to the related story of George Bernard Shaw’s \textit{Pygmalion} (1914 play; 1938 film), the story of the transformation of a young English woman of lower class to pass as a lady of the upper class, loosely based on the Greek myth. Shaw’s play has proved immensely popular and durable and is the source of the musical \textit{My Fair Lady} (musical 1956, film 1964, starring Audrey Hepburn).

As is well known, “the major source of the Pygmalion myth is an episode in Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}, written in Rome shortly after the year 1 A.D.” (Berst 6). Ovid’s Pygmalion is a sculptor in Cyprus who sees women as sexually immoral and grows to hate them so he resolves to live alone. He sculptures an ivory statue of a woman

\textsuperscript{46} “Armendáriz logró encarnar la esencia de la mexicanidad mejor que ningún otro actor del cine nacional.” (my translation)
so beautiful that no living woman approaches her beauty. He falls in love with his creation and caresses it and gives it gifts of clothing, jewelry and other trinkets. At the festival of Aphrodite the goddess of love, he asks for one like his “ivory virgin.” Aphrodite hears his petition and knows his true desire and causes the statue to live. Pygmalion embraces and makes love to his living statue, who later gives birth to their daughter Paphos. Scholar Geoffrey Miles, in discussing the erotic charge of Ovid’s version states, “the whole concept of a perfectly beautiful woman designed to the lover’s specifications and utterly devoted to her creator… is, in many ways, one of the most potent of male fantasies” (333). Both the Shrew story and the Pygmalion story are, at their center, based on this fantasy of shaping a woman into an otherwise unobtainable ideal.

Shaw’s Pygmalion reflects social tensions, particularly around class issues. As Nicholas Grene explains in his introduction to the play, the play reflects two conflicting beliefs. “Pygmalion simultaneously satirises the idea of human difference exemplified in the constructions of class, and celebrates the irrepressible individualism of the world’s vital geniuses. Liza, East End flower-girl turned duchess, was no ordinary flower-girl to start with” (viii). It is interesting to note that in his play, Liza becomes independent and autonomous while the film version of the musical My Fair Lady has Liza creeping back silently as Higgins listens to her recorded voice and softly demands his slippers from her—certainly an indication of submission to her tamer/teacher.

According to Grene, Shaw never meant for Liza and Higgins to end up together—“Higgins is not sexually attracted to Liza. […] We are a long way from the original
Pygmalion who dresses and undresses his ivory statue, caressing her naked limbs” (xi). It was under pressure from movie-makers to give it a “happily-ever-after” wedding at the end.

_Doña Bárbara_ (1943) shares some commonalities with Shaw’s play and film in Marisela’s (María Elena Márquez) transformation. Félix’s title character, discussed in the previous chapter, while certainly shrewish in nature, was not tamed. Her screen daughter Marisela, on the other hand, is trained in proper behavior for a woman. Marisela began the film as a wild child, crawling on the ground, wearing rags, covered in dirt, and not even knowing how to speak properly. Santos Luzardo (Julián Soler) takes her under his wing and into his home to educate her, a move that serves to underscore Doña Bárbara’s failure as a mother. Luzardo sees her barefoot and lounging on the ground and rides up to her. The framing serves to underscore their differences. He is high above her on his horse, casting a shadow over her. She, like Liza Doolittle in Shaw’s _Pygmalion_ and _My Fair Lady_, make animalistic noises, not even human speech. Luzardo takes her and bathes her face in a moment almost like baptism where Marisela is transformed from dirty to clean, complete with glamorous make-up and lighting. In later scenes, Luzardo teaches her to speak properly, using “proper”—read upper class—Spanish and brings her clothing to wear. Eventually, one of Luzardo’s men approaches with a white horse that he has tamed for Marisela’s use. He remarks to Luzardo upon seeing the transformed Marisela that “he is not the only one good at taming”—indicating that Luzardo has “tamed” Marisela. In a similar moment to Liza’s “test” where she must “pass” for an upper class lady at a party, Marisela is presented at
Luzardo’s party where she sings beautifully and dances with Luzardo. She does so well in her test that Luzardo realizes that he is starting to have romantic feelings for her and wants to send her away to avoid any improper sexual advances. Marisela convinces him to let her stay and, as we know, they end the movie arm-in-arm surveying their land. Marisela has submitted to the male authority represented by Luzardo—the ideal heterosexual couple.

In many ways, Marisela seems to be placed as a foil to Doña Bárbara, especially since the characters are the only two female characters with significant screen time. Marisela’s taming brings up some interesting questions. Marisela starts out presented as a lower class woman. Her scenes with Juan Primito place them in the same social class in their manner of speech and dress. Luzardo teaches her to speak and act as an upper class woman—one worthy to stand beside him over his land and worthy of his affection. I must wonder why Marisela’s character could be tamed and Doña Bárbara’s was not. Doña Bárbara could not be feminine enough to meet the ideal. She seemed at times to try—such as wearing a dress and letting her hair down but she was fundamentally “flawed.” Was it because she was raped and then later promiscuous, like the “sexually immoral” women of Cyprus that caused Pygmalion to hate women—even though the first thing he did after his creation came to life—by the hand of the goddess of love, no less—was have sex with her? I am reminded of seventeenth-century Mexican nun and writer Sor Juana de la Cruz’s poem “Hombres necios”
This poem suggests the hypocrisy of men who would reject a woman for being sexual while at the same time they are ones having sex with the women. Is this the case with Doña Bárbara and Marisela? Is Marisela accepted by Luzardo and by the film for her sexual “purity?” Is she allowed to be trained to be Luzardo’s consort because she is—in Liza’s words—“a good girl?” The character of Doña Bárbara is clearly sexually aggressive—choosing her lovers and the terms of the relationship—a female character whose sexual appetites are not properly circumscribed. As we return now to the Shrew story, one of the characteristics of the shrew character seems to be sexual desire—which Félix represents at a very visceral level, with the character becoming as agitated as the male character over frustrated sexual desires.

In this next section, I discuss several Mexican films clustered in the time period between the mid 1940s and the mid 1950s and examine how they treat the Shrew story and deal with the social tensions that arise due to various factors that contribute to changing gender roles. These Shrew adaptations reflect a concern for women’s changing roles in a modernizing society, especially as they were gaining new rights and freedoms. Women’s suffrage in municipal elections was granted in 1947 as “the municipality was viewed as the ‘natural’ place to allow women to participate in political
public life and to contribute their ‘feminine virtues’ gained through the traditional roles of mother, wife, and housewife in the spheres of family and private life” (Massolo 197-198). In 1952, the Alliance of Mexican Women was formed and its president Amalia Caballero de Castillo León was instrumental in obtaining the signatures of one-half million women supporting women’s suffrage thus convincing Aolfo Ruiz Cortines, the presidential candidate in 1952 to grant suffrage which he did in 1953 (Ramos Escandón 101). According to historian Julia Tuñón Pablos, “The state granted women the right to vote because a particular type of capitalist growth required legal equality among individuals, and especially, because developed nations had already done so (105). Nonetheless, gaining the right to vote should not be interpreted as simply the result of women’s activism or the fall of patriarchal power structures. Historian Joe Foweraker supports Tuñón’s assertion with the suggestion that women were not given the right to vote until it was politically advantageous for the ruling powers. He states, “In Mexico, women’s suffrage was delayed until forty years after the Revolution because it was thought that the majority of women opposed the secularization of the state and other projects of the ruling party” (75). Tuñón continues, “suffrage enhanced women’s legal standing, although they were repeatedly told to be very careful in exercising this right so as to not lose their femininity or to forget their traditional roles as wives and mothers. […] Women were given a limited sort of freedom that ensured they would stay close to home” (105-106). The underlying message is that women needed to maintain their traditional roles, even with new rights and freedoms, because the state needed them to
in order to appear modern. According to Tuñón, women did not win or earn the right to vote but it was given to them for purposes of national identity (105-106).

In the following pages, I turn to the films themselves as we discuss several major themes that are prominent in these *Shrew* adaptations, including property ownership and gender roles, sexuality and the expression of desire, violence and gender, and women’s voices in the expression of opinions. *Enamorada* (1946) won an impressive series of awards, both international and national, including Ariels for Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Director. Taibo explains that, not only was the film critically successful, it was also a success in the box-office (106). The film is set during the Mexican Revolution with Félix as Beatriz and Pedro Armendáriz as General José Juan Reyes. Taibo, discussing the two stars, describes them as:

> A couple of unprecedented force in Mexico; they appear as giants in the company of other film protagonists and figures. They surge forth from the screen and remain within us forever … even those absolutely against the star system must accept their presence and their capacity to domesticate the audience. (94)

This film certainly established them as a couple that the audience wanted to see together. As I have mentioned, Félix and Armendáriz appear together in two *Shrew* adaptations alone and in five other films: *Maclovia* (1948), *La escondida* (1956), *Café Colon* (1959), *La Cucaracha* (1959), and *La Bandida* (1963). Armendáriz was

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47 “una pareja de una fuerza sin precedentes en México; parecen gigantes ante los otros protagonistas, ante las otras figuras. Surgen en la pantalla y se quedan dentro de nosotros para siempre. […] aun el más absoluto enemigo del sistema de estrellas ha de aceptar su presencia y su capacidad de domesticación de la audiencia” (94, my translation)
established as a well-known leading man, often playing figures of masculine power, such as generals in the Revolution—his character seemed to always get the girl. He was also well-known in Hollywood from the late 1940s and on. His last performance before his death was in the James Bond movie *From Russia with Love* (1963) in which he plays a spy friend of Bond. Even suffering from cancer as he was during the filming, his character—testifying to his masculine star text—had a woman in his office with whom sexual activity was suggested as well as his obvious on-screen enjoyment of the gypsy belly-dancers dance performance and their subsequent fight as the two women wrestled each other over the favor of a man. Félix, already famous for her work in many other films—especially as a strong and independent character, delivers in this film an award-winning performance in which she is tamed by Armendáriz’s masculine general.

*Enamorada* expresses concerns about changing gender roles in Mexico through its interpretation of the *Shrew* story as well as through the incorporation of elements from different genres, including the action film and the screwball comedy—this latter idea is explored by film scholar Dolores Tierney. Beatriz (Félix) is the daughter of a rich man and as the revolutionary war comes to her town, all the rich men are rounded up to give money and supplies to the cause as well as to be punished for wrongdoing such as fixing food prices. There is a departure, however, from the *Shrew* story as Beatriz is given a pistol in order to take care of the house, even though there are men present. In this way, her strength of character is established. She is holding the (phallic) weapon and defending her household from potential marauders. She is not just
the daughter of a rich man to be used as the means of acquiring wealth and position but she holds her own protecting her property.

Film scholar Dolores Tierney suggests that the connection between violence and romantic interest is a staple of the Hollywood genre of screwball comedy in which two characters are juxtaposed in order to battle out their romantic feelings towards one another.\(^4^8\) She explains that, “in American films, this kind of physical interaction (violent, comic, playful, childish) was used as a code/metaphor for sexual interaction after the introduction of the Production Code in 1934” (233). It is interesting to note that portraying a link between violence and sexual activity on screen was actually encouraged by US censorship codes. Since *Enamorada* was filmed in Mexico, it was not subject to the US Production Code, but, as Tierney argues, the conventions of the screwball genre that developed in response to that Code were an influence on *Enamorada* as the director Emilio Fernández began his film career in Hollywood. An example of this type of violence occurs in the memorable scene as Beatriz walks past Armendáriz’s General and some of his men comment on her figure. She confronts General Reyes and slaps him twice. She is the violent one here but it also shows the men laughing at the slapping which defuses her confrontation by rendering it harmless to them. Although she uses physical violence against a man, it is shown to be more

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\(^4^8\) The Modern Times web site says that: “Screwball, […], became a popular slang word in the 1930s. It was applied to films where everything was a juxtaposition: educated and uneducated, rich and poor, intelligent and stupid, honest and dishonest, and most of all male and female. When two people fell in love, they did not simply surrender to their feelings, they battled it out. They lied to one another, often assuming indifferent personas toward each other. They often employed hideous tricks on each other, until finally after running out of inventions, fall into each others arms. It was fossilized comedy, physical and often painful, but mixed with the highest level of wit and sophistication, depending wholly on elegant and inventive writing.”
titillating than harmful. It is at this moment that the General, also showing that she cannot hurt him, touches his cheeks and says that he’s going to marry her. Her reaction against his objectification of her body only serves to heighten his desire.

Since she cannot harm him with her physical violence, Beatriz takes it one step further and she enters a store that sells explosives and purchases a firecracker that she promptly lights and tosses it under the General’s horse, which throws him to the ground. Unfortunately, the match that Beatriz used to light the firecracker was carelessly tossed to the ground and it sets off explosives in the store. With the use of a weapon she is able to harm the General, but her violence is seen in a negative light here—presented as careless and vengeful. She crossed over the level of acceptable violence for women. Her violence no longer merely signifies sexual desire but is now destructive. Thus, the film seems to suggest that excessive female desire is as destructive as the carelessly disposed match.

Tierney interprets the scene in which Beatriz and General Juan José exchange blows and comic banter through the door of her father’s house as “a potent metaphor for sexual intercourse: Juan José’s continual ramming of it is suggestive of attempted penetration (which ultimately he achieves)” (233). Notice that in this scene it is not just the General ramming the door. Beatriz participates in this “attempted penetration” as well. When the General arrive to call on her at her house, she tricks him into getting right next to the door and then she hits the door with a stick (phallus) startling him. Is he merely startled at the noise and the shock waves of the blow or is he startled by the fact that she hit the door (attempted penetration) at all? He retaliates by kicking the
door so that she gets the same treatment. This time the violence is mutual. She relents and opens the door, allowing him to enter. Why does she relent? Tierney suggests that the framing of scene with the two leads “taking up parallel positions on either side of the door” indicates that “as parallels of each other they are also in physical harmony: i.e. compatible” (233). When she allows him in (accepts his attempts at intercourse), he states that he is interested in marriage and she slams the door in his face. She is not interested in marriage—that is, submitting to patriarchal authority. She wants more independence and agency in her relationship as she eventually gets.

Feminist critic Ricki Wovsaniker documents a recent phenomenon of slim actresses boasting about their food consumption and how that is associated with “masculine sexiness” and sexual desire—that is, showing a healthy appetite at the table is indicative of a healthy appetite in the bedroom (60-61). Certainly these associations between food and sex are not new. In *Enamorada*, in addition to the “playful” violence discussed previously, to show her sexual desire, the film shows Beatriz eating—the desire for food, especially sensuous food, becomes equated with sexual desire. The day after the violent marriage proposal, the General is watching her eat ice cream and he becomes aroused and sends her a letter attempting to regain her favor. But she throws the letter into the fire before reading it. He continues following her and in a conversation, she tells him that he could have any woman but he wants her because she’s different. She is different because she physically expresses her sexual desire and her wish to not submit to patriarchal authority. The violence continues as she slaps him again but this time he grabs her hair and throws her to the ground, asserting himself
over her. The town’s priest intervenes—there are limits imposed on violence—and they go their separate ways.

I have suggested earlier that the Shrew film is as much about the tamer as about the “shrew.” Tierney states about Enamorada that “the true trajectory of the film lies in Juan José’s search for humility: tracing a path from his identity as a symbol of power and oppression, to that of a humble man asking for forgiveness. In Juan José’s case, the transformation is brought about through Beatriz” (233). In a bar, the General carves her name into the table. He truly seems to be enamored of her but does not know what to do. His sexual frustration is expressed by using a phallic instrument to mark her as his own through carving her name into the table. He gets advice from an older patron at the bar—a device in the Shrew and similar stories that suggests that the male is not perhaps as “natural” authority as he would like to believe since he requires advice in order to carry out the “taming.” He then goes to her house and serenades her with a song about her beauty and how she is like a goddess. She sees that it is he who sings to her but she does not allow him to see her peeking out the window—her gaze on his body is what is emphasized. She is clearly drawn to him as he verbally, rather than physically, expresses his desire for her. Tierney suggests that this scene seems to subvert the “conventional axis of male desiring the female” by denying the General the opportunity to see her. That is, it subverts the idea that the “female only connotes “to-be-looked-ness” as argued by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey (Franco 150-151, Tierney 231). Beatriz is the one who is looking at the male body and, as Tierney suggests, she is the active participant in the courtship here (231). Later, General Juan José approaches her
as she prays in the church and asks for her pardon and he professes his love for her.

He has completely changed his manner with her—before there was teasing and mild physical violence but now he seems to be trying to woo her. He has changed his taming tactics, at the advice of an older, more experienced man.

The film ends as Beatriz rejects her rich fiancé and sacrifices the life of ease that his riches promise for national ideals as represented by the Revolution. Beatriz is at a dinner party and a rich man places a string of pearls on her. She is engaged to this man but she is not happy since she does not desire him. She starts to sign some documents when she hears artillery fire. Her necklace breaks, spilling pearls to the ground—a symbolic break from the life of the rich man’s daughter and a representation of the sacrifice she makes—and she rushes out of the house to search for the General in the troops marching by her house. She sees him riding off so she embraces her father in farewell and joins the other women following the troops. Tierney interprets the couple’s departure as part of the screwball genre. She states the following: “Screwball plots usually revolve around a wacky couple who can find no place in society either as individuals, or as a couple. Hence, Screwball comedies often finish with the couple having to leave the urban world to find their own space” (234). I see Beatriz’s decision to follow the General on an allegorical level in that she has chosen the ideals represented by the Revolution over the possibility of an easy life for herself married to a rich man. She chooses her nation as her family, prefiguring those themes brought out in subsequent Félix films discussed in the following chapters. Her decision does have multiple readings. Though she has rejected the patriarchal institution of marriage, she
still chooses a role out of love and desire for the macho represented by the General and for the nation that is appropriately feminine—that of a camp follower, cook, helper, and lover to the Revolutionary soldiers. At the end of the film, when he leaves for his next battle, she follows as a soldadera—a role discussed in the following chapter, though perhaps indicative of economic hardship during wartime, allowed women more freedom in the activities and their sexuality. This reading subversively suggests that while she has apparently submitted to his “taming,” the underlying message is a rejection of the patriarchal version of the marriage relationship.

The main story of a woman falling in love with a soldier and leaving her previous life to follow him and support him in battle as well as many details from this last portion of the film are in homage to Josef von Sternberg’s *Morocco* (1930). Félix’s character’s behavior in *Enamorada*, however, more closely follows the Shrew model in which a strong-willed woman who resorts to violence to express herself is tamed by the most masculine man, in this case a strong leader in the Revolution who is not intimidated by her outbursts yet displays a remarkable level of emotionality in his serenades and professions of love for her. The Shrew elements allow for an examination of gender roles using the Revolution as a backdrop. Women, according to this model, should submit themselves to their men and support them out of love. Mild physical violence, even if interpreted as sex play, is presented as a means to that end.

In the next Shrew adaptation, the violence is different—it is not the “playful,” almost comic violence that is coded as sex play in *Enamorada*; nonetheless, it shares the theme of gender roles. *La Tigresa* is one of a group of three short films put together
under the title of *Canasta de cuentos mexicanos* (1956) based on a collection of short stories from Bruno Traven. Each of the short films deals with progress and difficulties that arise in modernity. Félix plays the title role of the final short film *La Tigresa*.

Félix, as Luisa, plays a strong independent woman who runs her own store that was left to her by her father. She states “My father died and there were no men so I became the man.” The story here seems to most clearly reference her role as Doña Bárbara where she was a wealthy landowner, controlling the daily workings of a large ranch.

Félix’s biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo explains that the director Julio Bracho cast Félix in the role of Luisa Brava because of similarities with the legend of María Félix (194). Taibo indicates six points in common between the character of Luisa Brava and Félix. Both: (1) had a love for horses and was Amazonian in her competitiveness, (2) were known for her beauty and her fortune, (3) possessed an education which has made her unbearable, (4) argued with everyone because she always had to be right, (5) would fly into a rage if anyone suggested that she was wrong, and (6) did not seem to need a man (194-195).49 As Taibo states, “The legend of María Félix seemed to fit the legend of ‘The Tigress’ and ‘The Tigress’ seemed to fit nicely with the social behavior of María” (195).50

49 “(1) Amaba los caballos y era una experta amazona siempre dispuesta a jugar carreras o a competir con cualquiera que se atreviera a retarla. (2) Por su extraordinaria belleza y aún más por su considerable fortuna, era muy codiciada por los jóvenes de la localidad. (3) Pasó todos los exámenes con honores. Esto la hizo más suficiente e insorptable. (4) Contradecía a todo el mundo y por supuesto ella siempre tenía razón. (5) Si alguien le demostraba que estaba equivocada, tenía un ataque de furia. (6) No parecía necesitar a un hombre. Ya que había estado en un convento, en donde ‘aparte de inglés, se aprenden muchas cosas prácticas y útiles.’ (194-195, my paraphrasing)

50 “La leyenda de María Félix parecía convenir a la ‘Tigresa’ y la ‘Tigresa’ encajar en el compartamiento social de María.” (195, my translation)
Luisa’s strength and independence are undermined when a handsome landowner Don Carlos (Pedro Armendáriz) enters her life. Luisa resorts to violence in the expression of her opinions, which helps to make her appear immature and not really capable of running the store. Luisa, at her shrewish best, has an argument with him, yelling and throwing dishes at him. Afterwards, Don Carlos is at the doctor’s office getting bandaged up. The doctor asks him why he would want to marry her when there are more domesticated women. Again, there is the reference that women need to be managed or controlled. Her aunts, eager to get Félix’s character married off, help make the arrangements and the two are wed, against Luisa’s wishes. It is interesting to note the role women play here in Luisa’s domestication—they are enforcing patriarchal norms on their niece while seeming to enjoy living their own single lives, apparently financially supported by Luisa’s store.

Don Carlos’ masculinity is called into question at his wedding ceremony, which plays into the idea that the main thrust of the story is about the “tamer” rather than the “shrew.” Don Carlos at the wedding ceremony is teased by the other men about “who wears the pants” when Luisa asks him to bring her something. Luisa must be instructed in the proper role for her new status. When it is time to consummate the marriage, Don Carlos kisses her but leaves her to sleep alone—employing the taming technique of physical deprivation. Clearly showing frustrated sexual desire, she is agitated, stalking about the room, smoking a cigarette in a sequence that echoes an earlier sequence when Don Carlos spends the night—in separate bedrooms, of course—at Luisa’s family
ranch. This sequence certainly points to Luisa’s own sexual desire by showing her agitated by the lack of consummation.

As part of her “taming,” Luisa must be isolated from her familiar means of support and forced to rely on her husband to meet her needs—an idea that would certainly appeal to a “macho” audience. Don Carlos takes her to his property—as named in the film, the “dominios de Don Carlos [the dominions of Don Carlos]” and begins his lessons. The word “dominion” clearly relates to domination and it is here, stripped from her own property and resources, that Luisa must be dominated or tamed.

The next stage in the “taming” involves threats of violence. Unable to achieve the expected level of compliance, don Carlos resorts to (excessive) violence and begins killing with his (phallic) revolver the animals on his ranch. Armendáriz as her film husband asks her to bring him coffee. She refuses so he, absurdly, begins asking different animals around the farm to bring him the coffee. When the animals do not bring him the coffee, he shoots them. The threat of violence, rather than physical violence serves to tame her. He speaks to the cat, “Nobody would take you in but I fed you so bring me some coffee.” The parallel between the animals and Luisa is made clear—she is Don Carlos’ property as much as the animals are. Luisa is an “old maid”—no one wanted to marry her, in spite of her beauty, because of her independent ways but Don Carlos has taken her in, to take care of her. The implication is that women “need” to be married to be fulfilled or that they need to submit and serve men to be worthy of living. He then talks to his horse—established earlier that Luisa is fond of
horses—and before he can shoot the horse, she brings him the coffee. Félix’s biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo suggests that this type of treatment would please both the male audience who see feminine independence as an insult and the female audience, from their space of constant humiliation, who would see the gestures of independence and aggressiveness without hiding their animosity (195).

Women’s sexuality must also be subordinated to masculine desire to maintain patriarchal order. Don Carlos takes his (phallic) gun to bed to have “his way” with her and complete her domination. A subversive question is raised. Is he so not adequately endowed that he needs to supplement with the gun? It is an interesting move since the short established that she was just as agitated as he was by not consummating her sexual desire. The parallel bedroom scenes establish that she desired sexual activity as much as he did. As long as her sexuality is subordinated to his desires then it is acceptable. Don Carlos must resort to violence and the threat of violence to tame Luisa. As in Doña Bárbara, her independent behavior is unacceptable when she does not submit to traditional gender roles.

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51 There is a less well known, although it pre-dates Shakespeare’s version, influence for this short film. The Spanish prince Don Juan Manuel’s (1282-1349?) story “De lo que aconteció a un mancebo que casó con una mujer muy fuerte y muy brava [What happened to a young man who married a very strong and wild young woman]” from his collection El conde Lucanor contains the “taming” method that appears in the film. This “taming” method employed by Manuel’s “mozo” is asking animals to do his bidding and then killing them when they do not perform the requested task.

52 Taibo compares La Tigresa with the 1967 US Zeffirelli production starring Elizabeth Taylor. “Ambos tratamientos resultaban atractivos para una audiencia compuesta por espectadores masculinos que contemplan la independencia femenina como un agravio y por mujeres que, desde su constante humillación, veían los gestos de independencia y agresividad de Mará y de Lyz Taylor con no disimulado encono” (195, my paraphrase)
In true *shrew* tradition, Félix’s character is portrayed as a strong independent woman who talks too much and too loudly, refusing to submit to the “proper” role for a woman—getting married and meek obedience to her husband. Armendáriz’s character takes upon himself the authority to tame her and bring her in line. First, he lassoes her into marriage—a trap for the woman in this case since she had been accustomed to the freedom afforded her by running a business and having enough income and resources to take care of herself and her aunts. She is then bound by the marriage laws and traditions and is bodily carried off her land to her new husband’s property. He resorts to violence and threats of violence to get her to comply with his wishes and the “proper” role for a wife. His violence does not physically touch her as we see in other film renditions of Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew* such as *Kiss Me Kate* and Franco Zefferirelli’s 1967 version. Nevertheless, although the violence is displace in *La Tigresa*, Don Carlos’ actions towards the animals equate Luisa with them—she is no more than his property just as his animals are his property.

*El rapto* (1954) is similar to the other films discussed here in that Félix plays a “shrew”—Miss Aurora Campo—that is “tamed” on screen. The violence is just as often self-inflicted in this film as it is the more “playful” type of violence we have seen previously that represents sexual desire as seen in *Enamorada*. This film, in addition to dealing with tensions regarding changing gender roles, has a subplot involving the triumph of the farmer over the corruption present within the government—certainly an issue during the 1950s as economic growth was pushed by the government, often at the expense of the poorest sectors of society. This time her real-life husband Jorge Negrete
is the tamer in his last role before his death. This film, more than any of the other film, plays on their real-life relationship and star texts.

Violence is used both to express sexual desire and also as a way to expose corruption in the local authorities. Aurora’s opening moment is when she tries to cross a river and Ricardo Alfaro (Negrete) tells her that she cannot get by that way. She argues with him, “Who are you to tell me I can’t!” She does not submit to his greater wisdom so she makes the attempt and falls into the river. Using violence in a vengeful way, much like in *Enamorada*, she calls for help and when he goes to her, she pulls him into the water. Ricardo is returning to his property after a long absence but the corrupt officials in the town have sold his ranch to Aurora (Félix) and spent the money on gambling and drinking. The corrupt officials here mirror those corrupt officials in *Doña Bárbara*. Ricardo goes to the officials and attempts to get his property back but is thwarted by their corrupt ways as they tell him that “from the law’s point of view, he is dead.” He goes back to the property and he and Aurora fight. Using violence against her, he pushes her down but she gets an idea.

Aurora inflicts violence on herself in an attempt to fool the officials. She goes to the authorities and accuses him of raping her—she has ripped her dress herself, attempting to legitimize her story. She shows her white undergarments and her legs, distracting the officials as she tells her story—their looks are obviously at her body as she inches her skirt up in explaining what happened. She uses her sexuality to attempt to get her way. Her plan, however, backfires. The corrupt officials, in a puzzling move,
decide that the solution to the problem is to have the two get married so that the house will be shared.

Ricardo must seek advice on how to “tame” his new wife. Again, the suggestion is that “taming” needs to be learned. Ricardo seeks advice from one who married a wild woman and figured out how to tame her on how to handle his new wife and is instructed that “the friskier the filly the more work is needed to tame her.” It is interesting to note that apparently Félix’s character is not the only strong-willed woman around, unlike some Shrew adaptations that seem to suggest she is unusual, but Félix’s “shrew” is the only one who appears on screen. The taming is again made to seem likely and natural, that her submission will be the result of his efforts to tame her.

Another interesting note regarding gender roles and star text is that in this adaptation, Negrete seems at first to be “an imbecile” when he appears to town’s corrupt leaders—which is especially unusual as Taibo points out that “el famoso charro, paradigma de los valores del mexicano [the famous cowboy singer, paradigm of the values of the Mexican man]” (172) appears unable to surmount the difficulties put in place by the corrupt town officials. Certainly Negrete’s star text—highlighted in the fotonovelas even after his death—is that he is capable and intelligent, even to the point of arrogance. The audience would not have been fooled by his seeming incompetence; they would have been waiting with anticipation to see how his character was going to solve the problems.

Ricardo’s new way to tame Aurora does not involve the violence that we saw earlier in the film or in the other adaptations. He sleeps separately and works the land,
showing a certain moral superiority. He sings serenades to her hoping to “kill her with kindness.” He does not seem to be taming her using physical violence or deprivation the way we see in the original play. Aurora is the violent one—perhaps, now her violence expresses her frustrated sexual desire. Aurora thinks she has the upper hand because he is attracted to her but Ricardo gets tired of working so hard and kicks her out of the house. Aurora goes back to the authorities and tries to get a divorce. When she sends servants to Ricardo to get her alimony, he has no money. Ricardo finally decides to work the system. At a town festival he makes his plans and plays the officials, their wives and Aurora, tricking Aurora into confessing that she had lied about Ricardo raping her. Ricardo comes to her rescue and the two walk off together hand in hand. The originally “socially underprivileged” man is finally compensated. He works within the system—since he has not been able to change it—and gets his property returned to him and he gets a newly submissive Aurora. Patriarchal order is restored within the family and the government’s corruption continues unabated.

Both *El rapto* and *Canasta de cuentos mexicanos* deal with issues of property ownership specifically. The woman owns property and is tricked or forced to give control of her property to a man through marriage laws. Sarah Hamilton in her article “Neoliberalism, Gender, and Property Rights in Rural Mexico” provides some insight into issues revolving around gender and property rights. She explains that the “agrarian reform projects of the middle and late twentieth century awarded land rights and other means of production disproportionately to men” in large part because those rights were issued “only to heads of households” and since “most rural households included a male
head, who was presumed to be his family’s primary economic provider” the titles were held in men’s names (1). It was not until 1971 when the Ley de Reforma Agraria “established that both males and females could be granted ejidatario status without specifying household leadership” (3). Even after these revisions, only 15 percent of the ejidatarios were female through the 1980s. On the other hand, according to Hamilton’s survey, women were increasingly taking an active role in decision-making regarding household funds and agriculture, possibly because of husbands’ or other male household members’ absences when working in the US in the 1980s. It is apparent that property ownership falls under the purview of men, even in contemporary cases where women actually did the managing of the land. The pervasive attitude seems to be that men own property and women only can own property if they do not have a man taking care of them. These Shrew films certainly tie into this perception that women should not be property owners because it undermined their femininity and called into question masculinity. Even in cases where the woman was actually quite competently managing the property without male assistance, the pervasive notion was that the ownership fell under male authority. Perhaps this is yet another way that gender roles are proscribed to bolster “macho” identity, property ownership was seen as a male right or privilege under patriarchal order.

I bring up the following Shrew adaptations although they do not feature Félix, featuring but rather two leading men famous for their masculine roles—Pedro Infante and Pedro Armendáriz—to demonstrate the difference that Félix’s star text makes even
in films dealing with similar plot lines from the same time period. In Félix’s *Shrew* films, it seems as though she is more sexual, more desiring than her counterparts in these following *Shrew* adaptations. Félix’s character in *Enamorada* chooses her man because of the way he makes her feel. The rich suitor cannot raise her feelings as the General does. Félix’s character suffers from sexual tension as much as Armendáriz in *La Tigresa*. Her character in *El rapto* shows her nearly taking her clothes off attempting to sway the authorities on her case—using her sexuality to get her way. In addition, Félix’s characters seem to be defying tradition female roles, at least until she is tamed. In *Enamorada* she carries a gun and uses weapons. In both *La Tigresa* and *El rapto* she is a property owner, managing a store or a ranch in its everyday duties. She is competent in these activities more traditionally ascribed to the male.

The first of these films is *Cartas Marcadas* (1947) starring Marga López as Victoria and Pedro Infante as Manuel is a vehicle for Infante’s singing, including drawing attention to the quality of his singing within the dialogue of the film. The two meet Victoria (López) is attempting to use a phone at a bar and Infante’s Manuel is singing “Ay, mis cuates” for the amusement of several drinking buddies. She cannot hear over the music and goes over to tell him to be quiet but she is momentarily captivated by his voice until he catches her. She then pokes fun of his singing and storms off. Victoria is to marry a veterinarian Ernesto (Alejandro Chaguerotti) but there is an inheritance, which she can only access if she marries Manuel in a justice of the peace ceremony, they wed but they do not kiss and immediately afterwards go their
separate ways. Victoria seems willing to give up on her fiancé for money, although there is an undercurrent of attraction as seen when Victoria listens to his voice.

Manuel begins the process of taming her when Bartolo Mé\textsuperscript{53} (El Chicote), Manuel’s manservant come up with a trick for Victoria—they send her a nicely wrapped box but when she opens it, mice scatter and the ladies with Victoria stand on chairs, screaming. In a show of his masculine strength and bravery, Manuel comes in to the rescue and shoots the mice.

Next we have the traditional taming technique of physical deprivation. When they arrive at the house they are to share for their inheritance, she divides up the house arbitrarily but discovers that her half of the house does not include the kitchen so Manuel and his men sit down to eat, taunting Victoria, Ernesto and her father with their meal. Later that evening, Ernesto tries to woo Victoria but Manuel laughs at his efforts and gets out his guitar to sing “Serenata.” He shows himself to be more appropriately masculine of the two men—he is able to express his passionate feelings while Ernesto seems impotent in his efforts.

When it is time to retire for the evening, Victoria discovers that her rash division of the house has left her without a mattress. She is seen in a negative light, careless in her decision-making. Although she is not physically violent, she is verbally violent in the expression of her opinions. She is angry and storms into his room saying that she will sleep in his bed and that he should leave. He begins to remove his clothing and she throws a fit, causing the others in the house to come running to see what the matter was.

\textsuperscript{53} His name is a joke within the dialogue, causing the court clerk confusion.
She finally gets them to leave her by threatening to unbutton her blouse. Although both Victoria and Aurora both seem to be using their sexuality for their own purposes, Félix’s character in *El rapto*, does not just threaten to expose herself, she actually rips up her own clothing to expose her undergarments in order to attempt to get her way.

Like Armendáriz’s General and Negrete’s Ricardo, Infante’s Manuel continues to send her gifts and serenades her, showcasing his vocal talents with the lovely “Palabritas de amor.” She is pleased to hear him sing the serenade but when he finishes she tosses the boxes of gifts out the window onto the street. Her character seems conflicted. She enjoys his attentions but her reactions are violent.

Finally Victoria admits her feelings for Manuel and gets together with a group of ladies and they serenade Manuel, declaring her love for him. In a reversal, he uses threats of violence against her. Just as she threw the boxes at him after his serenade, he comes out and shoots his pistol to scare them off. Like in *Enamorada*, the female lead must choose her man—the rich but effeminate one or the poor and masculine one. Ernesto and Manuel fight over Victoria and Ernesto shoots and it appears as though Manuel is wounded but he is just play-acting—Ernesto missed him—underscoring his impotence.

Later in the night, Bartolo and Manuel lean a ladder against Victoria’s balcony and Manuel and Victoria kiss until her father comes to her room, nearly discovering Manuel. He must hang from the balcony to hide because Bartolo removed the ladder. Her father sees Manuel trying to sneak away and threatens to kill him but he sets up a ladder outside Victoria’s room to allow the two lovers to elope. Although she seems to
have selected her man, it is clear that she is only permitted to go with that choice because her father allows it.

*El charro y la dama* (1949), starring Pedro Armendáriz and Rosita Quintana is the story of a young rich blond woman, again the daughter of a rich man, who falls in love with a cowboy. Patricia and her father are traveling to visit a rural area—they are going to a festival held in their honor—and are attacked and robbed by masked bandits. As part of the festival, there is a shooting contest. Armendáriz’s character Pedro does his demonstration. She volunteers to take the place of the scarecrow target and places an apple on his head. He misses and they switch places. She fires four times and succeeds and knocking the apple from his head. He says he gets three more tries so she reluctantly takes her place with the apple on her head and squeezes her eyes closed and prays. He fires his pistol twice. The apple falls from her head and she faints. He is able to handle the weapon better than she can and faces the fear of being shot better than she does.

After she recovers from her fainting spell, there is a dance in which all the men, except for Pedro, line up for a chance to dance with her. The men form a circle around her while her father blindfolds her and she spins around and when the music stops she selects another dance partner. After singing a song, she selects her dance partner, with eyes wide open—it is Pedro. It seems that she is exercising her choice but he approaches her and says she needs to cover herself—she is wearing a strapless black gown with a sweetheart neckline and elbow length gloves—and places a shawl over her shoulders. She is not bothered by his desire to cover her body; instead she kisses him
for his gift. As they are getting a drink, a coin falls from his handkerchief and she accuses him over being the bandit that robbed her on her way into town.

They all go to court and he is found guilty through trickery, although he maintains his innocence. After the sentence is pronounced, Pedro is taken to carry out the sentence—death by hanging. He is seated on a horse with his hands tied behind his back and a rope around his neck, when a shot rings out, splitting the rope allowing him to escape. Patricia has rescued him with her sharp-shooting skills. Like Félix’s characters, she appears capable and skilled. Afterwards, Patricia is in her room and Pedro enters with his pistol out. With the threat of violence in the air, he says that he is going to kidnap her but she diffuses the situation by saying how romantic it is. With further threats of violence with his knife, she writes with lipstick on the mirror that he has carried her off. He scratches off “Pedro” and writes “El Charro.”

He has taken her to a cabin and the woods and orders her to take care of the saddle. She refuses and he spanks her. This time the violence has escalated from threats to actual physical violence but it is the titillating form of spanking. This is the only Mexican film in this group that employs spanking, although US Shrew adaptations such as Kiss Me Kate (1953) use it. Her clothed buttocks are displayed as he swats her almost playfully. She attempts to return the violence and picks up a stick to hit him but he sees her and compliments her on the good idea to gather firewood, thus disarming her.

When it time to sleep, she is given the doghouse but a scorpion comes in and startles her and she begins screaming. He rescues her and begins feeling her neck and
hair, presumably checking for scorpions but she slaps him and he slaps her back. The
next day, she tries to get his pistol from him but the dog alerts him and he puts her to
work. The threat of nudity is used in some amusing scenes. At one point, he is
supposed to be getting ready for bed and she is horrified to see clothing go flying by so
she covers her face. He orders her to look over. She reluctantly does and discovers that
he is fully clothed. The sexuality seems to be taking a back seat to the humor in these
moments. Félix’s characters seem to feel desire to a greater degree. Another amusing
moment is when Patricia wants to bathe, she must go to the river but there is a
crocodile. She screams and tries to hide in her undergarments and he comes down to
rescue her, but the crocodile is a fake. He has tricked her yet again, trying to prove to
her that she needs to depend on him for her safety. In a last attempt to escape, she
finally is able to steal his pistol but discovers that it is not loaded when he catches her
with it. She hands over the pistol and he rotates the chamber and fires at a jar hanging
over her head and she ends up soaked. Her seeming competence with weapons is
completely undermined here.

At last he decides to return her to her father and he takes her back to the
outskirts of the town to let her go but she falls and hurts her ankle so he takes her back
on his horse. As soon as they are close enough in town, she yells for help and he is
carried off to jail. She sees her fiancé and slaps him but he falls down and hits a piano.
She is dissatisfied with her fiancé now that she has had the opportunity to be with the
masculine Mexican man represented by Armendáriz.
Pedro is released from jail and Patricia’s father and Pedro argue. Patricia’s father says that Pedro must marry her since she spent the night with him but he says that they had not, she had shared the bed with his dog, so they prepare to leave. Even here, when he is presented with the opportunity to make her his own, he takes the moral high ground. As Patricia and her family are leaving the town, bandits kidnap the sisters but it turns out to be their lovers. Both couples kiss and embrace. Pedro takes Patricia over the saddle of his horse and rides off spanking her. She is slung helplessly over the horse with her limbs flailing ineffectually. Her clothed buttocks are displayed and the audience participates vicariously in the more titillating than harmful violence.

This film certainly helps to establish Armendáriz’s star text as capable of the type of taming—physical deprivation and mild violence—that are part of the Shrew tradition so that in the subsequent film La Tigresa the audience would certainly believe that his character could tame Félix’s character, even though he never resorted to the same level of violence that he uses here. His character merely had to threaten violence before Félix’s character submitted herself to him. On the other hand, perhaps it was not as important as long as Félix seemed to submit on screen because the audience would know that in her personal life she was independent and did as she pleased.

These Mexican Shrew adaptations came out in the decade surrounding 1953 when women were granted suffrage in Mexico certainly point to a conflict about changing women’s roles in a society trying to modernize itself. Félix’s shrew characters form an interesting addition to the Shrew tradition by emphasizing her sexual
desires and her competence in traditionally masculine activities such as protecting her home and managing the daily activities of a store and ranch—carried out to a greater degree in the soldadera films discussed in the following chapter. Félix’s characters are not just a rich man’s daughter who must choose the most masculine suitor; they provide a subversive element that suggests that maybe women were capable of doing those activities that were traditionally in the masculine world but that they should not go outside of their feminine roles. Her Shrew characters perhaps express the most ambiguous “submission”—her submission really is just an act, off-screen in her personal life she maintained her independence.
CHAPTER 4

SENDING FÉLIX OFF TO WAR: THE SOLDADERA AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER

¿Cuál es el colmo del gallo? Que la gallina sea la de los huevos.\(^{54}\)

As Emilio Garcia Riera documents in his history of Mexican cinema, many films are set during the Revolution. In this chapter, I am chiefly concerned with a small group of films in which María Félix takes on the role of a soldadera and leader on the battlefield. Few films, with the notable exception of Matilde Landeta’s La negra Angustias (1950), show this version of the soldadera. Most films set during the Revolution, including both early and subsequent Hollywood-produced films such as Jack Conway’s Viva Villa! (1934) and Sam Pekinpah’s The Wild Bunch (1969) depict the soldadera in a different version—she is a “camp follower” taking care of the male soldiers’ sexual desires, preparing food for them, and caring for children.\(^{55}\) Félix has certainly been in her share of films that take place during the Revolution but she has not always played a leadership role. For example, she has starring roles, as already mentioned, in her earlier films La enamorada (1946), Río escondido (1947), but also the

\(^{54}\) Traditional joke. What is the greatest achievement of the rooster? That the hen be the one with the balls.

\(^{55}\) In fact, José Balaños’ La Soldadera (1967) seems to directly contradict Félix’s characterization of the soldadera by focussing the story on this type of camp-follower soldadera.
later films *La escondida* (1955), *Café Colón* (1959) *La Bandida* (1962) which I discuss in the following chapter. These films, although they deal with the Revolution, do not cast Félix as woman-in-arms, leading in battle. Her roles are, respectively, an upper-class young woman who falls in love with a leader in the Revolutionary forces and becomes a camp follower, a teacher, a mistress of an officer in the Federal army, a show girl, and a Madame of a brothel. In this chapter, I focus on the films in which her character picks up firearms and joins the fight, leading others in the fight for justice in land ownership and civil rights. These films are significant in that they are different from earlier films on the Revolution, including those starring María Félix. They are a rewriting of the Revolution and the *soldadera* and a challenge to traditional representations of gender roles.

The representation of the *soldadera* in film has a historical basis. The character of a *soldadera* points to a time in Mexican history when gender roles were in a state of flux as the people of Mexico engaged in war during the Mexican Revolution. Lower-class men who might have previously felt emasculated by class differences, took up arms and embraced masculinity, previously denied to them by the ruling classes. Women of all classes were forced from traditional gender roles as they took over authority roles at home and in the public arena from men who were at war or joined the men on the road as they moved from battle front to front. The *soldadera* was afforded a sexual freedom and was even glorified for her sexual availability to the male soldiers so that she could give birth to more revolutionaries, such as in the poem by “popular orator Baltasar Dromundo…included in *Domingos culturales* recommended for inspirational
readings at civic ceremonies” (O’Malley 134). Although this image of the *soldadera* with its emphasis on her physicality “differed sharply form the ethereal motherhood commonly depicted at the time and contradicted the notion that chastity was the supreme female virtue,” it still “fit within general patriarchal and Catholic concepts of a woman’s role” by “glorifying female sacrifice, especially through motherhood (O’Malley 135).

This chapter examines in particular *La Cucaracha* (1958), *Juana Gallo* (1960), and *La Generala* (1970). María Félix’s characters in these films are perhaps some of her most subversive with respect to gender roles although she states in her autobiography that *La Escondida, La Cucaracha* and *Juana Gallo* were very difficult for her to make because of the battle scenes, the dust and the horses [fueron películas dificiles para mí. Había mucha batalla, mucho polvo, mucho caballo] (169). She was in her forties at the time that these films were made which may have been a factor in the difficulty she had with them. Each of these three films picks up the image of the physical and sexually active *soldadera* and plays with gender roles as it treats the themes of war and violence, sexuality and motherhood, femininity and masculinity. To a certain degree, Félix’s portrayal of unconventional female characters in these films challenge traditional gender roles for both males and females by foregrounding their constructed nature. Philosopher Judith Butler articulates this idea of the constructed, performative nature of gender. Although she goes so far as to suggest that there is no

56 Filmed in 1966 but not released until 1970.
inner consciousness constructing the image but that the construction is everything. This work will focus more on the constructions themselves and how their representations in film allow tensions about changing roles to be addressed. As demonstrated below, the films question traditional and modern models of femininity as well as masculinity in a post-Revolutionary and post-World War II era and seem to propose or at least demonstrate a new model. The earliest of the three films *La Cucaracha* (1958) enforces certain aspects of traditional models of femininity such as submission to patriarchal authority in order for modern notions of masculinity to exist to a greater degree than the other films, but it is this film that highlights to the greatest degree the constructed nature of gender. *Juana Gallo* (1960), on the other hand, questions the strong female character within the dialogue of the film but the epilogue suggests that this type of woman is needed for the progress of the nation. In *La Generala* (1970), Félix’s last feature length film, her character is portrayed as monstrous, even to the point of castrating men. Her character here thus set limits on expected female behavior but by paralleling the Revolutionary hero’s mythic death, takes on similar mythic dimensions.

I turn now to historian Ilene O’Malley in her text *The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-1940* and her discussion of the shift in the paradigm for masculinity. She focuses her discussion on

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57 Butler states, “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body” (*Gender* xv). In her new study, she states, “the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (*Undoing* 3)
the changing post-1940s models of masculinity seen in Revolutionary heroes such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, which she suggests is concurrent with the rise of machismo. On a metaphorical level, O'Malley suggests that the nation functioned as a family, with the different social classes working as different generations within the family. She describes the “macho” as a rebellious son who realizes that the father, a supposedly benevolent authority figure, “is trying to keep him in an inferior role permanently even though he feel he deserves to be treated as an adult man” (140). The macho does not change the system that keeps him subjugated but instead “rejects only the restraints and responsibilities that are imposed as the price of manhood and instead demands all manhood’s privileges by force. The macho is the male perpetual adolescent, the swaggering bully forever proving his manhood by bravado, by besting other men, by dominating women” (140). She explains that prior to the Revolution, the caste hierarchy of the porfiriato had deprived lower-class men of their manhood, or personhood, in that it brutalized their physical existence and denied them sociopolitical equality with upper-class men. It also deprived them of their manhood in the patriarchal sense: their class position made it difficult to provide adequately for their families or to exercise their patriarchal privileges of exclusive sexual control over ‘their’ women. (136)

O’Malley continues, explaining that the “racist class oppression” effectively “emasculated lower-class men who recovered their manhood during the revolution by assaulting the socioeconomic structures that had oppressed them” (136). As they took their new places in post-Revolutionary society, they saw that “equal manhood included
the prerogatives of the patriarch. That entailed the continued oppression of women as
women, although women shared in the improved status of their classes” (136).
O’Malley points out that though “socioeconomic structures that had oppressed” the
lower-class men were attacked, the structures themselves were not changed at a
fundamental level, and in fact ideals of “manhood” such as providing for one’s family
became useful for the emerging post-Revolutionary Mexican state in “creat[ing]
responsible workers for the rebuilding of the economy” (138).

But by the 1940s, disillusionment with the Revolution had grown and people
doubted that the Revolutionary ideals would actually be held up. As O’Malley states,
“doubt grew over the years, and after 1940 when the institutionalization of the regime
was successfully completed, it was evident that the shortcomings of the Revolution
were not temporary—they were the new status quo” (142). Because of this frustration,
the model of masculinity of the “macho” was increasingly embraced because it was
attainable. O’Malley states, “The macho, the rebel against the father and a model of a
kind of manhood within the reach of most men, became the favored image of Mexican
men” (142). The films produced in the late 1950s and into the 1960s certainly seem to
exemplify this “macho” model of masculinity for the Revolutionary male and portray an
“emasculated” model for the oppressor. For example, a Revolutionary hero character
such as Antonio Zeta in La Cucaracha (1958) is portrayed by Emilio Fernández as a
Pancho Villa-type revolutionary. On the other side, the male Federal army colonel
coronel Feliciano López portrayed by Erik del Castillo in La Generala (1970) is
literally emasculated by Félix’s character as she castrates him in revenge for the death of her brother Manuel (Carlos Bracho).

The setting of these films—the Mexican Revolution—indicates a key moment in the construction of images of modern Mexican society and nationhood and recalls the ideals that the Mexican Revolution represents such as land ownership and political liberty. Historian Carmen Ramos Escandón states regarding the Revolution that “it is clear that the struggle itself modified the gender-based roles and spaces, subverting everyday life and erasing the boundaries between the spaces of public action and private life. Everyday life was subverted by the war itself” (90). A representation of this type of disruption is in the film La Cucaracha (1958). Coronel Antonio Zeta (Emilio Fernández) arrives with a small group of men to the town where the coronel Ricardo Zúñiga (David Reynoso) and his group are staying. The town evidences the level that the Revolution has saturated daily life—children are seen playing with rifles, riding them as if they were hobbyhorses. Historian Frederick Turner specifically includes La Cucaracha and Juana Gallo in his discussion of films that show a popular interpretation of the Revolution of how “injustice led to the necessary social revolution” (302). He explains, “In utilizing the heroes and ideals of the 1910 Revolution, Mexican film-makers stir nationalistic reactions while creating a popular commercial product” (302). Yet even while bolstering revolutionary nationalism, these films from the late 1950s forward rewrite or at least reinterpret in light of subsequent changes in Mexican society.

This time period encompasses the so-called Mexican “miracle.” This was a time of great political stability and economic growth that was ushered in during the
post-World War II period by president Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) but was accompanied by repression and corruption. Historian John Sherman writes that:

According to Cosío Villegas ‘after just one year under Alemán the so-called revolutionary government had ceased to be revolutionary.’ The very heart of the revolutionary experience was about to be cut out of Mexican national life. Underlying commitments to ending foreign economic domination and addressing grossly inequitable wealth distribution were in danger of evaporating as Alemán and his cohorts redirected the country toward unbridled capitalist development. (Sherman 575)

While there was great economic growth, the poorest of the population was increasingly poorer. Sherman explains:

A postwar ‘miracle’ had indeed occurred, in which Mexico averaged nearly 6 percent annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth into the 1960s, one of the highest sustained rates recorded in the world. But statistical growth unfortunately does not always translate into on-the-ground well-being and stability. It is certain that the Mexican economic pie grew in size, but the poor received increasingly less of it. (581)

During the time period in which these films were made, Presidents Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-58) and Aldolf López Mateos (1958-64) set into motion programs that controlled pricing on food and supply inexpensive basic foodstuff to the poor and supported the technological advances for commercial farming. These factors made it increasingly difficult for a plot of land to support a family allowed individual and
cooperatively held farmlands to fall into disrepair. One of the rallying calls to the Revolution *Tierra y libertad* [land and liberty] had fallen to wayside as increasing numbers of people moved to the cities to find employment in the new industries.

In addition, the family structure was changing, threatening male identity, as women took on economic roles both in the workplace and as consumers during this period of industrialization. Turner describes a “lack of family solidarity” that arose during the displacements of the Revolution and its “continu[ation] in twentieth-century Mexico by increasing urbanization, the exigencies of poverty combined with greater geographical mobility, feminine emancipation, and the ineffectiveness of religious prescriptions in some areas” (135). 58 Joanne Hershfield explains, “a new definition of woman was needed to legitimate modern social structures and relations of power. This definition had to somehow incorporate revised symbols of nationalism into existing representations of gender. Mexican cinema became one site wherein this struggle was waged and new symbols of the Mexican woman were shaped” (*Mexican* 29-30). Turner states

The dilution of familial loyalties in the cases of revolutionary family disruption permitted increasing national loyalty, as men, women and children who ordinarily would have derived their paramount sense of ‘belonging’ from family relationships now derived a heightened sense of belonging from their participation in revolutionary enterprises (135-136).

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58 It is interesting to note that after women gained suffrage on a national level there is little written about women’s political activity during the late fifties and into the sixties, although during this time women played a significant role in the economic development of the country.
Mexican film would exploit this sense of national “belonging” in films by referencing the Revolution and its hero cults. The epilogue of *Juana Gallo* (1960) goes beyond the metaphorical level and directly addresses shifting women’s roles. The epilogue begins with Félix’s title character riding away from burying her dead lover and comrades as she goes on to continue the fight. This scene is intercut with contemporary scenes of modernity—the building of universities, roads, and industries as a male explains in voice-over how the Revolution enabled this type of progress. The way the voiceover is played over the cross cut images of progress and Félix’s “revolutionary” image suggests that women’s changing roles are part of what enables effectiveness of the modernization process.

Turner describes an interesting variation on this epilogue in a later film *El centauro del norte* (1964). The story of the film is a romanticized version of the Revolution centering on Adelita and her aid to Pancho Villa. It follows her capture and marriage to a “handsome federal officer who joins the insurgents after taking her prisoner” (303). Turner explains how the film “effectively evokes a sense of Mexican nationalism as Adelita tells her federal captors how Pancho Villa is fighting for the people” (303). The film’s ending portrays battles of the Revolution followed by the accomplishments of contemporary Mexico—“steel furnaces blazing, handsome athletes parading, an aerial view of Mexico’s new forty-four-story Latin American tower, and companies of soldiers marching in the uniforms of Mexico’s past” (303). Here, instead of María Félix astride her horse, bravely riding off to face more battles as in *Juana*

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*59 I was unable to locate this film for the present study and had to rely on secondary sources for analysis.*
Gallo, Adelita, her husband, and their daughter all watch from a balcony as their son parades by in the companies of soldiers with the line “The Revolution has ‘created a Mexico for all Mexicans’ (303).

Yet, this image of womanhood in a post-Revolution society is very different from the lone figure of Félix riding off to fight the next battle. In El centauro del norte, the women (and older man) stand by and watch as the next generation of men takes up arms. In this film, the message was that women had their place—at the side of a Revolutionary hero, producing the next generation. Félix, on the other hand, portrays a strong woman who, in spite of the loss of her lover and comrades (or maybe because of that loss), continues in her role as leader and, as the film suggests, is necessary for Mexico’s industrial and economic progress. In contrast to the other Félix films, her character is not killed (La Generala) nor does she submit to a more traditional model of femininity (La Cucaracha). Juana Gallo, to a greater degree than the other films, plays to this sense of “nationalistic belonging” over “familial belonging.” Her family may be lost to her but she still “belongs”—what makes her Mexican is her support for the Revolutionary causes and, by extension, the industrialization and modernization projects. With the explicit parallels drawn between the Revolution and the industrialization projects of the 1950s and 1960s, the film suggests that it is acceptable for women to be on the battlefield/in the workforce because Mexico progresses. Just as women were great assets during the Revolution, women are also great assets during industrialization. The traditional notion of family is placed second to national values.
Although national progress and economic growth are prioritized during the 1950s and 1960s, certain traditional notions about femininity—she should still submit to patriarchal order—are maintained in the Félix soldadera films of this period even as they subversively suggest the constructed nature of gender roles.

These films employ a variety of techniques to show the “toughness” of Félix’s characters while at the same time undermining it in other ways. Félix, because of her star text, by playing these roles she does some important work in the representation of women in Mexican film. These particular films in which she plays a soldadera in a leadership role stand in contrast to Félix’s earlier films that deal with the Revolution, especially the award-winning Enamorada (1946) and Río Escondido (1947) in which Félix plays more traditional roles such as, respectively, the young upper class woman in love with a revolutionary officer and a teacher bringing knowledge to the lower classes. Even compared to Félix’s films of the same time period discussed in the next chapter, her soldadera films are radical in their portrayal of a strong woman, capable of leading men on the battlefield. These films go beyond her portrayal of Doña Bárbara in that in these films, at least for a little while, the audience actually sees her performing activities associated with the masculine—meaning that no matter what else happens to her, the suggestion is present that perhaps the gender roles are not so rigid after all. Félix’s portrayal of these characters in the soldadera films more than other of her films subvert the gender binary by showing that gender roles are constructed in nature, even if the plot of the film brings her back to her “place”—as it does in La Cucaracha and La

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60 A term employed by Sherrie Inness in her text Tough Girls.
Generala—in order to reassert the control of the threatened male subject as feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane would say (2). The play with gender roles in these three films raises important questions about what roles women and men should play in a post-Revolutionary and post-World War II Mexico.

La Cucaracha (1958), directed by Ismael Rodríguez, employs all three of these elements—violence, framing, and costuming that show this constructedness of gender while at the same time insisting on submission to particular gender conventions. It certainly allows for the idea that women are needed in the workplace but only when they submit to patriarchal authority—it does showcase the soldadera after all, but she is wanted as a camp follower, not a leader. La Cucaracha, the earliest of the three films here, begins with credits rolling over an orchestral overture that includes the melody from the corrido “La Cucaracha.”

The opening scene shows a long line of humanity walking along a trail in an arid region, surrounded by enormous rock formations. After the credits, the following words appear on the screen, “Abandonaron sus casas y cruzando los desiertos, llevando a sus hijos sobre sus espaldas, y con sus hombres e hijos hicieron la Revolución mexicana [They abandoned their houses and crossed deserts, carrying their children on their backs, and with their men and children they made the Mexican Revolution]” thus setting out a major theme of the movie—the role and image of the soldadera in the Revolution. The soldadera here is depicted as a helper to the male soldiers and provider of children. This moment is repeated at the

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61 As Lisa Evans writes in her study of the soldadera “Male Inadequacy: The Suppressing the Story of the Soldaderas,” “The corrido was the most common and popular pastime of the Revolution; men with
close of the film to confirm this role. The two female leads, *la Cucaracha* (Félix) and Isabel (Dolores del Río) undergo a series of transformations that highlight the gender roles expected from women in post-Revolutionary society by setting up the contrast of roles set during the Revolution. The film follows the transformation of *la Cucaracha* from a “tough” woman who is a leader, as well as the transformation of Isabel from an upper class woman, dependent on her husband and unwilling or unable to work, to women who enjoy working outside the home as a necessity for the growth of the nation yet still fit the submissive, traditional model of womanhood needed for stability of the family.

Violence serves as a framing device for these three films. It is the violence and disruption of war that force (allow) women to take on new roles. In the US during World War II, women were encouraged to take on industrial jobs to support the war with posters such as the “We can do it!” poster with Rosie the Riveter showing her muscles. Although during the 1950s there was not war in Mexico, it was certainly a time of economic growth that brought changes to society and the traditional family. These films seem to suggest that working outside the home is acceptable in certain circumstances. As we have discussed, the Revolution is a touchstone in the construction of images of modern Mexican society and nationhood and recalls the ideals that the Mexican Revolution represented such as land ownership and political liberty. The films’ setting links the positive feelings associated with Revolutionary ideas and
women working outside the home—a necessity for the growth of the nation, despite the disruptions to daily life.

In *La Cucaracha* these feelings of reluctance because of fears about the loss of femininity and thus masculinity are addressed in dialogue when Félix as la Cucaracha makes her first appearance as a leader of a group fighting in the Revolution. Zeta explains to Zúñiga that he does not want women in his troops, even though at this point he desperately needs people, which is why he has approached Zúñiga in the first place. She interrupts by saying that she is a *soldado*, with the masculine ending, adding to the gender ambiguity already suggested by her clothing and aggressive attitude. She even uses violence inappropriately against her soldiers. Her violence to this man is portrayed as excessive and uncontrollable. Cultural studies scholar Diana Taylor describe the “bad woman” of Argentina’s Dirty War, within the context of constructing national identity, “[she] was conceived as the obstacle to harmony, she (according to the scenario) activated the drama by being uncontrollable, by incarnating the birthplace of evil” (79). The Mexican Revolution was a time in Mexican history when the struggle for national identity was at stake and as this movie shows, played out on the bodies of women.

*La Cucaracha* suggests in the dialogue that violence performed in the name of the Revolution is appropriate and by extension the disruptions in the family caused by modernization are also acceptable because the nation takes priority. Zeta tells *la Cucararacha* that the man he killed in duel for her favor was a different death from the deaths all the other men he has killed—because those men he killed in the name of the
Revolution. He feels ashamed that *la Cucaracha* was waiting for him with her beautiful hair and wearing only the *sarape* he had purchased for her. The Revolution/the good of the nation is primary over love and the family.

Violence to women is seen to feminize the woman and masculinize the male. As such it seems to have some “transformative” power. As Ilene O’Malley has suggested, violence (especially towards women) is part of the defining characteristic of the “macho”—the new model of masculinity. This is best demonstrated in *La Cucaracha* when Zeta goes to *la Cucaracha*’s hotel room. In this transformative sequence, Colonel Antonio Zeta overpowers her. He tosses her to the floor and orders her to remove her clothing, an interesting reversal of the role she plays later in *La Generala*. In a dramatic film moment, the music swells as she removes her blouse. The camera is at her level, showing her illuminated nude back and Zeta standing in front of her and his pleasure at seeing her naked beauty visible in his face, mirroring the pleasure of the spectator at her submissive sexuality. The next sequence, showing clothing and thrown items littering the room, gives evidence to their passion.

This violent sex is pivotal within the narrative of the movie. Her redemption as a true “woman” is apparent in the next scene, when the couple walks hand and hand, smiling broadly. She is dressed in red, contrasting her normal khaki shirt and pants. Her blouse opens in a v-neck, and displays the shape of her breasts through the fabric. Her hair is unbound and she wears no hat. She wears dangling hoop earrings and a skirt. She carries a flower as she walks with her new lover. She no longer wears her bandoleers. She is no longer this ambiguous figure that looks like a woman but dresses
and acts like a man. She is now a “natural woman.” Antonio has “redeemed” her from the ambiguity of her cross-dressing, as his name Antonio Zeta (AZ) parallels him with the Alpha and the Omega or Christ and his redemptive powers. By penetrating her body, he has penetrated her masculine guise and utterly feminized her. Yet the male character’s masculinity is constructed as well. It is interesting to note that the actor playing Zeta (Emilio Fernández), the director of Enamorada discussed in the previous chapter had his voice dubbed. Fernández’ voice, described as “thin and watery” was dubbed “with the deeper voice of another actor”—a gesture that points to the construction of masculinity (Tierney 225).

In La Cucaracha, Félix plays the title character role that is based on the Mexican corrido. This nickname highlights the sexuality that was praised in the soldadera, although this sexual activity is redeemed by motherhood, as Ilene O’Malley has described. As one character describes her—she is like the female cockroach because she is not satisfied with just one man [rodadora, porque no se conforma con un solo macho, y le quita el suyo a las demás]. Within the film, this “experienced” nature is confirmed as two men who “have known/tasted” her [“sabemos a la misma mujer”] duel each other for her favor with the revolvers in hand and the stronger one kills the other. Elsewhere, the sexually promiscuous nature of the soldadera is confirmed as a soldadera rolls from one man’s blanket to another’s. On the other hand, it seems that a

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62 Tierney notes that Emilio Fernández, in life, was famous for his “violent and explosive personality,” “was a possessive, gun-loving, womanizer” and “behaved like many of the male characters in his films” (225, 228). In other words, his star text was also important.

63 “la cucaracha, ya no puede caminar, porque no tiene, porque le falta marijuana para fumar.” [The cockroach cannot walk because she doesn’t have any marijuana to smoke].
degree of (false?) modesty is desirable. For example, when Isabel bathes at the river, she separates herself from the other women. She has put up a blanket screen between her and the others. Her hair is loose and her cleavage is displayed in the fitted bodice. Some young men are spying on her in spite of her blanket. One of the women yells at them to go away, since Isabel is oblivious to their looks but when Antonio arrives on horseback, he removes his hat to her. She takes her loose hair and covers her exposed cleavage. He is positioned above her, on horseback, ostensibly getting a good view until she covered herself.

Her sexuality allows for the growth of the nation by producing more soldiers for the cause but only when appropriately framed. In one key sequence, a laboring woman is present on the battlefield. This particular image accomplishes a number of different functions within the movie. First, it shows the “proper” role for women in the Revolution—give birth to the next generation of soldiers. Second, it highlights la Cucaracha’s distance at this point in the film from this role—she is standing, the laboring woman writhes in pain on the ground. Third, it prefigures la Cucaracha’s own experience in childbirth.

However, during the battle, the woman dies before being able to give birth, which certainly seems to suggest a condemnation of women on the battlefield by visiting upon her the punishment of death. When la Cucaracha becomes pregnant from her encounter with Zeta, she leaves the battle front and gives birth in the home of a curandera—that is, in feminine space. This approval of sexuality for the purpose of improving the nation is confirmed as la Cucaracha labors. The camera closes in on la
Cucaracha’s face as cries out in labor and the shot cuts to a close up of a man yelling that Pancho Villa was coming, drawing a parallel between the birth of the boy and the arrival of the Revolutionary leader. She then joins the ranks of women bringing up the rear of the army as Isabel. She no longer carries a rifle but instead she carries a child. Her decision here is not unlike the decision she made at the end of Enamorada, where she joins the battle but only as a mother and helper to the male soldier.

*La Cucaracha* is the only one of the three soldadera films and one of the only Félix films overall that addresses the issue of motherhood so directly. Félix’s character is sexually active in *Juana Gallo* and plays the prostitute in *La Generala* although her sexual activity is not displayed. Motherhood was not a desired vocation for Félix herself. In life, Félix had a son by her first marriage and expressed in her autobiography that she was not very interested in having children, stating the experience of giving birth was horrible [Mi primer y único parto me había parecido un horor, una verdadera masacre] (164). She mentions also that motherhood was not really for her although she did get pregnant by Alex Berger, whom she married in 1956 [Yo le quise dar un hijo de su sangre, aunque no tuviera vocación para la maternidad] (164). She lost this child while filming *Flor de Mayo* (1959), which is somewhat ironic in that this film’s major themes were centered around traditional family values.

Costumes are used to help represent gender identity in these films. Félix puts on pants, especially in *La Cucaracha* and in numerous shots draws attention to this type of drag performance. As philosopher Judith Butler explains, “The performance of drag
plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (Gender 175). She continues, “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency” that the “relation between sex and gender” [are] assumed to be natural and necessary “ (Gender 175). The film’s use of “drag” draws attention to the performance of gender but does not truly subvert the heterosexual binary—it is still strictly male and female. For example, In La Cucaracha, she pulls up a chair and flips it around so that she sits on it backward with her legs spread. She is the only woman seen in pants in the movie until her sexual encounter with macho Colonel Antonio Zeta (Emilio Fernández); after which, she changes her tune and her wardrobe, eating ice cream and wearing brightly colored skirts. Now she performs femininity since that is what is required by the conventions of heterosexuality.

La Cucaracha is not the first time Félix puts on pants though. In Doña Barbara (1943), her third film, discussed in the first chapter, she wears a split skirt and rides horses astride, rather than sidesaddle as she attempts to control the land of her neighbor in this film based on a novel by Venezuelan Rómulo Gallegos. Biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo in his biography which chronicles her film career, writes that “They had discovered that the public wanted María Félix dressed like a man. They knew it since they saw her in Doña Bárbara with pants”64 (55). After La monja álferez (1944), her sixth film, in which she plays the based-on-a-true-story title character “the lieutenant nun,” a nun who escapes from the convent and puts on men’s clothing and fights in
battles in Peru during the Spanish colonization, she changes her entire wardrobe, on and off-screen.\textsuperscript{65} Part of her star persona was her image in pants, even though the majority of her films have her costumed in dresses and skirts as she plays glamorous roles.

As the title character in \textit{Juana Gallo} [Juana Rooster]\textsuperscript{66}, the first representation of Félix is a woman alone plowing a field, a task generally reserved for men. But her costume is feminine—she wears a pink skirt and sandals, a black headscarf, and broad-brimmed hat. She calls out to the pair of animals hauling the plow in a deep voice. She holds a long (phallic) stick in her left hand to guide the animals. One shot shows her from behind and at an angle so that the animals’ testicles are on display as she guides them with her long stick. This shot composition and her activity draw attention to this unusual woman. Although in this scene she is wearing a skirt, other elements such as the activity of plowing and the shot composition including the view of the sex of the animals and her stick serve to raise questions about her “femininity.” Her character is doing “men’s work,” troubling traditional gender roles.

Film critic Yvonne Tasker describes femininity “as a class position, one from which many women are excluded” (26). Tasker, basing herself on Beverly Skeggs observations in her text \textit{Becoming Respectable: Formation of Class and Gender} (London, Sage 1997), “femininity” is a class issue. For example, in the film \textit{La}

\textsuperscript{64} “Habían descubierto que el público quería a María Félix vestida de hombre. Lo sabían desde que la vieron en “Doña Bárbara con pantalones.”

\textsuperscript{65} Velasco in her study on Catalina de Erauso, the original “lieutenant nun” and her many representations in popular culture, discusses this Félix film.
*Cucaracha* when Félix’s character sees Antonio remove his hat to greet Isabel she becomes quite angry and confronts him. Antonio tries to reassure la Cucaracha that he loves her but Isabel is a “señora.” La Cucaracha gets angry and pulls off her headscarf and asks him, “so what am I?” He replies that she is “his woman.” This exchange draws particular attention to the role that class plays in identity, suggesting even that gender identification is not the primary identifier.

Another example of this idea that femininity is a class issue is when Félix, in *Juana Gallo* portrays a woman of the agricultural working class and seems to be excluded from an upper-class ideal of the feminine. In her first contact with other people, having just run in from the field when she heard gunshots and in the process she loses her hat and *rebozo* or headscarf, she—bareheaded now—addresses women who have their heads covered with the traditional black *rebozo* and orders them to take down the dead men hanging from a tree. Here, she is contrasted with the other women and her leadership skills begin to manifest themselves. In addition, this scene contrasts with the earlier film *La Escondida* (1955) discussed in the next chapter. In *La Escondida*, men are also killed by Federal troops but she is helpless to do anything about it. Her fiancé is punished and sent to join the Federal army while she becomes a mistress of a Federal military officer.

Film critic Sherrie Inness cites “toughness” as the ability to project authority as one of the defining characteristics in her study *Tough Girls* (26). Félix’s characters do project authority in these films but it is often undermined by other elements. Her men

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66 Even the title suggests ambiguity regarding her gender.
call her jefa [female boss] or generala [female general] but her authority is questioned in various instances. For example, in La Cucaracha Colonel Antonio Zeta (Emilio Fernández) examines her as he would examine a horse—which he does immediately preceding his examination of la Cucaracha—to determine her usefulness to him. In Juana Gallo, Colonel Arturo Ceballos Rico (Luis Aguilar) questions the masculinity of men who would be led by a woman and thereby questions her authority.67

In La Generala, her character Mariana who becomes known as “la generala,” leads in seeking revenge against Federalist Colonel Feliciano López (Eric del Castillo) the man who had her brother killed. The avenging motivation is traditionally ascribed to males but in both Juana Gallo and La Generala Félix’s character is motivated to take on the leadership role as a means to the end of avenging her family. Yet her authority and “toughness” are undermined in a masquerade in which she puts on a “costume.” In both films, she puts on upper-class feminine garb. In Juana Gallo, she wants to seduce a man who had been going to the French cabaret to see the dancing girls. She enlists the assistance of one of Cancan dancers (recalling her role in The French Cancan (1954)) and puts on a gown but she cannot walk in the high-heeled dress shoes and ends up wearing her jangling spurs and cowboy boots to comedic effect. In La Generala, Félix dresses in eveningwear to seduce the Federalist Colonel and make him vulnerable to her revenge plan. This move of masquerade is a technique that Inness discusses in Tough Girls that undermines a female protagonist’s toughness by having her put on the costume of roles that are appropriate for women in order “to go undercover.” Inness
states, “their toughness is brought into question because masquerade forces the audience to question the nature of identity” [...] Toughness[...] is perhaps as artificial as the Angels’ [from Charlie’s Angels] roles as hookers, nurses, or roller derby queens” (43). The “toughness” of the female protagonists is undermined by showing them “put on” roles in going “undercover” that are stereotypically associated with women such as the hooker, nurse, roller derby queens. In these two films, her masquerade undermines to a certain degree her “toughness.” In Juana Gallo, the “toughness” of her character seems to be undermined to a greater extent than in La Generala. In Juana Gallo, the men she meets with to make battle plans stand when she enters the room and then later make fun of her lover by calling him “Major Hen” [La mayor gallina]. Throughout the film, she proved herself capable in handling weapons and in strategic battle planning but when she put on the dress, her gender becomes the object of discussion.

La Cucaracha contains some sequences of dramatic costume changes that serve not only to undermine Félix’s “toughness” but also to indicate character changes. When La Cucaracha first appears on screen, she is laughing at Antonio and the Carrañista coronel Ricardo Zúñiga (David Reynoso). Her image seems designed to show her as strong but dangerous woman. She is dangerous because she refuses to conform to the “proper” image of “woman.” Her hair is bound under her hat. She wears crossed bandoliers, a sarape, and pants. She sits on a wall, looking down on them, her legs

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67 The dialogue here emphasizes her body, drawing attention to her buttocks. The dialogue suggests that she would be better suited for sexual activity.
68 Inness discusses television programs such as The Avengers (England from 1961, airing in the U.S. 1966-1969), Charlie’s Angels (U.S. 1976-81) and The Bionic Woman (U.S. 1976-78).
open. Her laughing, attitude, clothing and posture certainly break with gender norms that would require a submissive attitude to be properly considered a woman in this context. Her image is sexualized before him, with her pants and her posture. Also, her portrayal as uncontrollable and excessive, particularly in her use of violence problematicizes her authority.

In *La Cucaracha*, a key sequence emphasizes the focus on gender roles and undermines Félix’s “toughness.” Zeta gives la Cucaracha a long, obvious look up and down her body, focusing especially upon her pants. She stands with her legs slightly spread and her hip thrust to the side. Zeta replies that he’s not sure if she is a woman and that he does not shoot women. The question then becomes, as he walks away from her, “if you don’t shoot them, what do you do with them.” This leads to speculation with sexual innuendoes between Cucaracha and Trompeta (Lupe Carriles), her second-in-command. She follows him with Trompeta in tow and continues to try and get a response from him as he examines a horse for purchase. Cucaracha and the horse are parallel in that Zeta had just examined her for evidence of her sex, and ostensibly her use to him—taking note in particular her pants. Zeta then examines the animal for its potential use to him. He states that he came to fight and that she has come “pa’lo que está” or as film scholar Eli Barta translates, “para acostarse con todos [to sleep with everyone].” The implicit message is that in Zeta’s mind, her use to him as a woman is, to continue the horse metaphor, for riding.

69 That is, allied with Venustiano Carranza.
La Cucaracha shows, in this scene, the trouble she has caused for Zeta. He is not sure what to do with her because he cannot positively identify her sex because she has transgressed the boundaries of the “proper” gender role for a woman in this context. She does not quite fit into the heterosexual binary that Zeta expects. Even though she does not fit into this gender binary, her drag performance does not subvert the dominant gender norms, in that Zeta never truly seems to doubt her sex and therefore, never sees her outside the role he believes she should carry out. On the other hand, it does seem to suggest “a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (Butler *Bodies* 123). This ambivalence is emphasized in this scene by Zeta’s remarks that he is not sure if she is a woman and is further supported by the implication, as seen in the parallels drawn between her character and the horse, that by being “ambivalently gendered,” she is not human, she is an animal.

Physical strength and use of weapons, not only tie into the films’ violence, but also indicate “toughness.” In the film *La Cucaracha*, la Cucaracha kicks open the door to a planning meeting of Zeta. She arrives with some of her men carrying boxes of ammunition. She is on a stairway landing above Zeta and his men. She picks up a box, in an amazing feat of strength as a box of that size full of cartridges would be quite heavy, and tosses it down to Zeta’s feet and in an interesting scene change, the sound of the cartridges hitting the stone floor is overlaid with the sounds of the fire fight of that evening.
Regarding weapons, it is interesting to note that initially Isabel is unable or unwilling to use a weapon, the one that la Cucaracha gives to her. Later in the film, she accepts a rifle from Zeta and in the final moments of the film, she carries her rifle as she marches along with the other soldaderas bringing up the rear of the army. On the other hand, La Cucaracha initially takes her place on the front lines with a large machine gun, larger than Antonio’s gun. The gun, along with other weapons, is often seen as a phallic symbol. The depiction of la Cucaracha handling the largest weapon seen on screen certainly makes a statement about her gender identity. Her weapon is ostensibly compared, with shots showing one then the other, to Antonio’s weapon which is also a machine gun, the only other machine gun seen on screen, but his the smaller of the two firearms. By the end of the film, la Cucaracha has traded in her rifle for a baby—one phallus for another.

This film employs a number of techniques to construct and emphasize the performativity of gender. The character of la Cucaracha in particular draws attention to her performance of gender by creating an ambivalent figure who dresses in drag and then changes dramatically through the act of penetration. Antonio penetrates her in the sex act and thus feminizes her. Her clothing, attitude and whole bearing change. She is feminized in her clothing and her actions. She does not even seem to carry her phallic weapon after her penetration. It is not enough though. She can never be Isabel. She becomes jealous and takes out her insecurities on Isabel. Antonio says that he loves her but he is still drawn to Isabel, the widow, the señorita, the good woman. As film scholar Eli Bartra says in his article regarding Zeta’s final preference, “Moraleja: no seas
independiente, fuerte, bravia y "libertina" o te abandonarán por una mujer "como Dios manda" [Moral of the story: don’t be independent, strong, brave and ‘libertine’ or they will abandon you for a woman that is as God commands].

Both Inness and Tasker indicate that strength is an important element that makes up “toughness” and helps to define the female action heroine\(^\text{70}\) (Inness 24 and Tasker 4). In these two studies on contemporary and primarily Hollywood-produced films, the emphasis is on the physical body of the actress where strength is symbolized by a fit body and visible muscles. In these films, although María never flexes her biceps, she does display amazing physical strength. In *La Cucaracha* where she kicks open a door where the male military leaders were having a strategic planning meeting from which she had been excluded and picks up a case full of cartridges and flings them to the floor. During a major battle scene, she is seen handling a large-caliber machine gun with ease, again indicative of great physical strength. Another example of her physical strength, occurs in *Juana Gallo*, in amazing feat of strength she pries the lid from a stone sarcophagus and removes a rifle and bandoleers full of cartridges. This strength is undermined though, when a man is able to easily overpower her.

Another aspect of María’s characters’ physical abilities is the way in which weapons are handled. Weapons are traditionally phallic symbols of power and in these three films, her character proves to be quite competent in handling the weapons. In *La Cucaracha*, she is able to handle a heavy machine gun apparently quite competently as the enemies upon which she and her fellow soldiers had been firing fall back.
Unfortunately, by the end of the film, she has given up her guns for a child. In *Juana Gallo* she is able to take out enemy officers with a single shot from her position hidden high upon a hill. In *La Generala*, she proves her abilities with a curved knife and she proves to be the quicker draw when it comes down to the final showdown.

These films make use of these techniques of costumes, shot composition and violence to show the construction of gender. The films’ use of drag draws attention to the performance of gender but do not subvert the heterosexual binary. Both men and women are depicted as having particular roles in that society and those who did follow those roles would be punished. The films though do leave some ambiguous space for the exploration of the construction and performance of gender, suggesting that gender is made.

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70 Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies* defines the “action heroine” as a “figure who commands the narrative” (132)
CHAPTER 5

BEDDING MARÍA FÉLIX: SEX AND THE MOVIE STAR

¡Te has revolcado con toda la ciudad!
¡Y todavía me faltan los estados!71

Reading *Entertainment Weekly*, I ran across an article on the popular US television show *Desperate Housewives*. I was struck by some of the author’s comments about the show while introducing a spread highlighting the different female and male characters of the show, devoting more than twice as much space to the female characters over the male characters. I wondered, if a show like *Desperate Housewives*, with a considerable male following, is about exploiting the insecurities of women in the suburbs who have chosen to “stay home with the kids” but “miss the mark,” “fuel[ing] all their doubts about post-marriage unworthiness” in the early twenty-first century US society as author Gillian Flynn explains, then what kinds of popular culture exploit the insecurities of Mexican society of the middle twentieth century (22, 24)?72 Are those

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71 Dialogue from *Amor y sexo* (1963) Julio Alemán: You have slept with the whole city! María Félix: I still need to do the countryside!

72 Heading up a slew of shows—from *Supernanny* to *Wife Swap*—that showcase women missing the mark at home, *Housewives* taps into a bubbling strain of female anxiety. Lynette can’t control her nasty little brood; Bree can’t hold on to her husband. Teri Hatcher’s Susan refuses to mother her child, instead treating her like a best buddy, or worse her mommy. […] Naturally, *Housewives* wouldn’t have its rabid following (much of it male) if it weren’t put together in such a clever, sometimes infuriating way. […] The Housewives provide endless arguments: Should you chat with your daughter about your sex life? Can you force a child to feel compassion? Is it selfish to not want kids? When so much TV is forgotten
insecurities gendered? In the context of my discussion on the star text of María Félix, I see that her films that deal particularly with the image of the prostitute or the sexually promiscuous women seem to exploit societal anxieties about femininity and masculinity, family and work life in Mexico as it redefined itself as a nation throughout the 1940s to the 1960s.

In this chapter, I analyze several of Félix’s films in which she interprets roles of prostitutes or other “fallen” women including *La mujer sin alma* (1943), *El monje blanco* (1945), *La devoradora* (1946), *La diosa arrodillada* (1947), *French Cancan* (1954), *La Escondida* (1955), *Miércoles de ceniza* (1958), *Flor de mayo* (1959), *Café Colón* (1959), *La Bandida* (1962), and *Amor y sexo* (1964). Although many of Félix’s films incorporate the image of the sexually promiscuous woman, indeed that is certainly part of her star text, these films center on that image. In all but *Flor de mayo* she explicitly exchanges sexual services for money or goods, most commonly as a character coded as a prostitute although there is some overlap in character types. For example, in *La mujer sin alma* and *La Devoradora* her character is a more of a *femme fatale*—a figure that feminist film scholar Mary Ann Doane suggests represents “male fears about

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73 *French Can-Can* is actually a French co-production that has Félix in a supporting role. I include it here for comparison. In *French Cancan*, directed by Jean Renoir, María Félix plays a secondary role—Lola de Castro, the lover of Danglard (Jean Gabin) who is planning to open a dance hall the Moulin Rouge with the cancan with his new star dancer Nini (Francoise Arnoul). This role shows her in fine cabaret form with song and dance numbers—she even does a belly dance-style number. She also uses her sexuality to gain funding for the new dance hall. She is at odds with Nini and there is a catfight where she knocks Nini down. Although this was a smaller role for Félix, she never regretted taking it because she was able to meet Jean Renoir and learn from him. In fact, Taibo quotes her saying that she spent time on the set even when she was not in the scene just so she could spend time learning from an “important filmmaker” (180)
feminism” (3). On the other hand, in *El monje blanco* and *La Escondida* she plays a mistress, more of a victim of circumstances. Many of these films incorporate elements of the *cabaretera* films such as song and dance performance pieces set in a cabaret. Others have a more domestic setting. In *Flor de mayo*, Félix’s character is a young married woman who had an affair with an American shrimp fisherman. Their relationship resulted in a son while her husband of a few months was serving a jail sentence but through some deception, she passed the son off as her husband’s. Whatever the specific setting, in all of these films, Félix portrays women who, through their sexuality, trouble social structures such as the family, work, femininity, and masculinity. The “fallen woman” and particularly the figure of the prostitute in these films becomes a way to address concerns about sexuality and modernity. Prostitution has long been associated with working women as “the world’s oldest profession” and these films become a way of addressing concerns over women in the workplace and the effect on the traditional family. In many of her films, she portrays “working girls,” both in the literal and figurative senses. Her employment ranges from the glamorous prostitute, model, and/or showgirl to the, by comparison, ordinary seamstress. Her characters also often express sexual desire; she is sensual and sexual, taking pleasure in sexual contact as well as using sex for other motives, such as obtaining luxury items, including jewelry, furs, and cars as well as status.

This group of films spans Félix’s filmography from the 1940s though the 1960s. There is a distinct shift in tone and focus from the 1940s to the films from the latter half of the 1950s. The 1940s films focus on a loss of male power coupled with the
presentation of the distorting nature of female power run amok. These films seem to be a reaction to the early stages of modernization and the dark side of urban life. Félix’s characters from this time period are primarily a femme fatale type as she represents out-of-control female power. On the other hand, the films from the latter half of the 1950s and into the early 1960s, after women have gained the vote in Mexico, deal with the corruption of traditional understandings of patriarchal power and how it leads to women making bad choices. These films tend to have strong moralistic and/or political messages as they acknowledge and attempt to make peace with the process of modernization. Unlike the early films from the 1940s that position powerful (yet subordinated) women as the cause of social disturbance, in these films, Félix’s characters tend to be examples of essentially good women making bad choices. These films show the way to redemption for the female character—when she submits to patriarchal authority, order is restored to the society and progress for the nation can continue.

Although many of Félix’s 47 films deal with sexuality, these particular films of the 1940s and the late 1950s deal most explicitly with sex by presenting characters that are sexually promiscuous. All of these films deal with themes of modernization, the family, and sex and reflect shifting attitudes over time. The question is raised in these films: Is modernization about the breakdown of the traditional family? If so, is its loss lamented? How do discourses on sexuality, female desire, masculinity, and modernization come together in Félix’s star text and, in particular, in these films? Many of these films can be read on an allegorical level with lessons about the nation.
On another level, I am interested in the representation of the body in film nudity and love scenes and how its representation shifts over time.

To contextualize our discussion on the representation of prostitutes in Mexican film, we turn now to feminist scholar Barbara Walker as she discusses ancient prostitutes and historian Katherine Elaine Bliss and her study *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City*. Walker explains that ancient prostitutes were known as compassionate and often “commanded high social status and were revered for their learning” as well for their healing powers and often associated with worship (820). As we shall see in the Mexican *cabaretera* film and their association of dancing girls and prostitution, ancient prostitutes were often associated with sacred dancing (821). It is with Christianity that prostitutes and their profession became vilified “because whores occupied a significant position in paganism” (822). Walker continues, stating “Churchmen didn’t want to stamp out prostitution altogether, only amputate its spiritual meanings” and “accepted commercial prostitution as ‘a lawful immorality’” (822, 823). As for the early twentieth-century, this viewpoint has not changed much. Bliss studies Mexico City during the 1920s-1930s as she traces changing politics that led to the abolition of legalized prostitution in post-Revolutionary society. She provides valuable insights into shifting attitudes regarding sexuality, family life, and working life as Mexico tried to establish a new national identity following the Revolution. As Bliss notes, the context of these changes was not just the Revolution but also “the concerns of the early twentieth-century Mexican reform community [which] were consistent with international movements regarding the
social conditions of modernization, human rights, and public health reform over this same period” (12).

Walker notes that prostitution is often linked with economic hardship and allowed male authorities to put the blame on the “promiscuous” woman while absolving the male clients as victims of seduction, completely ignoring any economic factors of the prostitute’s profession. “Prostitution,” Walker explains the viewpoint of early Christian theologians, “enabled man to look upon promiscuous women as depraved, though their equally promiscuous clients were seen as helpless victims of compulsion. There was no recognition of the truth, that most prostitutes acted under a more telling compulsion than any man’s sexuality: the need to earn wherewithal to keep alive” (823). In the previous chapter, it was noted that the Revolutionary War did bring economic hardship to many as families were torn apart and livelihoods were destroyed. After the war, many women were left without the support of their families and found themselves alone in the capital city. With other employment options limited, many turned to the sex trade to survive. Bliss explains, “Refugees and local women may have occasionally turned to the world’s ‘oldest profession’ and sold sex to their neighbors and to military men in a difficult economy, but prostitutes’ ranks swelled when the revolutionary armies sacked the capital, abandoning the soldaderas—the soldiers’ sisters, wives, daughters, and lovers who traveled with the units—to their own devices in a strange city without friends or family” (71). In addition to economic hardship, Bliss notes that other factors were in play as the numbers of prostitutes seemed to be on the rise. She explains, “Rather than diminish the demand for the services of prostitutes,
it seems that the Revolution’s disruption of village and urban life, the breakup of families, and the social and cultural expectations of soldiers in war instead created a climate of ever more exaggerated sexual permissiveness” (64).

Bliss notes that masculinity became associated with the prostitute: “[…] considering popular novels and accounts of everyday life in revolutionary Mexico, it is clear that the image of the soldier, at least, was closely associated with prostitutes and brothels” (64). Bliss documents the association of the military man with the prostitute, “Military men enjoyed both visiting bordellos and spending time with the women they met in the city’s cafés, bars, nightclubs, and streets. The habit of spending time with prostitutes characterized army personnel of all ranks and social classes too, for documents reflect that all ranks, from foot soldier to generals, actively participated in the trade in sex in Mexico’s wartime capital” (75). Feminist scholar Julia O’Connell Davidson notes in her study *Prostitution, Power and Freedom* that “Prostitute use in not always a response to a personal erotic interest; sometimes it is enacted for the benefit of other men and/or in order to heighten a sense of group belonging” (165). It is not too far to stretch to believe that Mexican men, in an effort to assert their masculinity and thus their personhood might turn to prostitutes to “affirm masculinity” in a form of “collective, ritualized sexual exploitation” (Davidson 166). Historian Ilene O’Melley asserts, “[The lower class men] then took their places, at least in theory, as equals in the post-revolutionary society. As they conceived it, equal manhood included the prerogatives of the patriarch. That entailed the continued oppression of women as women” (136).
During the 1920s and 1930s, the Mexican government attempted to regulate prostitution. They eventually made it difficult for female brothel managers—la *matrona*—to maintain her clientele as a result of fines and restrictions levied against them. However, these fines and restrictions were not levied against male owners of cabarets, dancehalls and other venues of nighttime, un-chaperoned entertainment who were often given those positions as political favors to fellow politicians and military men. During this time, the body of the prostitute became the battleground for politicians as the government attempted to assert Revolutionary ideals and “one of the most important aspects of national political ideology: the stated goal of ‘redeeming the Mexican people’ from the poverty, vice, ignorance, immorality, and corruption that many revolutionaries believed had plagued the country under the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz” (4). However, regulations about prostitution reflected contradictions inherent in these ideals. Bliss states “Perhaps nothing reflected this tension between the opposing ideals of individual rights and collective progress more clearly than the revolutionary effort to promote public health reform. The Revolution promised that the individual had the right to enjoy good health, and yet the idea of public health itself asserts that the individual does not have the right to endanger the health of the entire community” (11). Walker explain that it was only when male authorities “understood the connection [between prostitution and] rampant venereal disease” that they took an interest in prostitution, but primarily to protect the male clients and their families, not the prostitutes themselves (Walker 826). In fact, Walker explains that “whores were not considered full-fledged human beings. The 18th-century term for a whore was ‘a fleshy
convenience”—when ‘convenience’ also meant outhouse (826). The idea that prostitutes are sub-human is carried out in these femme fatale films that portray the female as a destructive monster that must be destroyed or conformed to the patriarchal order.

As Bliss concludes her study, she suggests that it was not the abolition of regulated prostitution in 1940 that allowed it to be romanticized in film but the introduction of effective treatments against syphilis. She states, “In the aftermath of abolition—and with the syphilis threat rendered less dangerous thanks to the introduction of antibiotics in the late 1940s—the figure of the prostitute returned to capture the public’s imagination, as the popularity of such cabaretera-genre films as Salon México (1948) and Aventurera (1949) demonstrate” (212).

Both of these films have very similar main plots—a young woman of humble means is forced into prostitution because of disruptions in the traditional family caused by modernization and urban life. Film scholar Joanne Hershfield describes the cabaretera film:

The 1940s was the decade of the cabaretera (dance-hall) film in Mexican cinema. Though similar to Hollywood’s ‘fallen women’ film, the cabaretera was clearly a Mexican genre that incorporated aspects of the earlier ‘seduced and abandoned’ Mexican melodramas, hard-edged elements of the cine de arrabal (Mexican cinema’s urban melodrama), and popular music from the tropics: The Cuban danzón, the rumba, and the Brazilian samba. Like the Hollywood genre, Mexico’s fallen-women films emerged as a response to
changes in social and economic roles for women and the resulting difficulty of incorporating these changes into patriarchal discourse about female sexuality.

(77)

*Salón México*’s protagonist Mercedes (Marga López) is forced into prostitution to support her sister Beatriz’s (Silvia Derbez) schooling while *Aventurera*’s protagonist Elena (Ninón Sevilla) is forced into dancing at a cabaret when she tries to seek her fortune in Mexico City after her mother leaves her father for a lover and the father commits suicide. The films are very different in tone despite these basic similarities. In *Salón México*, the mood is dark. Mercedes sacrifices herself in order to improve her sister’s life. She does not seem to enjoy her “work” and must conceal her activities through masquerade from her sister. She dies at the hands of male client who would not give her the money she had earned. Through her sacrifice, she is redeemed in the eyes of the audience and the male police officer who conceals her secret “working life” from her sister. *Aventurera*, on the other hand, is a far lighter film, employing comic elements and unexpected double lives—her Madame Rosaura (Andrea Palma) is also the mother of the wealthy young man Elena wishes to marry. It also has many impressive song and dance numbers with elaborate costumes. Here, her fiancé Lucio (Tito Junco) is killed but she is able to move on to seek a better life.

During the 1940s, Hershf ield notes that the *cabaretera* film was an attempt “to update the La Malinche paradigm of the ‘bad woman’ in order to assimilate the Mexican working-class woman whose newfound social and economic power challenged the male’s traditional position of superiority” (79). Félix’s films of the 1940s that
resonate most strongly with the cabaretera film tend to contrast rather strongly with Hershfield’s analysis of 1940s cabaretera films. She describes the protagonist of these films as a “sympathetic character, a good woman forced into a bad life by circumstances beyond her control” (80). Félix in these films from the 1940s, on the other hand, does not portray “good woman, fallen on bad times.” Instead, in many of her roles she is seen as ambitious and selfish, ruining “good” men through tempting them sexually. Her roles are often closer to the femme fatale. It is actually her later films from the late 1950s that tend to demonstrate this “good woman forced into a bad life by circumstances beyond her control.”

Félix’s films from both the 1940s and the 1950s often combine elements of two types of female characters that Hershfield identifies as the cabaretera and the femme fatale. In the former, the protagonist worked in a dance hall, a space that was often used by workers in the sex trade to attract clientele. Generally, these characters are good women who have made bad choices—the “tart with a heart of gold” as represented in the Santa (1931) which is significant for being one of the first “talking” films in Mexico as well as its themes that address the fears about modernization and urban life disrupting the traditional family. The Mexican Cinema web page describes the synopsis of the film—“Santa is a humble girl that lives happily with her family in the small town of Chimalistac until the soldier Marcelino seduces her and then abandons her. Because of this situation, the young woman must suffer the pain of being cast out of her home.
and condemned to prostitution." She is condemned to prostitution due to circumstances beyond her control—she is seduced and abandoned—she is left with no choice but to become a prostitute in order to survive when her lover and family abandon her. Hershfield explains, that the 1930s fallen woman films “were typically concerned with an innocent young girl like Santa, who is seduced, abandoned, and forced, out of shame and economic necessity, into a life of prostitution” (Hershfield 80). This type—the “tart with heart”—is seen in later films such as Salón México (1947) in which the protagonist Mercedes is, as Hershfield describes, “The whore with the virgin’s heart of gold, sacrificing herself, as any mother should, for the good of her family” (93). It must be noted that Félix’s films from the 1940s go against this version—Félix’s characters, even in those films that explicitly exploit elements of the cabaretera, are far more the femme fatale, for which Hershfield uses Doña Bárbara (1943) played by María Félix as a primary example. She states, “the female-gone-bad characters are represented as ‘cruel and vengeful vampires, without sexual scruples, usurping the cruelty of men,

74 Directed by Antonio Moreno and starring Lupita Tovar in the title role. “la primera cinta mexicana filmada con sonido óptico y la que inauguraría la etapa industrial en el cine mexicano. [It is the first Mexican film to be filmed using the technology of optic sound which inaugurated a new age of industrial cinema.]” This film is described on the Mexican Cinema web page as “Santa es una humilde muchacha que vive feliz con su familia en el pequeño poblado de Chimalistac hasta que el militar Marcelino la seduce y la abandona. A partir de esta situación, la joven sufrirá la pena de ser expulsada de su hogar y condenada a la prostitución”. It is interesting to note that Santa is a film dealing with prostitution specifically but addresses larger issues such as the family and fears about modernization and urban life being disruptive to the traditional family was one of the first “talking” films in Mexico. In the US, one the first “talking” films was The Taming of the Shrew (1929), discussed in the second chapter, which certainly addresses fears about women’s place in society as they were gaining the right to vote and other political freedoms.
enslaving, beautiful, and unfeeling’ –la *devoradora*, the ‘devouring woman’ (108).75 It is the Félix films from the late 1950s that present characters that more closely align with the “tart with a heart of gold,” although the setting tends to be more domestic rather than the dance hall.

Félix’s films of the 1940s—even the *cabaretera* ones—produced after the abolition of regulated prostitution in Mexico, play on the insecurities of men by employing the figure of the *devoradora* or devouring woman, embodied by Félix. Although she played the prostitute—to be used by men—she was often the instrument of destruction for the male characters. Male anxieties are foregrounded in *La Devoradora*. The young, physically attractive man represented by Pablo (Felipe de Alba) cannot posses the woman because he cannot financially maintain her while the older, richer man represented by Adolfo (Julio Villareal) cannot truly posses the woman either because he cannot satisfy her physically. Even the young and rich man represented by Miguel (Luis Aldás) is no match for the adventuresome woman—la *aventurera*—as Agustín Lara’s song identifies Diana when they visit the cabaret for a night out. The story does not seek solutions to the male anxieties about his adequacy, or address the problem of attempting to prove his masculinity by treating women as property to be possessed. In these films, the female character becomes the monster—la *devoradora*—and destroys all of those men. She is ambitious, vain, selfish, and out of control. According to Mexican film historian Emilio García Riera, the publicity for this film blamed the woman entirely and proclaimed the innocence of the men—“Uno

75 Hershfield quotes from Jorge Ayala Blanco *La aventura del cine mexicano* Mexico City: Ediciones Era,
era rico y a ella le convenía…Otro era casi un niño y creía poder amarlo…el tercero le fue necesario…tres hombres se quemaron, así, en la llama de esa mujer, devoradora de vidas [One man was rich and he was suitable for her…Another was almost a child and she believed she was able to love him…The third was necessary for her…three men burned up just like that in the flames of that woman, the devourer of lives]” (102). The film satisfies the male anxieties by killing her and in so doing, reinforces patriarchal order—in her wedding gown on the day she was to have wed don Adolfo—instead while still allowing the male audience to take pleasure in her beauty. One must wonder if the female audience identified with the male and found pleasure in the restoration of patriarchal order or if they identified with Félix’s character who seemed in control of her life right up until the end.

In *La devoradora* (1946), Félix plays Diana. Her character’s name serves to remind the viewer of the Roman name of the Triple goddess who once ruled the world but was later vilified as the goddess of the witches during the Inquisition although she remained known as the goddess of hunting and wild woodlands (Walker 234). Visually, the film reminds us of the Huntress with a stylized sculpture of a leaping deer casting a shadow on wall above the mantel of her apartment behind her when she is in her living room.

Within the story of the film, this characterization is taken even further—she is the huntress of men. She destroys the lives of three men before her own life is taken. Each of these men represents a type and each is taken down by the formidable huntress.
First, a former lover Pablo goes to apartment and enters her bedroom, distraught that she has dumped him for an older, richer man. He trembles as he aims his pistol at her. She sees her opportunity for escape and approaches him, verbally egging him on “¡Anda! ¡Mátame! [Get on with it! Kill me!]” but physically she continues moving closer, distracting him with her seductive body and movements. The camera cuts away to show her servant Jacinta’s reaction so that when the gun is fired, it is left ambiguous as to who actually pulled the trigger. However, when the audience returns to her bedroom, the gun is in Diana’s hands, leaving no doubt as to her responsibility in his death. Then, she convinces her new fiancé Adolfo and his nephew Miguel to help her deceive the police with the cause of his death by moving his body to a more public place—Chapultepec Park. She seduces Miguel and takes him to her couch in the living room—she does not allow him into her inner sanctum of her bedroom. Miguel, however, is now completely convinced that she should not marry his uncle and takes matters into his own hands and kills her on the day of the wedding in her white wedding gown. Miguel’s career as a doctor is ruined as he turns himself over to the police, confessing his dual crime of the deceit of moving Pablo’s body and then the murder of Diana. Adolfo is not seen after Diana’s death as the film ends at Miguel’s confession and arrest. However, throughout the film, Adolfo is portrayed as going crazy because of his love for her and it is implied that he would not recover well from Diana’s deception and her subsequent death.

Diana’s characterization as a prostitute includes the *cabaretera* cue when she visits the cabaret but as a guest rather than a performer. Otherwise, the characterization
deals with fears regarding the socially and economically ambitious woman and her
disruption of patriarchal power. The film actually seems to displace concerns about
women in the workplace by suggesting that her sexuality is her means of support.
Diana does not seem to have another form of employment, but it is made clear that her
lovers support her financially. Although dialogue within the film suggests that her
desire is to be seen as an “honorable” woman, she eventually accepts payment. In a key
scene, she initially refuses to exchange kisses for a ring, stating that she only wants to
kiss Adolfo for love. She returns the ring and kisses him but then later accepts the ring
as an engagement ring when she takes her leave. During this scene, the visual
composition belies her protests. Don Adolfo is seated next to her on the couch but in
the foreground, covering his torso, is a wild bunch of Calla lilies, a traditional symbol of
female genitalia. It is clear from the visual cueing that she has used her (wild) sexuality
to seduce him and obtain riches and status from him. This moment is interrupted when
Pablo a former lover enters. Adolfo offers to defend her and chase him away but she
denies his offer and goes to Pablo with the excuse of trying to avoid a scene. Pablo
argues with her, calling Adolfo “un viejo verde [a dirty old man].” She tells Pablo to
hide and wait until she gets rid of Adolfo. She returns to Adolfo and feigns a
headache—the classic excuse to avoid further sexual contact. At this point, as she sees
Adolfo to the door, she accepts the ring and then returns Pablo and explains that she
wants to marry Adolfo because it is useful to her or it suits her—“me conviene”—not
for love or even affectionate feelings. Indeed, she then embraces Pablo as she tells him
that she is physically attracted to him—“me gustas.” The film, however, will not allow
the audience to forget Diana’s treachery for, as the two embrace, the shot centers on and closes in on the ring, not their faces as would be more typical in a romantic moment. This is not romance but business, the framing makes clear.

The figure of the *femme fatale* presented in the 1940s film contrasts strongly with the late 1950s films in which Félix portrays a prostitute or otherwise sexually promiscuous woman. These later films seem far less subversive than the earlier films in that Félix’s character is already somewhat tamed—she may be a prostitute or have had an extramarital affair but she is seeking redemption. She is seeking to restore patriarchal order rather than upset it, as her *femme fatale* characters seem to do. This Roberto Gavaldón film revolves around three characters—Madgalena, Pepe (Pedro Armendáriz), and Jim (Jack Palance) —whose love triangle serves as an allegory about Mexican and US relations during modernization. Director Roberto Gavaldón, whose Félix films include *La diosa arrodillada* (1947), *Camelia* (1954)\(^76\) *La Escondida* (1955), *Miércoles de ceniza* (1958), and, of course, *Flor de mayo* (1959). Film historian Ariel Zúñiga explains “It is not necessary to invoke the auteur theory to say that certain elements reappear in all his films. These are not formal or stylistic elements, but rather a personal approach to genres and themes linked to his own well-defined views of the world and the Mexican nation that surrounded him” (193). He

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\(^{76}\) A Mexican-Spanish co-production adapting Alexander Dumas Fils’ *La dame aux camélias* on which Verdi’s opera *La Traviata* is based. Félix plays Camelia, an actress suffering from a terminal illness. As the protagonist, she “plays Camille in a theatrical production as well as in her daily life” (Zúñiga 195). As the title courtesan, she sacrifices her own happiness to prove her love. She begins a heated affair with the *torero* Rafael (Jorge Mistral), who is, unbeknownst to her, the brother of one of her former lovers. She promises her former lover to break off the relationship with Rafael. Rafael then dedicates the bull that he kills at the bullfight to her but then later insults her without knowing that she is gravely ill. The film ends after her last performance of the play *La Dama de las Camelias* as she dies in Rafael’s arms. (Aguirre)
continues, “It is impossible to separate Roberto Gavaldón’s work from politics. No one in Mexico who achieves an important position can ignore the political dimension of social life, and Gavaldón was no exception” (195). Gavaldón “was an active participant in the various labour struggles of film workers, and one of the founders of the STPC (Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica)” though he was “a liberal rather than a leftist” (197). Certainly in the films discussed here, there is a powerful political element that is more pronounced, perhaps even to the point of heavy-handed, in the later films Miércoles de ceniza (1958) and Flor de mayo (1959).

The story of Flor de Mayo’s love triangle takes place in a fishing town Topolobampo on the pacific coast of Mexico where the entire town is involved in the preparation of the shrimp for sale. There is a strong educational element here as a voiceover as the cooperative leader explains that they should not participate in the lure of quick money on the black market because the entire town will lose their jobs if the fishing moves away. This sequence plays over images of a meeting with the shrimp fishers of the cooperative and women cleaning the shrimp. Additionally, the cooperative leader explains, the Mexican government would lose tax money that is used for schools and other public works if the work went abroad. To further emphasize the dangers of “sleeping with the enemy,” violence is employed. When Jim explains his technology that shows him where the shrimp are, he states that the shrimp do not understand territory so why should the fishermen but when the fishing boats cross the boundary line—and find the shrimp—they are fired upon by border patrol ships.
In *Flor de Mayo* (1959), the first element of the love triangle between the three main characters is Félix as Magdalena, a name that reminds the audience of Mary Magdalene, a prostitute who became a follower of Jesus when he cast demons from her. She was honored in Christian beliefs as the first one to whom the resurrected Christ appeared (Walker). In other words, her character is one who had made bad choices but was now seeking redemption for herself and restoration of the patriarchal order.

The second element of the allegorical love triangle is Jim Gatsby who represents America with his name and reminds the audience of the story of the American novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel’s rich Jay Gatsby tries to seduce Daisy, the married woman with whom he once had a relationship. Though the novel’s Gatsby lives the life of luxury, throwing lavish parties, he is miserable because he cannot be with his true love. In other words, money does not bring happiness.

The third element of the love triangle is Pepe. Pepe, representing the Mexican male and the third element of this love triangle, is characterized as hotheaded and prone to drinking binges and violence. He was even sentenced to a one-year jail term for dealing with contraband, although his friends at the dock comment that “they were never able to prove anything.” When Pepe discovers that Pepito is not his son, he goes to the bar, drinking and working himself into a fury—he wants to make Magdalena sorry for her affair. His friend Nacho tries to council him to leave the boy alone because he is innocent in this matter. Pepe is still furious and will not even speak with the boy that he raised and had called his “little piece of God” and his “golden shrimp” earlier in the film. Pepe, in his anger, says “does it not matter that she cheated on me
and then tricked me by making me believe that the boy was mine?” Nacho, in a telling statement, speaks about female desire and reminds Pepe that left her alone just six months after they were married by his stay in jail. Pepe confronts Magdalena, telling her to get out that he has more right to the boy than she does because she is a traitor and then he strikes her.

Magdalena is praised for her virtues by her husband Pepe but she has a secret. After they were married, Pepe was sent to jail and during that time, she had an affair with his good American friend Jim and became pregnant, although he left her before he found out. She passes the boy Pepito as Pepe’s own by giving a different date for his baptism. During the flashback scenes of her developing relationship with Jim, her portrayal seems to be mostly innocent—after all, she was a newly married young woman left on her own by her husband’s jail term. Her only sin seems to be some mild seduction of Jim—she invites him up to her place and cries on his shoulder after he defends her honor. In this way, Magdalena is presented as more of a victim of circumstances than as a conniving, manipulative femme fatale that Félix portrays in the films from the 1940s. In a flashback scene, Magdalena is carrying vegetables in a public conveyance and another man, knowing that her husband Pepe is in jail, makes advances. Jim sees this and hits the other man. Magdalena invites Jim to her house to thank him and offers him food and drink but he refuses. She begins to cry and he tries to comfort her saying that “a year will pass quickly” referring to Pepe’s jail sentence. She says that she is not crying for that reason and the two embrace and the screen fades to black, symbolizing the beginning of their physical relationship. Their relationship
develops through a series of flashbacks, intercut with Pepe discovering that he could not be the father of the boy whom he thought was his son. In these flashbacks, Jim is often shirtless, emphasizing his masculine attractiveness—it is he who seems to be the seducer here. In the flashbacks, Magdalena expresses her love for Jim and desire to go with him but he leaves town, sending a note with a local boy that he cannot see her anymore. He does not even have the courage to break off the relationship personally.

When he returns, Magdalena is upset with him saying that he left her like she was just any woman, a prostitute, although he tells her that he loves her. Yet when Jim returns and Pepe is so angry with her, Magdalena tells Jim that she wants to leave with him again and they spend the day at the beach with Pepito. She seems trying to make the best of the bad situation but, in need of a male protector and father for her son.

Finally, order is restored at Pepito’s first communion ceremony—a reminder of the importance of the church providing a stable foundation for the Mexican family. Magdalena and Jim approach the church and Jim sees the touching interaction between Pepe and Pepito at the ceremony and Jim realizes that Pepe is the boy’s true father, because he raised him. Magdalena goes to Pepito and holds his hand. Pepito is the link between the Pepe and Magdalena—he is the link that holds the Mexican family together, despite outside seductions that attempt to tear the family apart. Jim looks on as he holds the toy he had bought for Pepito—a symbol of the (misguided?) love he feels for the family—and is happy that the family has been restored.

On the surface, it seems that the film is very heavy-handed in its cautions about relationships between Mexico and foreign, especially US, influences. Yet, many
questions are raised with *Flor de Mayo* including the potency of the Mexican male. Here, though Magdalena has proven her fertility with the birth of Pepito, Pepe after six years of marriage (approximate time frame for first communion) has not been able to reproduce—Pepito, son of Magdalena and Jim, is their only child. Mexican Magdalena is only fertile with the American Jim. The irony presented in the film, perhaps unintentionally, is that while the film is explicitly didactic about avoiding foreign influence, the Mexicans are actually stagnant without the influence of the US represented in Jim’s fertile character. His character introduces technology that is useful in increasing the shrimp harvest. He runs into trouble only when he crosses US-Mexico boundaries and crashes his boat when the border patrol shoot at him. However, this scene provides an opportunity for Pepe to show his worth. Pepe rescues his old friend, in spite of his anger, characterizing him now as a worthy true friend as well as valiant. Perhaps, the underlying message, when the film is read this way, is that Mexico should work with foreign powers in order to advance.

While *Flor de Mayo* deals with contemporary 1950s Mexico, many of the other Félix films from the late 1950s and early 1960s are set in the past, a decision that serves to distance concerns about modernity. Three of the films in which Félix portrays a prostitute or mistress are set during the Revolution—*La Escondida* (1955), *Café Colón* (1959), and *La Bandida* (1962). Another film—which, like *Flor de Mayo*, is directed by Roberto Gavaldón—*Miércoles de Ceniza* (1958) is set during the Cristero War of 1926-29 which was, as described by historians Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley, “a popular response to the Revolutionary government’s failure to recognize
the power of faith among village peoples and to celebrate the achievement of the church’s reformers, who were carrying out social action policies parallel to the Revolution’s social programs” (433). *Miércoles de Ceniza* tells the story of Victoria (Félix) who was raped by a priest in her youth and learns to hate the clergy and the church that would allow the guilty one to go unpunished. She becomes a prostitute and eventually runs her own well-known and well-patronized brothel. This film, like *Flor de Mayo*, serves the audience a strong lesson by portraying a clandestine priest known as Dr. Federico Lamadrid (Arturo de Córdoba) as a good man who is capable of resisting Victoria’s charms. He turns her to the religious path as the film ends and he instructs her that “confession is the beginning of freeing yourself and repenting is obtaining forgiveness” and then leaves her alone to pray “help me God” as the shot widens and the credits begin to roll. Perhaps the camera pulls back to give her privacy in her prayers but it also gives the sense that perhaps she is as small and alone as she feels.

The three films set during the Revolution *La Escondida* (1955), *Café Colón* (1959), and *La Bandida* (1962) cast Félix as a mistress in the first film and a prostitute in the last two. In another Gavaldón film, Félix is Gabriela in *La Escondida* [The Hidden Woman] and is the fiancée of Felipe (Pedro Armendáriz) until she steals back money that was stolen from her and is caught by the *patron*. Felipe saves her from rape and punishment by saying that he committed the crime. He is sent to join the Federal military. The war leaves Gabriela in economic hardship and she becomes the kept woman, that is *la escondida*, of a high-ranking military official. This film also contains
the heavy-handed didactic elements that both *Flor de Mayo* and *Miércoles de Ceniza* exhibit. For example, class issues are foregrounded in a sequence that contrasts a gathering of the poor and a gathering of the rich. The poor hold a funeral for the men killed by government soldiers as punishment for those who “disobey the supreme government.” Meanwhile, the rich hold a boisterous party that involves heavy drinking and partner swapping.

This film emphasizes Gabriela’s attempt at redemption in two parallel train scenes. In the first she is on the train when Felipe’s group of Revolutionary soldiers attack. Her lover the General Nemesio Garza (Andrés Soler) hands Gabriela a pistol that she then uses to kill the machine gunner enabling the Revolutionary soldiers to reach the train and win the battle. Felipe is informed that she was left for him to kill personally for her “treachery” in sleeping with the government official. He goes to her and hits her several times. Gabriela is knocked unconscious during the struggle but he then goes to her, kissing her. She awakens and returns his kisses. Like Sleeping Beauty, she is awakened or reborn from her symbolic death by the kiss of a “real man”—the man who fights for Revolutionary ideals but also one who uses violence against women, just like the rich against whom the Revolution fights. She has been transformed into the *soldadera* who fights with the Revolutionary soldiers to bring justice to the poor, although after this scene, the fighting stops as Madero’s provisional government is announced to the Revolutionary soldiers.

The second train scene has a different outcome and occurs at the end of the film after Gabriela and Felipe have been reunited and spend all day and night in each other’s
arms. Felipe’s friend Máximo (Jorge Martínez de Hoyos) voices the concerns that the Revolution might not be able to achieve its goals as he fears that “the poor Indians will remain poor.” After Felipe has put on the Federal uniform, Máximo continues, “they’ll send you against me first and then against others, your own brothers.” Felipe is convinced and throws off the uniform and other soldiers follow suit shouting ¡Viva Zapata! and ¡Viva Felipe Rojano! Felipe is positioned as a hero of the Revolution as he is seen mounted on his white horse and the shouts of his soldiers make the parallel between Zapata and him. The Revolutionary army attack a train but Gabriela is on the train, she dies in the crossfire. Although Gabriela joined the Revolutionary soldiers as Félix’s other characters such in Enamorada in an appropriate capacity as a helper to her male protector unlike her character in the beginning of La Cucaracha, she is caught in the crossfire and dies. Perhaps her death is a lesson about appropriate roles for femininity, as in many of Félix’s films in which she portrays a woman outside of the patriarchal order that end with her character’s death or disappearance. On the other hand, Gabriela’s death might be interpreted to be more about the failure of the Mexican government to bring the ideals of the Revolution to fruition. Gabriela, by dying after she has been redeemed by turning to the Revolutionary’s side, represents a great loss to Felipe’s Revolutionary hero.

Café Colón (1959), directed by Benito Alazraki, is also set during the Revolution and shows a similar trajectory of redemption and restoration of patriarchal order but here the mood is lighter and the ending is happy—Félix is paired with Armendáriz again as she plays a cabaretera Mónica who agrees to marry Pedro
Armendáriz’s Revolutionary General Sebastián Robles at the end of the film. In this film, there is an element of masquerade that serves to provide some of the comedy of the film as Félix’s character puts on an upper class persona but her “true” self—the passionate, over-the-top self breaks through the masquerade. The film opens with a scene that establishes Mónica’s cabaret environment—and thus indicates her lower-class origins—with shots of men drinking heavily, wives being upset at their husbands who talk to the costumed servers and even women posing for portrait sketches while a costumed dancers perform the Cancan, reminding the viewer of Félix’s role in French Cancan (1954). Mónica is presented as a singer at the Café Colón engaged to a Federal military officer General Gumaro Valencia (Luis Beristáin)—she has allied herself with the rich. This is contrasted with the Zapatista General Robles’ environment—the middle of a heated battle with many being wounded in artillery fire. After this battle is when the two leads meet for the first time. Mónica is upset that her fiancé has essentially abandoned her when the Zapatista army won the battle for the capital city but the show must go on and she begins her number “Flor de amor [Flower of Love].” She sees Armendáriz’s General Sebastián Robles sleeping at a table. She hits him over the head with her flower basket and then begins yelling at him—interrupting her performance of the song with another type of performance. Back in her dressing room, she comments to her “manager”—the man who “made her a lady”—that all men are just flesh and blood and that they are hers, “son carne y hueso, todos con cojones son míos.” Mónica must have Sebastián because he has rejected her—although it turns out that his rejection was, in part, only because they did not understand each other’s point of
view—he takes lessons from a “dandy” because he is attracted to her. She then masquerades, trying to get his attention—dressing in an upper-class style outfit complete with a high-necked bodice and parasol—and goes to the Sebastián’s camp offering to “help”—although it is clear that her “help” is actually an attempt to get Sebastián to notice her. When he puts her to work, instructing her to help bathe the wounded men, she dumps the bucket of water over his head. He has not understood that her true motive was to seduce him not to actually work in the camp. Her masquerade is broken—she cannot maintain the guise of an upper class lady as her “true” nature spills out as the bucket of water spills out.

There are two other significant moments of masquerade. The first is when she tells Sebastián that she would like to be a housewife and mother of many children and holds a balloon party with for children at Café Colón but the General sees through her masquerade, calling her a liar and stating that she belongs to the Café Colón. He must leave and her masquerade fully slips away when a girl tries to get Mónica’s attention and she slaps at her.

The second moment is interesting not just as an element of masquerade but also because it contrasts so strongly with the image presented in her later soldadera films discussed in the previous chapter. She follows Sebastián as he is called away to battle. She is fearful of the machine gun fire. She sees a group of women with guns, a group of soldaderas and she goes up to them, picking up the gun of one of the injured women but she cannot even work the action of the rifle and leaves the area when she sees Sebastián eliminate the machine gunner by throwing a grenade to his position. Unlike
her character in *La Cucaracha* (1958) or *Juana Gallo* (1960) or *La Generala* (1970) she is not competent with firearms on the battlefield. She only succeeds in gaining Sebastián’s attention by protecting gold and jewels for him to finance the Revolutionary cause. The final scene has them walking away from Café Colón together as she accepts his marriage proposal. He has taken her out of the cabaret finally.

Throughout these films from the 1940s and the 1950s and early 1960s, the figure of the prostitute or the sexually promiscuous woman plays an important role in dealing with concerns about modernity and the changing roles for women and the effects on the traditional family as women enter the workforce in greater numbers. The earlier films foreground these anxieties by presenting a monstrous female figure—the *femme fatale*, *la devoradora*. She represents out-of-control female power and its destructive nature on men and patriarchal social structures. To a certain degree, *la devoradora* is a subversive figure in that she embodies female power and demonstrates its effectiveness at disrupting traditional family structures. The answer to fears foregrounded the *femme fatale* is to destroy her. Félix’s characters of these films from the 1940s—*La mujer sin alma* (1943), *La devoradora* (1946), *La diosa arrodillada* (1947) are broken—even if her beauty remains untouched, she cannot survive. The later films of the late 1950s and the early 1960s—*La Escondida* (1955), *Miércoles de ceniza* (1958), *Flor de mayo* (1959), *Café Colón* (1959), *La Bandida* (1962), and *Amor y sexo* (1964)—show a different view. Though Félix represents prostitutes or otherwise sexually promiscuous women, her characters here seem mostly to be seeking redemption and restoration of patriarchal order. These characters are often presented as victims of their
circumstances, women who have made bad choices along the way but still seek to be redeemed, still wish to maintain social order. These characters are willing to change and adopt a more submissive role to bring back the stability of the traditional family in the face of modernity. Modernity, in the form of economic progress, is accepted in these later films as long as patriarchal order is maintained with female submission.

With these films and their representation of the prostitute and sexually promiscuous woman and their change over time in mind, we turn now to a (meta)critical analysis. The image of the prostitute is prevalent in popular culture and is found in many films, television shows and other forms of media. Film scholar Yvonne Tasker in *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* suggests that “Across a variety of popular genres, Hollywood representation is characterised by an insistent equation between working women, women’s work and some form of sexual(ised) performance. Thus the caricature or the stereotype of the prostitute, whose physical labour is manifestly bound up with sex, signifies only one point on a continuum which extends across legal thrillers and crime movies into the paranoid scenarios of office politics.” (3). The title of Tasker’s book comes from Dorothy Arzner’s *Working Girls* (1931) which “plays on ‘the double meaning of ‘working girl,’ in its innocent literal sense and in its acquired sense that women who worked outside the home were morally suspect’ (6, quoted from Mayne 95). Tasker continues, “Ultimately, Mayne adds, ‘the term ‘working girl’ became a code for ‘prostitute,’ a suggestive elision which typifies Hollywood and indeed wider cultural representations” (6). In these Félix films, the actress’s sexuality—foregrounded as she plays a sex
worker—certainly touches on fears about modernity and changing the traditional model of the family as women entered the workforce in greater numbers. The films themselves tend to displace the anxiety from the current fears by setting them in the past or in the romanticized cabaret and generally do not specifically show female characters in other forms of employment.

Tasker identifies several types of the prostitute in the modern Hollywood film such as the victim, the “tart with a heart of gold,” and police women masquerading as prostitutes. Félix films from the late 1950s tend to show this “tart with heart” as she makes sacrifices and adopts a submissive attitude to restore patriarchal order. Félix’s contribution to the “police woman masquerading as a prostitute” genre is her film Que Dios me Perdone (1948) in which she plays a female spy who is instructed to seduce and marry an important business man. She is portrayed as a seductress who is only interested in obtaining information from the men she seduces. Tasker states “The repeated recourse to a narrative device in which a female police officer finds herself undercover as a prostitute functions both to comment on and reaffirm the extent to which women’s work involves sexual display and/or sexual performance” (93-94). Certainly I would argue that the actress portraying a prostitute reaffirms this connection between women’s work and sexual display. Tasker also notes that the prostitute costume additionally “functions as a fairly straightforward voyeuristic strategy for showcasing the body of the star/performer” (94).

The sexualized figure of the prostitute allows Félix to display her body within the text of the film. For example, in La diosa arrodillada Félix plays a classy call girl. The title of the film refers to the statue a kneeling nude woman for which she was the model—both as the character of Raquel within the text of the film as well as the body of the star for the actual prop. Her former lover Antonio (Arturo de Córdova), charged by his wife to select a statue for the fountain planned for the courtyard of their estate, goes to the artist’s workshop and sees the statue. Félix, in her role as Raquel, is dressing behind a screen at the studio. As the artist talks to Antonio, describing his “masterpiece”—“the purity of its lines, the contour of its legs [la pureza de líneas, el contorno de la pierna más perfecto]”—Antonio and the audience observe Félix dressing, as she sensuously dons stockings, matching the artist’s description. The artist concludes his sales pitch by stating that he created it to

The exception is in La mujer sin alma (1943) where Félix’s character Teresa works as a seamstress with other women in a dress shop prior to her marriage. But here, unlike the “shrew” films which show a female character running a ranch and presiding over property, the employment is coded as feminine—sewing and she works with other women with a male manager and once she is married, she no longer is seen working. The man, as a sign of his masculinity, is supposed to support his wife financially.
“provoke desire [provocar el deseo]” and it has—Antonio must buy the piece. He is obsessed, staring at for hours, even ignoring a tremendous lightening and rainstorm.

It is interesting to note in this discussion of the display of the body that Félix has one moment of all of forty-seven films in which she displays her bare breasts on screen. Of all the many love scenes, bathing and dressing scenes, and cabaret sequences, this moment occurs in *Amor y sexo* (1964) when she visits her husband in prison for a “conjugal visit.” She must strip for a female prison guard before she is allowed in the semi-private cell with her husband. Her character is reluctant to remove the finely knit cardigan but she finally strips, flashing her bare breasts, as she wears no bra. There is no question that the shot is intended to display her breasts to the audience as her torso is centered in the frame. This moment though is intended to demonstrate Diana’s unease at the situation—she is there for sex with her imprisoned husband, whom she no longer loves. She has been having an affair with a much younger doctor. She is literally stripped naked, even as she lies to her husband about her activities, refusing his kisses. The scene ends with her weeping alone on her own bed. Her rape, begun with the reluctant disrobing, is completed. Instead of heterosexual sex, instead of displaying her body in a passionate way, she is violated by the female prison guard and then by her husband and perhaps even by the film itself as it exploits her body in this unusual way. Throughout the rest of this film, in bedroom scenes she is carefully covered by the sheets and when she steps out of bed she carefully dons a robe so that no nudity is actually seen, even when it might perhaps be more natural allow the body to be displayed.
On yet another layer of analysis, the figure of the prostitute is essential to the concept of compulsory heterosexuality as a social system. The representation of the prostitute is the “bad woman.” She is the reflection of the “good woman,” meaning that neither the “bad woman” nor the “good woman” could exist without the other.

Regarding Mexican film and its representation of the prostitute, Carlos Monsiváis, focussing on the traditional model of the family, explains that the prostitute in film is a curious institution that is degraded yet glorified because of the way in which she protects the traditional family, the whore is canonized (185).

The figure of the prostitute or the “bad woman” is needed as the opposite of the “good woman” so that the “good woman” can be defined. Feminist scholar Eva Pendleton states, “Sex workers have historically operated as an ‘other’ against which varieties of white female sexual identity have constructed themselves. Heterosexuality as a social system depends upon the specter of unchastity in order to constitute itself; the ‘good wife’ as a social category cannot exist without the ‘whore’[…]” (73).

This binary of good/bad suggests that “woman” is either “good” or “bad,” she cannot just be “woman.” In fact, the “good woman/bad woman” binary hints at the performance of gender since “good” and “bad” women are defined by certain actions, that is the performance of particular activities. As Philosopher Judith Butler explains, “If I am someone who cannot be without doing, then the conditions of my doing are, in part, the conditions of my existence” (Undoing 3). In addition to this “good woman/bad

78 “la prostituta es la insitución degradada y glorificada en sentido inverso que protege a las familias. ‘Canonizemos a las putas’, escribió famosamente Jaime Sabines y, en el siglo precondônico, la prostituta filmica responde con creces a los ‘ex votos’ de la industria”
woman” binary, there is a second layer of duality here. The first duality at play this “good woman/bad woman” binary we have been discussing. It is often discussed in terms of the virgin/whore binary. This feminine duality is prevalent in Mexican culture. In contemporary Mexican terms, the feminine has been split into two different, yet inseparable, entities la Virgen de Guadalupe—the good, self-sacrificing, sexually pure mother—and la Malinche—the traitorous whore who betrayed the indigenous people yet is considered the mother of the mestizo Mexican people. In Mexican mythology the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, who is associated with both life and death, represents this duality. She is often depicted wearing a mask with two faces, a skirt made of rattlesnakes, and a necklace made of human hands and skulls. In one representation, she gives birth to death. The figure of Mary Magdalene has this association between female sexuality and death in that she was a prostitute and is credited as having anointed Christ’s body and then being the first of his disciples to see him risen from the dead. It is an association maintained in these Félix films. For example, in Flor de Mayo (1959) Félix’s character is named Magdalena and in Amor y Sexo (1964), Félix’s Diana’s home has so many skeletons and Day of the Dead figures that her sitting room is almost a shrine to death.

The second layer of duality, which is the overarching duality in compulsory heterosexuality is the male/female binary. Masculinity is often articulated by its “opposite,” femininity. The masculine is threatened by the “whore” or “bad woman” who might take their masculinity and thus their personhood, as Félix’s Diana does in La Devoradora destroying the three men. However, because masculinity only has the one
aspect (masculinity is not qualified by “good” or “bad,” it just is) then by losing his “masculinity” the man ceases to be a person, as Ilene O’Malley has suggested in her study. On the other hand, “bad” or “good” the “woman” is still a “woman” however constructed that identification might be. Feminist scholar Eva Pendleton explains how prostitution exposes the constructedness of gender, “Using femininity as an economic tool is a means of exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings. While some feminists argue that sex workers reinforce sexist norms, I would say that the act of making men pay is, in fact, quite subversive. It reverses the terms under which men feel entitled to unlimited access to women’s bodies” (79). The prostitute sets the terms under which her body is accessed. Her male clientele must abide by these terms or be denied access. An example of this type of contractual access and the fears raised by the “bad woman” is demonstrated in the film, *Miércoles de Ceniza*. A male client behaves inappropriately, taking his pistol (phallus) out and begins shooting at flower vases (symbol of female genitalia) in the brothel, the female prostitute (that is, the “bad woman”) takes his pistol from his hands and slaps him. He ceases his wild behavior and hands her money. A further reading of this scene in the film reveals the true fear—that masculinity is something that the “bad woman” can take from the man as here the prostitute takes the phallic pistol from the man and requires compliance to her terms. The “bad woman” is bad because she threatens patriarchal power structures while the “good woman” supports male authority as it defines “man” by providing masculinity’s “other.”

In addition to these dual binaries, in film, there is the double performance of the actress playing the role of the prostitute playing the role of femininity—
foregrounding the constructed nature of gender. In this respect, film representations of the prostitute are subversive in that they question virgin/whore binary by showcasing the double performance of femininity. In fact, as Pendleton in discussing prostitution and stripping as professions explains, “sex workers provide a powerful indictment of gender roles by demanding payment for playing them” (81). So in films about prostitution, the actor is paid for representing the prostitute who, within the context of the film, is paid for representing gender roles. In fact, Pendleton suggests that the representation of the prostitute is a form of drag performance. As Pendleton explains, “Sex workers operate under complex ideological and political conditions similar to those of drag performers. Within a matrix of power that constitutes what it means to be ‘female’ and ‘sexual,’ paid sex performers put on the trappings of femininity in order to reap material gain. In fact, sex work is drag in that it is a mimetic performance of highly charged feminine gender codes” (78).

Although Pendleton is discussing specific magazines articles about strippers, there are certain applications to these films about prostitutes. She notes that the way the articles are written with their “implicit audience of non-whores” and “ending on a pitiful note about innocence lost […] “accompanied by an inserted feature on the dangers of topless dancing, lest any of the readers think she might be tempted to try it,” she notes how “these kinds of tactics divert attention from the ways in which all women are forced to negotiate various forms of sexual stigmatization, leaving the ‘real whores’ marked as feminism’s (and heteronormative culture’s) ‘other’” (79). These films certainly have an implicit audience of “non-whores” and, especially the 1940s films, offer cautionary tales to their audiences that “that kind of woman” disrupts society, comes to ruin her community as she herself is ruined by her profession. On the other hand, the films from the late 1950s through the early sixties offer solutions for the “fallen woman”—she could turn to the church as in Miércoles de Ceniza or she could work through the relationship problems caused by her deviant behavior as in Flor de
In other words, she could submit to patriarchal authority and order to society is restored.

**Conclusion**

This project began as a presentation on Matilde Landeta’s *La Negra Angustias* (1950) for a film class that developed into a final project on *soldaderas* in film. In the process of my research, I found María Félix in the roles of *generalas* leading men in battle during the Mexican Revolution. From there, I expanded to a summer research project in which I took a closer look at María Félix in Mexican films that dealt with the Revolution. That summer project is the core of what is now chapter four “Sending Félix off to War: The *Soldadera* and the Performance of Gender.” In my explorations into María Félix’s star text as represented in her films, interviews, magazine articles, *fotonovelas*, and other public appearances in the media, I have uncovered a dynamic star whose public persona acts as barometer, registering social tensions during a period of modernization in Mexico from the 1940s to the 1960s, as societal changes brought families from a rural environment into a more urban space and women joined the work force outside of their homes.

La Doña is an important part of the psyche of Mexico, as well as throughout Latin America, wherever her films were shown. As Professor Ileana Rodríguez said to me as she worked with me on this project, describing her experiences when growing up in Mexico City seeing Félix on the silver screen, “We learned to hate her as a woman but admire her beauty.” Félix’s star text provided the “what if” safety valve for a society under the pressures of changing working conditions and values. “What if” women owned property like Doña Bárbara? “What if” women were financially
independent, what would happen to the family and what would men do? “What if” you could really tame powerful and independent women? “What if” women really could lead men in battle, could they do it in the work place? “What if” women worked outside the home, what happens to the family? “What if” women controlled their sexuality? Her star text allowed the “what if” fantasy of a beautiful, powerful, financially independent, woman who controlled her sexuality and destiny to play out in the minds of her audience. At the same time, Félix was living that fantasy that was so often “punished” or “reformed” on screen. Maybe her female audience “learned to hate her” or, in other words, learned to hate the disruptions to daily life and the family as working conditions and societal values were changing in an urban environment. Her star text stood in for those negative aspects of modernization in Mexico. A parallel can be drawn between Félix and Mexico in the 1940s-1960s with *Dallas* and the US in the 1980s. As cultural studies scholar Chris Rojek states regarding *Dallas*,

Generally, audiences did not regard the Ewing family [from *Dallas*] as role models for emulation. Rather, *Dallas* allowed viewers to vent their disapproval of trends in personality and society without engaging in overtly politicized actions. JR, Bobby and their wives, mistresses and misdemeanours were an escape valve for viewers caught up in the dehumanizing logic of advanced capitalism. (27)

Although it is tempered with a feeling of inadequacy, that one could not live up to her model of beauty, power, and intelligence, there still exists admiration and desire for her star text.
Félix’s star text is particularly significant because it encompasses several decades in Mexico’s history and thus measured those social tensions over time. In her films in the 1940s she plays the *devoradora*, destroying men through her greed in order to address fears about changing family dynamics as urbanization took place. In her films in the 1950s she plays the *shrew* and allows herself to be tamed in order to address the fears that arose over women becoming politically enfranchised when they were finally permitted to vote in national elections. In her films in the 1960s, she plays both the *generala* and the prostitute in order to address fears about women working outside the home. Her films set during the Revolution allowed questions to be raised about the effectiveness of the government in promoting Revolutionary ideals. Throughout her film career, her star text allowed the films to be read as a “what if” fantasy. Félix’s star text made people feel something—love her or hate her—she brought audiences to her films and to other forms of media.
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