revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos

Volumen 30.2 Invierno 2006
Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos

Vol. 30, No. 2 Invierno 2006

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Mother-Daughter Feminism and Personal Criticism in Isabel Allende’s Paula

A pesar de ser la escritora hispana más exitosa de los últimos años, la crítica tiende a catalogar a la chilena Isabel Allende como autora popular de escasos recursos teóricos. Tomando en cuenta la tendencia hacia la personalización de los esquemas teóricos que Nancy K. Miller llama “personal criticism,” este artículo considera Paula – texto en que Allende adopta una postura autobiográfica al hablar de la enfermedad y muerte de su hija – un ejemplo de dicha crítica personal en la que la autora revela sus particulares nociones sobre el feminismo. Mi lectura explora la orientación genealogía del contenido de Paula así como su perspectiva narrativa, destacando la preferencia en ambos planos por las relaciones entre madres e hijas. Analiza, también, las implicaciones feministas de la diádama narrológica madre-hija que sostiene Paula, comparándola con la retórica narrativa de Las mil y una noches y la psicología feminista contenida en el mito de Démeter y Perséfone y sus ritos antiguos. Este acercamiento ayuda a perfilar las prioridades feministas del texto a la vez que cuestiona la perjudicial noción de que la accesibilidad narrativa y la formulación de teorías son actividades mutuamente excluyentes.

Now, if the other who signs in my place is dead, that has a certain number of consequences.  
(Jacques Derrida, The Ear of the Other)

Through incredible neglect and disregard, patriarchal traditions have wiped out traces of mother-daughter genealogies.  
(Luce Irigaray, Je, tu, nous)

In Conversations with Isabel Allende, John Rodden observes that although many critics rightfully see Allende as "the newest edition and only woman in the 'exclusive male club' of first-rank Latin American writers of the postwar 'Boom'" (8), few actually consider her a serious writer. Rodden enumerates several reasons for this appraisal, including Allende's popularity and status as a celebrity writer or "personality" (8), her dismissive attitude regarding "critics' hostility
toward her work" (13), the simplicity of a writing style that is decidedly not "baroque" (13), and the objections of feminist critics "who find her female characters stereotyped or weak" (16). Indeed, despite her success in a tradition dominated by men since Cervantes and her repeated self-identifications as a feminist, critics interviewing Allende frequently question her understanding of and commitment to feminism. Allende generally responds to charges that she, her female characters, or her writing style are somehow not feminist enough by opposing her own definitions of feminism to what she perceives to be the theoretical biases of her critics. At one extreme, she rejects critics' expectations that feminism should figure prominently in her works at all: "I don't invent characters so that they serve as models for radical feminists or young women who want to be feminists, but I simply tell life how it is" (quoted in Rodden 375). Allende critiques the notion that awareness of specific literary and cultural theories should constitute a valid criterion for critical evaluations of her works by subordinating the classificatory impulse of critics to her self-imposed mandate simply to tell stories:

Labels are unavoidable when you have critics ... They will label you no matter what, and you have to be classified. I don't want to be a feminist writer, a political writer, a social writer, a magic realism writer or a Latin American writer. I am just a writer; I am a storyteller. (Quoted in Rodden 359-60)

Despite such pronouncements, Allende more often accepts the feminist label, although she asserts the right to define for herself what it signifies. Asked point-blank if she considers herself a "feminist writer," Allende immediately agrees in the affirmative, though not without questioning the consensus implied by the interviewer's terminology: "First of all, we should all agree on the term feminist. Right now it is loaded with negative meanings for a lot of people" (quoted in Rodden 358). She claims that by emphasizing women's lives in her novels her objective has been to create "extraordinary women who could symbolize my version of what is meant to be feminine" (quoted in Rodden 40). In her own way, Allende views the notions of feminism and femininity as inseparable and complementary: "I have been very liberal, a feminist, and daring to do all the things that people of my generation were not permitted to do. Yet I use lipstick, high heels, and what I am most proud of is motherhood" (quoted in Rodden 375-76). Despite adhering to a traditional notion of femininity in her own struggles against the injustices of patriarchy, Allende opposes herself to what many feminist theorists consider one of the most empowering expressions of the feminine – the idea that women's writing should be different than that of their male counterparts. Confronted with the accusation that her straightforward prose is "actually masculine writing," Allende denies any connection between gender distinctions and writing styles: "What is masculine writing? I
mean does language or literature have sex? Writing is writing. Language is language, and you write from a human point of view" (quoted in Rodden 155).

These comments suggest that a dialectic of mutual misunderstanding and suspicion contributes to a significant disconnect between Allende and her critics regarding definitions of feminist theory and practice. Given her hostility toward the theoretical assumptions of literary critics and her insistence in defining her own feminist objectives, this article proposes a reading of Allende’s memoir Paula (1994) rooted in Nancy K. Miller’s notion of personal criticism. Because of its autobiographical nature, Paula is an especially appropriate candidate for analysis as a work of personal criticism capable of revealing its author’s personalized theoretical conceptions. According to Miller, personal criticism “entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism ... a deliberate move toward self-figuration, although the degree and form of self-disclosure of course vary widely” (Getting 1). She sees this personal criticism as a reaction to the increasing rigidity of theoretical labels; “This outbreak of self-writing ... intersects with a certain overloading of the rhetorics of representativity (including feminism’s) – the incantatory recital of the ‘speaking as a’s and the imperialisms of the ‘speaking for’s’” (Getting ix). While Miller is mainly concerned with the theorist as autobiographer, Laura Marcus views personal criticism as one of the “new spaces” into which autobiographical writings are moving and posits a double movement between the often disparate genres of autobiography and theory that makes the term personal criticism equally applicable to the autobiographer as theorist: “Autobiographical texts are engaging directly with theoretical accounts of subjectivity and history, while criticism and theory are calling for a recognition of the subjectivity of the theorist” (282). Rather than evaluating Allende’s understanding of feminism by comparing her works to established theoretical models, this perspective encourages us to see her as “a writing self outside or to the side of labels, or at least at a critical distance from them” and to consider any feminist implications of Paula part of “a wider effort to remap the theoretical” (Miller, Getting ix-x). My identification of Paula as a work of personal criticism is also intended as a response to the pervasive view that although Spanish America has consistently produced captivating literary texts it has been incapable of providing theoretical models for their interpretation and has, therefore, been locked in a position of dependence on imported theories and critical methodologies.³

Written at about the time Allende turns 50, Paula is a sort of midlife memoir in which the author records events from her family history as well as her own childhood, adolescence and adult personal and professional lives.¹ The text is named for Allende’s only daughter, whose sudden lapse into a disease-induced coma prompts her mother to begin recording her memories: “Escucha, Paula, voy a contarte una historia, para que cuando despiertes no estés tan perdida” (11). From this initial sentence until a point midway through the
narration when Allende accepts her daughter’s impending death, her autobiographical tales are directed at Paula in the second person. Contrary to what occurs in novels such as *La casa de los espíritus* and *El plan infinito*, male voices are barred from the exclusively mother-daughter orientation that results from Allende’s privileging of her matrilineal genealogy and her desire to stave off the impending death of her daughter through storytelling. The mother-daughter dynamic that informs *Paula’s* narrative pretext and narratological structure allows Allende to identify with the feminist tendencies associated with the figure of the storyteller Sheherazade, and – most significantly – to connect herself to the feminine and feminist impulses imbedded in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the Western archetype of mother-daughter separation. My analyses of these parallels will demonstrate that Allende’s use of the mother-daughter dyad as pretext to initiate the narration of her life story and as narratological vehicle to transmit it forms the basis of her personalized contribution to a type of feminism that many influential theorists consider especially relevant.

The mother-daughter narrative relationship from which Allende’s feminist impulses spring in *Paula* is rooted in her particular approach to genealogy. In much the same way that she negates a theoretical distinction between masculine and feminine writing styles, Allende seems ambivalent to feminist appropriations of genealogy that seek to subvert the ways in which this discourse of familial relationships traditionally favors patriarchal authority. While feminist theorists and autobiographers have shown an interest in Foucauldian or postmodern variants of genealogical discourse that recognize and empower marginalized subjects, much of the storytelling in *Paula* appears at first glance to rely on a conventional approach to family history. The focus on origins and the importance of restoring family fictions so characteristic of traditional genealogy is often the impetus and focus of Allende’s works. The foundational act of Allende’s literary career – the writing of *La casa de los espíritus* – is a genealogical narrative “born,” as is *Paula*, when the author learns of the impending death of a relative. In a passage reflective of her emphasis on maternal logic in *Paula*, Allende compares the conception and writing of a novel to “el proceso alegre de engendrar un niño, la paciencia de gestarlo, la fortaleza para traerlo a la vida y el sentimiento de profundo asombro en que culmina” (355-56). Allende’s surprisingly successful initiation into literary writing is given lengthy treatment in one of the final chapters of *Paula*, in which the episode is cast in a narrative thread that reveals family history, autobiography, fiction, and criticism to be inseparable elements of a more mature Allende’s reconstruction of her fortieth year.

*Paula’s* reliance on genealogical rhetoric – albeit more legendary than documentary – is emphasized from the outset:
La leyenda familiar comienza a principios del siglo pasado, cuando un fornido marinero
vasco desembarcó en las costas de Chile, con la cabeza perdida en proyectos de grandeza
y protegido por el relicario de su madre colgado al cuello, pero para qué ir tan atrás, basta
decir que su descendencia fue una estirpe de mujeres impetuosas y hombres de brazos
fines para el trabajo y corazón sentimental. (11)

In terms of gender, this caricaturized genealogy offered up by Allende is sym-
metrical, neither favouring nor excluding male or female precursors. Although
her first ancestor is a brawny sailor engaged in the stereotypically masculine
activities of the era, he is depicted as dependent on maternal influences for his
wellbeing. A male progenitor with a more influential presence in Paula is the
author's maternal grandfather, “el Tata,” depicted throughout the text as a wise,
understanding, and benevolent patriarch. In addition to el Tata, Allende's
stepfather, Ramón; her son, Nicolás; her son-in-law, Ernesto; her second hus-
band, Willie; and even her ex-husband, Michael; each fulfill roles within the
text’s narrative logic and are usually treated benignly by the author. However,
while men are a constant presence in Paula, it is important to point out that
they always function as secondary characters within what Allende calls “esa
familia de mujeres enigmáticas” (13).

Allende is not overtly hostile to the men from her family tree whom she
casts as characters in Paula, but since the text clearly privileges her maternal
ancestry – in spite of her famous surname – and emphasizes a special solidarity
among her female ancestors and descendants, the genealogical orientation of
Paula is best described as matrilineal. Allende’s treatment of her father, Tomás
Allende, who abandoned her mother in Peru, is illustrative of her dismissive
attitude regarding paternal lines. She tells Paula that Tomás “desapareció en la
bruma, y lo menciono sólo porque llevas algo de su sangre, Paula, por ninguna
otra razón” (13). Significantly, Tomás Allende is characterized as the personifi-
cation of the Spanish American obsession with patriarchal lineage, its rights and
symbols. According to Allende, the end of her parents’ marriage practically
mandated her family's matrilineal approach to genealogical matters:

El único bien que [mi padre] exigió cuando firmó la nulidad matrimonial fue la
devolución de su escudo de armas, tres perros famélicos en un campo azul, que obstru-
de inmediato porque mi madre y el resto de su familia se reían a carcajadas de los
blasones. Con la partida de ese irónico escudo desapareció cualquier linaje que pudié-
ramos reclamar, de un plumazo quedamos sin estirpe. La imagen de Tomás se diluyó en
el olvido. (38)

In phrases such as “a las mujeres de mi familia el amor les llega como un ven-
daval” (68), Allende’s preference for matrilineal genealogy and the mainly fe-
male solidarity she associates with it are apparent throughout the memoir. At
one point, Allende enumerates what could be called an exclusively female lineage in an attempt to draw upon its combined strength and wisdom to help her comatose daughter:

Ni tu abuela ni yo tenemos respuesta, estamos perdidas en este silencio abismal. pienso en mi bisabuela, en mi abuela claravidente, en mi madre, en ti y en mi nieta que nacé en mayo, una firme cadena femenina que se remonta hasta la primera mujer, la madre universal. Debo movilizar esas fuerzas nutritivas para tu salvación. (87)

Despite this focus on matrilineal genealogy in Paula, Allende recognizes the power and influence of men in her own family and in conservative Chilean society: "Los varones controlan el poder político y económico, la cultura y las costumbres, proclaman las leyes y las aplican a su antojo" (157). Although Allende emphasizes the strength of women in her family ("las mujeres no se mueven, son árboles anclados en el suelo firme" (157)) she rejects any theory of matriarchal control in Chilean family life: "No sé quién inventó el mito del matriarcado ni cómo se ha perpetuado por más de cien años; tal vez un visitante de otras épocas ... advirtió que las chilenas son más fuertes y organizadoras que la mayoría de los hombres, y concluyó frívolamente que tienen el mando" (157).

In significant contrast to the patriarchal society described in much of Paula, Allende does ensure that women take command of the rhetorical relationship at the text's core – the mother-daughter, narrator-narratee relationship. It is in this realm that Allende's preference for the female relationships of her matrilineal genealogy translates into matriarchal control of the text's narratological dimension.

Nancy K. Miller, the critic I have already credited with introducing the notion of personal criticism, argues for the primacy of a relational poetics in connection with autobiographical discourse, noting that the self-other relationships usually associated with women's autobiographies are common in autobiographies written by men as well. She observes that some male-authored texts, such as Derrida's Circonference,

have made me wonder whether we might not more usefully expand the vision of the autobiographical self as connected to a significant other and bound to a community rather than restrict it through mutually exclusive models. For what these male-authored works have in common is precisely the structure of self-portrayal through the relation to a privileged other that characterizes most female-authored autobiography. ("Representing" 4)

Miller is not arguing for a gender-neutral approach to autobiographical criticism; rather she is proposing the "female" strategy of acknowledging the relationship with a listener or narratee – what Derrida has elsewhere called the "ear
of the other"—as the normative standard for authentic textual self-figuration.3
Miller's recasting of the generic parameters of autobiographical texts in terms of
their relational structure provides a compelling rationale to examine Allende's
memoir, and its relevance as a work of personal criticism or theory, from a narr-
ratological perspective. Depending on such a strategy to uncover the feminist
impulses embedded in Paulina may at first seem counterintuitive since, as Susan
S. Lanser has observed, "no contemporary theory, whether Anglo-American or
continental, has exerted so little influence on feminist criticism [as has narrat-
ology]" (611). However, despite what she calls a feminist "coolness toward narrat-
ology" (611), Lanser's thesis is that the discipline of narratological methods
can in fact enrich feminist criticism while insights from feminist theories and
women's texts have the potential to broaden the questions and categories ad-
dressed by traditional, formalist narratology (611-12). When it comes to de-
ciding some of the key questions being debated by feminist theorists—such as
the "volatile" question of "whether there is indeed a 'women's writing'"—Lanser
favors the precision of narratological systems over "more impressionistic theo-
ries of difference" (614). For Lanser, narratology's "unique value for feminist
scholarship" lies in its "particular responsiveness to certain problems for
which other theories have not been adequate" (614-15).

According to Gerald Prince, one narratological concept in particular—the
distinction between narrator and narratee—can be especially relevant in the
identification of a text's thematic and ideological priorities. Prince has argued
that "the relations between the narrator and the narratee in a text may under-
score one theme, illustrate another, or contradict yet another. Often the theme
refers directly to the narrative situation and it is the narrative as theme that
these relations reveal" (32). In Part One of Paula in particular, the importance
of the narratee is reinforced by what Prince characterizes as direct or "specific"
signals, "statements in which the narrator designates the narratee by such words
as 'reader' or 'listener'—'my dear' or 'my friend,' or in which "the addressee is
designated by second-person pronouns and verb forms" (13). In the chapters in
which Allende's narration is most ostensibly directed to her daughter, this type
of direct address of the narratee is foregrounded:

¿Dónde andas, Paula? ¿Cómo serás cuando despiertes? (19)
Es muy difícil escribir estas páginas, Paula. (30)
A ti te cuento otras historias, hija. (61)
Sólo que tenías doce años, Paula. (84)
¿Sabrás que soy tu madre cuando despiertes, Paula? (88)
El lunes me agarró la muerte, Paula. (106)
Estás convertida en un bebe grande, Paula. (173-74)
Me has dado silencio para examinar mi paso por este mundo, Paulina, para regresar al
pasado verdadero y al pasado fantástico. (181)
Prince maintains that “it sometimes happens that we must study the narratee in order to discover a narrative’s fundamental thrust” (23). In accordance with this narratological insight, the direct or specific narrator-narratee signals just cited, and many others like them scattered throughout the first part of Paula, would tend to reinforce the text’s clear thematic emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship and to circumscribe its most important ideological messages to the same realm.

It is important to note that the narratological structure of Paula changes drastically at the beginning of Part Two (midway through the text) as Allende accepts the reality of her daughter’s impending death. At this point, the direct, second-person signals yield to a more conventional, first-person autobiographical voice, whose immediate narratee is unclear: “Ya no escribo para que cuando mi hija despierte no esté tan perdida, porque no despertará. Estas páginas no tienen destinatario, Paula nunca podrá leerlas” (227). Despite this narratological shift, the mother-daughter focus introduced and sustained by the text’s founding narrative relationship is never completely abandoned. Allende continues to alternate her autobiographical remembrances with constant updates of Paula’s condition at the hospital or at her California home, and it seems as if communication between mother and daughter is actually enhanced once Paula is freed from the role of narratee. In Part Two, she is able to communicate with her mother in dreams or apparitions and through a letter written before her illness, interactions that would not have made sense if she had continued to function in an exclusively receptive role. Significantly, after the last of these communications from Paula, Allende returns to the pattern of writing directly to her daughter: “Perdona por haberte hecho esperar tanto, hija ... Tu única salida es la muerte, hija, ahora me atrevo a pensar, a decírtelo y a escribirlo en mi cuaderno amarillo” (356-57).

While the change in narratological orientation, that affects most of the second part of Paula in no way detracts from its mother-daughter focus, it does have important implications for the reception of Allende’s memoir and the elements of her personalized feminist ideology. Throughout Part One, Allende positions her daughter as a receptive presence that may someday read a manuscript composed through a combination of diary and the letter writing, modalities intended for private use. In Part Two, however, Paula becomes a public text “addressed to a narratee who is external (that is, heterodiegetic) to the textual world and who can be equated with a public readership” (Lanser 620). Lanser notes that “public narration evokes a direct relationship between the reader and the narratee and clearly approximates more closely the non-fictional author-reader relationship” (620). Margaret Ewalt directly applies this reception-based logic to the shift from private to public address in Paula.
In the second part of the book, Allende widens her audience to include any potential reader. Since she becomes aware that Paula will never read the book, Allende stops directing the narrative exclusively (grammatically at least) to Paula, and the narrative voice shifts to include the actual reader as Allende directs her story to everyone. This is why the book becomes a public memoir called *Paula* and not a private letter called *Dear Paula.*

By replacing its specific, private addressee with a nonspecific, public narratee, Allende ensures that the theoretical implications of its emphasis on mother-daughter relationships are passed on more directly to its real readers.

The first part of *Paula* could accurately be described as what Lanser calls “a semi-private narrative act,” a category “in which narration is private but is designed to be read as well by someone other than its officially designated narratee” (621). In a gesture that is particularly significant for my reading of *Paula*, Lanser cites *A Thousand and One Nights* as an example of this genre. Prince also comments on *A Thousand and One Nights*, citing it as a prime instance of how narrator-narratee relations reinforce “the theme of narration as life” because “the heroine will die if her narratee decides not to listen” (32). Such observations are suggestive given that fact that by identifying herself with the storytelling protagonist of *Eva Luna*, Allende has clearly assumed the role of a (or the) Spanish-American Sheherazade. Strangely, this deliberate intertextual role-play has never been interrogated for its feminist implications, at least not at the rhetorical or narratological level. Even a brief analysis of the attention given to the *Thousand and One Nights* in *Paula* and Allende’s enactment of its general narrative structure yields evidence of an underlying feminist impulse rooted in the text’s rhetorical circumstance. Allende refers to *Las mil y una noches* early on in *Paula*, claiming that she first read an edition in four volumes during her schoolgirl days in Beirut after discovering it in her stepfather’s locked cabinet: “Usando otro alambre retorcido abrí nuevamente el armario y esta vez encontré *... Las mil y una noches*” (83). Allende remembers her encounter with the text as an act of transgression that foreshadows her own literary vocation and exposes her disdain of the prohibitions—and privileges—of patriarchy: “Deduje que sin duda existía una razón poderosa para que esos libros estuvieran bajo llave y por lo mismo me interesaron más que los bombones, los cigarrillos y las mujeres en portadas de las revista eróticas” (83). The narration of this and many other episodes that emphasize Allende’s resistance to and subversion of patriarchal norms underscore her identification with Sheherazade as an icon of defiance of the restrictions of patriarchal order. Examples of this tendency in *Paula* include Allende’s emphasis on her work outside of the home as a print and broadcast journalist during an era when few women worked in such public roles, her willingness to abandon a failing marriage and assume single parenthood, her
recognition of the needs of her body and her own sensuality, and her success as a professional writer within a tradition long dominated by men.

Early on in *Paola*, Allende clearly invokes the narrative-as-life motif central to the frame story that connects the tales of *A Thousand and One Nights*. Referring to the jumbled episodes from her life story handwritten in a makeshift manuscript at her daughter's bedside, she tells her narratee, "Se me ocurre que si doy forma a esta devastación podré ayudarte y ayudarme, el meticuloso ejercicio de la escritura puede ser nuestra salvación" (17). From that point on, Allende mimics the Sheherazadíán protocol of episodic storytelling interrupted by a sort of frame tale that constitutes a regular reminder of imminent death. She later reiterates the parallel by comparing the motivations of her grandmother who wrote "para salvar los fragmentos evasivos de los días y engañar a la mala memoria" (182) with her own intention in writing *Paola*: "Yo intento distraer a la muerte" (182). The constant return to the frame tale in *Paola* – to the more immediate drama involving Paula Frías's condition – is a structural echo of *A Thousand and One Nights* that recalls the rhetorical situation of the original.

Alleging that "Sheherazade's story has been often, and influentially, misunderstood" (87), Eva Sallis proposes that understanding the narrative situation of the frame story, which is actually suppressed in many editions, is central to explaining the persistent popularity of the text and of its storyteller. Her reading draws out several implications important to a feminist interpretation of *A Thousand and One Nights* which apply, by virtue of rhetorical parallels, to Allende's approach in *Paola*. Sallis' review of the frame narrative casts Sheherazade not only as an able storyteller but also as a proactive woman who uses not only narration but "sleight and even profound trickery" (89) to control the men in her life, despite the intensely patriarchal order of her Arabian culture. For example, Sallis points out that when Sheherazade defies her father's judgment and volunteers herself as a bride to the murderous king Shahriyar, "paternal authority is invoked but ultimately rejected" (93). Sallis (87) also notes that the storyteller's strategy for staying alive was premeditated since she had previously arranged for her sister, Dunzayad, to request a story in the king's presence. She criticizes the male-perpetuated notion that Sheherazade is a beautiful heroine, emphasizing that despite its brevity the initial installment of the frame tale reveals altogether different traits of the storyteller: "Her intelligence and wisdom are described ... for it is her brain, not her body which is going to be central to the ensuing actions" (101). According to Sallis (103), translators have tended to make their reincarnations of Sheherazade weaker than the source character. In her condemnation of this trend, Sallis reiterates the essentially feminist – as opposed to "feminine" – nature of the original storyteller:
This recurrent misreading reflects the early translators’ attempt to recast Sheherazade as stereotypically feminine, passive, reactive rather than proactive, the trapped victim who saves herself (and herself only) by elaborate sleight. As is clear from a close reading Sheherazade fills always the proactive role, Shahriyar the reactive. Their relationship is one of complex mixing of powers, where hers is manifest and transforming, his latent and destructive. (103)

In light of the rhetorical similarities between *A Thousand and One Nights* and *Paula*, this summary of Salis’s arguments provides preliminary evidence that the narratological relationships emphasized in Allende’s memoir point to the manifestation of a personalized feminist poetics. Always mediated by the fictional distance between an author and her characters in the *Eva Luna* series, Allende’s identification with the figure of Sheherazade and her attendant traits is clearly more deliberate in *Paula*’s first-person approach.

The fact that Allende substitutes a female narratee in *Paula* for Sheherazade’s male addressee has specific ramifications that reveal the central thrust of her own feminism and help to explain her unrivaled popularity among women readers. By directing her memoir to her own daughter, Allende places a matrilineal, mother-daughter genealogical relationship at the center of the text’s rhetorical plane. This strategy results in at least one obvious feminist gesture in that notwithstanding their importance in Allende’s life and in Chilean society, men are banished from the narrative act in *Paula*, which is confined to a female dyad. Unlike *La casa de los espíritus*, in which the male voice of Esteban Trueba frequently interrupts the female voices of the text, men are characters only – completely closed off from *Paula*’s mother-daughter rhetoric. Allende’s activation of this particular narrative approach in *Paula* implies definite feminist consequences because, as Andrea O’Reilly claims, “told and retold, stories between mothers and daughters allow us to define female experience outside the phallocentric narrative of patriarchy” (501). To be sure, relatively recent meditations on mother-daughter relationships have established them as a crucial area of feminist inquiry. In her *Diccionario ideológico feminista*, Victoria Sau notes that suppression of mother-daughter relationships characterizes patriarchal orders, despite – or perhaps because of – the potential strength of the bond:

La diada hija-madre fue separada, prohibida, rota, a partir del matricidio original y el inicio del tabú del incesto a favor del sexo masculino. De ahí la gran paradoja de que en la literatura, la pintura, la estatuaria, las religiones, no encontremos representaciones o referencias de la pareja hija-madre, pero en cambio circula la idea de que es la relación más íntima, profunda y presumiblemente indestructible que existe. (146)
Similarly, Adrienne Rich observes that "this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy" at the expense of the "eternal, determinative" mother-son dyad because "like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men in general" (226). The increasing interest among feminists in this topic since Rich's comments in Of Woman Born (1976) permits O'Reilly to summarize its contributions to various ideological blocs within the feminist movement: "The scholarship on mothers, daughters, and feminism falls into four interconnected themes: empowerment, agency, narrative, and the motherline. All four centre upon and call for reciprocal mother-daughter identification to achieve a lasting politics of empowerment" (496).

My reading of Paula stresses the fourth area, but before discussing the importance of a narrative "motherline" in Allende's text, we should review the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone (Kore) that informs this and other theories based on mother-daughter identification. The story, first related in a Homeric hymn of the seventh century B.C., is considered the Western archetype of mother-daughter loss and restoration. Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus, is abducted by Hades who rapes her and consigns her to permanent separation from her mother in the underworld. Demeter, the goddess associated with corn and grain, reacts with a mix of anger and profound grief that makes the earth barren. Hades eventually relents and restores Persephone to her mother for nine months of the year during which Demeter permits the mortals to plant and harvest crops. To be sure, this myth has been of great interest to feminist theorists, some of whom have equated the patriarchal maneuvering of the gods who negotiated the infamous separation of mother and daughter and the intentions of the men who later introduced modifications to its interpretation. Rich skeptically observes that "the separation of Demeter and Kore is an unwilling one" (240) unmotivated by any enmity between the two women. In Thinking the Difference, Luce Irigaray places this mythical separation of mothers and daughters at the very root of patriarchal order: "The abduction of the daughter of the great Goddess serves to establish the order of male gods and the structure of patriarchal society" (111). She notes that in subsequent versions of the story, patriarchal retellings placed the blame for the separation at the feet of Persephone, a strategy she attributes to men's desires to control the suggestive powers of the myth: "The story is so terrible and so exemplary that it is understandable that the patriarchal era wished to make the seductive woman bear the responsibility for its crime" (Thinking 102). Irigaray contends that these changes correspond with a "time of a shift from matrilinearity to patrilinearity" (Thinking 103) and that patriarchal order has sustained itself since by keeping daughters and mothers apart - to the extent that many people now believe "that we know nothing about mother-daughter relationships" (Thinking 109).
Allende's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship in *Paula* represents the antithesis of the patriarchal neglect Frigay is describing by embracing values associated with the Eleusinian mysteries, ancient and secretive initiatory rituals held at the Greek city of Eleusis. After preliminary stages of preparation and a symbolic reenactment of the Demeter-Persephone legend along the road from Athens to Eleusis, the initiates — sworn to secrecy under penalty of death — completed the ceremonies in a large temple where they were shown sacred relics of Demeter and witnessed at last, if only in a symbolic flash of fire, the apparition of Persephone and her infant son. According to Carl Kerényi, the major revelation contained in the symbolism of the mysteries was a consciousness of the continuity of life:

Objectively, the idea of the goddess regaining her daughter, and therefore *herself*, flashed on the experient's soul. Subjectively, the same flash of revelation showed him his own continuity, the continued existence of all living things. The not-knowing, the failure to understand that attached to the figure of the grieving Demeter, ceased. The paradox contained in the living idea — that in motherhood, death and continuity are one in the losing and finding of the Kore — is now resolved. (142)

Among the most important symbols at Eleusis were the ear of corn and the grain of wheat that were seen as gifts of Demeter suggesting the Eleusinian ideal of continuity. Kerényi observes that: "Every grain of wheat and every maiden contains, as it were, all its descendants and all her descendants — an infinite series of mothers and daughters in one" (153). C.G. Jung observes that the Eleusinian ideal of a matrilineal genealogy extending both "upwards and downwards" contributes to women's psychological association with the notion of immortality and forms the basis of their identity:

A woman lives first as a mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations — the first step toward the immediate experience of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of *immortality*. The individual’s life is elevated into a type, indeed it becomes the archetype of woman’s fate in general. (162)

According to Jung, the Eleusinian experience that begins with awareness of mother-daughter union ultimately implies contact with a more complete genealogy whose collective existence gives meaning to the individual life and restores women to an elusive wholeness. He states that a woman’s awareness of the Demeterian archetype leads to a restoration ... of the lives of her ancestors, who now, through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future. An experience of
this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her. At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. All ritual preoccupation with archetypes ultimately has this aim and this result. (162)

Paula can at once be read as an intimate diary of a mother struggling to cope with the unexpected loss of her only daughter and as an autobiographical retelling of the Demeter-Persephone myth. The rhetorical premise of Paula — that Allende narrates her memories as a desperate attempt to rescue or reclaim a daughter who is being unfairly taken from her — is as pertinent to the story of Demeter and Persephone as it is to Sheherazade’s project. Although Paula eventually dies, the end of the narration, as in the mysteries at Eleusis, implies reunion and continuity in spite of death: “Adiós, Paula, mujer. Bienvenida, Paula, espíritu” (366). Another element of Paula that connects it to the symbolic-archetypal interpretation of the Eleusinian mysteries carried out here by Kerényi and Jung is the idea that a multi-generational, matrilineal consciousness brings empowering benefits such as connectedness, wholeness, and self-understanding. In Paula, Allende underscores her connections to other women in her matrilineal genealogy by casting herself not only as Paula’s mother but also as a daughter, granddaughter, and grandmother. In particular, she emphasizes her role as daughter by referring often to her own mother, Panchita, as a supportive influence. The lives of Panchita and her second husband, Ramón, inspire many of the segments narrated in Paula, although at one point the author remarks, “La vida de mi madre es una novela que me ha sido prohibido escribir” (68). Significantly, Allende’s mother is often associated with the author’s vocation as a writer. Allende (67) credits her mother with encouraging her to write by giving her a notebook when she was a child. She later confesses that she writes to her mother on an almost daily basis, and that they save their correspondence in an effort to establish a collaborative history of their lives: “Sabemos que el registro de nuestras vidas está a salvo de la mala memoria” (101). According to Allende, her mother’s help has been instrumental in her success as a professional writer. She remembers (306) that her mother provided “stupendous” ideas during the writing of La casa de los espíritus and was responsible for convincing her to publish the manuscript. In true Eleusinian fashion, Panchita is invariably portrayed as a source of pride, strength, and inspiration for Allende throughout Paula, most notably when the author needs a mother’s strength and wisdom to support the trials of Paula’s illness and death.

The feminine (and feminist) benefits of Eleusinian connections in general and mother-daughter storytelling in particular are the subject of Naomi Ruth Lowinsky’s book Stories from the Motherline: Reclaiming the Mother-Daughter Bond, Finding Our Feminine Souls. Considering Paula as an example of
motherline narrative helps to perceive additional elements of Allende's personalized feminist priorities. The motherline is narrative - oral or written - that stresses matrilineal genealogies and embodies Eleusinian principles by placing special value on the notion of intergenerational connectedness between women. Lowinsky defines the motherline in part as "the ancient lore of women," as "something we have forgotten that we know" (1). The relevance of this concept to Paula is immediately clear in Lowinsky's description of the types of narratives that compose the motherline and in the relationships that transmit them:

They are stories of the life cycles that link the generations of women: mothers who are also daughters; daughters who have become mothers; grandmothers who always remain granddaughters. They are stories that evoke the dead: a mother who dies while her child was very young; a child who never made it to adulthood. (1-2)

The motherline is genealogical in structure, although it differs from more rigid patriarchal models and favours metaphors exclusive to women's experience: "Imagine cords of connection tied over generations ... These cords of meaning weave through our life-giving experiences like umbilical cords, connecting us through those we bear to those who bore our mothers and fathers" (Lowinsky 12). In addition to its focus on a more organic than legalistic genealogy, Lowinsky describes various characteristics of motherline narratives that also relate directly to Allende's orientation in Paula. For example, motherline stories: (1) "are the product of matriarchal consciousness," (2) are "about kith and kin and relationships that loop through time," (3) "describe a world in which the boundaries of fantasy and reality are permeable," and (4) develop across "boundaries of life and death [that] are easily crossed" (Lowinsky 22-23). Clearly each of these characteristics of the motherline is pertinent to Paula. I have already described how Allende's proclivity for matrilineal genealogy translates to matriarchal control of the text's narratological relationships. Its alternating narrative structure facilitates a non-linear form of storytelling. In several instances, such as when she reveals her molestation by a fisherman, Allende loops back to autobiographical episodes whose conclusion has been interrupted by an update on her daughter's condition or delayed by other stories. Dreams and visions that blur the boundaries of reality are frequent in Paula, and the related idea that life and death are overlapping dimensions is one of the text's central ideas. When in need of help from beyond the grave, whether it be to finish a novel or to save her daughter's life, Allende never hesitates to appeal to the spirits of her departed ancestors – male or female – for assistance.

There is yet another motherline element that is particularly applicable to Allende's project in Paula – Lowinsky's observation (21-22) that a woman's search for her motherline is especially intense during her midlife years, when she is most aware of being simultaneously a daughter and a mother. "Stories
from the middle of a life are different from those that begin at the beginning, or begin at the end,” Lowinsky states, because “in the middle of a woman’s life three aspects – child, mother, and old woman – meet and need to understand each other” (75). The illness and death of Paula Frias and much of the writing of Paula occur during 1992, Allende’s fiftieth year. Upon contemplating that milestone, Allende fuses elements of youthful vigor, old age, and her relationship with her daughter: “Tengo cincuenta años, he entrado en la última mitad de mi vida, pero siento la misma fuerza de los veinte, el cuerpo todavía no me falla. Vieja ... así me llamaba Paula por cariño. Ahora la palabra me asusta un poco, me sugiere un mujer con verrugas y varices” (286). Read in its fuller context, this passage supports the notion that at midlife Allende sees herself as something of a composite of – or bridge between – the experiences of her youthful daughter and her aging mother. Lowinsky calls this tendency “looping,” which she defines as “an associate process” that disregards linear time by tying together “life stages, roles, and generations” (31-32).

The motherline, as Lowinsky describes it, is a “feminine” principle that draws on archetypal bedrock and inspires Eleusinian emotions although these “are not limited to a particular time or religious practice” (11). She claims that her clinical practice as a psychotherapist demonstrates that “the Motherline is a name for that pattern, for the oneness of body and psyche, for the experience of community among women” (4). The Eleusinian focus on maternity and continuity that characterize the motherline leads Lowinsky to define her perspective in opposition to feminist theories that seem to reject “the feminine.” She laments at having found “little in contemporary psychological feminist theory that mirrored the depths of my experience of the life cycles” (9). She summarizes the distinction between her clinical interactions with women and her readings in feminist literature by concluding that “we are living out a cultural split that can be described as the feminist ambivalence toward the feminine” (30). This position clearly reveals an affinity between Lowinsky and Allende, whose comments quoted at the beginning of this article attest to her disapproval of feminist theories that seem dismissive of traditional markers of femininity. Lowinsky advocates “integrating feminism and the feminine” by “bringing to consciousness the Motherline as it is expressed in the very texture of how women talk, the looping that ties together life-cycle experiences, the Eleusinian motions that reflect the sacred nature of organic experience” (36). If we admit the relevance of Lowinsky’s theories to a comprehensive and inclusive definition of feminism, the recognition of a consistent Eleusinian impulse in Paula would imply a critical short-sightedness on the part of those prone to questioning Allende’s feminism by associating it with the supposedly weaker term of a feminist/feminine opposition.

Since cultural impositions have produced a climate of “ambivalence about the feminine” (Lowinsky 13), a woman who sees her life story as being con-
nected to the motherline and its Eleusinian principles "gains female authority in a number of ways" (Lowinsky 13). According to Lewinsky, components of this female authority include a woman's grounding in her own feminine nature and body ("knowledge of ... its blood mysteries and their power" [13]), identification with a female genealogy that lends historical perspective to today's challenges, and "a connection to the archetypal mother and to the wisdom of the ancient worldview, which holds that body and soul are one and that all life is interconnected" (13). This final benefit is an echo of Jung's metaphysical interpretation of the Eleusinian rites as existing in order to give the initiates a sense of wholeness, belonging, and meaning. In reference to recent autobiographies by women, Stephanie Demetrakopolous observes that even within the climate of fragmentation and nihilism that characterizes postmodern culture — or perhaps because of such tendencies — notions such as "roots," wholeness, and community are anything but passé: "The energy with which women autobiographers are establishing their matrilineal roots seems the clearest and perhaps most publicly accessible demonstration of this force, now emerging, becoming more articulate in a period of human history thirsting for spirit and meaning" (205). Likewise, Allende's focus on the mother-daughter relationship in _Paula_ clearly coincides with Irigaray's call to make restoration of this bond a primary objective of feminism: "To re-establish elementary social justice, to save the earth from total subjugation to male values (which often give priority to violence, power, money) we must restore this missing pillar of our culture: the mother-daughter relationship" (_Thinking_ 112).

I began this article by summarizing the climate of doubt surrounding Isabel Allende's insistence that she is, in fact, a feminist writer. As an alternative to applying a set of influential theories to _Paula_, the intent of my reading, in accordance with Nancy K. Miller's notion of personal criticism, has been to document elements of the author's own poetics of feminism as they are expressed in her memoir _Paula_. As indicators of Allende's personalized feminist priorities, I have focused on her privileging of matrilineal genealogical and narratological connections and on the theoretical implications of the intertextual parallels suggested by these strategies. Although _Paula_'s treatment of genealogy is not exclusively matrilineal, the narratological relationship that sustains much of the text is. Through _Paula_'s foregrounding of narrator-narratee relations and the "narration as life" theme, Allende activates the feminist implications of a deliberate and sustained identification with the proactive storyteller Sheherazade. Likewise, her focus on mother-daughter relationships and her appropriation of the Demeter-Persephone myth connect her to the feminist priorities enumerated by theorists such as Rich, Irigaray, and Lowinsky. Allende's feminist stance in _Paula_ combines relational and archetypal emphases and privileges concepts such as women's experience, matrilineal connectedness, and wholeness over notions such as women's writing or whether gendered components of
identity are constructed through language or in various stages of a psychoanalytical model. My reading of Paula as a work of personal criticism suggests that to uphold the longstanding and prejudicial view that popular authors either ignore theory or sacrifice it in the name of accessibility is a dubious position in the case of Isabel Allende. By choosing to project her narration toward a silent and ultimately absent daughter, Allende ensures that her personalized feminist theories reach a vast reading public beyond her immediate narrative. In Demeter-like fashion, she extends assurances of renovation and survival to the real readers of Paula even as she sows in them the seeds of her own feminist convictions and helps to restore the right of mothers and daughters to breach the separations and silences imposed by centuries of patriarchal authority. By centering her memoir on a mother-daughter relationship whose thematic and narratological implications widen our understanding of feminism and of relational approaches to autobiographical writing in general, Allende produces a work of personal criticism that succeeds in remapping the theoretical (Miller, Getting x).

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NOTES

In general, the concept known as women’s writing, or Écriture féminine, is attributed to the writings of Hélène Cixous that relate women’s writing to notions such as the body, multiplicity, and indeterminacy as opposed to the authority, unity, and closure of much male writing. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous encourages women to write as gendered subjects (“Write! Writing is for you ... your body is yours, take it”), a view predicated on her conviction that sexual difference manifests itself through distinct writing styles: “I mean it when I speak of male writing. I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing” (309, 311). The notion that women’s writing constitutes a central element of literary feminism is especially pertinent to feminist theories of autobiographical expression. In her introduction to Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism, widely considered the genesis of modern feminist studies of autobiography, Estelle C. Jelinek (17) opposes the masculine norms of chronological, linear, and unified narrative to the more fragmentary or diffuse forms of expression preferred by many female autobiographers. According to Jelinek, “the ... criteria of orderliness, wholeness or a harmonious shaping with which [traditional/male] critics characterize autobiography is often not applicable to women’s autobiographies” since women prefer “discontinuous forms” because they are “analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives” (19).

In The Voice of the Masters, Roberto González Echevarría laments the weakness of Latin American’s critical discourse: “Signs of this crisis are everywhere. The most
apparent is the absence of any school, ideology, or critical tendency enjoying even a medicum of shared acceptance among writers, critics, and intellectuals” (33). He wonders whether “the very lack of a system and the presence of criticism in the work of creative writers ... constitute Latin America’s theoretical contribution to present-day critical thought, whether, in short, literature itself is not Latin America’s critical thought” (35). For additional discussion regarding the problematic relationship between Spanish American literature and critical theory, see the articles by Alonso, González Pérez, and Paz.

Although I refer to Paula as a memoir throughout this article, it should be noted that several factors complicate its generic classification. By combining a comprehensive narration of Allende’s life story with a more immediate and introspective focus on the period of Paula’s illness, the text alternates between autobiography proper and the memoir subgenre. Paula also displays characteristics of two additional autobiographical subgenres that have been identified as particularly feminine modes of self-writing — the diary and epistolary forms. The portions of the text that deal with the evolution of Paula’s condition appear as periodic, diary-like entries. Rebecca Hogan explores diary writing in the context of Naomi Schor’s identification of the detail as a feminine principle and concludes that “the privileging of the detail in the diary form gives it a structure and perspective which have been culturally and historically seen as feminine” (Hogan 399). Paula purportedly begins as a letter from mother to daughter, and letters from daughter to mother also figure prominently in the text’s narrative logic (11, 87, 231, 334–335). Katherine R. Goodman sees the epistolary autobiography, in which such exchanges function as a technique for the articulation of female subjectivity, as a genre “unique to women” (317). Catherine M. Perricone widens even further the generic parameters of Paula, interpreting it as an example of “meta-realist narrative” for the way it transcends the designation of ‘memoir’ and appropriates the multiple generic discourses anchored in reality: history, biography, elegy, confession, autobiography, Bildungsroman, and testimonial” (42).

4. Owing much to Michel Foucault’s redefinition of genealogy as a historical modality that eschews origins and empowers the marginalized and voiceless, feminist theorists and autobiographers have become increasingly interested in the theoretical potential of a whole series of alternative genealogies. For a good discussion on how Foucauldian genealogy can be empowering to marginalized subjects, see Harutoonian. For more specifically feminist applications, see the articles by Cain and Ferguson. Gilbert and Guibar present their own genealogical alternatives in their feminist answers to Derrida’s notion of “grammatology” (see “Ceremonies”) and Harold Bloom’s patriarchal model of precursor anxiety (see “Forward”).

5. In The Ear of the Other, Derrida argues that the autobiographer postulates a listener or reader capable of inscribing a writer’s signature to the text even after his or her death or that “a text is signed only much later by the other” (50–51). The Derridian epigraph to this article is especially applicable to Paula since Allende, like the
Nietzsche of whom Derrida speaks, ostensibly narrates to a deceased relative—an absent presence which, presumably, can only defer the act of signature to another “other.”

6 The significance of the narrative shift that separates Parts One and Two of Paula is the focus of Margaret Ewalt’s article. Ewalt reads Paula as a text in which the author discovers herself through writing, especially in Part Two, which abounds in “passages of meta-writing” (33). Ewalt concludes that in Paula Allende “offers a model that might especially speak to any mother or daughter but which also serves as a more universal commentary on the value of such self-exploration” (36).

7 This notion of a marginal but exclusively female voice—a voice inherited through her own maternal genealogy—had been an important aspect of Allende’s professed feminism even before writing Paula. Asked by an interviewer why she writes, Allende responded: “I come from a family of storytellers, an oral tradition, and that helps a lot. As women, we were kept silent in public, but we had a private voice. And now, because others have made it easy for me, I write about the lives of my people. It is the voice, not of winners, but of the little people, us, my mother, my grandmother, not my grandfather who wrote history with big letters” (Gazarian Gautier 14).

8 While my own focus is on the feminist implications of excluding men from the narrative relationships of Paula, Doris Meyer argues that the dialogism produced by the inclusion of the voice of Esteban Trueba in La casa de los espíritus reflects a particularly Latin American kind of feminism. In Meyer’s interpretation, “Allende’s ingenious blending of the two narrative voices not only clearly situates the female voice within the context of machista culture but it also displaces and subverts the power of that culture” (361).

9 One of the patriarchal perspectives Irigaray most dreads is Freud’s theorizing of female sexuality and identity, which she calls “unacceptable” because it posits “the need for the daughter to turn away from the mother, the need for hatred between them, without sublimation of female identity being an issue, so that the daughter can enter into the realm of the desire and law of the father” (Thinking 109).

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