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## Mester

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0x78664q>

### Journal

Mester, 23(2)

### Author

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### Publication Date

1994

### DOI

10.5070/M3232014420

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## Luigi Pirandello's *La vita che ti diedi* and Xavier Villaurrutia's *El ausente*

As a part of his effort to reduce Mexican theater's insularity, Xavier Villaurrutia translated and staged a number of American, French, and Italian plays, including three by the person he considered "el más significativo y el más original" playwright<sup>1</sup> in the period after World War I (*Obras* 933): Luigi Pirandello. Among these works was a 1940 translation of Pirandello's *La vita che ti diedi*,<sup>2</sup> which deals with Donn'Anna, a mother who believes that her son is still alive in spite of the fact that the audience knows he is dead. Although a minor work, *La vita che ti diedi* contains the essence of the ideas, questions and obsessions that infuse all of Pirandello's plays.<sup>3</sup>

Not long after completing the translation, Villaurrutia began *El ausente*, one of his own early plays which bears a number of similarities to Pirandello's play.<sup>4</sup> Villaurrutia was clearly intrigued by the Italian playwright's ideas and this interest becomes apparent when we compare *La vita che ti diedi* and *El ausente*. Both plays present the idea that reality is individual and psychological. In both, the protagonists assert that their individual perspective determines what is "real."

Donn'Anna, in *La vita che ti diedi*, believes that her son Cesarino is still alive, and will remain so until she can maintain his living image in her mind. For Donn'Anna, her son is not the cadaver that others see as Cesarino. Her Cesarino is the image she has of him as he was before he left home to go to Northern Europe to continue his education. In essence, Donn'Anna does not accept the fact that people change with time. She tries to hold on to what is dear to her—her individual view of the past Cesarino.

Relationships between other characters further emphasize the idea that people change while others' images of them remain fixed. Lida and Fabio, Donn'Anna's sister's son and daughter, for example, return to visit their mother after being away for only a year. Their mother, Donna Fiorina, does not recognize them. They have "diventati altri," particularly in their "modo di gestire, di muoversi, di guardare, di sorridere." (474) The problem does not simply lie with Donna Fiorina, however. Other characters in the play also have fixed images of the two young people, which fail to keep up with a reality in flux. Elisabetta, the nurse-maid, for example, says that Lida "sembra un'altra" (476). But while others' images of Lida and Fabio have failed to keep pace with a constantly-changing reality, the reverse is also true. The young people's image of their mother is also fixed in a way that no longer corresponds to reality. Fabio, in fact, tells her that she is "davvero strana" (478) because of the way she is looking at them. The reunion, in essence, becomes a moment of philosophical crisis, in which the conflict between the basic human need for change and the need for a fixed image becomes painfully apparent.

In *El ausente*, Villaurrutia offers an intriguing twist on Pirandello's premise. Pedro, unlike Donn'Anna's son, is still alive. But for his wife Fernanda, the image of her husband as he once was, is more real than the person he has become. Thus she, like Donn'Anna, clings to the image from the past and abandons current reality, preferring to live with the memory of her husband rather than spending the rest of her life with an unrecognizably changed Pedro.

Fernanda also shares with Donn'Anna and Donna Fiorina the conviction that her image of her loved one is real, the change he has undergone is not. And like Donna Fiorina, Fernanda views the change in very concrete physical terms. Upon seeing Pedro, Fernanda remarks that his eyes "no son los mismos" and neither are his "gestos" (167). And at the end of the play,

Fernanda tells her neighbor that the Pedro who returned to her “no era el mismo.” She asks her: “¿Le vio las manos? ¿Le vio los ojos? No eran los suyos.” (174) Villaurrutia’s echoes of Pirandello’s language suggest, in fact, that Fernanda’s comments were inspired by Donna Fiorina’s.

Similarities between Cesarino in *La vita che ti diedi* and Pedro in *El ausente* also call attention to Pirandello’s influence on Villaurrutia. Both characters are spectral presences, physically absent in a way that supports the central characters’ belief that their image of their loved ones is the only reality. Although Pedro is alive, he never utters a word. This creates an especially startling image on stage, where we expect all important characters to have their say. A silent character is physically, but not psychologically present. He or she can become real to us only in so far as the other characters speak about him or her. Thus, for the audience, Pedro only exists through what Fernanda says. Pedro’s silence thus supports Fernanda’s perceptions of reality. He is only real in her mind. In essence, Villaurrutia, like Pirandello, centers his play around a character who is, for all intents and purposes, dead. Villaurrutia, however, takes on the interesting and challenging task of creating this ghost out of a living character.

Villaurrutia creates a similar twist on Pirandello in the way his characters relate to one another. The relationship between parent and child is an obvious choice for exploring the conflict between the ever-changing individual and others’ fixed image of him. Children are the epitome of change and it is every parent’s constant challenge to keep his or her image of the child in some relationship to the child’s or even young adult’s current reality. It is no surprise, therefore, that mother and child relationships—both Donn’Anna’s and Donna Fiorina’s—dominate *La vita che ti diedi*. The extent to which references to the same sort of relationships appear in *El ausente*, however, is quite surprising. In a play without children or parents, the central relationship is a maternal one. Fernanda talks to Pedro as if he

were a child. When he first returns, she lectures him—over the course of a full page and a half of text—about how much suffering his departure has caused her. She interrupts this scolding to tell him to wash his hands. Like a child who knows to have misbehaved, he obeys her (168-9).

The maternal nature of Fernanda's relationship with Pedro is underscored by Pedro's mistress, Rosa, who scoffs at Fernanda's milk and cookies. She offers Pedro a different kind of relationship which is based on sex. This comes out first with the stage directions which describe Rosa as having dyed blond hair and a dress which "le ciñe el cuerpo ondulante" (168). Rosa's name itself suggests sexuality through the association with passion. Her actions further stress the charged relationship as we see when she takes away the milk Fernanda had given Pedro and offers him liquor (172). Liquor is also what Rosa asks Fernanda's neighbor to buy for them (170). In essence, Rosa's sexually charged relationship with Pedro serves to accentuate, through the contrast, that Fernanda is more of a mother than a wife to Pedro.

In spite of the similarities between *La vita che ti diedi* and *El ausente*, the two works diverge considerably. The major difference has to do with the main idea of the two plays and the position in which it occurs. In Pirandello's case the idea is presented at the beginning of the play. It is an idea that dominates Pirandello's writings. It appears in a number of works written before *La vita che ti diedi*, most notably in *Così è (se vi pare)*, written in 1917. But the idea and a similar plot to *La vita che ti diedi* can be traced even before *Così è (se vi pare)*, to two short stories, "I pensionati della memoria," and "La camera in attesa."

"I pensionati della memoria," written in 1914,<sup>5</sup> presents the philosophical idea that a person is alive as long as there is someone else who remembers him or her. It's not a very good story since it amounts to little more than a mere philosophical treatise which presents the idea in a rather

cold and didactic manner. There are no real characters in the story except for the narrator who, in presenting his ideas, mentions a certain Mr. Herbst, whom the narrator had met twenty years before in Germany. Mr. Herbst was a hat salesman and it may be that he is by now dead. Yet, for the narrator, Mr. Herbst is still there, alive in his mind, selling hats. The individual reality of the narrator is all that matters.

"La camera in attesa,"<sup>6</sup> written in 1916, repeats the ideas of "I pensionati della memoria," but here Pirandello gives us a more successful story, although still not a very good one. A mother is informed that her son has been missing in action and has probably died in an African war. She believes, however, that her son is still alive and will eventually come back. Together with her three daughters, she continues to keep his room ready for his return.

The weakness of this story is caused by the intrusion of a second narrator who explains, in terms reminiscent of the narrator of "I pensionati della memoria," the four women's individual view of reality. Thus, while "La camera in attesa" does have the human emotion of the mother, her three daughters and Claretta, the son's fiancée, Pirandello does not manage to blend the ideas with the characters because of the intrusive second narrator.

When Pirandello wrote *La vita che ti diedi*, he picked up strands of the plots and ideas of these two stories; he was thus dealing with the same material and ideas for the third time. In the play, he tries to correct the weaknesses of the stories by blending the philosophical ideas and human qualities in the character of Donn'Anna. However, the author succeeds only partially. Ideas, not human qualities, dominate *La vita che ti diedi*.

Donn'Anna's individual view of reality—the distinction between her image of Cesarino and his corpse—starts at the beginning of the play and continues until the end. The protagonist explains her idea in very rational terms to Don Giorgio, the priest who is helping with the funeral arrange-

ments. For Donn'Anna, the cadaver is not her son; her Cesarino is someone else (460).

The idea of an individual view of reality is pushed to an extreme as we see from the suggestion that others consider Donn'Anna to be mad. Pirandello, however, softens this judgment by presenting a few members of that society which might call Donn'Anna mad, as sharing those same ideas. Donna Fiorina, the protagonist's sister, and Elisabetta, the nursemaid, for example, begin to show signs of agreeing with Donn'Anna's perspective. This adds legitimacy to the philosophical ideas although at the same time it creates some empathy for Donn'Anna as a human being. However, it's not enough, for the play still remains characterized by cerebralism. When Donn'Anna finally accepts the death of the image of her son, for example, it's the death of an idea, rather than a human being, that she mourns. She is obviously in pain, but her sorrow is caused by philosophy—her inability to keep alive her image of her son—not the death of a human being. Ultimately, we admire Donn'Anna intellectual brilliance but do not empathize with her as a human being.

In a way, Villaurrutia manages to accomplish in *El ausente* what Pirandello could not in his several attempts: to blend the philosophical ideas with human emotions. In the Mexican play, the idea of individual view of reality comes out only at the very end. The idea is enveloped in Fernanda's response to her predicament; it is not at all cerebral. We see a woman who is asked to choose between two painful dénouements, whether to live with her husband and his mistress in a *ménage à trois*, as Rosa suggests, or to live alone. She opts for solitude preferring to live with the image she has of Pedro, which for her is the only Pedro, rather than living with the person who has returned to her and whom she does not really recognize. In *El ausente*, the philosophical idea is the result of human conflict. After the husband leaves, there is some rationalization about the choice, but what

emerges more is the pain of a woman who will live the rest of her life alone.

The two plays also differ in their endings although both conclusions are tragic.<sup>7</sup> In Pirandello's case, the tragic element reflects the cerebralism of the play. When Donn'Anna finally accepts her son's death—the image she had of her son—her tragic fate unfolds. By recognizing the death of Cesarino, Donn'Anna acknowledges her own psychological death. As she tells Don Giorgio early in the play, when a loved one dies, those remaining alive cry. But they do so because the dead one can no longer "dare vita" to the living (462). As De Castris says, in *La vita che ti diedi* "muore chi resta" (171). In essence, in her desperate attempt to keep her son alive, by giving him life in her own mind, Donn'Anna was actually trying to keep herself alive by means of the life that he, alive, would be able to give her. Donn'Anna's tragedy is shrouded in philosophy and therefore has little effect on us.

In Villaurrutia's case, the ending is also tragic as Fernanda loses Pedro for ever. Yet, this loss is blunted by the protagonist's relationship with the rest of society. Unlike Donn'Anna, who is completely alone and misunderstood in spite of the suggestion that her individual view of reality may be shared by a few members of society at large, the protagonist of *El ausente* can communicate and be understood by the society of the play. In fact, Fernanda even shares society's values.<sup>8</sup> This comes out at the end when Maria, her neighbor, brings back the police to chase away Pedro and his mistress. The neighbor correctly predicts what Fernanda's decision will be: her refusal to accept the *ménage à trois* with Rosa and Pedro. In essence, Fernanda manages to remain part of society with her rejection of the proposed arrangement; yet she accomplishes it by retaining her individual view of reality—distinguishing the "good" Pedro she knew from the "bad" one. In Fernanda's decision, Villaurrutia reconciles the irreconcilable: the conflict between the individual view of reality and that of society.

In spite of the differences we have discussed, there is no doubt that the



Italian play influenced the Mexican one. Villaurrutia was familiar with Pirandello's theater and in particular with *La vita che ti diedi* which he had translated into Spanish. It is of course difficult to pinpoint exactly what Villaurrutia might have taken from Pirandello.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, however, we end up with an original play. Starting out with Pirandello's philosophical thesis, Villaurrutia adds a human dimension, creating in this way a perfect blend between intellect and heart—something the Italian dramatist did not achieve in *La vita che ti diedi*.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to Nomland, Pirandello's works were first introduced in Mexico in the 1920s when Gustavo Villatoro returned from Italy and infected everyone with his enthusiasm for the Italian playwright (234). Pirandello was Villaurrutia's favorite playwright (Moreno 509, Beck 35).

<sup>2</sup> Villaurrutia translated it together with Agustín Lazo. The play was staged in Mexico City in 1940. Villaurrutia wrote that Virginia Fábregas, in her role as Donn'Anna, did "una interpretación digna de recuerdo y respeto" (*Obras* 933).

<sup>3</sup> *La vita che ti diedi* is, like many of Pirandello's plays, based on a previously published story. In this case, two stories form the basis for the play: "I pensionati della memoria", published in 1914 and "La camera in attesa", published in 1916. The play was written for Eleonora Duse who wanted to revive her dramatic career. The Italian actress was "scandalizzata" by the work however, and refused to act in it (Bragaglia 296). It was first staged in 1923 and published the year after. For a thorough analysis of the changes Pirandello made as he moved from stories to play, see Maceri's article.

<sup>4</sup> *El ausente* is part of Villaurrutia's *Autos profanos* which the author designated as such because, he, like the authors of the Spanish *autos*, is concerned with certain problems relating to ultimate realities. The other four *autos* are *¿En qué piensas?*, *Parece mentira*, *Ha llegado el momento*, and *Sea Ud. breve. El ausente* was published first in *Tierra Nueva*, III, 13, 14, January-April, 1942. It was first staged in 1952 at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City.

<sup>5</sup> "I pensionati della memoria" was first published in *Abruptium* (January 1914) and then in the collection *Donna Mimma* (Florence, Bemporad, 1925). In 1934 it was published by Mondadori.

<sup>6</sup> The story was first published in *La lettura* (May 1916). In 1917 it was included in the collection *E domani, lunedì* (Milan, Treves), and then became part of *Novelle per un anno*, published first by Bemporad (1928) and then by Mondadori (1934).

<sup>7</sup> Licastro agrees that *La vita che ti diedi* ends tragically but not in desperation since he sees Donn'Anna rejoining life as "il senso comune prevale e l'equilibrio emotivo della protagonista è recuperato" (120).

<sup>8</sup> Magaña Esquivel (245) and Chumacero (XXIV) assert that Villaurrutia invents his characters rather than taking them from Mexican society. Rivera-Rodas, on the other hand, believes that Villaurrutia's theatrical characters are archetypes of contemporary Mexican society (1356).

<sup>9</sup> Bellini (41) and Gorostiza (41) point out that while it is true that Villaurrutia was quite likely influenced by many writers, it's difficult to pinpoint them. Cypess asserts that although Villaurrutia was an apt student of French drama, he managed through his creative genius to produce an original theater (14). De Kuehne asserts that many of Villaurrutia's plays show Pirandellian influences, among them, *¿En qué piensas?*, *Parece mentira*, *Invitación a la muerte*, *Juego peligroso*, and *La mujer legítima*.

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