

# Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 1 (2008)

The Politics of Rereading



## Postfeminist Mosaics: Jamie Pachino's Theodora

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doi: [10.12681/syn.16604](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16604)

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Christina Dokou

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say...outside of writing in general.

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

Now, the question to be asked is, why is it that we prefer the replica to the original? Why does it give us the greater *frisson*? To understand this, we must understand and confront our insecurity, our existential indecision, the profound atavistic fear we experience when we are face to face with the original...which appears most powerful and therefore threatens us... Now, there is the representation—let me fracture that word, the representation—of the world. It is not a substitute for that plain and primitive world, but an enhancement and enrichment, an ironisation and summation of that world. ...A monochrome world has become Technicolor, a single croaking speaker has become wraparound sound. Is this our loss? No, it is our conquest, our victory.

Julian Barnes, *England, England*

## Introduction: Past Virtuous towards Virtual

Imagine the awkwardness, the embarrassment even, of any critic or researcher hypothetically confronted, Prufrock-like, by the contemporary, live subject of their analysis—author, poet, celebrity, historical personage—with "That is not what I meant at all./That is not it at all." In that sense, scholars of times and persons past do enjoy a relative minor immunity from such fundamental challenges. In Jamie Pachino's hitherto unpublished play, *Theodora: An Unauthorized Biography* (1994), however, the expected complacency suggested by the title is dramatically shaken, taking along with it a whole series of related certainties about scholarship, authenticity, and identity. In a fantastic setting meant to represent the historical researcher's thinking process, Theodora (500-548 AD), the (in)famous hippodrome-dancer-turned-wife of Byzantine Emperor Justinian, confronts a token five of her dozen-or-so historiographers: her contemporary Procopius of Caesarea, the initial creator of her twisted image in his venomous *Secret History* (or *Anekdotia*); four historiographers identified by date as 1090, 1590, and 1890; and the modern, first-ever female biographer, identified as 1990. These encounters prove not only that all her historical portraits have been, in the famous 1919 court verdict of Henry Ford, sexist "bunk," but also that any subsequent nonsexist attempts at discovering "the *real* Theodora" are equally doomed. Nevertheless, such attempts may be quite useful if historiography is to be used as a metaphor and a tool for the exploration of our very human need for building an identity through contrast and comparison, and for purposeful self-deception—on and off the stage. Even the on-stage Theodora *herself* must eventually be acknowledged as a simulacrum bequeathed to us by a past that cannot possibly be divulged or recreated with any satisfactory certainty.

Although the California-based Jamie Pachino has served in the faculty of several colleges and is also very active in the film and TV industry as a screenwriter (<[www.netspace.org](http://www.netspace.org)>), she is best-known as a playwright of rising fame, with plays that have garnered a sizable list of awards (Rand and Rand) and are mainly characterized, according to Daniel Inouye, by "the presence of a strong female protagonist" (19) and a matching feminist worldview. It is in this context that *Theodora*, which has won very good reviews (<[www.netspace.org](http://www.netspace.org)>) and the Theatre Conspiracy's Emerging Women Playwrights Series award, is showcased as a play that "attempts to solve the mystery [of Theodora's controversial and outrageously sexist portrayals throughout the centuries] in a fast-paced and funny examination of the elusive nature of historical truth" (<[www.feministtheatre.org](http://www.feministtheatre.org)>).

## Speaking Volumes: A Postmodern Review of the Feminist Agenda

Foreshadowed by the division of her *dramatis personae* into simply "Men" and "Women," Pachino's *Theodora* brings the above-quoted sexist controversy alive on stage in a variety of ways. Beyond the obvious confrontation of Theodora with her male historians (culminating, tellingly, in an actual ring fight, ending in a double knockout, between the Empress and Procopius in Act I, Scene 5), Pachino uses postmodern reflexive and parodic strategies that highlight this sense of uncertainty about the

possibility of fair past representations and its ensuing scientific ethical tension. "Decentered, allegorical, schizophrenic...—however we choose to diagnose its symptoms, postmodernism is usually treated, by its protagonists and antagonists alike, as a crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions," says Craig Owens in his linking of postmodernism and feminism (57). His view indicates why postmodern thinking is the ideal vehicle for witnessing the implosion of historiography the play attempts. The premise of the plot, and its being hosted on a set of intercommunicating, even movable platforms on the stage, set up a condition known as metalepsis. Metalepsis, a term which Gerard Genette borrowed from rhetoric and used in a postmodern context, describes the situation where two levels of existence, or rather narrative, that can't possibly merge, do so.<sup>1</sup> Theodora does not simply appear as a convenient ghost evoked by her researchers to vindicate their authority as stemming from an original actual referent, but rather as the living embodiment of a series of dead texts, an avatar of nothingness. Although she appears real to her 1990 researcher, who is bent on restoring the historical truth and doing justice to a female icon much-maligned by sexism in the science of historiography, Theodora cannot remember anything about her life that is not written down in her various biographies. At the same time, she questions and resists both her biographers' attempts at encompassing her, much as 1990 is inclined to do, and also 1990's own attempts at rewriting her, since the historiographer's feminist goodwill contains no actual fact on which Theodora can build another, alternative life:

THEODORA: What would you like to know?  
1990: Could you tell the story?  
THEODORA: Of course I could.  
1990: Oh good. Well that's...that's good.  
THEODORA: Which version?  
1990: Excuse me?  
THEODORA: Whose version do you want?  
1990: I—yours. (the men laugh) Your version—why is that funny?  
1890: She has no version.  
1590: Not her own.  
1090: Any number to pick from, of course. (9)

The dizzying metalepsis loop shows the researcher's frustration at the lack of any credible answers, mounting as the plot unfolds—a literal plot by male historiographers against strong female subjects, as 1990 suspects but cannot conclusively prove. This male bias blends in with the greater issue about the nature of history, opening up questions about the credibility of all historiography and "notions of identity—how we know someone through time" (Inouye 6), as 1990 wonders: "The question is, how do you know someone completely? And even if once, once in your life, you think you have, you think you do, how can you know for sure?" (34).

The sandwiching of this question between the wrestling standstill of Theodora and Procopius and a mock-objective diatribe on Act I, Scene 6 about "Things You Can/ Can Never Know for Sure about a Woman," culminates in a sexist outbreak of "COPULATOR FORNICATOR ABORTIONIST" that leaves the male historiographers smugly satisfied (36). We are strongly urged to conclude that we do not, and cannot, ever know for sure; that the conferral of identity is an illusion. The problem is only exacerbated, of course, when the identified subject is a woman, who has traditionally in patriarchy not been allowed to speak for, or define, herself in any historically valid ways as a human being or individual, handed instead portraits that range from the befuddling to the deleterious—and culminate in the other. This is the primary point Pachino makes in her play and the reason for 1990's research, who stands for any thinking, active and aware woman of today.

However, like the aptly-named Dysart's disillusionment with psychiatry in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, "All reined up in old language and old assumptions, straining to jump clean-hoofed on to a whole new track of being I only suspect is there" (Shaffer 18), 1990 comes to recognize that the problems of a particular case of bias are inescapably and synecdochically linked, on one level, to the fundamental flaw of the very science whose objectivity she thinks she serves. This science has been problematized by the proponents of new historicism, especially Michel Foucault who, in his 1969 *Archaeology of Knowledge*, denounced the "repressive presence" of a manifest epistemological "discourse as the quest for and the repetition of an origin that eludes all historical determination" (25). Speaking about

the deconstructive effect of this Foucaultian thinking on museum science, Douglas Crimp notes: "Not only does the very term *postmodernism* imply the foreclosure of what Foucault would call the *épistémé*, or archive, of modernism" (with its recourse to fictions of a comprehensible, authentic past), but "Foucault's project involves the replacement of those unities of humanistic historical thought such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source and origin with concepts like discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit, and transformation" (45). It is this kind of treatment that Pachino reserves for *Theodora*. Alongside spiraling question games, the playwright brings into play personality shifts as the Empress counters, or caters to, her biographers; rampant (and hilarious) anachronisms, especially in the alternative ways in which Justinian and Theodora met, creating in this way a postmodern pastiche of scenes seemingly cut out of pulp fiction and Cecil B. DeMille movies; and ultimately the constant overturning of 1990's keen expectations. The deconstructive treatment of Theodora becomes the developing principle of the play; more so, in the playwright's eyes, than the feminist agenda concurrent to it: "I had an experience with my play *Theodora: An Unauthorized Biography*," Pachino says in an interview,

where the *Chicago Tribune* critic said I was 'male bashing' because the historians who get lambasted are all men. But that critic overlooked the fact that until the 1900s all the historians *were men*, and I was simply HISTORIAN bashing. The woman historian in the play got her hits as well, but the critic neglected to see that because the play supported a feminist agenda. ("The Story Behind")

The significance of this quote, however, goes further in demonstrating that the problem Pachino is broaching in *Theodora* does not simply concern the viewing of History as historical text, but any text—her own included. The theme of the fundamental falsity of the text is evident also in Pachino's highly-acclaimed play *The Return to Morality*, where a well-intentioned liberal author sees his satire of the religious right taken at face-value, unleashing a maelstrom of trouble (<[www.netspace.org](http://www.netspace.org)>). In *Theodora*, however, it becomes evident that there is no difference between the actual historical body of the Empress and the venomous slander that Procopius wrote without even having witnessed any of it: both are texts that were—perhaps inevitably—abandoned by their owners to be others, that is, (ab)used by those who quoted them afterwards. They exchange nigh-identical accusations seemingly taken wholesale out of Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author"—that he denied his book and she her life "by not owning up to it," thus leaving it in the wrong hands afterwards (52). Later, though, they are both subsumed under Theodora's legend, an entity larger than either, without an iota of authenticity the originals possessed, and reflecting more the revisions rather than their source:

PROCOPIUS: I know when I was born.

THEODORA: I could have had you killed. At any moment. If I chose. But you remember one thing, Procopius: if you had never written anything about me, if you had kept your pen shut and mentioned me in passing as the wife of the Emperor you were chronicling, none of this would have happened. That they continue to talk about me 1400 years later is your fault. That they devote whole novels to me still is your responsibility. And you have to live with that. Because as much as you hated me, the thought of you disappearing was even more terrifying....(Tosses a book to him) There's your immortality, sweetheart. (53)

### **Ms.-Representation, Or, "Pro, Copy Us!"**

What happens, however, when postmodernist, new historicist considerations overlap with the feminist agenda of the play? On the one hand, arguably the metaleptic mix works as a kind of *écriture féminine*, with the befuddled, questioning female professional 1990 straight out of Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa." On the other, the abrupt swings in tone and language; the constantly-interrupted flow of arguments countered by the emotional outbursts of Theodora and 1990; the unruly shifts of personae; and the parody of stiff historiography (a technique favored by *écriture féminine*) "all over the map" in Pachino's words (Inouye 103)—all are disciplined to the purpose of showing woman as the eternal postmodern, the one whose veil nobody has lifted yet. Lacking this intelligent playfulness, the play might have appeared as a kind of on-stage mix of theory and Platonic dialogue, and so it is probably these qualities that constitute the essential charm of the play. As the *Chicago Reader* reviewer of *Theodora* also noted: "Pachino moves through what could have been dry-as-dust arguments about historiography with an extraordinary grace, intelligence and wit" (<[www.netspace.org](http://www.netspace.org)>). The feminist parody also doubles as postmodern irony throughout the play, showing how a critique of patriarchy can induce a critique of phallogocentric scientific tradition as

well. Looking at visual artists who work with anachronistic collages, Crimp concludes that the exercise attacks the "structural coherence" (47) on which the modernist illusion of completeness is based. If we consider the stage of *Theodora* as such a visual tableau, then at first we are humorously surprised at the image of Justinian and Theodora (the entire carnivalesque Act II, Scene 2) presented alternately as john and prostitute, party animals, Disney rejects, and spies. The scene may appear as an easy attempt at domesticating the distant and unsettling Byzantium, letting us perhaps know that the past is not as sacrosanct and unalterable as patriarchal historiography would have us believe. However, this barrage of silly possibilities simply ends up suggesting that the other, seemingly tradition-hallowed versions may be equally frivolous, thereby undermining also the present and the future of such renditions, "a past that has never been present, and which never will be" (Derrida, "Différance" 21). In this way, frivolity and humorous anachronisms aggregate in Pachino's play like two negatives making a positive.

On the other hand, on the level of content, the beneficial mix of the two works is more like a double-edged knife, resulting in a kind of postfeminist critique. As Ryan Claycomb notes about contemporary feminist playwrights (Pachino included):

By placing narratives of real lives within the context of performance, these artists point out the degree to which gender, identity, and history are socially constructed performances and are subject to the manipulations of power. And by highlighting the gender biases embedded in these performative notions, they are then able to revise and reconstruct them within a new framework, one that resists hegemonic power and acknowledges difference. (3)

This postmodern questioning of (patriarchal) cultural authority, however, can easily turn on its own feminist impetus, and does so here. To begin with, it doesn't take long to understand what 1990's motive for the research is, when her first question is about the (missing) name of Theodora's mother (Pachino 5,7): The "Search for Our Mothers' Gardens," the Cixousian "maternal body," and other such second-wave feminist metaphors suggest the conscious and systematic effort, hailed by Gilbert and Gubar in their seminal (albeit criticized since) 1979 *The Madwoman in the Attic*. I am referring to the need to trace, in the sense of acknowledging but also duplicating, "the difficult paths by which nineteenth-century women overcame their 'anxiety of authorship,' repudiated debilitating patriarchal prescriptions, and recovered or remembered the lost foremothers who could help them find their distinctive female power" (59). However, from her first encounters with both Theodora and her biographers, 1990 realizes that it takes more than feminist goodwill to set right the wrongs of historiographic bias against women and to discover this empowering past of glorious foremothers, when there are no alternative credible sources available. In Claycomb's words, "the question remains as to who is being recovered and how this recovery takes place," and there is a noted, added "discrepancy in the rhetoric of women as plural and generalized and the subject of the biographies as singular and particular" (96). Theodora broaches such an issue when she argues with 1990 that "if they [historians] made me 'remarkable' and 'unique' then *women* were not capable, only I was—*women* were not strong and powerful, or decisive and cruel and ravishingly beautiful, only *me*"; Theodora's "recovery" in fact obscures all other women's significant lives (Pachino 69-70).

Nevertheless, I do not agree with Claycomb's conclusion that the sheer volume of women's lives onstage counters this problem (97). I believe that Pachino's approach is far more complex, and she has certainly thought about aspects of the problem in *The Return to Morality*, *Aurora's Motive*, and *Waving Goodbye* (through the problematic of mother-daughter relationship or loss). How can one recover what has no possibility of being found, especially given that in cases like Theodora's there is no original suppressed information left; what could a feminist-minded researcher possibly unearth to his/her advantage? 1990 experiences a shock when she realizes that she will have to ultimately base her feminist research on...the sexist slanders of *The Secret History*. Her reaction reflects the impasse of the contemporary researcher faced with the intimation—or rather, the cultural imperative of feminist politics that require objectivity, if not affirmative action, for the Madwoman—yet have no means or venues to effect it. In fact, 1990 can only hope to be co-opted:

PROCOPIUS:... You will be the first woman  
1590:Ever.  
1990: To join your club. (62)

The pivotal scene, with the historians urging 1990 "Use us" and "Take whatever you like" while they slowly fill her hands with their books and lead her to their platform reads as a parody of seduction (59-60) ironically suggesting that, the more 1990 struggles to dig into the truth, the more she is doomed to empower the patriarchal tradition by one more repetition of "exactly the same" (62). The play harps on the joke by having 1990 first introduce to the practice of keeping "exact" records her video camera, a supposedly new and more accurate recorder of facts. Only this turns against her as it ends up filming Procopius quoting "the real truth about Theodora," i.e. his slanderous fabrications out of his chronicle (28). Also, after the historiographical seduction scene, and while 1990 thinks she has resisted and shooed the men away, Theodora appears as a projection on the overhead screen, with a flicker that possibly suggests the lacunae in the knowledge about her real self; but according to Pachino's stage directions, "1990 sees her and thinks she is flesh and blood" (63).

The video camera, then, becomes a significant symbol of the new feminist and scientific viewpoint that in cases like Theodora's cannot possibly be new (or authentically old, actually) in the rescue effort for buried *herstory*, because the material it should base itself on to fulfill the demands for objectivity and truth its science posits is *nonexistent*. In that context, the repetition of the Deriddean written sign—be it Theodora or Procopius—on screen at the same time oddly both validates (as *per* Derrida in *Of Grammatology*) its meaning, making it a credible authority, yet also discredits its (re)written nature as more untrustworthy with every turn. Crimp notes this as a defining trait of postmodern politics applied in art vis-à-vis fictions of authenticity: the camera does not add, in its recreation, any new artistic input, yet the object is still not the original one: "Through reproductive technology postmodernist art dispenses with the aura. The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images" (53). The deconstruction of *historio-graphe* as malleable text has already begun, anyway, with Theodora's earlier re-enactment of her re-telling of the story of her rough Hippodrome childhood to customers she beds, in order to elicit a bigger pity fee (Pachino 16-20). While the first (re)telling of the story fills us (vicariously through 1990) with indignation at the hard fate of financially unprotected women in a bloodthirsty man's world, its increasingly embellished retelling by Theodora for money (the last version even accompanies a strip-tease) "prostitutes" the story as well, making us doubt not only the veracity of the retellings, but the original as well. For all we know, Theodora is not beyond playing up to 1990 as another "customer" of her legendary *exposé* (pun intended):

THEODORA: So how do you like the story so far?

1990: You are playing with me.

THEODORA: Yes. (21)

Wickedly, Pachino links this last metaphor to the historiographers' profession, both by having them act the customers to Theodora's reenactment of her courtesan days, but also by their blunt admission that they write whatever comes to their prejudiced minds "as best we can to sell our books" (11). The fact that this is the only factual admission among this flurry of re-tellings and re-visions suggests that it should be taken not as professional affectation, but in earnest. Yet what value is earnestness in this impossible enterprise, when the only thing it can expose is the transcriber's own ineluctable inauthenticity? The postmodern methodology seems to leave its postfeminist agenda in the lurch.

### **The Post: Who Gets It?**

Still, the playwright ultimately avoids making 1990 another disillusioned dunce or cynical pro. One needs, I think, to see Pachino's play in the context of what is considered history as an increasingly popular subject nowadays—yet this popularity is qualified, because what the public usually welcomes as historical is what it *sees* as such, no matter the inconsistencies and anachronisms. From historical romance novels like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* to Dan Brown's execrable *The Da Vinci Code*; from the revival of westerns with Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* to *Apocalypse* and *The Passion of the Christ* in the original languages; from TV shows like *Rome* to a slew of successful BBC revivals of Jane Austen, history is no longer popularly seen as a boring, dusty domain of scholarship, but as a challenge promising spectacle and adrenaline rushes, even at the expense of factual details, or even sound logic. Hilton Kramer's observation, for example, that "nowadays there is no art so dead that an

art historian cannot be found to detect some simulacrum of life in its moldering remains" (qtd. in Crimp 43) seems to hold true for all types of historic reconstructive forensics, countering views like that of Theodor Adorno that see museums and libraries as the "sepulchres" of culture (Crimp 48, 43). In a way, then, these pop distortions of the past reflect our own scientific vacillations concerning the potential of any science for the discovery of post-Foucaultian truth.

Concurrently, the museum itself as an institution has gradually responded to the demand for throwing a live doorway to the past wide open in an effortless transition that will make the viewer feel as if they are living the authentic experience itself (via simulation programs, interactive tours, touch-and-feel exhibits, etc.). It is this feeling, the *zeitgeist* that is sought after, not the actual past; and it is ironic that this surrender to the real feel cohabits perfectly, even feeds upon, the new historicist understanding of the comprehensibility of past conceptualizations as illusion. There is a telling scene in *Theodora*, when 1990 first pulls out the camera to film Procopius, and he stands astonished at his own image, since mirrors were invented long after his time: "That's really me?" he asks (27), underlining via alienation effect the point Theodora's ghost has been trying to make about the incongruity of one's own views of oneself and the viewing of oneself through the eyes of others. Yet she also lets a bit of authorial irony slip: does Pachino's audience realize there is nobody really there to be observed in the first place? We are so fascinated by these seemingly authentic reconstructions, the real rising like Phoenix from the sands of time, that we willingly suspend our knowledge that they are fundamentally different from the untouchable entity of the actual past, and they only seem real by reflecting our world-views rather than those of past peoples.

In other words, the key word in Kramer's observation is "simulacra." As Jean Baudrillard has shown, human techno-culture as a second nature has collapsed any fictions of recourse to the natural or original, increasingly privileging simulations even when a complicated, elusive, and imperfect original is available (e.g., Tamagochis as opposed to real pets—a choice not available, of course, concerning the past): "Never again will the real have to be produced," Baudrillard concludes, since the emergence of the hyperreal has abolished representation, hence anything "original" (472). We are irreversibly addicted, according to Arthur Kroker, to the virtual, "and the will to virtuality is about the recline of the western civilization: a great shutting-down of experience, with a veneer of technological dynamism over an inner reality of inertia"; a process which does not produce, but only incessantly recycles past products in their ever-superficialized variants (7). Accordingly in *Theodora*, that which Kroker decries as deception takes on a sinister life of its own—a life that impertinently claims authenticity as such, since there is no authentic production to compete with it. Although the historians admit, under pressure from Theodora, that their job is to be "forever in pursuit" of "something you can never know" (Pachino 47), they resist their subject's claim that "Without me you don't exist" (47) and even continue on with their profession after Theodora leaves in a huff (Act II, Scene 8), giving her no choice but to return, since there is "no legacy but what people thought about it" (94). The life offered to the past is patently inauthentic *and* the only one possible; to further the postmodern irony, the hitherto debunked historical text, in its capacity for infinite guilt-free semiotic interpretation and proliferation, and in its movement from historian to historian through the ages, appears more alive than Theodora does, since she cannot evolve inside or outside it.

Yet curiously, this is not a case of proliferation due to the "Death of the Author," as Barthes' model would have it be, but rather the death of the Subject-Matter. It is only by killing off the competition, by freezing Theodora's image (to use Pachino's camera metaphor) inside the historical text that the culture-colored authorial voice can be established. This is understood in the play when Theodora urges 1990, "Write your own damn story and leave mine alone" (71), a sentence which leads to the final reconciliation of 1990 with her recalcitrant subject:

1990: I haven't got anything to add. To you.  
THEODORA: It probably won't help much.  
1990: Helped me. (97)

As a final gesture of friendly farewell, 1990 reveals to Theodora her "circa" death date (1998), indicating that this profession-conscious historiographer differs from her predecessors in at least

acknowledging the sacrifice of her subject to the purposes of a self-sustaining enterprise of simulation within a culture's incessant attempt to understand itself.

This final scene also wraps up the extended simulation metaphor that sustains the metaleptic field of the play by drawing attention to the main symbol of the play, the easel with the tiles that slowly form, as the action unfolds, Theodora's famous Ravenna mosaic portrait. The idea of re-presentation as piecing-together, but also as a collective exercise that pits the presence of the subject against the exigencies of the medium and its composing agents, runs as a connective seam throughout the play, with the older pictorial form giving way to 1990's camera and the historians' book portrayals. Occasionally, Theodora or one of the historians adds a few tiles to the image, as if building up her portrait through diachronic textual aggregation.

Yet this seeming cliché is deconstructed as it is being made, since the audience witnesses the lies, opportunism, desperation, bias and ignorance that have resulted in the building of this image: "Go put a tile into the mosaic. See how it feels," Theodora taunts 1990 (22). Furthermore, and by the same grace of process awareness, the mosaic functions for the audience and 1990 more like Theodor Adorno's *vexierbild*, or picture-puzzle, showing at the same time Theodora's portrait and that of her biographers. The *vexierbild* interpretation of the mosaic Pachino herself encourages is additionally useful because, for Adorno, the picture-puzzle, "Like art it hides something while at the same time showing it" (178). As a metaphor for art, it further removes historiography from science: in yet another telling match of one-liners, Procopius and Theodora give their own, simultaneous and overlapping, explanation for the mosaic, with the former valorizing the "democracy" of tiles while the latter hails the subject-image as the defining principle (Pachino 73-76). The stalemate of theories suggests the mosaic is inconclusively both and neither. Close to the end, Theodora tears the mosaic apart, after having re-cited the one and only scene of her life verbatim recorded—incidentally, the only scene where she comes off as a wholly positive role-model: that of her brave advice to Justinian not to abandon Constantinople and his throne during the Nika insurrection, advice which saved his throne and, possibly, his life (93-94). Later, at the very end (97), 1990 also hands Theodora the videotape, as a tribute, signalling that both the old and the new historiographical approaches have produced nothing worth recording for posterity as accurate reflection.

There are, however, at least two more significant representations/simulations in the play. The first is the two consecutive instant Polaroid shots 1990 takes with Theodora, again as a parting tribute to the failed process from which she has been taught her limits and responsibilities (99). The one Polaroid of the two smiling women is placed by Theodora on the easel where the mosaic used to be, signifying the awareness of the observer being part of the object's impression, and objectifying the idea of the unreachable past: the two Polaroids are almost simultaneously taken, but since "Theodora reacts to the flash" (99) and the two pictures mean different things to each woman, the "picture" for the historian and that for the original subject can never be totally identical. The passing of the Polaroid also signifies—in the smile and in Theodora's sincere thanking of 1990 for the picture (101)—the latter's sense of fulfilment as regards her feminist agenda. 1990 does manage to unearth the true image of a woman, even if that woman is only herself, buried under past assumptions about her job and role. As for Theodora, she is still inaccessible to 1990, but at least the researcher, true to the cultural mandates of her era as regards the art of history, has simulated how it feels to be a woman stymied by patriarchal conventions—be they slander or scientific seduction. She has projected herself onto Theodora precisely because she acknowledges the foremother as an unrecoverable void to be colonized by her self.

The other representation that occurs is that of the play, the image that the audience gleans from this simulation through the eyes of the only contemporary persona, 1990. Significantly, in the end Theodora, doing a bit of reverse research allowed her by the equation of subject and object within the postmodern framework, wishes to know in turn one thing about her researcher, and learns that her name is Iris. Pachino fuses here a predominantly female symbol, the flower iris—with its many sexual/sensual reverberations in feminist literature and art, from Myriel Rukeyser to Georgia O'Keefe—with the iris of the eye, our gateway to visual communication with the outside world, and hence the tool par excellence of the observing scientist. The substitution of "1990" for the name of the researcher suggests that the acquisition of the Derridean awareness, "between the blinds" so to speak,



of oneself as a viewing mechanism, hence part of the observing process along with the object, is what makes the difference between the contemporary woman or the female historiographer and the preceding, impersonal male historiographers. It is a Pyrrhic victory as scientific achievements go, but a *différance* nevertheless.

What is more important, the replacement of the initial roster designation "WOMEN" with two named individuals is perhaps a comment akin to the criticism leveled by feminist theorists like Judith Butler or Barbara Christian against Gilbert and Gubar. The latter are accused of taking an essentialist view of "woman" as a category of subjecthood with common inherent qualities and needs, without considering the irreducible differences of time, place, race, class or any other external diversifying parameters, the significations imposed by culture upon any given physical form. As Claycomb notes, the struggle taken up by women playwrights to represent female identity runs a strong risk of essentialist reduction:

these narratives rely on historical referentiality and an essentialism of the self to reinforce their efficacy. ...biographical drama asserts that feminist playwrights respond to the imperative to reclaim lost feminist lives, but must do so in ways that subvert the objectifying impulses of life writing. (3)

In other words, any feminist researcher who attempts to unearth the past—especially the past of women buried and distorted under patriarchal bias—must face the dilemma of either simulating such an unearthed reality via the input of her own cultural imperatives, thus equally distorting her supposedly now-true subject into propaganda, or to quit trying in honest scientific despair. Similarly, 1990 initially labors under the fallacy of being capable to reach the past because womanhood is essentially the same always, and she is "the first woman. To record [Theodora]. Ever," wielding modern recording devices and feminist ideas (Pachino 22-23). She does not understand that her organic position cannot possibly compensate for her limits caused by the gap of time and conditions, even when Theodora taunts her with the difference:

1990: I just think if it was my life... my...

THEODORA: And how should I fight them? You tell me.

1990: Well you could...

THEODORA: With a sword?

1990: No...

THEODORA: With my fists?

1990: No—

THEODORA: With my rapier wit?

1990: No!

THEODORA: And why should I trust you?

1990: You don't even—(stops, hearing)... what? (21-22)

In the end, however, in the segment titled "WHAT HISTORIANS DO WHEN THEIR SUBJECTS DESERT THEM," 1990 first realizes the inadequacy of all prior historians, who just copy one another and add their own barroom (literally!) opinions to the existing body of histories (87). Then she is forced by Procopius to realize her own complicity in the historiographic conspiracy to simulate, i.e. to mask, what is not there with something that cannot possibly exist:

PROCOPIUS: Yes. What answer will you have so generously prepared for me? An eyewitness. (Pause). So easy to condemn, mnn? Some 1400 years later. So easy to judge. When you propose to do to her exactly what we have, with your...documentary. Which part of your century will you weave into her life? What will you title your version? THEODORA: WOMAN FOR THE 90's? Congratulations my dear. You have just sealed the argument that will render you obsolete. And secure my place in history. My commendation. (88)

Furthermore, while the drunken historiographers acknowledge the dirty secret of their art—each one weaving his/her century into history—the audience may see Iris on stage, and thus experience the postmodern disillusionment of the eye being included in, and subjected to, the examining process. But are the viewers conscious that they, too, constitute a further level of this process? Pachino seems to be highly aware of her difficult role as a creator of honest illusions. Interestingly, most of her plays are based in some way on true-life incidents, like historical events, real-life interviews, or already-existing texts, while her introduction into the art of the dramatic dialogue came, as she says, from "a teacher who assigned us to follow people around, eavesdrop on them, and write what they said in our

journals" ("The Story Behind"). There seems to be an unspoken yet persistent commitment to bringing the true to life—that is, on-stage life-likeness—in her work. But how can the truth be served if people do not warm up to the cause by reacting, for example, to Theodora's drama as if it were real? Pachino says in an interview:

The issue of identity interests me. How you define somebody's life, how you define your own life. That's in a play of mine called *Theodora* about this true, notorious empress from Byzantium and everybody told her story but her. And so I'm really fascinated by that. How could you presume to tell somebody else's story? Which is basically what I do for a living. (Inouye 102)

This self-questioning translates in the play's most emotionally engaging moments being consistently the ones that relinquish any claim to their verifying sources: the real action begins when 1990 invites Theodora to do her biography "without the books" (38). Also, when Theodora reveals the drama of her son being torn from her by Orthodox fanatics forever, and Procopius challenges her truthfulness by saying that the opposite is "written down everywhere!" Theodora responds vehemently: "Then it's wrong and it needs to be fixed!" (43). Wrong by whose authority? This Theodora is a product of the playwright's imagination, so her claim to truth (and her appeal to our emotions) is equally, if not more, simulated. The play within the play is picked up by its reviewers as well, one of whom (in the Chicago *Nightlines*) praises Pachino for having "created a delightful and provocative *conundrum*" and "an account of Theodora that's about as complex as the woman herself surely *must have been*" (<[www.netspace.org](http://www.netspace.org)>, emphasis added)—with the modality of the final verb throwing a shadow of inconclusiveness on the comparison. The playwright, like her vehicle-character, Iris, seems to complete a personal journey of self-discovery by living vicariously for a while through Theodora: for both, the prize appears to be self-awareness vis-à-vis their vocation. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Pachino's chosen subject started her (notorious) career as:

1090: ...a born actress  
1890 (with 1090) actress with a ready wit  
1590: and an outrageous demeanor... (13)

After all, Pachino says about her *ars dramatica*: "To me writing is a lot like extended improvisation on paper for one actor—me, the writer" ("The Story Behind"); so, strangely, to serve the feminist agenda of her play, she must subjugate the urgent claims to the truth to utter fiction. It is a dilemma as old as the anecdote about Averrhoes's genuine puzzlement over the simulated reactions of the actors he witnessed crying and laughing with no actual cause; as old as the concept of mimesis, which turns into simulation in the absence of Aristotelian "completeness" in the great event to be imitated.

### Conclusion: What Lies, What Stays

The deconstruction of historiography (and hysteriography; and herstoriography) in *Theodora* may prevail thematically, but there is one element in the play imbued with staying power that works towards amplifying the sense of inconclusiveness permeating all metaleptic levels. And its power is, literally, *staying*: the famous incident at the Nika insurrection of the people against Justinian's rule, and the Emperor's decision to follow Theodora's advice and stay in the capital to face the rebels instead of taking his advisors' counsel to flee (91-93). Amidst all the indecision to which every piece of history about Theodora inevitably concludes, this one clear moment about staying stays as an ironic taunt of that elusive truth that *exists* out there in the past, out of reach. Furthermore, this incident can be seen as the culmination of an underlying motif tied to the two prior key moments that form Theodora's personality, the savage ridicule of her widowed mother's supplication by the male mob at the Hippodrome, and the abduction of her baby son by the monks and nuns. In narrating both those traumatic occasions, Theodora uses the exact same concluding phrase: "And I will never forget it. I will never forget what the Greens/Orthodoxy did to us/me that day" (20, 40-41). The verbatim repetition and the solid vehemence Pachino instills at that moment in the otherwise mercurial and vague character of the Empress suggest that there is something about womanhood that is experienced equally by Theodora, her mother and sisters, and every woman ever exposed to the vilest aspects of patriarchy. In a world of histories that lie and historians that forget, this woman never forgets those wrongs directed against her femininity. This does not mean that there is an essential dimension in womanhood itself as substance or inner quality, of course, but that there has been substantial biased

treatment towards women (regardless of their inner qualities). This is perhaps, ironically, the one essentially true and verifiable conclusion throughout history, the thing that allows 1990 to empathize with Theodora, as she, too, is mobbed repeatedly by the historians. In the end, with Iris having said her goodbyes, leaving the stage to the chorus of historians repeating their lies (the same incantation as in the beginning of the play, showing that, for them, nothing has changed), it is Theodora this time that utters the final word: "woman" (102). This one true noun in a sea of false adjectives, charged with enough tongue-in-cheek inconclusiveness throughout the play to leave the plot open-ended can be seen as what Derrida calls the "supplement," that which "occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence," exceeding and also comprising the text's limits in a "play of substitution [which] fills and marks a determined lack" (*Of Grammatology* 157). The wronged woman remains the unvindicated ghost in this western *kwaidan*, for whom no catharsis can be achieved—a center uncontained and deferred that allows the play of signification and the play on-stage to continue *ad infinitum*.

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<sup>1</sup> For metalepsis, see Fludernik.

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