

Characters and caricatures in Nalé Roxlo's *Una viuda difícil*

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The comedy *Una viuda difícil* (1944) is replete with characters, representatives of vastly divergent social classes and age-groups. Of all the characters, Mariano and Isabel alone attain true, autonomous status in the course of the comedy. They are surrounded by a mobile, fluctuating chorus of caricatures, voluble witnesses to the unfolding incidents of the play. These secondary characters exist either through their profession, be it *verdugo*, *pregonero* or *pintor*, through their social status in the colonial community, as in the case of the reluctant spinster Rita, or through their habitual behavior, as with the multitude of unbidden suitors in their amorous pilgrimage to the *platería*.

Yet both Isabel and Mariano are initially encumbered also with the restrictive social label of *viuda* and the role of *asesino* respectively—together with the plethora of associations traditionally implied by them. Before they can assert their individuality, they must either discard the stereotypic label, as Isabel does, or like Mariano disprove his assumed reputation of *asesino*. Isabel's character is then subsequently disclosed by encounters with those who, unlike herself, have not developed beyond caricature. Mariano, on the other hand, invested with an ill-deserved but self-sought reputation which establishes a false picture of his character, must gradually dispel this illusion through his own actions and words, finally negating the role of murderer completely. Apart from revealing the character of others, a further artistic function of caricatures is that of injecting the leavening agent of farce into such intrinsically grim situations as, for instance, the forthcoming execution. If these peripheral characters contribute a farcical element to the play, then Isabel and Mariano, the two integral, central protagonists, do not. They rather illustrate ideas which have wider implications than those which farce, by its very nature, allows.

In *Una viuda difícil*, Isabel's habitual setting, the *platería*, becomes an extension of her personal situation as well as a reflection of her character. More-

over, she shows a marked proclivity towards symbols and symbolic actions which illuminate still further her nature. When she is still a beleaguered widow, the shop sign attests to her uncompromising morality: *Platería de la Honradez*. Made expansive by late-blooming marital love, she later has this sign changed so as to indicate her new-found happiness:

Gran Platería del Asesino
De la ex viuda Isabel de la Flor,
Si no compran me importa un comino.
¡Y viva el amor!¹

When Mariano afterwards convinces her that he is not an *asesino*, that she is, in fact, infatuated with his reputation, her ebullience is extinguished as rapidly as it had been kindled and she orders the sign changed accordingly to *Platería del Desengaño*.

The interior of the silversmith's shop is also eloquent of both the social condition and personality of its owner. The bars across the window echo those of the bird cages hanging in it. As a *viuda*, Isabel is imprisoned within a social role from which she seeks to free herself. When later Mariano is to introduce a wounded bird into the *platería*, Isabel feels an unconscious affinity with its plight, similar to her own in that she, too, has been wounded by the malice of others. A month later, the bird will appear fully recuperated, just as the vicissitudes of Isabel's life will also take an upward turn. Her unconscious awareness of the symbolic value of objects is further demonstrated when Justina, the vendor of *mazamorra*, calls in at the silversmith's shop in her new capacity as go-between on Víctor's behalf. Upon hearing Justina's insinuations and suggestions, Isabel crosses to the window and leans against its bars in a tacit acknowledgement of her figurative imprisonment. She then rejects Justina (and Víctor implicitly) by telling her not to leave any more *mazamorra*, that which designates Justina's profession and hence, in accordance with the elliptical nature of caricature, the woman herself. Yet like the general atmosphere of the shop, Isabel's personality is cheerful and gay. If her social condition is reflected in that of the caged birds, then her nature corresponds to the profusion of bright flowers which adorn the room. Thus it is not by chance that Don Cosme, the first suitor to happen by, combines these two concepts in his appreciative trope "flor de las viudas de la colonia" (p. 10).

All three of Isabel's most constant suitors react appropriately to her vivacious personality with a floral tribute, restricted to a verbal reference with the somewhat parsimonious Don Cosme, and a literal homage in the case of Víctor and Pedrito.² Already then the passage of concrete objects into symbols, a recurrent phenomenon in the comedy, is under way. The literal flowers in the opening scene cede to Don Cosme's 'flowery' compliment, replaced in turn by the daily piece of jasmine which the romantic Pedrito brings to the widow. As a consequence Isabel comes to view herself in similar terms. Víctor's behavior following his unexpected appearance at the *platería* causes her to extemporize on the infelicitous lot of widows, the unwilling victims of male concupiscence, expressing it consciously with an extended floral metaphor:

Yo, al fin y al cabo, no tengo nada que perder; soy viuda, es decir, campo abierto, planta sin dueño, todo el que pase puede tender la mano sucia y cortarme una flor sin pensar en si me duelen las raíces. También a las viudas con el marido se nos mueren los sentimientos y la decencia, ¿no es eso? (pp. 30-31).

Flowers also mirror Isabel's state of mind, her fluctuating moods whether optimistic or pessimistic. With blossoms pinned flamboyantly in her hair to denote her new-born happiness as Mariano's wife, she has the *pintor* paint the second shop sign, proclaiming herself to be "la ex viuda Isabel de la Flor." Once her vision of Mariano is negated by his removal of the mask of *asesino*, Isabel prepares to welcome her flock of admirers. Pedrito, "el chico de las diamelas," ritualistically presents her with jasmine, significantly "la última que queda." When she makes as if to reciprocate with a kiss, the boy, the sole suitor with integrity, shames her by refusing it. Thus this final floral offering weakens her defiant stand against Mariano, preparing the way for full reconciliation with him. Through the agency of Isabel's perspicacity, flowers serve a dual artistic function in the play. They delineate the inevitable fate of young, attractive widows in that particular social and temporal context, and they reflect at the same time the indomitable, colorful character of one such individual.

That trinity of caricatures composed of *misias* Jovita, Micaela and Mariquita does not share Isabel's capacity for perceiving the symbolic value inherent in mundane objects. As they gather together after Isabel's precipitous marriage they appear to be celebrating a wake rather than a wedding, and the flower *leitmotif* soon recurs. Isabel is "en la flor de la vida" and she has sacrificed herself. Prompted by Pedrito's admission that for a month he had been bringing Isabel jasmine, their lugubrious and irrelevant conversation degenerates still further into the relative merits and demerits of specific flowers devoid of all recondite significance. The situation inevitably becomes farcical; Nalé Roxlo seems to be implying that females, even as caricatures, can be relied upon to convert what is potentially meaningful into inanity.

Mariano, like Isabel, escapes caricature to become a true character. His physical appearance as he is being led to the gallows belies his real nature: "el cabello y la barba muy crecidos le dan un aspecto feroz" (p. 33). Around Mariano will center the theme of the deceptive guise which reality so frequently adopts. As an inhabitant of the tough Matadero district, he found a reputation for courage to be of prime importance. He is willing even to hang in order to preserve intact his renown as the slayer of no less than seven men. These supposed multiple murders of his have caused him to become "casi legendario," and *gaucho* poets sing of his exploits. The process of fixing him into a pre-established set of characteristics—the mask of *asesino*—was in motion. Isabel, deceived by the illusion he has willfully spun around himself, resents him initially as earlier she had resented Víctor when that illusion is destroyed. Mariano is, in fact, gentle and compassionate as his rescue of the wounded bird from the cruelty of a gang of ruffians demonstrates. He and Isabel alike share a similar concern for the underdog, the needy. When Mariano, like the bird, is wounded by the malice

of others, Isabel defends him unhesitatingly. They are thus drawn together by a genuine, mutual characteristic, a deep-felt humaneness.

If Mariano and Isabel develop as characters in the course of the comedy, the caricatures, as is to be expected, do not. At the end of the play as at the beginning they are defined by one specific trait or disposition. Don Cosme remains an aspiring if aged Don Juan, flagrantly hypocritical and irritating. While recognizing verbally Isabel's moral obligation to retain intact her virtuous reputation, he is mounting an active campaign against that very attribute she is supposed to guard above all others. Víctor, similarly, is governed by the sole attitude of seducing Isabel.³ The *sereno*, Don Hilarión, is limited in his turn by his occupational jargon to which he constantly resorts when at a loss for something else to say. Even his social conversation is punctuated with the empty, meaningless assertion that all is well: "Buenas noches ¡y sereno!" (p. 137). The *verdugo*, on the other hand, represents a comically grotesque element in the play. He persists in his fixed idea of obtaining customers, reminding Mariano that his pardon is only conditional; he acutely regrets the loss of money from the cancelled hanging, which would have helped provide for his family. The *verdugo* ignores or is unaware of the grotesqueness of his occupation, speaking of *clientela* and comparing himself with Isabel and her customers. In an attempt at redeeming the lost payment, he offers to sell her a rope, "de la buena, de un ahorcado efectivo" (p. 66), as a good-luck charm, and is quite impervious to her reaction of horror. Just as he then becomes associated with his cupidity and his *cuerda*, the symbol of his profession, so too Justina is associated with *mazamorra*, the symbol of hers.

Justina shares Isabel's social predicament of widowhood. Whereas Isabel refuses to submit passively to what would seem to be its inevitable consequences, Justina is resigned to her fate, seeing as its cause human nature:

¡Y claro, es la costumbre! . . . Usted sabe, niña, como son los hombres; hacen como en la guerra: cae uno y el que está más cerca se siente obligado a llenar la brecha, cosa de amor propio. . . Parece ser que ya durante el velorio de mi finado, que Dios perdone, sus mejores amigos me jugaron al truco (p. 20).⁴

Justina is incensed not so much by the fact that she was the prize in a card game but that she was won by a Galician. Her dissatisfaction, rather than having a valid, moral justification, is nullified by the trivial, even ludicrous nature of her objections. She possesses the potential for being a character but dissipates it, becoming instead a caricature through the intervention of farce. Like Rita, she lacks that integrity which characterizes Isabel and gives her autonomy.

The conditions of Rita and Isabel are contrasting—dearth and surplus of the same commodity, namely male attention. Rita, the reluctant spinster and confidante to Isabel, comically resorts to St. Anthony, the retriever of lost articles and a worker of miracles, for she seems to have exhausted the potential and good will of St. Joseph, to whom maidens usually appeal when seeking a husband. Rita, although a more frequent and welcome visitor to the *platería* than anyone else, remains a caricature precisely because she is defined by this one need of hers, that of securing herself a spouse. Nor is she particular, as she is prepared to accept

anything the saint offers: "que me dé lo que pueda, pero pronto. ¿No te parece? Porque a una también se le puede pasar la juventud." (p. 17)⁵ Despite all her efforts, her state remains unchanged for the duration of the comedy thereby fixing her in this role which she is only too willing to renounce. She is not permitted to expand into a fully developed character as she affords more comic potential through the frustration of her desires.

Rita has come to be associated with supplicatory *exvotos* which therefore lose their 'normal' religious implications, assuming instead a more limited and secular one, that of denoting these frustrated desires of hers. Isabel's instinctive propensity towards symbols⁶ is again manifested in her exaggerated, fanciful description of the latest model in *exvotos*: a phoenix, a cupid whose bandage has slipped from one eye, a stork, a horn of plenty, a dog, a key, a locket, a perfume vial and various ribbons constitute the comic, pseudo-symbolic composite, whose grotesqueness is proportionate only to the degree of Rita's obsession; Rita, moreover, is quite oblivious of Isabel's joke as she is unaware of the image she projects to others. Similar to the *verdugo's* rope, the *exvoto* entails a magnification beyond all natural proportions of the usual function of things. In the same way, one characteristic or aspect of the minor participants in the play is emphasized to the near exclusion of all others, resulting in caricatures rather than complex characters.

Both Justina and Rita serve as contrasts to Isabel. Rita is dissatisfied with spinsterhood, and would like to renounce this status; Justina has accommodated herself to the character of men, complying with their nature, making the most of her situation without overt rebellion or attempts at changing what she sees as an inevitable, immutable state of affairs. Isabel, on the other hand, has the male attention which Rita craves but rejects it, just as she rejects the complacent solution of Justina. She and Mariano alike become characters, escaping the respective label of *viuda* and the adopted role of *asesino*, precisely through a shared rebellion, their refusal to conform to set, accepted patterns of behavior. They both assert their own individuality and character, thus avoiding the limitations of caricature which delineate those in their proximity.

Notes

1. Conrado Nalé Roxlo, *Una viuda difícil* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidon, 1944), p. 118. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

2. Isabel's suitors, in keeping with the immediately accessible, obvious nature of caricature, represent clearly defined age-groups: Don Cosme and his crony, the *vejete*, are in their declining years, and loathe to admit it; Víctor, like Mariano, is a mature man while Pedrito and the more nebulous *galán* are still youths.

3. With the naming of two of the caricatures, Víctor and the servant Nieves, the playwright introduces irony for comic effect: Víctor, rather than being victorious, is in fact the loser in the quest for Isabel's favors, and Nieves, in spite of the whiteness that her name implies, is a negress. Nieves does not exist through the stressing of one behavioral aspect, but through her characteristic speech, her inability to pronounce "r", which results in such comic contortions as "glacias," "polqueña," etc.

4. It is noteworthy that Justina unconsciously associates "sentimental" situations with war and all the brutality it implies. Isabel will later elect to marry Mariano, on the spur of the moment, in the belief that he has been justly convicted of seven murders. Nalé Roxlo's inferences about female psychology would not then appear to be very laudatory, insinuating as he does that women are unwittingly attracted to what is dark and violent in men. Isabel is

certainly profoundly disillusioned when she learns of Mariano's innocence, and is only won back by his demonstration of courage, the positive face of violence and bravado.

5. There is implicit in *Una viuda difícil* both an apparent eulogy of marriage as an ideal state and a parody of it. The Viceroy has decided to pardon Mariano in acknowledgement of his own wedding anniversary, but only if some woman is prepared to marry him. The parody exists in seeing marriage as prolonged torture, as opposed to the transient torture of hanging: "la pena de horca por la de himeneo," (p. 34). If this reference to marriage is amongst the most outstanding farcical elements of the comedy, together with Rita's concentrated attempts at attaining that blissful state, then the outcome of that farcical situation—the marriage of Isabel and Mariano—is treated with comic seriousness. Once more, it is the characters who furnish the play with its more serious elements and the caricatures who supply much of the comedy and farce; marriage then becomes a unifying link between the two.

6. The tables are turned on Isabel and on this proclivity of hers when Rita points out to her that the funereal, black suit that she had made for Mariano could well be interpreted as a sign of mourning for his seven victims. For Isabel, the gesture in having it made had one significance, so that she failed to see that the color, for others, could have another meaning. It is an index of her growing concern for Mariano's feeling that she energetically rejects the suit once Rita has pointed out to her the way in which it could be misinterpreted.

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