

Existential Irony in Three Carballido Plays

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Emilio Carballido has written many different kinds of plays: one-act vignettes, plays with historical settings, political commentary, and fantasies. The fantasy plays explore the psychological and archetypal delineations of human freedom.¹ *Medusa*, *Teseo*, and *Las estatuas de marfil*, a trilogy, deal more singlemindedly with the characteristically existential notion of freedom as action, seeking to explore "how far a free agent can escape from his particular situation in his choices."² But these three plays include as many styles. *Medusa* is fantastic and heavily symbolic, and *Teseo*, the least complex of the three, is a one-act fantasy. *Las estatuas de marfil* is entirely realistic, but it is the most subtle and difficult. Together, the plays are three variations on a single theme, and Carballido, through symbol and elegantly metaphorical plot, has incorporated the existential irony that is characteristic of Sartre's drama.

In *Medusa*, the protagonist Perseo wants to perform some heroic act. Accordingly, he sets out, with divine guidance, to kill Medusa whom he comes to love and pity. Perseo must choose between not doing a deed he has come to find meaningless and morally questionable, and doing it to accept a definition of himself, though it compromises his freedom. Teseo chooses, at the beginning of his play, to be all that Perseo has become at the end of *Medusa*—opportunistic, amoral, unloving—to escape the ignominious sentimentality and hypocrisy that his father represents in his old age. Teseo also wishes to define himself and his character outside of his surroundings, and explicitly states the implicit aims of Perseo: "I am the son of my own acts."³ The central characters of *Las estatuas de marfil*, Sabina and César, likewise seek to shape their characters by assuming roles: Sabina wishes to become an actress instead of a housewife, and César, more ambiguously, wants to be a good writer.

The illusory freedom of circumstance is exposed by devastating irony in all three plays. Irony with regard to the expectations of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves is characteristic of the plays of Sartre. Like the heroes of *Les Mains sales* and *Huis Clos*, Perseo comes to disbelieve the

heroism of his once intended action, and consciously rejects his fate. Then he is led, by accident, to commit the very acts he has rejected, and to become, because of this, much less free. Teseo, too, is visited by the irony of circumstance: he elects an enormous unseen fate when he chooses Phaedra over Ariadne. He will find himself touched by the feelings and morals he has acted beyond. Teseo compares with César in *Las estatuas de marfil* and with Garcin in *Huis Clos*. All three believe themselves to be acting on a stage much larger than the evident setting: Teseo in the realm of dynasty and power, César in the realm of art, or at least, of the Mexican theatre, and Garcin in the realm of political ideology. Yet each is betrayed by his actions in the visible, immediate setting. Teseo, embracing Phaedra, takes a fate analogous to that of his father; César, inadvertently, becomes the director he does not want to be; and Garcin proves incapable of love or bravery. As in *Medusa*, it is the discrepancy between role and reality that proves the undoing of the characters.

The terrible counterpoint of role, heroism and love in *Medusa* is strikingly close to *Les Mains sales*. Both Hugo and Perseo want to become heroes and seek to act accordingly. Each loves the person he must kill; each rejects the notions of heroism only to commit the act inadvertently. Medusa and Jessica alike condemn the callous and bloody ideal of heroism. Hugo lives to see his deed change shape in the eyes of others. He chooses at the end of the play to identify himself with his legend and not with the personal reality of his action. Perseo, in the end, does the same.

Drama is "acting" as well as action, and role-playing is the most important ironic foil to the real desires and circumstances of the characters in these plays by Carballido just as it is in those of Sartre. In *Medusa*, the paradox of action in the theatre as acting is represented by symbol as well as by the ironies of circumstance that are so much like those of *Les Mains sales*. In *Las estatuas de marfil* Carballido uses theatre as a metaphor for life and explores the complexities of this metaphor more fully than Sartre even in *Huis Clos*.

Marble statuary and monsters, symbols of the lack of freedom imposed by role, are common to all three Carballido plays. In *Teseo*, the minotaur and his labyrinth are figures for Teseo in his hero's role. *Las estatuas de marfil* is named after a game the characters play; the game is in turn the reality of their lives. In *Medusa*, those who look on the monster's hair are literally turned to stone, but the role of hero analogously calcifies the protagonist himself into his role. Perseo questions Medusa about her fate, trying to discover if she petrifies people willfully or not. Wiser than he, she knows the irrelevance of the question. At the end of the play, Perseo tries to use Medusa's head to his own advantage. Turning Acrisio and his court to stone, he inadvertently does the same to his mother. His possession and use of Medusa's head is at once the symbol and irony of his own situation: he has become the thing which he abhorred, condemned, as Medusa had been, to act out his exceptional destiny.

Medusa makes clear that obsession with self-definition ends in the assumption of an imprisoning role. She uses her own case as an example and warning to Perseo, and tries to convince him that love is the only humanly possible way for him to see and know himself. Other characters in the play are monsters like Medusa herself, and have become so because they wished to be different from

other men, to see themselves in the shape of an ideal. Dánae, Perseo's mother, is so obsessed with her unrecognized status as "blessed among women" that she is oblivious to the grotesque imitation of that momentary golden rain—her constant tears. Acrisio seems to have turned his inability to guard his daughter into an impotent cult of his own body. Both are caricatures of the human—monsters—in the same way as Medusa and the Gorgone, only they are not as obviously marked. The confusion between the monstrous and the human is all the more evident because the monsters in *Medusa* and *Teseo* behave in a warmly human (if comical) way, whereas the human characters very often are simply parodies of themselves, repeating the same acts over and over.

If the result of role-playing is monstrous and rigid, the origin is equally inhuman. This is explored in both *Las estatuas de marfil* and *Medusa* through the analogy of role and artistic form. In the former, the theatre metaphor, dramatizations, and scenes from other plays are used to show how literary role mirrors life. In *Medusa*, the mirror of Athena's shield is a symbol of the reflections that art and love show to life.

In one scene of Act V of *Medusa*, the court poets are called to immortalize Perseo's deeds. The dialogue between Perseo and the poets is very much like the dialogues on heroism and love between Perseo and Medusa earlier in the play. The poets believe they should universalize Perseo's exploits for all men to experience. Perseo protests that the poet's universal version will not be identical with his own experience, but this is brushed aside. Like Medusa, but in a more clinical fashion, the poets note the murderous character of the hero, and regard as predictable his nausea over the first two "heroic" acts. In fact, none of Perseo's unique emotions interests these poets, and it is tempting to dismiss the scene as a satire.

But in the love scene between Medusa and Perseo in Act IV, both celebrate the universality of their feelings; abandoning the personal, subjective utterances common to such scenes, they speak of themselves and their feelings in the third person. Like Athena's shield, which renders harmless the visible monster Medusa, the mirror of love counteracts the need for self-identification that is its root. The mirror of art, in turn, like love, embraces and defines the universal scope of human possibility without feeling. The poets are not concerned with Perseo's individual feelings because they are common; art defines and limits the actions and circumstances of the hero completely, but without agony or nausea.

Perseo, Teseo, César, and Sabina all believe themselves to be acting on the stage of universals, which is properly the realm of art, or role. Sabina discovers in each new play an ideal new Sabina; Perseo and Teseo become the bloody, cold images of themselves as heroes—their legends; César sacrifices himself and his freedom of action to his artistic ideal.

Through the notion of role, both *Les Mains sales* and *Medusa* expose the loss of human freedom. The exigencies of heroism force both protagonists to forego the personal design of their existence for an impersonal one. The dehumanizing force of role is enlarged by the fact that both men must kill the person whom they love. Carballido extends the essential inhumanity and limitation of role to the realm of art with the symbol of the mirror. In *Huis Clos*, Sartre too adds a symbolic dimension to his commentary on the ironies of role, but unlike the symbols in *Medusa*, the symbols of *Huis Clos* are formal. To represent Hell,

Sartre uses a confined stage setting, with a single opening door, and a circular plot.

Huis Clos is a play about the reality and illusions of the characters' visions of themselves and how these define their relations with others—their roles. The "action" of the play is simply a continual theatrical dialogue. The characters must play roles with each other: their situation is dramatic and they have no choice but to play, only a choice of what to play. The three characters discover that Hell is the confines of the room and of their own inter-relationships.

The situation is the same in *Las estatuas de marfil*. The play is about the inter-relationships of the characters; these do not really change in the course of the play, they are only clarified.

Carballido uses the same symbolically confined setting and circular plot here as Sartre in *Huis Clos*. The entire play takes place in two rooms of the Rosas apartment. There is no real division between the bedroom and the living room in the setting; it is only suggested by the lighting. Sabina is never seen out of the apartment. Even the theatre belongs there—her home is the scene of the rehearsals. The two aspects of her life intrude upon each other. The commitments of her married life conflict ultimately with those of the theatre; the theatre intrudes on the bedroom when Sabina comforts herself by acting scenes from a play after her husband has left.

The action begins and ends with the same scene—a cast party at Sabina's home. The small differences in each scene underscore the larger differences. Sabina receives flowers from her husband at the second party—for her true role as wife and mother. The party is obviously less lively; only Mundo, her husband, remarks on this in the first scene.

Sartre uses the theatre metaphor as the framework of the action itself in *Huis Clos*. Carballido's use of it here is more complex. *Las estatuas de marfil* is a play about plays, a play composed of fragments from other plays, a play of made-up scenes and games, and a play which ends with a scene composed for a play in the future. This makes the interplay of truth and falsity, reality and illusion, irony and pathos all the more deceptive.

Lucila, Argentina, and Alicia are all variants of Sabina. Each represents a role choice for Sabina, and each is frozen within the confines of the role she represents—like a statue. The opening scene between Lucila and César is an important commentary on the character of Sabina. Lucila is socially pretentious. So is Sabina, and it is part of the "Morel heritage," as Argentina explains it. Lucila presents her infidelity as a drama to César, and what interested her about the adultery was evidently the role of lover rather than love itself. She wanted to feel herself in love, and is forced by the exigencies of role to do all that she does. Sabina adopts the same attitude at the end of Act I; later she reveals that she is interested in acting this particular drama with César. Lastly, Lucila's adultery may correspond to the relationship between César and Sabina. This is not evident to the reader until the end of the play, and is one of the incalculables of it, open to interpretation by actor and director.

Argentina is clearly a model for Sabina, both as wife and mother, and as a Morel. From the first, each Morel, male or female, entertains both artistic pretensions and the longing to leave the city. Each fails, as Sabina will fail. It is

perhaps the destiny of each Morel to be "tragado por la selva," as the first one puts it.

Alicia is also a "statue" of Sabina and the opposite of Lucila in social status. She is closely allied to Sabina since they are both of lower class origin, but she is also a parody of Sabina. César suggests that Sabina is "un poco cursi," but Alicia is truly vulgar: inappropriately dressed, unable to hide her feelings for César, ill-behaved, and, most importantly, completely oblivious to the degrading aspects of her potential career as an actress in Mexico City.

Las estatuas de marfil is also a play about plays with an incomplete "play within a play" structure. Two scenes from other plays are used as commentary on the real situation. The first of these Sabina repeats to herself at the end of the first act. Rejecting the attentions of her husband—the reality of love—she acts the role of a woman in love with herself as lover. The scene is the stronger for following Lucila's confession of the same feelings. In the second scene, Sabina struggles to perform the role of an aged actress and cannot master it to César's satisfaction. He demands irony, pride, and dignity in the defeats of a life that "ella misma se escogió."⁴ Sabina is only "lúgubre y gimoteante." At one level, this scene is a figure for Sabina's own inability to measure up to her desire to be a great actress. It may also be a commentary on the last scene of the play. In that scene, Sabina is at one of the low points of the role she has chosen to play. She is given the opportunity to act, presumably, with dignity and pride, accepting her fate. She clings instead to the idea that her child will fulfill the destiny that she herself has given up. As César tries to suggest, this is an illusion. Sabina is not a tragic figure. She has not entirely accepted the realities of her own life if she persists in searching for a way out even in the next generation. She has achieved a certain dignity and light irony in these scenes. She has evidently discovered that César has not told the impresario about her at all. This is clear to the audience from the outset, but Sabina thought she might become an actress in Mexico City simply because she understood that César had mentioned her personally to the impresario. She has been the victim of the contrivances of her husband and of César, and she has, by the end of the play, overcome the hysterics of her initial discovery.

In addition to fragments from other plays, the characters also invent scenes for one another and try to force each other in various ways to assume certain roles. The members of the theatre group try to make César a sort of divine director—a Pygmalion, as Sabina puts it. He resists whenever the role confronts him explicitly—all through Act I, then most clearly when Sabina reveals the extent of her dependence on him for guidance in Act II. He spells out clearly that she must make her own decision. Like Perseo, César rejects the role of hero (director) only to find that circumstances have played him false and he has unconsciously played the role he sought to avoid. As long as the role confronts him in the context of the theatre, he successfully avoids it. But he cannot avoid it in reality. He is the one who dissuades Sabina from an abortion. He makes the decision for her and directs her toward what he believes to be her true role of wife and mother. He does not know that Sabina's conception has not been the ideal sort he described in Act I—a conscious, responsible act. It is dramatic invention, also in Act I, that suggests to Sabina that she might look beyond

the confines of her own home to an acting career. It is clear in that scene that César is playing "for himself"; he is describing his own theatrical ambitions, not those of some actress. Yet the scene acquires its own momentum: he is dismayed to discover that Sabina has taken seriously the role he has conjured up, and this confusion lasts through the play.

The two Pygmalions, César and Mundo, play a scene for each other at the end of Act II. Each assumes a stereotypic role: "una brillante exhibición de músculos y de grandiosa virilidad" and "una brillante exhibición de inteligencia."⁵ Together they debate the future of Sabina, inconclusively of course. But the irony of the scene is complex. Mundo is clearly aping the role he has refused since Act I—that of tyrannical husband. Yet he has covertly played that role by contriving Sabina's pregnancy. César is aping what has appeared to be his own true role—that of tolerant, liberal bohemian. Yet he has (much more ambiguously) undermined Sabina's position by possibly fathering her child, directing her to seek a career, and then persuading her not to have an abortion. He has essentially acted out the same role as Mundo, and perhaps César and Mundo bear the same sort of relationship to each other that Lucila, Argentina, and Alicia do to Sabina. Each man deceives Sabina, but in a different way, Mundo by the fact of her pregnancy, and César by the scenarios he creates.

The irony does not end there, though. It is clear that Sabina is not a tragic figure. Carballido does not indulge in pathos either, for she is not completely a victim. Each of the Pygmalions is compromised by the circumstances in which he acts. César is unwittingly a "César" or director, and Mundo may be unwittingly a cuckold.

By the end of *Las estatuas de marfil*, the relationships between the main characters have not really changed, but they have been clarified. The false clues have been removed and the reader sees that César and Mundo have been playing the same role all along. César is, for Sabina, a director/husband. She is unable, herself, to decide what she must do, and so she is forced to play a role—ultimately that of wife and mother. César, thinking to apprentice himself humbly to Art, is guilty of arrogance in his private life. His emotional coldness is like the coldness of the two ideal heroes in the other Carballido plays.

Medusa, *Teseo*, and *Las estatuas de marfil* are closely analogous to the plays of Sartre. The relatively simple circumstantial irony of *Les Mains sales*, *Medusa* and *Teseo*; the symbolism of *Medusa* and *Huis Clos*; and the elegant and subtle irony of game and role in *Las estatuas de marfil* all elaborate the same design.

The characters do not escape their circumstances in their choices, though they try, by adopting role, to act beyond circumstance. Role is the paradigm of eternal damnation: Hell in *Huis Clos*; the generations that hover—unwanted models and unforeseen destinies—about the heroes of all three Carballido plays; and the immortal and inhuman designs of legend and art. As Medusa says, "No hay más que un sitio: el que todos los hombres tienen en el espacio y en el tiempo."⁶ Art, statuary, monsters, and games may resemble the human in form, but they lack this essential human characteristic.

Notes

1. Eugene Skinner, "Carballido: Temática y forma de tres autos," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 3/1 (Fall 1969), pp. 37-47.
2. Mary Warnock, *The Philosophy of Sartre* (London, 1965), p. 133.
3. Emilio Carballido, *The Golden Thread and other plays*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), p. 215.
4. Emilio Carballido, *Las estatuas de marfil* (Xalapa: Universidad Veracruzana, 1960), p. 58.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
6. Emilio Carballido, *Teatro*, *Letras Mexicanas* 57 (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1960), p. 110.