

Whence Wolff's Canary? A Conjecture on Commonality

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Any reader of the Chilean Egon Wolff's *Flores de papel* (1970) who is familiar with the theatre of August Strindberg will be struck by certain parallels in setting, character and symbol between Wolff's play and Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. This similarity, particularly in the respective male protagonists and in the use of encaged pet birds—Julie's greenfinch and Eva's canary (or, perhaps, Strindberg's Julie and Wolff's Eva)—is such, in fact, that one may well assume that Wolff was at least partially influenced by the Swedish master when he fashioned his own work. Wolff, however, has asserted that he did not know *Miss Julie* when he wrote *Flores de papel*.¹ The resemblance remains fascinating, nonetheless, and in order better to examine it, a brief analysis of the symbolism and the general nature of Wolff's drama is in order.

Flores de papel, like Wolff's earlier *Los invasores* (1963), deals with the invasion and conquest of an upper class home by a force from the lower class. In *Los invasores*, however, a wealthy family is pitted against a group of indigents, while *Flores* involves only one representative from each class: a forty-year-old *solterona* named Eva and a thirty-year-old man from the slums called Merluza, who is possibly an alcoholic, a homosexual, a sadomasochist, a syphilitic, a "loco maniático" (as he once refers to himself) or two or more of the above. The oneiric frame, which in *Los invasores* adds dramatic complexity to what would otherwise be a straight-forward social-message play,² is not employed in *Flores de papel*, but in its place there is a psychological study of Eva, the woman, and, to a certain extent, of Merluza as well.³ The messages of the two plays also differ: in *Los invasores*, it comprises a warning to the upper classes—and warning implies that there is still the possibility for change and reconciliation—whereas in *Flores de papel* it is simply too late for such reconciliation—there is no longer any hope.

The action in *Flores* centers on the seduction of a lonely woman by a strange, seemingly unbalanced man. This seduction, is, however, psychological rather than sexual and is complicated by the fact that the submission involves willful self-degradation on the woman's part. Since this woman is

from the upper class and the young man who enters her apartment and eventually comes to exercise complete control over her is from the lower class, the psychological assault and conquest can also be viewed as symbolic of a social and political assault on and overthrow of the rich by the poor.

While both psychological dramas (*Discípulos del miedo*, *Mansión de lechuzas*) and social message plays (*Niñamadre*, *Los invasores*) are to be found in Wolff's dramatic repertory, in *Flores de papel* he integrates the two into one, and with very substantial artistry. The success of the play stems in part from the effective fusion of these two types of drama, but it is also due in considerable measure to the symbolic imagery the playwright employs in the development of his story. Foremost among the images are the canary and bird cage as they come to symbolize Eva and her apartment. At a second level, a parallel is established between the physical engagement of the canary, and the psychological and social engagement of the two characters. Early in the play Eva tells Merluza of a childhood game of pirate ships in which her brother would pretend to be a glorious sea captain and she the evil pirate. Merluza picks up the term pirate and begins to apply it to the canary, establishing thus a symbolic nexus between this bird and Eva. Given this connection, it becomes clear that when he vents his rage on the bird and the cage, screaming at and shaking them violently, he is actually displaying his hatred for Eva, or at least for what she represents. His killing of the bird and destruction of the cage midway through the play also constitutes an unmistakable foreshadowing of his psychological assassination of Eva and his destruction of her apartment.

The bird and cage, Eva's attractive living room, and the straw figurines and paintings which adorn it are also representative of the relatively ordered existence of the upper classes as well as of traditional beauty and artistic achievement. The fact that, in the author's judgment, these values will not just be transformed or perhaps improved but simply annihilated or destroyed by a revolution, becomes quite obvious as we witness Merluza's angry destruction of all these things and find that they are replaced by rough furniture made from scraps of the original, by increasingly grotesque paper flowers and other paper figures and ultimately by long strips of old newspaper.

Eva's inability to speak or to react in any manner to what is happening to her at the end of the play is indicative of her utter helplessness at this point. By extension, it also reveals the author's view of what the reaction of the upper classes might be when faced with a revolution. In *Los invasores* they were shown to be paralyzed by a sense of fear and of guilt, and there was established the image of the poor as angry ants and of the wealthy as trees that simply stood and waited for the ants to climb all over them. In *Flores de papel* there is also stillness and silence but the victim and victimizer here, rather than being described as trees and ants, are starkly human.

Symbolism is also evident in the names given the two characters. The name Eva, of course, is symbolic of woman in general, but also may be related to the fact that this woman's fall stems from an uncontrollable passion or desire—here for companionship and affection. Merluza, meanwhile, is a type of deep-water carnivorous fish—"hake" in English—but the term is also used in certain areas to mean "gigolo" and in others to signify "drunkenness." All three meanings or acceptations clearly apply to Merluza; he devours, at least

psychologically, another human, he refers to himself on several occasions as a gigolo, and Eva attributes his momentary fits of trembling to alcoholism.⁴

Twentieth-century dramatists and theorists—Artaud, Beckett, Genet, Albee, Weiss, Gambaro and others—have developed and espoused a so-called theatre of cruelty and of the absurd in which violence—physical and/or psychological—stands at the fore. The characters in their works are usually very few in number and are often designated simply by first name—Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon and Albee's George and Martha among them. These characters are generally more symbolic or representative than realistic, and the symbolism tends to be universal rather than regional or national. Their lives are often shown to be void of meaning and they survive by participating in interminable games that appear to offer some purpose for existence. Egon Wolff, as we have seen, makes use of most of these tenets in fashioning his *Flores de papel*. There is, for example, obvious psychological violence in Merluza's treatment of Eva and here, as in Gambaro's *El campo* and *Las paredes*, its effect is so devastating that the victim is rendered totally helpless. Wolff also employs only two characters. Both carry simple names and are, at least at one level, more representative than realistic. As for game participation, near the end of the play Merluza remarks "Como ve, es de la mayor importancia haber entendido el juego. Creer el uno en el otro. Confiar mutuamente. Renunciar a su propia identidad en beneficio de la identidad del prójimo . . ." ⁵ This statement, though it can easily be lost in the verbiage of the final minutes, is nonetheless quite significant in that it conveys not only his method in dealing with Eva—that all was a game—but also his purpose, to cause her to renounce her own identity and to become, in effect, one of the masses.

Flores de papel is, at the same time, a message play in the traditional sense, as Wolff is telling us what will happen, perhaps inevitably, as a result of the socio-economic dichotomy which exists, not only in Chile and Latin America, but throughout much of the world. In *Los invasores* there may, in fact, still have been time to rectify the situation. That work's message, as mentioned earlier, constitutes a warning, and this warning is vividly represented at the very end of the play when a hand appears outside the Meyer's living room window and proceeds to break the pane. Since Lucas Meyer has just told his family that he had dreamed that scene, and that the invaders in his dream entered through that window, the audience is left to wonder whether the invasion is for real this time, or whether what they have seen is just another dream. In *Flores de papel*, however, there remains no doubt, for the living room, symbolic in both works of upper class existence, has here been desecrated, and the play ends with the people gone and the room in shambles.

Given its single setting, the limited time of action, and its focus on only two characters and on just one basic emotion of each—Merluza's destructive hatred and Eva's need for affection and companionship—*Flores de papel* has a dramatic compactness not equalled in any of Wolff's earlier plays. This compactness, in combination with highly effective imagery and symbolism, and universality of message, places the work, in my estimation, among the top three or four plays from all of Spanish America.

As has been shown, *Flores de papel* bears a certain resemblance to *Los invasores*. The former, in fact, might be considered a distillation or purification of the latter, with a good dollop of pessimism then added for flavor. Dramatists frequently fashion new workings or adaptations of favorite themes, however, and thus it is not surprising that Wolff should follow *Los invasores* with a work such as *Flores de papel*. Notable similarities between given works by two different authors do intrigue us, nonetheless, in that they suggest the possibility either of direct influence or of environment and circumstance so strikingly parallel that they lead independently to the same images and symbols. A good case in point, as mentioned at the outset, is *Flores de papel* and August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (1888), two works reflecting different centuries, continents, cultures and world views.

In his authorial foreword to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg writes: "The plot speaks for itself, and as it really only concerns two people, I have concentrated on these, introducing only one minor character, the cook, and keeping the unhappy spirit of the father above and behind the action. I have done this because it seems to me that the psychological process is what interests people most today."⁶ Delete the reference to the minor character and the non-appearing father, and this comment could well have been Wolff's description of *Flores de papel*.

At another point Strindberg states: "As far as the technical side of the work is concerned I have made the experiment of abolishing the division into acts. This is because I have come to the conclusion that our capacity for illusion is disturbed by the intervals, during which the audience has the time to reflect and escape from the suggestive influence of the author-hypnotist." (p. 69) *Flores de papel* is not divided into acts either—and interestingly it is apparently the only play by Wolff in which they are not employed. *Flores* is, of course, divided into six scenes, but there is no indication of any intermission, and thus the effect should prove substantially the same as that sought by Strindberg, though in Wolff's case the chief interest seems to be to maintain and indeed heighten dramatic tension rather than merely sustain theatrical illusion.

Even more intriguing than the above-mentioned parallels in plot design are the similarities between certain props and between the protagonists of the two plays. In *Miss Julie*, the female lead is Julie, the twenty-five-year-old daughter of a Swedish count, and the male protagonist is Jean, a thirty-year-old valet in the Count's service. In *Flores*, meanwhile, Eva is a forty-year-old woman from the upper middle class while Merluza is a thirty-year-old ne'er-do-well, apparently from the slums. The two males, thus, are exactly the same age, and there is an obvious parallel in social status between the two sets of protagonists. Furthermore, both playwrights emphasize the psychological portrayal of the female leads and in both plays unrestrained or "morally flawed" desire is the basis for their undoing. At the beginning of their respective plays both male characters appear humble and respectful but by the end each has gained psychological control over the woman. Merluza leads Eva out into the night in her tattered wedding gown, and Jean convinces Julie to go out to the barn and commit suicide. Merluza differs from Jean, however, in his seeming irrationality and in this respect he is somewhat reminiscent of

Julie, though her "craziness" appears much less ominous than his. The opening line of *Miss Julie*, spoken by Jean, is "Miss Julie's crazy again tonight, absolutely crazy." (p. 75). Crazy, however, in the sense that she is acting in a rather undignified manner and is associating excessively with her father's servants. Merluza, meanwhile, is clearly a violent person, and his destructive hatred is of such magnitude that he must be considered dangerous.

In terms of props, both plays take place in a single room—a kitchen in *Miss Julie* and a living room in *Flores*—and in each case food and drink are served. Both males also utter phrases in French that they had learned in previous employment, though with Jean they form a logical part of the dialogue and are indicative of his industriousness and his will to learn and to rise in society, whereas with Merluza they are irrational throw-ins that simply add to the mystery of his past.

Most fascinating, however, is the fact that both Julie and Eva have pet birds in a cage—the latter a canary and the former a greenfinch. For Julie—and the statement surely applies to Eva as well—the bird is "the only living creature who cares for me . . ." (p. 106), but in each case the bird is killed by the male; Merluza wrings the one's neck while Jean cuts off the other's head with a cleaver. Jean's first (expressed) inclination, however, is also to wring the bird's neck.

Despite the above-mentioned commonality between several physical props and between the respective protagonists, there are significant differences between *Flores de papel* and *Miss Julie*. Wolff's characters, for example, are more intriguing or fascinating than those of Strindberg, at least for modern tastes, because he leaves almost all of their present and past—employment, social condition, marriage, ancestry, etc.—to the imagination of the reader, and centers instead on their interaction within the crucible that is Eva's apartment. With Julie and Jean, on the other hand, we know of his and her childhoods, of her parents and her broken engagement, and we are even told that her "craziness" is a result of her monthly cycle.

As for the physical props, Wolff focuses on one—the canary and cage—or, to recoin a phrase, the bird in a gilded cage. He has them on stage from the beginning, and clearly establishes a symbolic nexus between the canary and Eva and between the cage and Eva's apartment. He also has straw figurines of birds on stage, and when Merluza twists their necks it foreshadows his killing of the canary, an action which in turn foreshadows Merluza's psychological assassination of Eva. In *Miss Julie*, on the other hand, Julie brings the caged greenfinch into the room near the end of the play, but with no prior allusion to it. She wants to take the bird on the trip she and Jean have planned. When he refuses, however, she allows him to take the bird from the cage and chop off its head. She then rants briefly over the blood, saying that it should have been that of Jean and of all men, but this seems to be the only tangible reason for introducing the prop. Little, that is to say, is done to develop its dramatic potential.

Earlier in the play, Julie speaks of a recurring dream in which she is trapped on top of a pillar, and longs only to get back to the ground or perhaps underground. Jean then relates his own recurring dream: he tries to climb to the top of a great tree, but finds the bark so smooth that he has not yet been

able to reach the first branches. In both cases, the dreams do relate to the character's desires and actions in the play, but nothing more is made of the specific symbolism of the dreams themselves—i.e., the pillar and the tree.

In terms of symbolism, one can view the slaughter of the greenfinch and Julie's dreamed desire of being underground as foreshadowing her impending suicide, but in neither case are symbol and action nearly so well connected as they are in *Flores de papel*. Strindberg thus introduces several images with strong dramatic or symbolic potential but does not really develop any of them. Wolff, in contrast, employs only one, but then develops it quite successfully.

Given the above-mentioned parallels and Strindberg's renown, one could, as mentioned earlier, easily be led to conjecture that Wolff was conscious of and at least partially inspired by *Miss Julie* when he wrote *Flores de papel*, and then to conclude that though he drew from Strindberg, he constructed a very different play—one that is tighter and much more dramatically viable than the model on which it was, in part, based. But since Wolff has asserted that he did not know *Miss Julie* when he wrote *Flores*, and since there is no real reason to doubt his assertion, we are cast into the fascinating but highly speculative realm of artistic affinity. It is possible, of course, that there is a third work by some other author that served as a model for both playwrights, or that our two writers arrived at like or similar images and symbols by pure coincidence. Since neither of these extremes appears likely, however, and since we are already into speculation, let us go a bit further.

Both writers center on the willful self-degradation of a woman brought on by a moral "weakness" or "flaw," and in doing so they depict the antagonistic relationship between master and servant or upper and lower class. Given these common and commonplace emphases, both authors could easily arrive independently at the symbol of the bird in a gilded cage with its connotations of beauty, helplessness, abstraction, and isolation. The two playwrights could also logically employ utterances in French by two men from the lower class, both because of the French influence in Sweden and the Europeanity of Santiago, and because French, traditionally the "cultural" language, would quickly and effectively set the two men apart from the ordinary.

The parallel between the neck twisting of the bird in *Flores* and the reference thereto in *Miss Julie* seems a less likely case of affinity, though such is certainly possible. One need only think of González Martínez' "Tuércele el cuello al cisne" with its aristocratic but by then stagnant swan and its dark, foreboding owl to realize that they, too, could be partial models for Eva and Merluza.

There are, in conclusion, a number of significant parallels in imagery and symbolism between *Miss Julie* and *Flores de papel*, even though no overwhelming case can or need be made for direct influence of the former on the latter. Indeed, given the thematics of each author, their choice of these images and symbols becomes entirely plausible. One cannot help but be struck by the similarity between these two works, nonetheless, and then be led to ponder anew the whole process of artistic creation.

Notes

1. In a personal letter from Wolff, dated March 11, 1979.
2. A good overview of Wolff's theatre is: Margaret Sayers Peden, "The Theatre of Egon Wolff," in *Dramatists in Revolt: The New Latin American Theatre*, ed. Leon Lyday and George Woodyard (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), pp. 190-201. For a discussion of the use of dream in *Los invasores* see my "Egon Wolff's *Los invasores*: A Play Within a Dream," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 6/1 (Fall 1972), 19-26.
3. Daniel López, in his essay entitled "Ambiguity in *Flores de papel*," concentrates on Merluza's psychological assault on Eva, and on the function of language manipulation in carrying out this assault. (*Latin American Theatre Review*, 12/1 (Fall 1978), 43-50).
4. In his letter of March 11, 1979, Wolff notes that he chose the name El Merluza not for its carnivorous connotation but rather because it is a common and inexpensive fish in Chile and therefore a staple of the lower class. Thus it symbolizes (in Wolff's words) "masa anónima y barata, forma insustancial perdida en lo numérico."
5. Egon Wolff, *Flores de papel*, in *9 dramaturgos hispanoamericanos*, ed. Frank Dauster, Leon Lyday and George Woodyard (Ottawa: Girol Books, Inc., 1979), II, 220.
6. August Strindberg, "Author's Foreward," in *Six Plays of August Strindberg*, trns. Elizabeth Sprigge (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1955), p. 69. Further quotations from this foreward and from the text of *Miss Julie* are from this volume and are indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the text.