The Ideology of Happy Endings: Wolff's *Mansión de lechuzas*

Norma Helsper

Egon Wolff's *Mansión de lechuzas* is most often seen as the author's flawed but promising first play. Margaret Sayers Peden, for example, evaluates the work as follows:

> The weak point of the play . . . is that the tension as it is developed by Wolff hardly seems worth the source of that tension, which is Marta's desire to protect her sons from the knowledge of their dead father's true character. Since the situation seems somewhat artificial, the author must resort to exaggeration for heightening a tension that does not develop naturally . . . then finally, too easily, all the energy and crisis of the play are discharged through the simple revelation of the truth about the father by an outside, offstage, character . . . (32).

While it is true that the play projects a tension which, upon first examination, is difficult to justify, it is the contention of this study that the origin of that tension is more complex than Peden says it is. The dramatic tension of *Mansión de lechuzas* is a product of the way in which its author attempts to combine two different types of play. On the one hand, the work seems to be a psychological drama concerning one woman's method of coping with the memory of a sadistic husband. The play shows how her trauma and her convoluted way of making sense of her experiences affect her children. On the other hand, the play is a social drama that deals with Chile's changing class structure, and with the anxiety engendered in the upper classes by growing pressure for change. When seen in this way, the tension created by the play is undoubtedly "worth the source of that tension." Although in disagreement with Peden on this point, this study supports her contention that ". . . all the energy and crisis of the play are discharged . . . too easily. . . ." But rather than attribute this flaw to a lack of technical skill, I would contend that it is a product of Wolff's overriding desire (in the plays written prior to 1962) to smooth over the bitterness caused by the class differences that divide his society. He does this by presenting metaphorical

solutions to social problems.[1] His "happy endings" of this period solve his characters' personal dilemmas and suggest that his society's conflicts can be resolved just as easily, so the theatre-going public goes home with its very real anxieties about the changing social order calmed. Here I will examine the construction of *Mansión de lechuzas*' "happy ending" and comment on its place in the development of Wolff's drama during the period from 1958 to 1971, a time whose tumultuous politics had a profound effect on the dramatist's work.

In *Mansión de lechuzas*, Marta, an aristocratic widow, lives with her two teenage sons, Andrés and Felipe, in the decaying *mansión* of the title. They make their living cultivating flowers. Actually, it would be more accurate to say they do not make their living, because each year since her husband's death, Marta has been forced to sell a piece of the originally extensive lands to support herself and her household. Owing to this situation, they now have close neighbors, an Italian immigrant family consisting of a young man, Mótolla, his wife, and her sister.

The conflict in *Mansón de lechuzas*, stated in its broadest terms, is between forces attempting to maintain barriers between an inside and an outside (both social and emotional) and forces pushing to break down those barriers. Marta personifies the forces for maintaining barriers, and the house in which she and her sons live is a metaphorical representation of the "inside" she tries so hard to keep under wraps. Antonio Skármeta's comments on the use of space in Wolff's theatre aptly characterizes the function of the *mansión*. "Si no son invernaderos, serán muros. O vitrales. El cerco alrededor de la intimidad se manifiesta escenográficamente en la acción de resguardo, en la presencia de elementos sostenedores y al mismo tiempo limitadores. El espacio en el teatro de Wolff se configura en forma ambigua: como resguardo y opresión" (p. 23). As the play begins, mother and sons are playing a game of *ludo*. Marta frequently suggests they play games together in their house-prison. Gameplaying within an enclosed space is a common feature of the theatre of the absurd. In absurdist drama, games function as a metaphor for life's lack of purpose; the repetition inherent in game-playing represents the impossibility of progress. The characters in the theatre of the absurd often seem childlike because this lack of purpose or progress does not fit the commonly accepted image of what it means to be an adult. In *Mansión*, Marta's insistence on gameplaying is part of her effort to keep her sons from leaving the innocence of childhood; at the same time, the games underscore the absurd quality of the lies lived within the confines of the old house, isolated from society. *Mansión de lechuzas*, of course, could by no stretch of the imagination be called an absurdist play; it quite obviously utilizes a realist aesthetic. Yet the metaphorical use of gameplaying here is similar to that commonly found in more properly absurdist theatre, although the scope of the

metaphor is much reduced. It is not until later in Wolff's development, in *Kindergarten*, that the despair inherent in the absurdist aesthetic and the cruelty so commonly associated with it come to dominate a whole play.

The unusual sensitivity to the situation of women seen in *Mansión de lechuzas* is another feature which will be repeated in Wolff's later work, although it should be noted that the author's sympathy toward women, especially impoverished ones (such as la Polla in *Niñamadre*), often goes hand in hand with an apparent inability to see the sources of their oppression. Nevertheless, in *Mansión de lechuzas* the plot about Marta and her dark secret shows a remarkable concern for and analysis of the psychological subjugation of women. Marta continually tells her sons that their father was the perfect husband, a good man to whose standards she could never measure up. It is revealed at the end of the play that he felt revulsion for the female body and sadistically ridiculed his wife for such natural bodily functions as perspiring. Wolff shows an admirable insight into the psychology of the battered woman by having Marta internalize her husband's view of her; that is, she feels his standards were right and is ashamed that she could not meet them.

The character Móttola, Marta's Italian immigrant neighbor, functions within both the psychological drama and the social drama of this play. His role in the psychological drama is as the representative of the material world. His portrait is one of a man who talks with naturalness, but without vulgarity, about bodily functions and the physical aspects of life. It could even be said Móttola's speeches, always directed to Marta, exhibit a large measure of naiveté:

> Móttola: . . . la Mariana . . . ¿Sabe lo que me ha hecho el otro día? . . . (Ríe.) Io venía saliendo de la ducha . . . (muestra su cuerpo), tutto nudo, ¿entiende? . . . (Entre turbado y jocoso.) Y ella se ha molestado, ¿Y sabe per qué? . . . Porque las mías nalgas . . . (se golpea las asentaderas) porque siendo un hombre grande, yo tengo las nalgas de un bambino . . . (175-6)

Marta is always horrified by him, and the intensity of her horror always seems inordinate. Perhaps this is because he is "horrifying" on two levels. In the psychological drama, he is a reminder to Marta of the side of herself she has tried so hard to repress. And this, of course, is what the lower classes so often represent for the upper: the animal or physical side of human nature. The "masses" are seen as wild, terrifying, and yet attractive, perhaps because the rich perceive the other groups as being freer than they and less constrained by

decorum.[2] Móttola is the "hinge" of the two tangents of this play. He is a personification of the attraction-repulsion toward the lower classes (the Other) felt by this society's more prosperous members. Wolff here posits an intimate linkage between individual and social psychology. The playwright makes the resurgence of the repressed part of Marta's personality as inevitable as the encounter of the two classes.

> Marta: Mañana mismo vamos a clausurar esa puerta con un candado . . .
>
> Andrés: (con irritación) Pero ya no las podemos evitar, mamá. Tendríamos que levantar un muro hasta el cielo para que esa gente no se metiera aquí. No podemos evitar a esa gente con un candado, mamá; debes comprenderlo de una vez. (171)

As noted by Skármeta, the image of invasion contained in these lines is one of the most-repeated features of Wolff's work. I will comment on the development over time of this image in my concluding remarks.

The encroachment of the lower clases on the world which used to belong to the aristocracy is linked in *Mansión de lechuzas* to signs of decadence associated with the latter group. In opposition to the portrayal of Móttola (representative of the lower classes) as vital and full of life, we have images of decay and death associated with Marta's upper-class family. The most striking example occurs after the eldest son, Andrés, is laughed at in a job interview because he is so unfamiliar with the ways of the world. He compares the lives of his family members with those of the camellias they cultivate:

> . . . Mira, ¿qué ha sido del fundo vecino, mamá? Ahora es una población obrera . . . Y de la Quebrada del Helecho, ¿qué ha sido? Un canal de desperdicios y carretera para camiones . . . Es la ciudad que se nos mete dentro. ¿Has visto cómo florecen las camelias este año? . . . Llenas de flores, ¿no? Repletas de flores raquíticas y perfumadas . . . ¿Tú sabes por qué? . . . Porque se están muriendo . . . Se están muriendo y se defienden de la muerte, exhalando con toda su fuerza el resto de vida que les queda, (pausa) como nosotros. Camelias que se mueren en perfume, detrás de una reja oxidada. (197)

This image of the upper classes as delicate and doomed, incapable of reproduction, is a repeated one in the play, and can be seen in Wolff's *Niñamadre*

(first staged in 1961) as well. Speeches such as the one about the camellias, in which simile is used to poetic effect, set a tone suggestive of additional levels of meaning for other events of the play. For example, Marta's teen-aged sons, owing to her efforts to keep them childlike, apparently lack even the most basic sex education, and their unacknowledged sexual urges begin to find outlets in such activities as looking at pornographic pictures and peeping at school-girls through windows. It is suggested that the aristocracy's isolation is unhealthy, both for its members and for the society at large. Móttola provides the counter example of sexuality accepted and expressed in a healthy manner on the level of the psychological drama, and in the social drama represents the dynamic force on the contemporary Chilean scene. But the fact that he and his wife, in spite of their sexually healthy lifestyle, have not been able to have a child also must have significance on the symbolic level: any one class, by itself, is barren. The message seems to be that in order to create a society of any offspring at all, i.e., a country with a future of any sort, the different classes must work in conjunction with one another.[3] This is just what happens at the play's end, when Móttola has organized a party for the poor children in Marta's house and yard. The lines Wolff has his characters speak strongly suggest that the scene be taken as social metaphor. Andrés says ". . . la vida está volviendo de nuevo a nuestra vieja tierra. ¿Oyes?" (224). He does not say "nuestra casa" or "nuestra familia," but "nuestra tierra." And what he hears are the voices of the children of the lower classes whom Móttola is entertaining.

The gap between the classes is first bridged in the play when Móttola's sister-in-law, Eleonora, approaches Andrés, whom she sexually initiates. In this interaction, once again, the unknown, feared but desired realm of sexuality comes to the aristocrat only by way of the working class. Andrés is portrayed as the "poor little rich boy" who has gained nothing from his supposedly aristocratic standing.

> Eleonora: Móttola dice . . . que ustedes pertenecen a la aristocracia . . .
> Andrés: No sé . . . No me importa.
> Eleonora: Hay gente a la que le importa. Yo creo que son cosas de antes. Hoy vale el que sabe hacer algo . . . (203)

The withering away of any awareness of the importance of class standing suggested by this conversation is a wishful projection on the part of the playwright. Most sources assert that Chileans in the 1950s were highly aware of their position in the social order (Vidal 61). Wolff's portrayal of the love affair

between Eleonora and Andrés is perhaps the first step in the construction of the play's "too-quick-and-easy" ending, which Peden and others find so unsatisfactory. Probably no one would quarrel with the intensity of the boy's reaction to this first sexual experience: "Cuando uno de repente ha descubierto que ya no tiene miedo . . . que nada es espantoso, sino claro y lógico . . . y ese descubrimiento lo llena a uno de confianza . . ." (209). But if his further statements are also understood as social synecdoche, in which Andrés and Eleonora represent their respective classes, we have the first indication of Wolff's strong tendency to portray the social relations he desires: "Mamá, yo no estoy enamorado de esa mujer . . . Ambos lo hacemos por necesidad. Ella me necesita, porque le doy algún sentido a lo que ha hecho toda su vida, y yo . . . porque necesitaba estar con una mujer para saber que todo es simple" (209-210). In some respects the encounter of the classes constructed by Wolff resembles the classic liberal idea of "hybrid vigor," the notion that the genetic mixing of different ethnic or class groups strengthens the race. In the works of Venezuelan novelist Rómulo Gallegos, for example, it is suggested that society would benefit from the crossing of white aristocrats with Venezuelans of mulatto or indigenous ancestry. Uruguayan-Argentine playwright Florencio Sánchez showed the benefits of marrying ambitious Italian immigrants to proud criollos in his *La gringa*. But it is important to note that Wolff's proposition is much more timid than those of Gallegos or Sánchez. He specifically rules out a true coupling across class lines; notice in the passage cited above that Andrés states he is not in love with Eleonora. It appears that instead the playwright is proposing that the different social strata work together for a better Chile while "keeping their places." This idea, as already mentioned, is one of the basic tenets of corporatism: the existence of a "natural" social hierarchy.

Wolff's message is that emotional wounds, whether private or social in origin, can heal, and that the different social classes can coexist in harmony. But the facility with which these desiderata are achieved in *Mansión de lechuzas* is somehow unconvincing. After years of neurotic denial, Marta is suddenly emotionally healthy after Andrés reveals he has learned the truth about her husband's abuse of her. She is immediately open to the lower classes who formerly terrified her: "Andrés, abre la puerta, ¿quieres? . . . deja que entren esos niños. Quiero tenerlos a todos aquí, junto a mí . . . Deja que entre la luz de la tarde" (224). Social and personal problems are solved when Marta, Christ-like, says the equivalent of "let the little children come to me." Critic Domingo Piga, referring to another Wolff play, *Parejas de trapo*, makes a comment which could also apply to *Mansión de lechuzas*: "Esta brusca transformación está desmintiendo toda la obra, o mejor todo el desarrollo psicológico de la obra reniega de ese final que quiere ser feliz" (105). Wolff's own portrayal of Marta's

deep emotional scarring, and of the depth of his society's divisions, works against acceptance of his facile ending.

This is especially true in retrospect. With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, we now know that the classes in Chile did not do what would have been necessary to peacefully advance their society. Instead, Chileans became more and more polarized, a situation that contributed to making the 1973 military coup possible. The growing polarization affecting his fellow citizens is visible in Wolff's plays; we can see it by examining the motif of invasion and the plays' endings. The "Other" that "invades" in *Mansión de lechuzas* is a vigorous working person, and is portrayed as a positive presence. One reason the early plays fail to convince may be because the lower classes are not angry: Móttola, Polla of *Niñamadre*, and the "good" characters of *Discípulos de miedo* are all portrayed from a paternalistic perspective as child-like. By the late sixties, however, the "invaders" (of *Los invasores* and *Flores de papel*) have become a kind of lumpen, warped beyond hope of redemption or coexistence. Wolff's portrayal of those "invaded" also changes over time. In *Mansión de lechuzas* and *Niñamadre*, those in the superior socioeconomic position are members of the old landholding aristocracy. Everything in the plays suggests that it is time they relinquished their power to newer, more dynamic economic forces, and their "happy endings" suggest that this is just what is happening. In *Los invasores* those being invaded are productive capitalists, who are at fault for not sharing the wealth, and so seem to deserve what may happen to them, although an ambiguous ending suggests a possibility of remedying the situation if they mend their ways. Finally, in *Flores de papel* (1971), staged after socialist Salvador Allende was elected president of Chile, the "invaded" person is an innocuous upper-middle-class woman, and the play's ending leaves no doubt that she will be destroyed by the "invader," a psychopathic street person. By 1971, when Chile's lower clases were beginning to challenge seriously the socioeconomic order, Wolff portrayed the terror felt by members of the upper and even the middle class at having their position threatened.[4] Happy endings, at this point in Chilean history and in the theatre of Egon Wolff, were no longer possible.

State University of New York at Cortland

Notes

1. Hernán Vidal makes this point with relation to Wolff's *Discípulos del miedo*: "Hay un escamoteo de fisuras reales, abiertas por el conflicto de clases y sólo dirimibles en el espacio público más amplio de la conducción de una cultura nacional. En reemplazo de esas tensiones se presenta un espacio privado y doméstico, utópicamente aspirando a la armonía de un orden paternalista, de familias de clase media con intereses conservadores, que son exhibidas como símbolos de la nacionalidad" (74).

2. Antonio Skármeta comments that in Donoso's *Coronación* as well as Wolff's plays ". . . hay fuerzas invasoras que irrumpen en el estéril mundo y que dinamizan el ámbito sentando el conflicto. Y también aquí estas fuerzas son ambiguas: por un lado son las fuentes naturales de una barbarie, seres incultos, desposeídos, elementales, que prenden pasiones en cuerpos neutralizados emotivamente, y por otra parte, son elementos destructores, violadores" (26).

3. As critic Hernán Vidal points out, Wolff's plays written before 1962 (*Discípulos del miedo*, *Mansión de lechuzas*, and *Niñamadre*) can be seen as an articulation of the corporatist Christian Democratic discourse, which holds that there is an inequality inherent in the human race which leads to social hierarchization; this is seen as the natural order of things that therefore should be respected. Liberal democracy's attempts to subvert this hierarchy are seen as leading to social chaos. A well-ordered society, in which each social grouping does its part, and knows its place, is the ideal.

4. In an article first published that same year, Skármeta comments: "Es evidente que las últimas décadas en Chile han significado una agotadora tensión y desgaste para los grupos conservadores y los sectores más tradicionales de la burguesía. Políticamente, su arma de defensa ha sido la expansión del miedo a los cambios hacia sectores mayoritarios que no viven espontáneamente la pesadilla. Toda una publicidad conservadora se traduce en campañas de terror" (29). A well-known example of what Skármeta is talking about is the poster suggesting that if the left gained political control in Chile, children would be taken from their families and sent to Russia to be educated.

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