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Prospero's Orphans in Uva de Aragón's "Not the Truth, Not a Lie"

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Throughout much of contemporary Cuban and Cuban-American literature the reader is confronted with a dichotomous view of the island's post-revolutionary reality. Havana is emblematically juxtaposed with Miami, individual greed with egalitarianism, the spiritual with the material, hetero- with homosexual, Black with White, and even Civilization with Barbarism. Uva de Aragón, however, questions one's ability to judge life in such clear terms and challenges the supposition that modern-day Cuba can be measured in terms of discrete opposites. She does so in her 1977 short story "Not the Truth, Not a Lie" through the voices of two young lovers who impart their vision of the other by remembering nostalgically their youth and a Cuba that no longer exists. The Revolution is behind them, and both are in a state of being that allows them to share their thoughts freely and without sanction. They are both dead, as the reader learns at the story's close. As they recount their understanding of the world then—from the perspective offered from another reality—the characters confront themselves and each other honestly. In doing so, their thoughts and opinions reveal an archetypal drama that parallels Shakespeare's last great work, *The Tempest* (1612). Both works are set on their respective islands: a tempest is conjured up on one, a tempestuous revolution on the other. In Shakespeare's work the audience confronts an impossible relationship between the metaphorically dark figure of Caliban and the pure figure of Miranda. In de Aragón's story, one confronts a similar impossibility, impossible due to the different social status of one who is white and rich and the other black and poor.

The setting and characters of *The Tempest* evoke various associations with the Americas. Roberto Fernández Retamar, for example, cites Montaigne's "On Cannibals" as an indisputable source of *The Tempest* based on the extant copy of Giovanni Floro's 1603 translation that Shakespeare owned and annotated (8). Caliban, as he further reminds us, is Shakespeare's anagram for cannibal and is derived from the indigenous, collective term *Carib*, described by Columbus as, "men with one eye and others with dogs' muzzles, who ate human beings," and subsequently as, "people held by everyone on the islands to be very ferocious, and who eat human flesh" (Fernández Retamar 6).

In Caribbean discourse, few debate the American references within *The Tempest*, although there is no consensus about the allegorical roles played out by its characters. Ariel and Caliban in particular serve as emblems of two distinctive realities that writers have interpreted in diverse ways in a postcolonial era. For example, many are familiar with José Enrique Rodó's vision of Latin America as the lofty and ephemeral spirit of Ariel who is juxtaposed with Caliban—the monstrous and brutish representation of Anglo America. Fernández Retamar, on the other hand, envisions the opposite. Latin America is best represented by Caliban as the colonized and dominated one, the cultural icon of the Americas who has been made a servant by Prospero as he oversees his new found subjects in his exile. Citing such works as Césaire's *A Tempest* and Brathwaite's *Islands*, among others, Fernández Retamar concludes:

Our symbol then is not Ariel, as Rodó thought, but rather Caliban. This is something that we, the *mestizo* inhabitants of these same isles where Caliban lived, see with particular clarity: Prospero invaded the islands, killed our

ancestors, enslaved Caliban, and taught him his language to make himself understood. (14)

Although Rodó and Retamar offer opposing views of the symbolic qualities of Shakespeare's characters, they nevertheless agree that Ariel and Caliban serve as discrete, Manichaeic symbols, just as the Taíno/Carib emblems function in Columbus' depiction. For Rodó, one is civilized and the other barbaric; for Retamar, one is the colonizer and the other the colonized. In short, whether the postcolonial emphasis on the Caliban/Carib emblem as the exploited and enslaved, or the traditional depiction of the Ariel/Taíno figure as the pure and lofty spirit, both schools agree on the lack of ambiguity. The Shakespearean characters are contrastive emblems designed to elicit a singular interpretation.

"Not the Truth, Not a Lie" differs from these previous works that draw from *The Tempest* in that the characters are less archetypal and more fully realized as human. To convey their relationship, de Aragón allows the dialogue to meander through a complicated narrative of nostalgia, disappointment, and blame, and—most literally—an undying love for the other. As the story begins, the female narrator remembers fondly the summer vacation when she comes to know José María. The dialogue reveals that their friendship and youthful love lasts until summer's end when the narrator returns to the city and José María goes to prison for stealing. Years later, in the time of the Revolution, José María joins a mob that attacks and loots her father's house, and in the process the young narrator is killed accidentally. Now from the grave she inquires about his views on the Revolution, which he rightfully interprets as a masked desire to believe that he is not involved in the incident. In recalling the day, he admits:

I was in the lead. Don't cry. No, it's not a lie, but it's not the truth either. Do you know that everything is like that, not the truth, not a lie? Yes, I was there. Yes, everything happened just like they said. But ... I went there looking for you and you weren't there! I fled ... I ran (Aragón 180)

After he discovers her dead body, José María goes to the sea, and—contrary to the official reports of his death in the line of duty—he commits suicide.¹

At first, their love story from beyond the grave may seem to have more in common with *Romeo and Juliet*, yet a closer examination of *The Tempest* reveals many similarities with de Aragón's work. Typical of Shakespeare's late romances, *The Tempest* centers on the reunion of family and concession. It is a drama of rivals and reconciliation. One will recall that in Shakespeare's work Prospero is deposed from the dukedom of Milan by his brother, Antonio, and arrives with his daughter, Miranda, on an enchanted island, inhabited by a witch, Sycorax, who is dead before the play begins. He is served by her son, Caliban—a monstrous but mortal being—and Ariel, a spirit that he rescues. At the outset of the drama, Prospero conjures up a storm with his magical powers as a ship passes by carrying Alonso—King of Naples—his brother Sebastian, his son Ferdinand, and Prospero's own brother, Antonio. Shipwrecked on the

island, a series of conflicts and resolutions unfold that ultimately bring all parties together. Within these events one finds four sub-conflicts that are intertwined over the course of the drama: the initial rivalry between the two brothers Antonio and Prospero; the conspiracy of Sebastian and Antonio to overthrow King Alonso; the scheme of Stephano and Trinculo—in cahoots with Caliban—to kill Prospero; and finally Miranda as the object of Ferdinand's affection and Caliban's lust. Of these, Prospero's desire to reclaim his rightful dukedom and exact retribution from his brother occupy the central focus of Shakespeare's drama; however, it is the final two conflicts mentioned—those that involve Caliban's desire to remove Prospero and conquer Miranda—and their respective characterizations that merit attention when examining de Aragón's story.

The first striking similarity between the two texts rests with the characterization of the Miranda/narrator and Caliban/José María figures. In the simplest of terms, both works portray the Caliban/José María figure as dark, exploited, and marginalized, whereas the Miranda/narrator—or daughter—figure is clearly white, privileged, and elitist. In Shakespeare's work Caliban is native to the island and Miranda is foreign. Likewise, José María's character is at home in his island ambience, which for her is alien despite the fact it is her homeland as well.

While these initial similarities are quite obvious, one finds a deeper connection between the two works upon examining the development of the male and female archetypes. To illustrate these similarities, I will examine three aspects in particular: the characters' perception of each other; their respective places in their microcosms; and finally the resultant interaction—or impossibility of interaction—between the male/female archetypes.

In order to understand more clearly José María as de Aragón's Caliban, one must first consider the complicated question of the characters' perceptions of their own freedom and limitations. For José María, his feelings of inferiority and the constraints brought about by his poverty and negritude are made even more apparent to him as he comes to know the "other." As he explains about their first encounter, "You were dressed in white ... And I even remember what I thought ... or what I felt. I felt even darker!" (Aragón 178). His relationship with her does not ameliorate his circumstances. Rather, it only makes him more aware of his own negritude. Not unlike Shakespeare's Caliban, he describes himself in terms of a "prisoner of my dark skin, of my birth, of my poverty. Of my own hatred. Of my envy and jealousy. Of my dreams" (Aragón 178). In contrast to José María's self-perceptions, however, the narrator sees the exact opposite. In her view, she is the one who is imprisoned, while he is the one who ironically enjoys the freedom afforded him by his station: "What does living mean for a poor boy, a poor black child?" she says, "Did you know, José María, that I envied you? No ... don't laugh. To me you were free ..." (Aragón 177). From her perspective he enjoys a natural freedom of sorts, an ultimate independence possessed by those who are at one with their environment: "More than once, I had to rub my eyes," she says, "because I thought I saw you with wings. I thought you were so smart, because you could read the movement of the stars. You could tell time by the sun. You knew the names of plants, where the crabs hid, and how to catch them" (Aragón 177-8).

Her romantic idealization of José María contrasts with her own perception that she is the one who is truly imprisoned, imprisoned precisely by her own wealth. Her patent leather shoes literally constrict her. Moreover, her French lace and silk blouses stand in visual and symbolic contrast with his bare, bronzed skin. Regardless of the accuracy of her perceptions, her attitude nonetheless evokes a sense of undeserved self-pity or that of a “poor little rich girl.” Once again she is reminiscent of Shakespeare’s Miranda, who enjoys an equally lofty station afforded her by her father’s magical powers, but who also must endure the constraints imposed upon her by the very same. Prospero’s demand at the outset of the drama that she “Obey and be attentive” establishes his domination over Miranda in a manner reminiscent of the societal constraints placed upon the narrator in de Aragón’s story (*Temp.* 1.2.39). In fact, even though Miranda is punished to a lesser degree than Caliban, in a manner of speaking she is just as imprisoned in Prospero’s cave. Octave Mannoni points out that Prospero instinctively reacts in an authoritarian manner with all, and not just with Caliban:

There is no doubting the nature of Prospero’s magical power, for at his side we find his obedient daughter Whenever his absolute authority is threatened, and however slight the threat, Prospero ... always becomes impatient and almost neurotically touchy. ... [H]e tries to treat Miranda as an equal; but he fails. (105)

Thus, the cave and his paternal oversight are intended to protect her from Caliban’s carnal desire, but the cave—her refuge—is also her cell. Similarly in de Aragón’s version, the wealth and status enjoyed by the narrator’s family seemingly should afford her greater opportunity; nevertheless, the insular nature of the setting becomes a metaphor. In the most immediate sense she is isolated from others because she must remain within the family’s mansion, while in a greater sense she is held captive by the very forces intended to shield her from that which is different.

A second shared similarity between José María and Caliban concerns the depiction of the two as the natural or legitimate possessors of the island. In Caliban’s case, Patricia Seed points out that he enjoys native sovereignty of his island until “Prospero opportunistically uses [the alleged rape of Miranda] as the pretext to seize the island” (211). Similarly de Aragón depicts the special bond that José María experiences with the island as the ruler of his immediate environment: “the beach was his, his alone. The boy experienced the sensual pleasure of possession” (Aragón 176). In fact, his sense of self is attributable to a large extent to his solitary island nature, again reminiscent of Caliban, who, until the arrival of Prospero and Miranda, lacked interaction with humans. Likewise, José María’s environment—in particular the sea—is his sole companion:

the sea loved him [It] was like a mother, lulling him and rocking him tenderly on her lap ... giving him life from her own life
At night the sea sometimes frightened him ... like a woman who is both feared and desired. He hears seductive voices tempting him. As if a magnet were

attracting him with a tireless force. What might await him in the distant depths of the waters?" (Aragón 176-177)

This last statement offers a clear foreshadowing of José María's demise, as later he will walk into the tide and commit suicide, but early on in the story it serves to establish his relationship with the island. Just as Caliban is more the rightful lord of the island than Prospero who conquers him, there is a natural legitimacy to José María that contrasts with the narrator's material possessions and foreignness, evocative of Miranda. In short, his sea and its breeze stand in opposition to her silk and her lace. His bare feet contrast with her imported patent leather shoes. His clothes are worn; hers bind her. In José María the reader finds the same dark and exploited calibanesque figure of a natural man who is juxtaposed with the privileged daughter. Beyond these similarities in characterization, however, one recognizes a clear distinction regarding the issue of love and lust: namely, Miranda's abhorrence of Caliban as an inferior monster who lusts after her, in comparison to the narrator's idealization of José María as one who is enamored of her.

Unlike the infatuation that the two characters share in de Aragón's story, Miranda lives in fear and aversion of the Caliban "monster": "'Tis a villain, sir, / I do not love to look on" (*Temp* 1.2.309). Her disgust however stems from more than just a physical repulsion. On a psychological level, her reaction is due to Caliban's attempt to rape her, as alleged by Prospero: "I have used thee, / Filth as thou art, with humane care, and lodged thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child" (*Temp* 1.2.345-9). Although it is Miranda who is victimized by Caliban, the lasting consequences of his actions carry greater significance for his relationship with the father—at least from Prospero's point of view. His accusation forms the basis for Mannoni's well-known thesis of the "Prospero complex," defined as the composite depiction of "the paternalistic colonial, with his pride, his neurotic impatience, and his desire to dominate [with ...] the racialist whose daughter has suffered an attempted rape at the hands of an inferior being" (Mannoni 110). In other words, Prospero's fear that the inferior will defile the superior leads him to punish Caliban for his act (real or imagined), and at the same time it presses him to take paternalistic responsibility for the offender. Even though the supposed violation is of Miranda, it is Prospero who is portrayed as Caliban's victim as well as his custodian. The two enter into an arrangement of co-dependency (Master/Slave) out of an irrational fear of independence. Caliban is dependent upon Prospero, whose magical powers enslave him. At the same time, equally dependent upon Caliban are Prospero and Miranda, who exploit his services: "We cannot miss him. He does make our fire, / Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices / that profit us ..." (*Temp* 1.2.311-12).

Frantz Fanon rejects Mannoni's "psychology of colonialism" as an attempt to promote "native inferiority" and "full-blown cultural dependency" (Apter 77). More precisely, he argues against the notion that there is a psychological predisposition to seek out the colonizer (Fanon 107-8). For Fanon, Mannoni's theory of a dependency complex rests on unconscious neuroses that cannot explain colonialism in a rational way. Nevertheless, one could argue that the

characters' mutual dependency is not based on a rational arrangement sought by either party. Instead, the relationship is based on fear, distrust, and guilt. As Mannoni further points out:

the argument: you tried to violate Miranda, *therefore* you shall chop wood, belongs to a non-rational mode of thinking. In spite of the various forms this attitude may take (it includes, for instance, working for the father-in-law, a common practice in patriarchal communities), it is primarily a justification of hatred on grounds of sexual guilt, and it is at the root of colonial racialism. (106)

The "Prospero complex" differs in de Aragón's story but is equally evident. Even though the narrator's sincere love for José María contrasts with Miranda's fear of Caliban, it becomes apparent that what separates the two young characters is the same colonial racism described by Mannoni above. One lusts after the protected daughter of Prospero, a foreigner to the island. The other is the object of affection of the privileged daughter, who likewise seems alien to José María's environment. Moreover, Caliban's lust for Miranda results in his perpetual enslavement; José María's love for the narrator results in his death. Furthermore, while it is true that de Aragón does not offer an explicit picture of the paternalistic, colonial figure who fears that his daughter will be defiled, society nonetheless projects its own racial fears on the couple and irrationally distrusts José María. In other words, pre-revolutionary society itself serves as the paternalistic, neurotic force. It also establishes the legacy that continues even beyond the Revolution, since the two young lovers are only allowed to be together in death. In this sense, Christopher Lane's support for Mannoni is well-founded when he points out, "his argument about colonial positions helps explain how tyranny may persist in countries that ostensibly have achieved independence, but are in fact ruled by despots emulating former colonial structures" (142).

Another manifestation of Prospero's supposed paternalistic benevolence lies in the act of teaching Caliban to speak:

I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known. (*Temp* 1.2.354-58)²

Despite his declaration of pity, Prospero's intent is clearly self-serving. By teaching Caliban to speak, Prospero equips him to understand his master's commands. As George Lamming points out, "Prospero has given Caliban Language; and with it an unstated history of consequences, an unknown history of future intentions Prospero lives in the absolute certainty that Language which is his gift to Caliban is the very prison in which Caliban's achievements will be realised and restricted" (109-110). Language is the means by which and through which he comes to self-

awareness. More precisely, it is a colonial tool intended to make him mindful of his state. In the same way that Prospero teaches Caliban to speak, the narrator teaches José María to read, a gift that in her opinion will reveal a new world to José María: "Reading. A new world with infinite horizons. The world is yours, José María. The past. The future. Conquer them! Run! You're free" (Aragón 179). The narrator's enthusiastic declaration of a "new world with infinite horizons" brings to mind Miranda's revelation of a "brave new world," and yet both protagonists are ultimately deceived (*Temp* 5.1.182). For José María reading proves to be a disillusionment and not a liberation, as the narrator intends: "Don't you know," he says, "that you planted in me the longing to learn, when I was condemned to live with no other text than my poverty. You snatched away the world you opened up to me" (Aragón 180). His lament echoes a similar grievance spoken by Caliban when he confronts Prospero saying, "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language!" (*Temp* 1.2.362-4). In short, Caliban is taught his master's language. José María is taught to read. Through language Caliban understands his captivity. Through language—or, more precisely, learning—José María understands more fully that he is impoverished. The former can speak but only to listen to commands. The latter can read but has no texts.

A final point of comparison concerns José María's involvement in the Revolution, which calls to mind Caliban's conspiracy to remove Prospero. When he admonishes Stephano to, "Do that good mischief which may make this island / Thine own forever, and I, thy Caliban," one could argue that Caliban is not trying to re-conquer his rightful home (*Temp* 4.1.216-7). He is simply trading one master for another. But even in this more limited attempt, he fails. More precisely, he fails because the Shakespearean rebels—Stephano and Trinculo—do not understand their mission. Rather than aligning himself with Prospero's brother and powerful rival Antonio, Caliban joins ranks with a drunken servant and Jester. Not surprisingly the attempt to overthrow Prospero's figurative dictatorship is side-tracked by their misguided greed when they come across the garments that Ariel and Prospero have left outside the cave, a ploy that even Caliban recognizes as a trap: "Let it alone, thou fool; it is but trash" (*Temp* 4.1.223). In other words, Stephano and Trinculo seek reward, not revolution. The same is true in de Aragón's story when the rebels come to the narrator's house, presumably for war booty. The would-be revolution is preempted in both cases. Shakespeare's characters are distracted from their goal by their greed for the garments, just as the rebels are distracted from their ideological cause by their looting of the narrator's house. In *The Tempest* the outcome of the rebels' plot is evident: they fail. In de Aragón's story, however, the reader is less certain. It is unclear if the Revolution really brings about any change other than the fact that the narrator and, consequently, José María die. This presumed failure could be construed as positive if the reader understands that the two are now free to be together in another reality that does not impose societal constraints upon them. They are free precisely because the father—the source of the constraints—is now absent or, more likely, a casualty of war. In this respect, although the rebels' intentions coincide with those of the Shakespearean insurgents, the outcome differs. That is to say, both groups are distracted by greed, but de Aragón's rebels in fact are successful in removing the narrator's father, or rather

their figurative Prospero. In this sense, the conclusion of de Aragón's work calls to mind Fernández Retamar's interpretation of Ernest Renan's *Caliban* (1878), in which the conspirators obtain power after overthrowing Prospero:

In this work, Caliban is the incarnation of the people presented in their worst light, except that this time his conspiracy against Prospero is successful and he achieves power.... This reading owes less to Shakespeare than to the Paris Commune, which had taken place only seven years before. (9)

In other words, in the same way that the extra-textual events of the Paris Commune altered Renan's perception and portrayal of Shakespeare's characters, the events of the Cuban Revolution are inextricably linked to de Aragón's characterization.

In summarizing the most striking similarities, one finds that both José María and Caliban are portrayed as dark, inferior, and exploited. They are seen as the rightful owners of their respective islands, and yet they are marginalized by the symbolic non-natives, or "other." Caliban lusts after the protected daughter of a powerful foreigner. José María loves the privileged daughter of an absent and rich—and perhaps equally foreign—father. Caliban's lust for Miranda results in perpetual enslavement; José María's concern for the narrator results in his death. Caliban is taught language, which in turn leads to his awareness that he is enslaved. José María is taught to read, which in turn leads to awareness of his poverty. Both fail in their attempts to revolt: in one, the servants are distracted by petty theft; in the other, the mob is distracted by looting. In both cases their attempts to bring about change fail because their cohorts pursue material gain at the expense of their quest for freedom.

Despite the many points of comparison, ultimately the two works differ significantly in purpose. In *The Tempest* the reader is left with a comedy in which order is restored. As Gonzalo summarizes at the end of the drama, Prospero recovers his dukedom, King Alonso regains his son whom he thinks dead, Ferdinand and Miranda find true love, and the crew survives the shipwreck. Ariel is freed, and Caliban is punished (Shakespeare 318). De Aragón's story, however, aligns more closely with tragedy than comedy, one which, nonetheless, intends to leave the reader with a sense of hope as the two young lovers—perhaps ghosts—walk along the beach at the story's conclusion. As a subversion of *The Tempest*, the last image in the narrative suggests only traces of Miranda and Caliban as if the two young characters are their offspring. Figuratively, then, de Aragón's characters are Prospero's orphans. The father figure is now absent—just as Prospero hopes to leave the island at the end of the drama—and with his departure the dichotomous values of black and white, right and wrong have disappeared also. In this light de Aragón suggests that neither side has won the Revolution. The characters' summer love that is forbidden by pre-revolutionary mores is still impossible after the Revolution. Moreover, both have lost their innocence, which they can never recover. Both are dead at the expense of the Revolution. In fact, the Revolution may have killed the best of both worlds: the white and privileged, the black and poor. While some may consider this type of ambivalence as

naive relativism, or even as an accusatory thesis against both ideological sides, de Aragón's work serves as a subtle reminder that Cuba, or perhaps life itself, is too complicated to be judged in such absolute terms. In short, Cuba's historical dialectics lead the reader to the same conclusion that José María draws when he explains, "No, it's not a lie, but it's not the truth either" (180).

Notes

¹Ellen Lismore Leeder observes that death, and in particular suicide, is one of the most common traits found throughout de Aragón's early work and can be found in her first collection of short stories in "Not the Truth, Not a Lie" ["Ni verdad, ni mentira"], "La leyenda del aula," and "Peterson" (144).

²Although Dymkowski's edition of *The Tempest* indicates that Miranda speaks these words, the editor acknowledges that, "Dryden and Davenant gave this speech to Prospero, regarding it as too indecorous for Miranda to speak" (164, note 351b-62).

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