

POSTMODERNISM'S EXISTENTIALIST REALISM: ANA MARÍA MOIX'S *ÉRASE UNA VEZ*

JEFFREY OXFORD
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN (MILWAUKEE, USA)

Resumen: Aunque un vistazo superficial de *Érase una vez* (Moix, 1985) quizá le da a entender que este cuento es una crítica feminista de la represión de la sociedad patriarcal tradicional, un estudio más detallado revela que ambos géneros están atrapados en un mundo posmoderno de mimetismo repetitivo y paródico impuesto por un lector que puede cambiar la vida de cualquier personaje como quiera. Este lector, entonces, llega a ser un catalizador de la narrativa, controlando y convirtiendo a los personajes de *Érase una vez* en interpretaciones paródicas de ambas sociedades y literaturas anteriores y contemporáneas. De una manera bien relevadora, el cuento de hadas posmoderno y post-franquista —tal como lo presenta Moix— ha vuelto al punto de partida, permitiendo que el proceso creador genere un paradigma nuevo de «fueron felices y comieron perdices.»

Palabras clave: Cuento de hadas, feminismo, mimetismo, Moix (Ana María), *Las virtudes peligrosas*, *Érase una vez*, patriarcalo, postmodernismo.

Abstract: Although an initial, superficial, view of *Érase una vez* (Moix, 1985) might lead one to believe this short story to be a feminist criticism of the traditional patriarchal society of repression, a closer examination reveals that both genders are trapped in a postmodern world of repetitive and parodic mimeticism imposed by a reader who is at free will to change the characters' life story. This reader, then, becomes a narrative catalyst, controlling and converting the characters of *Érase una vez* into parodic interpretations of both former and contemporary society and literature. In a revealing fashion, the postmodern and post-Franco Spanish fairy tale —as presented by Moix— has come full circle, allowing the creative process to generate a new paradigm of «happily ever after».

Key words: Fairy tale, feminism, mimeticism, Moix (Ana María), *Las virtudes peligrosas*, *Érase una vez*, patriarchy, postmodernism.

Résumé: Quoiqu'une lecture initiale et superficielle d'*Érase una vez* (Moix, 1985) pourrait voir en cette nouvelle une critique féministe de la société traditionnelle patriarcale répressive, une étude plus approfondie révèle que les deux sexes sont bloqués dans un monde post-moderne de mimétisme répétitif et parodique imposé par un lecteur libre de modifier la vie des personnages. Ce lecteur devient donc un catalyseur narratif qui contrôle et transforme les personnages d'*Érase una vez* en interprétations parodiques de la société et de la littérature, à la fois contemporaines et passées. D'une façon révélatrice, le conte de fées espagnol post-moderne et post-franquiste—tel que le présente Moix—s'est profondément transformé, permettant à l'acte créateur de donner un sens nouveau à l'adage, «Ils se marièrent et eurent beaucoup d'enfants».

Mots-clés: Conte de fée, féminisme, mimétisme, Moix (Ana María), *Las virtudes peligrosas*, *Érase una vez*, patriarcat, post-modernisme.

Ana María Moix's prestige as an important, young Spanish writer was firmly

established by Josep Castellet's criticism of her in his *Nueve novísimos poetas españoles* (1970). Since that time, her stature has only increased, with her artistic production extending to other forms of the narrative genre as well. In fact, her 1985 collection of short stories, *Las virtudes peligrosas*, has received much critical acclaim, with individual units of the work being noted for, among other things, giving a voice to women through the power of the gaze (Jones, 1996), the silent woman's domination over the man (Costa, 1995), the problematic «double-speak» of a female author using a male narrator to tell a story about how two women's actions cause the insanity of one of their husbands (Bush, 1991), and the underlying theme of lesbianism (Levine, 1987). The five short stories which compose the collection each have a distinctive theme. The first, *Las virtudes peligrosas*, is aptly summarized in the aforementioned critique by Bush (1991). The third, *El inocente*, is the story of a young man in a bar waiting for Laura while an old professor prattles on about the negative side of love. The fourth story, *El problema*, personifies the title as a character and portrays his struggle throughout life to become more than merely the unnamed, and unspecific, «el problema». The fifth story, *Los muertos*, relates the events surrounding a fifteenth-anniversary party, the guests deliberately being chosen because of their differences in social status and non-acquaintance with each other. None of these literary innovations or themes was totally new to Spanish literature in 1985, but they were still fairly revolutionary literary techniques/issues for a Spanish woman writer, less than ten years after the death of the ultraconservative Caudillo who had maintained a strict censorship over Spanish letters until his death in 1975. While the lead story of Moix's collection up to now has received the most critical attention, the present essay will focus upon the second story, *Érase una vez*, which most blatantly demonstrates how, in postmodern Spanish society, overt patriarchal repression of the female seems to have been replaced by more subtle language manipulation and metatextual mimeticism which deprivilege both genders and trap everyone in a new construct of a parodic remaking of Nietzsche's eternal return via the contemporary fairy tale.

Érase una vez is the main character of the story by the same name. A female, she finds herself frequently «al borde de una crisis» (Moix, 1985:48), a figure with «bucles rubios» (47), a «blanca figura» (47) dressed in a «vestido blanco» (48), and with «ojos claros, vacíos [...] azules, ausentes y huecos» (51). She has a very unstable disposition, going from «al borde de una crisis» (48) at the beginning of the narrative, to crying, to desperately grasping her brother for emotional support, to sudden dancing, to throwing herself on the ground bewailing her lot in life, *ad nauseum*, always lamenting her fate of being condemned to existing in a realm of only «una vez» and, at the end of the story, in the same condition as when it began: «al borde de una crisis» (78). In short, this title character reflects an essential characteristic of the narrative, a postmodernist prosopopoeic rendering of redundant phrases from multiple fairy tales and children's

songs such as *Érase una vez*, *Uno para contarlo*, and *Con quién* as well as characters from those same sources such as *El hombre feliz*, *Blancanieves*, and the «enanito» Mudio.

Moix's story, in fact, can best be understood through the lens of postmodern phenomenological criticism. These critics, according to Holman and Harmon, «Tend to see the experience of reading as an aesthetic meditation or intuitive communication between the aesthetic object and the reader» (1992:354). This tacit recognition of reader-response theory and practice would normally presuppose a close examination of the relationship between narrative and reader in a deconstructionist paradigm; in the narrative under study, however, the focus shifts to an examination of the relationship between the characters and the *reader/catalyst*¹ in the construction of a new type of narratological reality in which there is no conflict between the implied and the actual readers. The former simply does not exist or have any importance over the characters' lives since Moix converts the implied reader of the original fairy tale into the unnamed reader/catalyst of her story; consequently, then, the reader/catalyst constructs his/her own reader responses through the mere act of beginning to read the original fairy tale, to which Moix's characters react in modern-day fashion to that same fairy tale. As reincarnations of characters written into existence centuries before in other countries, by other authors, Moix's characters share no commonality of setting or history with contemporary readers even though they are bound by the constraints of postmodern prosopoeic language and thought.

Eternal recreation becomes a constant for postmodern readers of Moix' narrative. As Andrés Trapiello has noted, «es un hecho incontestable que la modernidad de nuestras letras y de nuestro pensamiento pasó [...] por [los de la Generación del 98 como] Unamuno» (1997: Dust Jacket), but unlike Augusto Pérez, who –in *Niebla* (written in 1907, published in 1914) – is condemned to death by the author Unamuno², Moix's characters are condemned to life/death, not by the author and creator of the original stories and personages –past tense only–, but to multiple lives/deaths by each and every reader who recounts the respective fairy tale or song –past, present, or future– in which the character is eternally bound to return.

That is, the relationship between character and reader/catalyst in *Érase una vez* is certainly much more than merely intuitive; the search for true communication between the

¹ I am using the term *reader/catalyst* at this point in order to clarify that I am talking about the reader of the intertext (i.e., the original fairy tales) as opposed to the «reader» of Moix's story entitled *Érase una vez*. The importance of this distinction should become even more apparent later in the essay.

² I will ignore the debate within the text of *Niebla* itself between the characters Augusto Pérez and Unamuno about whether the former is actually able to kill himself. While such is prescient of Moix's technique using a reader/catalyst, and Unamuno is very much an influence on Moix—as discussed later in this essay—my point here is that Moix's characters have multiple lives created and influenced by the reader—as opposed to Unamuno's focus on the author as creator—.

reader/catalyst and character serves as the basis for the latter's existentialist angst and desire for fulfillment and identity. Without the reader/catalyst, these modern-day versions of the characters are incomplete, for it is, as noted in the following examples, the very reader/catalyst who both causes to exist and controls the existence of those characters:

Alguien en algún lugar, había empezado a contar o a leer las vivencias de Alicia, y la Liebre de Marzo, el Sombrero y el Lirón habían desaparecido, interrumpiendo la merienda, para acudir a la boca del narrador (Moix, 1985:65-66).

Ojalá quien [a Érase una vez] hubiera llevado a la boca, en cualquier rincón del mundo, al empezar con ella, al decir érase una vez, una historia, tuviera la suficiente imaginación para contarla muy muy larga (Moix, 1985:68).

Un dragón se arrastraba, herido, hacia él. Mientras le extraía una espada de una de las patas y se la vendaba, el monstruo alternaba protestas contra el escozor provocado por el desinfectante y contra el narrador que le había en suerte: la historia contada fue la habitual, pero en lugar de resultar muerto por el caballero, sólo quedó herido, accidente más doloroso que la muerte (Moix, 1985:72).

That is, as Uno para contarlo notes, the reader/narrator has supreme control:

La muerte, ansiaba la muerte, único remedio para liberarse de su memoria, del presente y del futuro [...]. La muerte, sí, pero, ¿cómo hallarla?, ¿dónde?, ¿cómo una frase se daba muerte a sí misma? Imposible, sólo quien la pronunciaba o pensaba poseía el don de matarla silenciándola. Una frase no podía tacharse a sí misma, ni olvidarse, ni callarse. Nada ni nadie tan falto de libertad como las palabras» (Moix, 1985:77-78).

In this new paradigm, then, the true creator is neither the original author of the fairy tale –e.g., Perrault, *et al.*– nor the reconstructed author (Moix); the issue of who is the true creator has passed beyond Unamuno's debates with Augusto concerning the written word to a more sophisticated, postmodern fragmentary reality in which the voice of the reader/catalyst becomes the true creator. The oral tradition has, once again, imposed itself not only on the continuation of the actual story but also on the quality and quantity of the lives of the characters within these very stories. Similar to the rhetorical cliché question «If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?» the postmodern reader is faced with the question of «without the spoken word, do these characters exist?»

These existentialist concerns –tacitly encapsulated within the question of whether mere words and fairy tale characters can become characters and have life– go to the heart of the relationships between imitation, creation, and the created object. As mere words, Moix's narrative reveals a strong indication of metatextual prosopopoeia, but as fairy tale characters within another (albeit simulated) fairy tale, the parodic element can hardly be overlooked. Parody –defined by Hutcheon as «repetition with critical distance» (1985:6)– is the essential element which ties Moix's story together and causes the

postmodern reader to view the events in a humorous fashion since life in the characters' home is not as it appears to the outsider or as portrayed in the original fairy tales –and certainly not the traditional «happily ever after»–. La Bella Durmiente is, in fact, «no sólo feísima sino malvada: bebía café sin cesar para evitar el sueño y para demostrarles saber tejer perfectamente sin pincharse» (Moix, 1985:63). «Blancanieves se había empeñado, aquella mañana, en tomar el sol en el parque y, mientras cinco enanitos se afanaban en aplicarle harina para disimular el color tostado de la piel, Gruñón, rojo de ira, los regañaba a todos: [...] '¿Crees muy fácil encontrar un príncipe miope para que te bese y despierte cada vez que a alguien se le ocurre contar su disparatada historia?'» (Moix, 1985:63). The valiant knights with shining armor «les horrorizaba matar al monstruo de cien cabezas que ningún daño les había causado, la sangre les producía náuseas y la rubia princesa les aburría mortalmente» (Moix, 1985:72).

Even the inherent humor, then, also demonstrates the subjugation of the characters to external forces in this intersection of (de)constructionism and identity. The various characters have no innate ability to construct their own identity; such ability comes merely through the power of the reader/catalyst's spoken word, and they are condemned to repeat their history and/or relive the same –or closely similar– life events within the relative confines of a pseudo-mimetic re-presentation of yet another created world. Or, as Jones notes, «in Miss Moix's fiction empirical facts [i.e., the original fairy tales] are unreliable because of their constant modifications [by the reader/catalyst], ultimately confirming the perplexing relativity of all things: objects, characters, events» (1976:112). At the same time, Moix's repetitive –albeit parodic– imitation of the original narratives also undermines them because of a structural redundancy within the text not found in the original versions; in the postmodern version, the last paragraph of the narrative parallels the first and third paragraphs of the same work, creating a circular, unending story-line in opposition to the chronological, finite plot structure of the original:

Los bucles rubios de Érase una vez crecieron de nuevo, escribió mentalmente Uno para contarlos bajo los tilos al contemplar la blanca figura de su hermana, en pie, de espaldas a él, al otro lado del lago (Moix, 1985:47).

Sí, no veía el rostro de Érase una vez ni, por consiguiente, su expresión; pero, por el repetido gesto de pasarse la mano por los bucles de la nuca y tirar rápida y nerviosamente de la punta de los cabellos, Uno para contarlos lo comprendió: su hermana se hallaba al borde de una crisis (Moix, 1985:48).

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The question that immediately arises, in light of the transformative nature of parody, concerns the imitative purpose and/or relationship of Moix's invented world to either Spain of the day or the historical worlds of the original fairy tales. That is, in spite of the common denial by critics of the presence of social realism in her works³, is it possible that, at least in this one narrative, Moix does concern herself with such? While obviously not the only aspect of social realism, a starting point for such a discussion which offers an alternative interpretation of Moix's construct of society is an analysis of gender roles/issues within the work. As previously noted, Moix's characters are not traditional fairy tale entities; *Érase una vez* is a female of unstable disposition, frequently «al borde de una crisis,» to such an extent that she is constantly pulling out her «golden locks [...] a symbol of her imprisonment» (Soliño, 2002:266). Sleeping Beauty «para demostrarles saber tejer perfectamente sin pincharse [...] se empeñó en confeccionar una camisa para El hombre feliz» (Moix, 1985:63). Snow White delights in sun tanning, and Count Laurel's widow exclaims, «¡Harta, estoy harta de esta viudez de siglos! ¡De esta cama vacía...!» (75). That is, none of the females is happy with her traditional position/role; all feel downtrodden and aspire to rebel against the created world allotted them by their creator.

The interpretation offered above is in line with other critics' observations that Moix's literary work is generally of a feminist nature. Schumm notes that «*Julia* [1970] embodies women's impotent condition in society and, thus, attempts to change it» (1994:167). Soufas says «the thrust and direction of [Moix's] early writing [...], if anything, demonstrates strong overtones of an incipient feminism» (1987:226), and in the same critical tone, Levine adds that «Moix's previous works [...] not only enabled woman to write 'her self' but went even further by allowing her to address the French feminists' dictate of 'writing the female body'» (1987:99). Finally, Jones references Moix's «strong characters, who to date are exclusively feminine» (Jones, 1976:113) and that in the 1970s Moix «was associated with *Vindicación feminista*, an important feminist journal with a mission to report on national and international issues from a feminist point of view» (1997:142). In summary, a reader familiar with Moix's other writings and biography would logically expect a feminist slant out of *Érase una vez* as well.

However, while overt sexist language denigrating the female is frequent throughout *Érase una vez*, it also bears considering that the strength and savoir-faire of patriarchy has here lost its gleam; the males are not presented in a very favorable light or in control of their own destinies. The three principal male characters, in fact—Uno para contarlo, Conde Laurel, and El hombre feliz—fare very little, if any, better than the females. While it is true that Uno para contarlo is often the source of consolation for his sister,

³ For a more ample discussion of this topic, see Bush (1991), and Steward (1998).

he too suffers his bouts of being «nervioso y malhumorado» (Moix, 1985:67), is eager to «disfrutar la ausencia de su hermana» (68), is frustrated by the question of «¿a quién contar la historia de cuantos aquí vivían y de cuanto sucedía si sólo él quedaba? Sólo él, Uno para contarlo» (77), and is the one who «cumplió con su obligación de mirar por el ojo de cerradura» (63) in order just to see the other inhabitants of the house and know they still exist. Conde Laurel's dilemma is even more precarious: he is, in fact, an «inexistente persona» (55), «Muerto. Desde siempre» (58), and «predestinado a bogar en la inalterable corriente de unas aguas estancadas en una frase del canto de una viuda a la que nunca conocerían» (70) yet somehow unaware that his widow lives with his siblings in the same house that he frequents. El hombre feliz, «a veces, al sorprenderse pensando [...] corría hacia el laberinto en un desesperado intento para perderse a sí mismo» (62), never able to make a real difference in the world, in spite of his willingness to give the shirt off his back in order to help anyone in need. As Costa notes, «Moix assumes the voice of the male reader/writer, rendering not his accomplishments, but his failures: [...] the inept simplifications derived from his efforts, and a voracious and self-destructive desire to control the text absolutely» (1995:95). In essence, then, Moix's male characters are no better off than their female counterparts, being likewise subject to the reader/catalyst's rendering and interpretation of their lives.

Thus, while an initial, superficial, view of *Érase una vez* might lead one to view it as a feminist criticism of the traditional patriarchal society of repression, in reality, neither gender is privileged; both are deprivileged, trapped in a world of repetitive mimeticism by a language neither their own nor one that they can control. The creative and controlling agent is the reader/catalyst –of either gender– who repeats/reorders the characters' life story at will. Language –i.e., the voice of the reader/catalyst– becomes the controlling and creative agent. And while the characters are granted a «new life» through a prosopopeic evocation of their name in Moix's work, that life exists only as a transitory imitation of that of the original fairy tale. At best, then, the characters of *Érase una vez* are merely simulated and parodic reincarnations of former worlds; at worst, they are simply expressions on a sheet of paper that the postmodern Spanish mind recognizes, but subject to multiple interpretations without any inherent worth or identity in and of themselves. Perhaps, then, in the postmodern world of post-Franco Spain, the fairy tale has come full circle, truly allowing the creative process to generate a new paradigm of «happily ever after» as per each individual reader's wishes.

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