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SUB/IN/DI-VERTING THE OEDIPUS SYNDROME IN
LUISA JOSEFINA HERNANDEZ'S *LOS HUESPEDES REALES*

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Luisa Josefina Hernández's play, *Los huéspedes reales* (1956), opens as night begins to fall in a comfortable, middle-class living room, marked more than anything by its complete normality. The first words are spoken by the protagonist Cecilia, "Bueno, Isabel... ¿Por qué te molesta?" to which her friend responds, "A ti debería molestarte, no a mí" (84, emphasis added). Thus, already in the opening moments of the play, characters twice use the term that epitomizes the work: **molestar**, to bother, to disturb; from the Latin **molestus**, heavy, hence painful, troublesome. Surely, *Los huéspedes reales* is a disturbing, troublesome play, marked by an abnormality that contests the visible ordinariness of the setting. And the work is rendered even more troublesome in that one is encouraged to read it as a contemporary version of the Electra complex.¹ Although such a reading is in many ways valid, perhaps even incontestable, it nonetheless occasions a sense of dis-ease, dis-comfort (at least in this critic), for while the focus on the Electra, implicitly incestuous, relationship between Ernesto and Cecilia **might** explain the twisted love/hate attachment between mother and daughter, there are too many elements of the play still left unexplained: among them, the unusual friendship between Cecilia and Isabel; the perversely destructive, if indeed socially "normal and natural" relationship between Juan Manuel and his lover; the convoluted bond between Elena and Ernesto; the mercurial rapport between Cecilia and Bernardo which oscillates between platonic friendship and eroticism. None of the relationships of the play fall into the category of what we would like to label "normal"; much about the play is "disturbing." Why?

Until relatively recently Western thought has been dominated by what Jacques Derrida labels phallogocentrism, in which the spoken word and the

masculine have been consistently privileged in our history, philosophy, and sociopolitical structures (*De la grammatologie*). Similarly, our literature and our literary criticism have been dominated by what might be called the Oedipus syndrome, a fixation that manifests itself in two modes: first by a privileging of the masculine as both writers and readers are "immasculated," forced into reading and writing "like men," and second, by an insistence on perceiving Oedipal relationships everywhere and then basing our literary analysis on that perception. Critic Judith Fetterley has analyzed the process of immascultation that informs our reading of texts as we are all, male and female, coerced into the role of "male" readers. Parallel and simultaneous to this immascultation, there has been a perceptual and analytical emphasis on the father's position and power which has led us to view him as the center or mediator of all desire, relationships, and action.² Thus, in the Oedipal syndrome we not only privilege but also become obsessed with the fictive father's symbolic phallus while we tend to efface or condemn all else, including the fictive mother and the feminine.³ Thus, like Freud, whose Oedipus complex was founded on a mythic, literary construct, we have formulated our cognizance of the literary world on a metaphor based on another metaphor and thus redoubled the fictive edifice, perhaps blinding ourselves (like Oedipus) as we bury ourselves in mythic chimeras. As a result we have often focused on only one half of the perceived, perceiving, and perceivable world: the masculine, the paternal, the phallic.⁴

Doubtlessly, the problem of immascultation (in both its manifestations) has affected women writers as much as readers since the former have often been told that they had to write "like a man" in order to be published, read by men, and thus be successful. Or so it has seemed. I suggest, however, that at times the immascultation has been only "skin deep" and that beneath the visible surface there can be found a contravention of this process in texts that divert, subvert, and even invert the Oedipus syndrome while apparently affirming it.

A case in point is Luisa Josefina Hernández's *Los huéspedes reales*, a work that structures itself on the tension between the visible and the invisible, the spoken and the unspoken, on a number of levels as, wittingly or not, it diverts, inverts, and subverts the syndrome it seems to perpetuate. Most critical readings of *Los huéspedes reales* have immasculated, metaphorically at least, both the protagonist Cecilia and the playwright by emphasizing the potentially incestuous relationship and positing that the central object of desire is the father's phallus. I suggest, however, that the play's phallic ideas and the Electra complex are undermined or negated as much as they are supported. In fact, much as the society it portrays, the work proffers and endorses contradictory discursive fields as it sketches a site of resistance, albeit unwittingly, in which societal norms and models for "normal" and "natural" interpersonal relationships are questioned.⁵ In this manner, *Los huéspedes reales* simultaneously colludes with and contests the Oedipus tradition on which those interpersonal relationships are based, hence the reader's troublesome sense of dis-ease.⁶

The fact that all characters prove ill-adapted to ideal societal gender roles delineated by readers of Freud may point more to the inadequacy of the roles themselves than to some tragic flaw on the part of the characters. In this regard, Hernández's theatrical mirror discretely calls attention both to the inadequacy of drama as a mirror of reality and to the artificiality of the "nature" that mirror would pretend to reflect.⁷ Thus, I propose to read the play not as a mirror of the Oedipus tradition but as a potential site of resistance, reappropriation, and rereading of that tradition.

Let us note first that since Cecilia, the purported Electra here, does not aim to kill her mother (as in the Sophocles play) nor has her father been murdered by the latter, we must presume that the Electra evoked by most critics is the potentially incestuous Electra of psychoanalysis's Electra complex, not that of the classical myth, in which there seems to be no suggestion of incest or erotic desire between father and daughter.⁸ In their search for a feminine counterpart to the Oedipus complex, in which the son wishes to eliminate the father and usurp his patriarchal, phallic position by marrying the mother, Freud's followers, among them Jung, labeled the potentially incestuous relationship between father and daughter and the resultant jealousy toward the mother, the Electra complex.⁹ As described by psychoanalytical theory, the daughter wishes to replace (become?) the mother (as wife of the father). Thus, although the Electra complex is one limited to females, the object of desire, the focus of attention, is still the metaphoric or virtual phallus, just as it is in the Oedipus complex.¹⁰ Significantly, then both the Oedipus and the Electra complexes are constructs (psychological myths?) that privilege the masculine.

By centering on the relationship between Ernesto and his daughter and labeling it "unnatural" or incestuous, critical analyses of *Los huéspedes reales* have also privileged the masculine and implied that the object of desire, which motivates all action in the play, is the symbolic or literal phallus of the father. I suggest, however, that the primary concern of the play is less Ernesto and phallic desire than Cecilia and, specifically, her rejection of both the phallic and limited gender roles. At the same time, I propose that all the action of the play revolves around her and the rite of passage (marriage) she undergoes. The work is clearly structured to begin and to end with her: she is the first and the last character to appear on stage and to speak. Indeed, her centrality is marked as early as the opening stage directions (which for the theatre audience are unspoken and perhaps invisible) — "*Sala de casa de Cecilia*" (84, emphasis added) — and each scene begins with a similar description. In a patriarchal society such as the Mexican and in view of the fact that Cecilia is presented as a young woman only twenty years old, it would be more appropriate to designate the home as that of Ernesto, that of Ernesto and Elena, or even that of the parents of Cecilia (the latter, had Hernández wished to draw more attention to Cecilia). That the playwright specifically and repeatedly labels it Cecilia's home suggests, first, that Cecilia is the most important character in that house and, second,

that there is a special tie between Cecilia and that house, which has “[d]os puertas, una lleva a la calle y la otra al interior de la casa” (84). Similarly, Cecilia has two options: she can “pass” from inside to outside, take her assigned position (that of wife and future mother) in a new home under the auspices of the husband and the sociopolitical structure of adulthood, or she can turn inward, refuse to “pass” and turn back instead to the security of the childhood home and the pseudo gynocentric world it implies.¹¹ She opts for the latter, making the final words of the play particularly significant: “Queremos estar solas... Y esta vez, el camino es largo, largo, largo...” (138, emphasis added). The home, traditional center of matriarchal influence (and initial infant attachment according to Freud), will finally belong exclusively to and be dominated by the women, in fact, not just in appearances. But, as suggested by Cecilia’s image of the long, long road, a relationship between mother and adult daughter, unmediated by the father, will not be an easy one, for it is one that has yet to be written or imagined, staged, described or prescribed.

In addition, except for scenes three and five, in which Bernardo appears, all the scenes of the play take place in the closed, protective environment of the house.¹² Thus, it would not be difficult to understand the house as a synecdoche of the childhood Cecilia does not wish to leave. Indeed as the moment for her departure nears, the stage directions describe her with “*el rostro más atemorizado de la tierra*” (118) because in her own words, “llegó un mensajero envuelto en una capa de terciopelo y montado en un caballo blanco para anunciarme que debo partir” (109) and “*todos quieren que yo me vaya*” (119). And, as Ernesto notes after the marriage ceremony (the rite of passage), “*esta casa era lo único que ella tenía. Le has quitado todo sin saber si le dabas algo en cambio*” (130), although, of course, the same accusation might be made of him when he commits suicide and leaves her fatherless.

Unlike the purported, if indeed metaphoric, object of desire in the Electra complex, an erotic relationship, with either her father or Juan Manuel, would more often than not seem to be precisely what Cecilia does not desire.¹³ She yearns for permanent childhood and perhaps impossible, fairy tale love, but not erotic, phallic love. Indeed, Hernández discourages our interpretation of Cecilia’s desire as incestuous by having her recognize that she and her father are play acting when they talk about their love and by having her laugh at it: after they recite the lines they *would* say in a love scene, Cecilia, “(*Muerta de risa*),” responds, “Papá, ¿de veras se decían esas cosas cuando tú tenías veinte años?” (100), certainly not the words of a young woman trying to seduce her father and gain his sexual favors (as some critics have implied), although perhaps the words of one who recognizes the play acting involved in assuming adult gender or sex roles.¹⁴

One critic has attributed the tension and lack of tranquility that permeate the work and mark Cecilia’s interaction with the other characters (those “bothersome” elements) to her being “constantemente bajo la fuerza de la

sinrazón... reconoce estar totalmente absorbida por el amor a su padre y acepta permanecer con él para siempre, a toda costa" (Knowles, *Teoría* 41). I suggest, however, that the *sinrazón* that dominates Cecilia may well be the sociopolitical structure that requires the daughter, in this case an only child and the center of the tiny universe of the home, to give up this privileged position and to exchange it for that of wife, subject (in the society portrayed) to domination and perhaps even abuse (psychological if not physical) by the husband, in this case a particularly odious one. As Cecilia observes, "Voy a casarme con la persona a quien más desprecio y no puedo evitarlo" (109). It is the home itself and all it symbolizes (the past world of privilege) that Cecilia does not wish to leave as much if not more than it is her father. Her resistance to the sociopolitical structure is particularly apparent near the end of the play when she insists, in unequivocally nonerotic terms, "yo ya estoy enamorada... **de esta casa**, de mi cama donde **duermo sola**" (135, emphasis added). Let us note too that, although Cecilia repeatedly assures Ernesto, "moriremos juntos," when he does die, she does not consider suicide, but rather life, specifically among women (*solas*, without males) in the now maternal home. Thus, the conclusion of the play, when she apparently decides to stay with her mother, marks a site of resistance to the Oedipal syndrome as it signals the possibility that her actions have been motivated by desire for self-determination (which would include not relinquishing her privileged position in the home) and/or for a relationship of equality with her mother or others, even as she recognizes how long the road to those goals will be.¹⁵

In fact, Cecilia's resistance to the phallogentric is subtly portrayed as early as the opening scene. There she interacts with two female characters, Isabel and her mother, and wonders about the female's preoccupation with the males — "¿Por qué lo discutimos tan a menudo?" (84) — while recognizing the potential perniciousness of those males to the rapport among females — "¿No te perjudicaría que yo tuviera un novio visible?" (85). Although males may motivate much of their discourse here, those males are distinctly and significantly absent, as they are again at the conclusion of the play. Thus, the male's invisibility here, his nonpresence, tacitly empowers the females and enables bonds between them, much as, I suggest, Ernesto's final suicide, nonpresence, will empower the wife and daughter and furnish the stage on which a new/different relationship between them might begin to be enacted.

The question of invisibility also underlines the play's resistance to traditional sociopolitical and gender roles insofar as only certain roles, certain possibilities — the phallogentric — are seen, can be seen, can be staged (because they have already been written, prescribed). Others are hidden from view in a complex game of hide and seek that simultaneously evokes and denies their existence. For example, after Ernesto's suicide, Cecilia states to Juan Manuel, "Esto es asunto de mi padre y mío... ni quiero que veas lo que sigue" (138). What follows, what is a matter for her and her father, and what she (and perhaps

Hernández) does not want seen, what is visually censored here (again perhaps because it has not yet been written, imagined) can only be a new/different rapport with the mother in the microcosmic world of the house of women. Similarly, what are also left essentially invisible (censored, unstaged) are Isabel's feelings for Cecilia, which are evoked only indirectly or articulated to an absent Cecilia, in a pertinent play of revealment and concealment. As Isabel says, "Es verdad que no tengo amigos. Siento afecto por ti, Cecilia. Lamento que a veces..." (86). Later, alone, in Cecilia's room she whispers, "¿Por qué no aceptas que te quieran? Yo siempre te he querido mucho y nunca me has prestado atención" (124). She continues,

he sido para ti como un útere que se baila a voluntad y que no tiene sentimientos propios. Eso es malo. Si no sabes querer a las personas, deberías por lo menos apreciar su cariño.... Vuelve en ti, Cecilia, no estés loca, Cecilia, por favor sé feliz (124).

Thus, Isabel's discourse, although frequently silenced (censored) by Elena as is Cecilia's, asks Cecilia to seek her "*felicidad de buena ley*" (as Ernesto also does), the one society has determined should be hers, and not "be crazy" by rejecting that visible, socially acceptable role. Still by positing that it is "crazy" to resist the dominant mode, her speech subtly proposes that the "craziness" is in the eyes of the beholder. In this respect another, a different possibility is put forth: that the *sinrazón* may exist not in Cecilia but in the social structure that would impose very specific and limited gender roles and (perhaps as a result) discourage interpersonal relationships that are not triangular, mediated by and centered around a male (father, husband, boyfriend). And, in spite of Elena's seeming willingness to impose the societal role on Cecilia, there are moments of the play that also point to her own resistance or potential resistance to the imposed gender roles. As she argues, in a statement whose multiple negatives mark the resentment and the resistance,

Durante veinte años no he pensado sino en ti, a nadie he servido sino a ti, no he salido a la calle más que contigo... Podría decirse que los últimos años de mi vida no han tenido otro objeto que el de acompañarte (113).

Ernesto, however, views her "dedication" to him differently; he sees it as a trap embroidered with complex designs to prevent them from advancing to the future that he admits he neither needs nor wants.

At the same time, it cannot be irrelevant that both Elena and Ernesto acknowledge that Cecilia is incapable of loving anyone. Even her relationships with Bernard and Ernesto, the two males for whom she does demonstrate some degree of fondness, are alternately marked by attraction and rejection and echo the antagonism between Elena and Ernesto that becomes visible during their various encounters. Although Elena recalls a past when their relationship was

based on some mutual affection and perhaps even desire, Ernesto's discourse refutes that memory and functions as a weapon to hurt her. What is perhaps most unsettling throughout the play is the rapidity with which all the characters convert (via their speech) from visible victim, brunt of others' verbal aggression, to victimizer verbal attacker.

Similarly, the most mistreated character of the play, Juan Manuel's lover, also takes her turn as aggressor when her speech avoids consorship and she makes visible her "invisible" relationship with Cecilia's fiance. In fact, the question of appearances (or visibility) and female empowerment (or lack thereof) along with the question of phallic, heterosexual eroticism are brought to the foreground when his mistress phones Cecilia from a *casa de citas* (locus of illicit eroticism). The call highlights both the erotic that will structure Cecilia's future with Juan Manuel and the latter's capacity for oppressive and deceitful behavior (which again juxtaposes the visible and the invisible). Although Hernández overtly portrays Juan Manuel as a contemptible character with whom marriage should be unthinkable, his behavior, while exaggerated and made to appear particularly loathsome, is not totally alien to society's expectations of the male, that is, to his prescribed role as husband and father. As Elena notes with subtle irony, the male is expected to be unfaithful: "¿qué otra cosa podría esperar Cecilia de un hombre como usted?" (103). And he is expected to dominate or even hurt her with her implicit consent or at least her silence: "Los hombres pueden herimos de diferentes modos, nosotras lo único que podemos hacer es resentirlo" (103). Thus, Juan Manuel has apparently only performed as he has been taught and as a result is not only not ashamed of the psychological havoc he has wreaked on his lover but, in fact, proud of having reduced her to a lesser being:

además **es culpa mía** que se encuentre como ahora, casi enloquecida... **Ahora no es nada**. Ella se ha convertido en una mujer que grita, que se desmaya, que se arrastra... **ya no es una persona** (91, emphasis added).

Who could blame Cecilia for not choosing this future?

Again, perhaps Cecilia's problem is less incestuous desire for her father than her reluctance to accept an adult woman's role (wife and mother) and follow social mandates that disadvantage her. As she expresses it after her father has urged her to comply with "nature," to marry and seek her "*felicidad de buena ley*" (136, the choice of words cannot be casual), "Lo que tú has llamado fraude es un fraude, pero es completamente real, es una equivocación, pero una equivocación que existe y que yo no puedo borrar" (136). Earlier, Cecilia insisted that if she were to marry, the chain of betrayals would begin, suggesting that she would do to her children what her parents are doing to her (117) because "hay un momento en que una descubre que se halla en el camino de lo que no debe ser y no sabe cómo evitarlo. Hay fuerzas que empujan a una" (110). Thus,

the ulcer, the sore, the Oedipus syndrome, the metaphoric journey on the metaphoric social road that prescribes and restricts gender role possibilities, will be infinitely perpetuated. I suggest, then, that the erotic, incestuous relationship that defines the Electra complex is negated more often than it is affirmed in Cecilia's character, if indeed not in Ernesto's, which may explain his suicide.¹⁶ Let us recall that it is in the final scene when Ernesto most overtly reveals incestuous desire for Cecilia, looking at her "like a man looks at a woman." Her reactions to him have generally been interpreted as an indication of her incestuous desire. Nonetheless, they might alternatively be interpreted as her comprehension of the agency of his erotic desire in her "power" over and "conquest" of the male other (in this case so that she can stay in "her" home, and paradoxically, in her nonerotic state).

On several occasions Knowles substantiates his Electra complex theory by referring to Cecilia's manipulative powers that make her "digna hija de su madre" (*Teoría* 57). Nonetheless, she is unquestionably more a mirror reflection of the males of the text since wife is precisely the role she wishes to avoid. The irony implicit in the text's resistance to the Oedipus syndrome is that in the Oedipal narrative the son would become (assume the place of) his father; in the Electra complex the daughter would become (assume the place of) her mother as erotic companion of the father. But such is exactly what Cecilia does not want. In this family romance, Cecilia seeks not be her mother but, on the contrary and in the words of Marianne Hirsch, to "disidentify" with the mother.

At the same time and perhaps even more important, Cecilia might well be designated "digna hija de su padre," for like him she wishes to halt the flow of time. Ernesto arrests the process by committing suicide; Cecilia attempts to halt it by forestalling the rite of passage and remaining in her nonphallic state within the pseudo gynocentric home as daughter, not as wife. Early in the play her position is made clear when she insists, "Yo nunca he crecido... Papá... no voy a crecer nunca" (99). Later she is even more specific and adamant: "quiero quedarme aquí, **detenida**, como para que no me pase nada. ¿Por qué no me detienes?" (116, emphasis added) and, like a child, promises Ernesto that if he will do that, "Seré buena" (117). That is, she would have them remain forever like father and daughter in a state of permanent status quo, Garden of Eden, where being is static, not fluid, not a process of becoming, and definitely not phallic. Even Ernesto's words highlight her desire to freeze time: "El mal no es nuestra cercanía, es tratar de confundir y **detener el curso de las cosas**" (117, emphasis added). Their sin will be to attempt to negate the course of events by refusing to follow the process of sociopolitical norms (considered "natural" although strictly cultural, manmade), by means of which the daughter must abandon her privileged position in the childhood home and exchange it for one of complicitous submission in the home of the husband.¹⁷

Significantly, however, her father is not the only character to whom she expresses a desire to halt the flow of time and remain as they are. As early as

scene three, after acknowledging her sexual inexperience, she comments to Bernardo, "Si fuera posible ser siempre así [sexually inexperienced?]. Si pudiéramos vivir un siglo en esta calle..." (98). When again, at the end of the work, Cecilia reiterates her desire to stop the inevitable process and remain a child, Ernesto responds, "Eres una mujer y quieres ser una niña, eres mi hija y quieres hacer papeles de esposa..." (136). Ironically, however, the roles Cecilia wishes to fulfill are those of mother: fix breakfast, take care of his clothes, sew on his buttons, read to him (135) — that is, play house. Since she refers to herself as his "niña" and yet is capable of "mothering" him, keeping him dependent, it is perhaps logical that he should conclude, "Ya no soy un hombre" (137).

Nonetheless, in the Oedipal syndrome the object of desire is not only the literal phallus but also the perceived power and position of the father. In this respect Hernández's work also marks a site of rereading, for Ernesto is anything but powerful. Indeed, throughout he is shown to be ineffectual and powerless, as incapable as Cecilia of assuming his assigned role within societal gender arrangements, in his case that of patriarch. Instead of taking care of and controlling her, he is faced with being taken care of and controlled by her as he is reduced to the role of a child. Thus the rite of passage implicit in the marriage ceremony has been inverted, for Cecilia has not gone *out*, left the parental home for the home of the husband, to assume the socially acceptable (and visible) role of mother of another (a procreative, sexual being within society), but rather has turned back, inward, to assume that role ("invisibly" as it were) within the parental home but without the concurrent sexuality and procreativity ("Yo soy mi propia hija," 136) of the visible role prescribed by society — prescribed and thus visible. It would appear then that the problem of all the characters is double: to find and enact the prescribed, visible role appropriate to the specific point in time while neither anticipating nor betraying the future.

Still, like many critics, Ernesto reproaches, not himself, but Elena for the catastrophe that results from Cecilia's marriage to Juan Manuel, even though he had refused to take action to stop that wedding. He himself articulates early in the play, although paradoxically in the third person and in the past tense (not unlike the tendency we find in psychoanalytical narrative), his decision to do nothing: "No quise intervenir" (94). As is typical in our Freudian, Oedipal systematics, the father's culpability is overlooked here and blame is placed on the child, who is accused of an Electra complex, or on the mother, who is accused of being a "castrating female" or of having insisted that the daughter live in and adjust to the pallocentric society that has been historically (if indeed patriarchally) prepared for her — the society that the mother is impotent to change for either herself or her daughter.¹⁸ As Elena says, "Cecilia tenía que hacer una nueva casa con un hombre, como todas las mujeres" (130, emphasis added). In this manner, Elena recognizes that within the sociopolitical structure roles are fixed for each stage of life, prescribed according to gender, and inescapable.¹⁹ Yet, critics of the play have accepted Ernesto's accusations and

words as more valid than Elena's in spite of the fact that he is a man who hits his wife (131) and calls his daughter a "*puta*" (137). Meanwhile, Elena believes she has only fulfilled her role and wants to continue to occupy her "place" (112), like the one Cecilia is to assume with Juan Manuel — "ese lugar preparado hace tanto tiempo" (102).²⁰ And just as Cecilia would avoid her future role as Juan Manuel's wife and mother of his children, Elena, who is certainly not to be idealized in her maternal role, would abandon her maternal role and return to her earlier role as young wife, before Cecilia's birth; as she states in another observation fraught with negatives,

Tengo la sensación que desde que ella nació no hemos estado juntos nunca aunque hayamos luchado por la misma cosa. No hemos puesto atención en nuestros sentimientos y en nuestros deseos sino en ella, siempre en ella. ... ¿No le parece justo que después de tantos años podamos ocuparnos de nosotros mismos? (102).

I have discussed elsewhere the relation between marriage and the rite of passage.²¹ It is important for our purposes here, however, to recognize that the rite of passage marks the preparation for and the assumption of adult gender roles and sexuality (children are usually, if indeed erroneously, considered asexual), as defined by the given society. As a result, the effects of this rite of passage on the male and the female differ significantly. Theoretically, the ritual, the marriage, will offer the son passage from his adolescent role of semi-dependence to one of power and supremacy. In primitive societies, the rite of passage signals the boy's acceptance into manhood as he leaves the world of the women and enters that of the men.²² Metaphorically at least, he will realize the desires of the Oedipus complex: he will visibly become the/a father as he marries the/a mother (to be). He will gain a father's control of the/a mother/wife and the children. Within the world of the new family, he will assume the power and role, the phallic position, he believes his father already has and will imitate, reflect him.

Within the context of Hernández play this change of male status is made apparent when Juan Manuel announces their marriage, "Voy a invitarte a un lugar lejano y para siempre," a statement that heralds permanent, major change and movement from the inside to the outside ("un lugar lejano"). Then, when Juan Manuel informs Cecilia that he wants to marry her, he revealingly adds, "vamos a hacer un hogar juntos, a tener varios hijos, a educarlos..." (90), thereby signaling the start of the process (the road repeatedly evoked) that will preclude the prerogatives she has enjoyed in her privileged position as only daughter in this family. At the same time, he also alludes to the beginning of what she later calls the fraud — the education of children to conform to the same old patterns.²³ Ironically, of course, the activities to which he refers are ones for which society will hold her responsible while overlooking and perhaps even condoning his inactivity and lack of participation, just as so many critics have overlooked

Ernesto's lethargy and subsequent willingness to cast all blame on Elena.

Even more important, throughout this scene the stage directions and other kinesic indicators consistently mark Juan Manuel as a contemptible being. This is the first time he has spoken with Cecilia since she learned of his mistress, a factor that seems to have motivated his decision to announce his marriage plans to her, but, instead of offering her some form of explanation or even consolation for this breach, he employs a diversionary technique and announces that he has a surprise for her. In this respect, he uses the word to hide rather than to reveal or communicate, even when he states his intention to reveal. Ironically, of course, she has already received the "surprise" in the form of the phone call (discourse that does dis-cover). At the end of a dramatic delay, when he finally tells her what he has in mind, both his discourse and the kinesic code belie his sincerity. Not only does Hernández have him prevaricate, "¡Yo nunca he podido pensar en nadie que no fueras tú!" but she also has him follow his words with an inappropriate gesture — laughter — as he adds that he could not marry anyone else because she is so simple — a strange but revealing basis for a marital relationship that again signals the confrontation of contradictory discourses that suggest that the future wife must be an eternal child, but one who has abdicated her earlier privileges. Cecilia's responses, however, bring both his duplicity and the paradox of societal expectations into focus. She forces him into the explanation that he, as the stage directions note in a curious paradox of visibility and invisibility, "*pensaba pasar por alto*" (90). Thus, Cecilia makes him articulate, make visible, what he and much of our androcentric society prefer to leave invisible, unarticulated — that their relationship (a product of contradictory expectations) will be based on both an imbalance of power and insincerity (role playing).²⁴

The imbalance of power in their relationship (an imbalance that seems to structure all the relationship of the play) and his sense of prepotence continue to surface as he tells Cecilia she understands nothing, as he articulates, perhaps unwittingly, his perverse pleasure at the destructive power he has wielded over his lover, as he speaks to her as one might to a child (92), and as he reminds her of her own impotence: "las mujeres como tú no pueden hacer nada" (92). Admittedly these concepts are taken out of context, but nevertheless, viewed in juxtaposition to each other, they do reflect a pattern. This pattern continues in his question to her about whether she will know how to administer all that he will give, a gift he expects her to accept "sin complicaciones" (90). The question itself, of course, implies some form of genetic incompetence on her part; he will give, she will receive (preferably eagerly) and administer (but probably poorly). That is, she will be kept in her childlike state, but the few privileges which accompany that state will be taken away. At the same time, because of the deceptive nature of his own discourse and kinesics (his theatrical staging), he misreads her reactions, both verbal and physical: he views her anger and aggression with self-flattery and interprets them as signs of her love for him

rather than her disdain since again it is inconceivable to him that anyone might perceive him other than he views himself. He expects of her a mirror to reflect and glorify his image, his assumed role. Thus, the theatrical role he assumes even within the play, perhaps not unlike much theatre, creates the world as he would have it rather than mirroring "nature." While he cannot or will not see beyond the mirror of his own reaction, the play itself resists his "reading" and "bothers" us.

Later he will become bothered himself, annoyed with her when "*le parece que se pone en cuestión su autoridad de futuro marido*" (105), that is, when she resists, refuses to accept "sin complicaciones" the assigned role with all its inherent contradictions, and Elena will have to warn her, "Olvidas tu posición, Cecilia" (106). Thus Hernández clearly establishes the despicable nature of Juan Manuel's personality and the fact that the marriage ritual will provide him with dominance over Cecilia as it forces her into a less than desirable role/position. As Isabel notes, offering to flee from this future with her, "Toda la vida. Ya no podrás escoger nada ni hacer nada. Todo estará hecho y decidido" (119). In this future, Cecilia's status will be that of a possession; as Juan Manuel states,

Ella es... todo lo que no he **tenido** nunca... La idea de **tener** un hogar, una casa decente con una mujer virtuosa es lo que me ha dado fuerza... estoy orgulloso de ser aceptado por la única mujer que considero digna de ser mi esposa (101, emphasis added).

Indeed, let us not forget that one of the reasons Juan Manuel has chosen to marry Cecilia is that his mistress is "[u]na mujer que traicionó el futuro" (91), betrayed his future: she is already married, already "possessed" by someone else. Nonetheless, at the same time, Juan Manuel's words about Cecilia are subtended by two implicit ironies. First, he has not been accepted by her, and second, he wants to have a home with a virtuous woman but feels no need to be virtuous himself. That is, the image of himself he wants her to reflect will be a mythic and distorted one. Hernández, however, offers a subtle explanation for this exaggeration of self-importance and self-imposition on the part of Juan Manuel, who declares that he wants his home with Cecilia to be everything his own has not been. In his own words, "yo crecí en el más completo desorden... mi padre no supo ser un padre y mi madre no pudo resistirse a... tantas cosas" (101). Lest the same occur in the new family he will assume an overly compensatory, dictatorial, patriarchal role and play the role (in the most theatrical sense) he thinks should be that of the male. Again, while the society portrayed would reduce the possibilities for adult roles to two — mother or father — the fact that none of the characters can fill the roles as scripted suggests the resistance, the challenge to the roles.

Clearly, it is the phallogocentric future of society's gender arrangements that Cecilia rejects: "Lo de siempre. La interminable cosa que a todo el mundo le

sucede: lo que no puede evitarse... Lo que viene después" (98). She spurns the future, the empty dishes at the metaphoric banquet, the role playing without love, which leaves one hungry, as is Elena: "un banquete para huéspedes reales. Cubiertos de plata, vasos de oro, un clavel rojo cerca de cada plato... ¡y las fuentes vacías!" (98).²⁵ Disidentifying with and rejecting the predetermined adult role in society, that of wife and mother (particularly as embodied by her own mother), Cecilia herself sums up her position: "la hija soy yo. Yo soy la niña, la mimada, la irresponsable, la que hace las gracias y llora en secreto cuando la castigan. La que lee libros sobre personas mayores sabiendo que nada de eso sucederá a ella. Yo soy mi propia hija" (135-36). Thus, Cecilia would be (remain) her own creation, her own possession, and repudiate the cultural gender definitions. Let us recall that in the first scene the male is defined by his capacity to possess or have women: "El hombre que no tiene mujeres es menos hombre... Tu padre mismo" (87). Thus, the implication is that in order to be a woman, Cecilia must be possessed.²⁶ Indeed, as Ernesto states in the final scene when Juan Manuel tries to return Cecilia to him as if she were an object purchased at a store, "¿No es suya? ¿No la quería usted?" (134). Nevertheless, the complexity of the Hernández work rests in the tension between the visible and the invisible, between contradictory discursive fields, for as defined by Elena the man not only "has" women, but is "had" by them:

¿Han pensado alguna vez lo que es un hombre?, ¿no?... Pues un hombre es un ser de mujeres, de todas las mujeres. Con ellas vive, por ellas se doblaga, a ellas se entrega. Su trabajo, su humor y sus necesidades están relacionadas con ellas (87).

Thus, nothing is as simple as it seems; all are marked by tension-producing contradiction. It is perhaps this very tension — not always visible — that bothers us as the play simultaneously supports and undermines the contradictory positions and discourses that shape our extratextual world.

Ironically, of course, in the final analysis the rite of passage, the wedding, does take place, and although Cecilia later returns home, seemingly turning back in time (as Elena would also), home is no longer the same after Ernesto's suicide. Now she will have to begin what she labels the long road, the inevitable and interminable state of becoming, but now in a gynocentric environment in fact not just in appearance. Thus, as I stated at the beginning, she rejects the symbolic phallus as implied in both an erotic relationship and societal gender roles, specifically the traditional feminine role of submission, a role which, by the way, her mother rarely assumes as anything more than the most superficial mask. Indeed, Cecilia's calm in the face of her father's suicide suggests her recognition that now she will be able to remain in her home, in her childlike state, for now her mother will accept her. Could this be what she desired all along? Is this what must not be seen, what must remain invisible in the end?

And what is this long road to which Cecilia refers? The answer perhaps

is to be found at the end of scene five, the halfway point of the play. Here Cecilia speaks with Bernardo of her desire to remain forever in the street, just as they are. They have decided not to become lovers (again to remain just as they are, avoiding, rejecting the erotic) but to enjoy the little time they have left before her marriage, in their platonic adolescent state, in some sense outside of the normal flow of time, pretending that it is not inevitably moving forward. As Bernardo proposes, first employing the path/road image, “Caminemos por el sendero de la sinrazón, sin pararnos a averiguar las causas, como si los dos tuviéramos alas en los pies. Ya sabemos que el orden, de algún modo, ha de restablecerse” (112) — there is no escaping the sociopolitical structures. But Cecilia images the path/road, the flow of time, less unidirectionally, imagining a river (traditional image of time) that flows forward and backward at once: “Vamos por un río que se mueve en dos sentidos al mismo tiempo, por un viento que sopla de norte a sur y viceversa, por una calle que declina y asciende” (112). And because the road “es corto, es corto, es corto,” it does not require all their effort. On the other hand, the road evoked in the final scene is “largo, largo, largo” and thus will require all their effort, perhaps more than anything because it goes against what is considered the “natural” flow of time and the grain of society with its imposition of phallogocentric relations (adulthood, erotic relations, abandonment of the home of the parents to become parents). Thus, the play’s conclusion marks the site of resistance. Not only does it avoid the narrative closure of traditional literature (“and they lived happily ever after”), but it also highlights that the end is not the end but rather an end. And that end simultaneously marks the beginning of the struggle as it emphasizes the immensity of the effort that will be required to change gender arrangements and conceive of new possibilities both inside and outside of literature.

Frank Dauster is certainly correct in his analysis of the ritual form in the play (“Forma”) and in his emphasis on the feast (“Ritual Feast”). I would only expand his choice of myth, for *Los huéspedes reales* might also be read as a modern rendition of the story of Iphigenia, the other daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, the daughter who believed (as did her mother) that she was going to her wedding when in fact she was going to be sacrificed for the good of society, for the war effort.²⁷ Cecilia, of course, is more perceptive than Iphigenia and recognizes the metaphoric death inherent in the ritual marriage. When Juan Manuel announces that he is going to invite her to somewhere far away and forever, she cynically queries, “¿Vamos a hacer una tentativa de suicidio juntos?” (90). She further highlights the death motif when she questions, before “consenting” to the marriage, if the other woman “¿[m]orirá inevitablemente?” (105). It is significant, too, that in the story of Iphigenia, once the process is set in motion, Agamemnon, not unlike Ernesto, is too weak and cowardly to confront society (in Agamemnon’s case, the army), acknowledge that the sacrifice is wrong, and act with strength and conviction to prevent it. In both cases, the paternal figure is impotent to provide the protection the daughter

needs — the metaphoric phallic power and discourse are a sham, as Lacan has long insisted. Ultimately, both Iphigenia and Cecilia go to the sacrifice with courage. Iphigenia is saved by the goddess Diana. Whether or not Cecilia is saved we cannot know, for the play ends as Ernesto commits suicide. Because he precludes the future and metaphorically substitutes for Cecilia as the sacrificial victim society seems to demand, he cannot be killed (in the future) by the unfaithful and treacherous Clytemnestra, as was Agamemnon in a later installment of the myth. In this respect Hernández precludes a simplistic reading of the ancient myths, recognizing that it is merely a question of where we focus, where we arbitrarily establish our beginnings and endings in our attempt to provide the illusory mirror of progress. Different starting and ending points would produce quite a different, even contradictory myth. Thus we might perhaps better label the principal conflict in the Hernández play as that between Cecilia and the phallogocentric, patriarchal society, of which Ernesto is but a feeble, ineffectual representative, one ephemeral, present incarnation.

And again we return to the notion that nothing is quite as it has appeared. Everything has been marked by contradiction. What appeared to be love was not. What seemed to be hatred between mother and daughter may not have been. What we interpreted as the object of desire, the phallus, was precisely what was not desired. The banquet, symbol of social ritual and role playing, was empty, foodless — a signifier that negates itself. And most important, what we labeled natural was not. The marriage, part of the “natural chain of events” is shown to be a process of socialization, inevitable perhaps, but man-made and supplemental. In his analysis of the play as a classic tragedy, Knowles posits that the principal movement within the genre is the reestablishment of the order and equilibrium lost when a “natural law” has been violated (*Teoría* 45). As Hernández shows, however, the law is anything but natural. The reflection itself is inevitably distorted. Thus, the site of resistance, the theatrical mirror, here reflects not “nature” but the sociopolitical inventions we have designated as natural.

NOTAS

1 The back cover of the 1958 Universidad Veracruzana edition notes, “Logró encontrar así, bajo el sencillo rostro de una muchacha mexicana, la máscara patética de Electra.” Knowles states, “En su tragedia, ‘*Los Huéspedes Reales*’, Luisa Josefina Hernández presenta el tema clásico de Electra en una familia mexicana actual” (*Teoría* 41). Dauster labels the work a “[v]ersión del mito de Electra” (“Forma” 60), although admittedly his interest is more in the tragic form than in the specific myth itself. Boorman recognizes the psychological rather than mythic foundation of the readings and declares that in this play “Hernández’ interest shifts to a study of prototypical behavior based primarily on Freudian models. The play considers the consequences of a contemporary Electra complex and thoroughly analyzes the psychological motivations of the characters” (76-77). Gloria Feiman Waldman, however, centers more on female relationships and “the anguish of mother-daughter relationships” (75) although she too finds “the

powerful dilemma of a father and daughter caught in an Electra situation" (78).

2 It is not irrelevant that this "analytical" emphasis subtends psychoanalysis as well as literary analysis since both are influenced by cultural codes, and literary analysis is particular susceptible to the metaphoric figures of psychoanalysis.

3 Indeed, Luce Irigaray has devoted two volumes to demonstrating how the valorization of the masculine and the phallic subtends all our cultural constructs: *Speculum of the Other Woman* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

4 Irigaray analyzes our cultural "oculocentrism," which privileges the visual over the other senses, as one of the conditions of this phallic fixation.

5 Most contemporary theory (borrowing from Michel Foucault) recognizes that our cognizance of our world is based on a series of contradictory discursive fields, which Weedon defines as "competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes" (35).

6 Although I use the term "reading" here, I use it in its broadest and most metaphoric sense. The spectators of a play metaphorically "read" the work as they watch the performance. The use of the word "read" is not intended to distract from the representational nature of the performance or from the play as staging rather than literature.

7 In recent years, numerous critics have refuted the notion of theatre as a mirror of reality. For example, Dolan posits, "The theatre... is not really a mirror of reality. A mirror implies passivity and noninvolvement, an object used but never changed by the variety of people who hold it up and look into it" (16). Similarly, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have noted, "Art is not a mirror. It mediates and re-presents social relations in a schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful" (quoted in Dolan, 16).

8 In the Sophocles play, Electra hates her mother, Clytemnestra, and wishes to see her dead for having orchestrated the death of her father, Agamemnon, and having married his usurper, none of which occurs in *Los huéspedes reales*.

Even the psychoanalytical reading of the Sophocles play — a reading which engenders the Electra complex — is founded on some questionable premises. As employed by psychoanalysis the Electra complex describes the daughter's incestuous desires for the father; she desires his phallus. But, in the classic Electra myth (not the rewriting of the myth proposed by psychoanalysis) it would be as difficult to speak of an incestuous relationship between the father and the daughter as it is to speak of an incestuous relationship between Hamlet and his father. In both cases the "child's" antagonism toward the mother is based on the mother's sexuality (that the child would deny) or the mother's failure to comply with the stereotypical, generic maternal role, as well as the possibility that the father's power will now pass not into the child's hands but into the hands of others.

Let us note too that throughout this study my objections to psychoanalytical constructs, Freudian and Lacanian particularly, are based as much on interpretations and reductionary applications of those theories as on the theories themselves.

9 Editors, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, in Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality* (12-13), note that Freud himself never accepted the term. Others have labeled the same

phenomenon the “female Oedipus complex.”

10 To the extent that the Electra complex is merely a reformulation and renaming of the Oedipus complex, an explanation of the same phenomenon in females that Freud proclaimed to observe in males, the Electra complex also privileges the phallic in spite of its feminine nomenclature.

Both Jane Gallop and Luce Irigaray have argued that although Freudians and Lacanians insist that the phallus is merely a symbol and not to be confused with the virtual penis, it often is. Irigaray says of the female as perceived by Western culture, “Her lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value” (*Sex* 23). Gallop notes, “Yet ‘phallus,’ the signifier in its specificity... is always a reference to the ‘penis’. ‘Phallus’ cannot function as signifier in ignorance of ‘penis’. ‘Phallus’ is not the originary, proper name of some referent that may get contingently translated as ‘penis’” (98). “The penis is what men have and women do not; the phallus is the attribute of power which neither men nor women have. But as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which refers to and can be confused... with a penis, this confusion will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not” (Gallop 97).

11 I use the adjective *pseudo* here because although we generally view the home as a center of matriarchal influence and power, in fact, Irigaray demonstrates that it is a limited, “permitted” power within a society organized by men for men to (over)value the masculine, the phallic (*Sex* 142).

12 Although it is certainly true that scene five is also the only scene that might be viewed as positing any degree of hope for Cecilia’s future since it offers the possibility of escape from the course of events preplanned even before her birth, this potential is negated kinesically in that the stage, the park, remains empty, devoid of all human presence, at the close of that scene. All other scenes conclude with one or more characters still present on stage, if indeed static.

Also, although scene three does take place outside, since its locale is the front steps of the house, the presence of the house is still very much felt.

13 The critical insistence on perceiving the Electra complex at the heart of the play leads one to wonder if this too is not a diversionary technique necessary to disguise the fact that Cecilia is essentially disinterested in the phallic. Such a reading parallels the gesture of the Father who, according to Irigaray, covers, subverts, and diverts his desire with his Law.

14 Both Irigaray and Barthes have suggested that the principal pleasure of “love” is talking about it: *Sex* (103) and *A Lover’s Discourse*.

Also, there can be little doubt that critical analyses of the play have tended to accept these words too literally and have failed to recognize that their veracity (from Cecilia’s perspective at least) is undermined by the rhetorical and kinesic indicators: the conditional tense (“diría”), the overt play acting (quotation marks), her physical gestures (dancing a waltz, laughing). Still it is important to recognize that, as presented, although Cecilia recognizes the theatricality of the situation, Ernesto perhaps does not, for in reaction to her laughter and verbal emphasis on the play acting, his response is one of confusion and shame: “*El padre se desconcierta, se avergüenza*” (100).

15 Cecilia's relationship to her mother would necessarily be misinterpreted in a traditional reading since, according to Irigaray's theory, the relationship between mother and daughter cannot be articulated without a new (other) syntax and grammar (*Sex* 143).

16 Irigaray and Gallop have argued that the entire Oedipal systematics (myth) is necessary to disguise, divert, and invert the father's desire for the daughter which is hidden in his Law and must be kept invisible. Perhaps readers of Hernández's play, like readers of Freud, would also invert this desire and view it as originating in the daughter rather than the father. The stage directions are explicit in this regard: "*(Ernesto la mira como un hombre mira a una mujer...)*" (136),

17 Luce Irigaray has expressed it succinctly: "Why should a woman have to leave — and 'hate'... her own mother, leave her own house, abandon her own family, renounce the name of her own mother and father, in order to take a man's genealogical desires upon herself?" (*Sex* 65).

18 Hirsch has discussed the "daughter's anger at the mother who has accepted her powerlessness, who is unable to protect her from a submission to society's gender arrangements" (165).

19 Although Elena would also like to halt the flow of time, she seems to recognize that as an Edenic impossibility. Surely, Cecilia's desire to remain young and stop the flow of time is mirrored in her mother, Elena, who also wishes to return to what, from her point of view, was an Edenic state — the time when she and Ernesto were young and presumably in love, the time before Cecilia's birth (although as we are to learn later in the play, this paradise probably never existed except as a mythic chimera of her own making, for she acknowledges that there was never anything between them [133], much as there is no basis for the relationship between Juan Manuel and Cecilia). Earlier, however, Elena complains that since her daughter's birth, their lives have centered on her to the exclusion of their own desires (doubtlessly, in both senses of the word) (102) and that she wants more from life than this stasis and emptiness (the banquet without food evoked in the title) which resembles death more than life: "hemos sido felices, creo. A veces, la vida pasa sin sentirla" (95). This sensation of inertia and fixation which foreshadows what awaits Cecilia as future wife and mother is physically manifest at the conclusion of each scene as the characters remain motionless and stare into space. Throughout the play, the underlying conflict may be that between being and becoming, which again may be the specularization of the visible and the invisible.

Thus while all the characters would like time to stand still, to remain in or return to one fixed role (which unfortunately can only be valid for one stage of life), Ernesto's inability to tolerate the fact that being is a continuous process of becoming leads him to commit suicide and halt the process violently: "no sé cuál es mi lugar en el mundo, ni el lugar de los que me rodean, ni cómo son" (137). Thus, Ernesto himself will provide the barrier to Elena's wishes just as he does to Cecilia's, for even before his suicide he rejects her physically and emotionally as he accuses her, "Te colocas en el lugar de tu hija. En este momento quieres ser Cecilia y le tienes envidia. Crees tener sus veinte años y estar recién casada. Has vivido con celos y con rabia de que ella era joven y bonita, por eso..." (130). Ernesto patently seeks stasis, identities which are fixed, clearly

differentiated (mother and daughter), and reduced to a label.

20 While I recognize the discordance between Elena's speech and praxis, I cannot view her as totally evil as Knowles does. When Ernesto declares that she has never loved Cecilia, she does not deny it, merely stating, "¡No pude!" (132), and yet the first scene ends in a gesture of love on her part when she requests permission to embrace Cecilia, who, both parents admit, is incapable of loving anyone (132). Similarly, her relationship with Ernesto is fraught with apparent contradiction as she seeks the future with him yet refers to unarticulated past problems: "Los hombres pueden herirnos de diferentes modos, nosotras, lo único que podemos hacer es resentirlo" (103). From his perspective, however, she has merely emasculated him: "Lo que tú deseabas es que te diera oportunidad de tejer a mi alrededor como una araña, hasta inmovilizarme. Pues bien, mírame, estoy atrapado e inmóvil" (114-15). Perhaps they are both right. The validity of the Hernández play rests in her refusal (unlike that of critics) to reduce the complexity of the problem and place the responsibility in the hands of any one character. More accurately we must recognize that the problem has its roots in the sociopolitical gender arrangements.

21 See the first chapter of *The Lost Rib*.

22 Along the same lines, Freud posited that both male and female children experience an initial attachment to the mother which must be overcome at a later age.

23 We generally consider the creation and maintenance of the home along with the bearing and raising of children as feminine tasks, if indeed assigned by patriarchal society. Ironically however, although Juan Manuel will assign Cecilia the task of "educating" the children (which in Spanish refers to both raising and instructing), their marriage will effectuate the end of her education: "Ya no tiene importancia que faltes a clases" (106).

24 There is an interesting parallel here between Hernández and her character, for by means of the stage directions Hernández also makes visible what might not be visible or apparent on the stage. It would surely be difficult to convey this contradiction via kinesics.

25 Were there any doubt as to the role playing and falseness that will be implicit in this metaphoric banquet, Hernández reminds us that Cecilia has to be dressed in a special manner and made up (i.e. disguised, masked, theatrical) in order to attend the ritual: "Ya vino una mujer a peinarme y a pintarme. Me dejó como... como debo estar" (118). Irigaray posits that the only "path" historically assigned to women is that of mimicry as they must deliberately assume the feminine role (*Sex* 76).

26 The irony, of course, is that she is already "possessed" by the father as Elena's speech acknowledges.

27 I base my analysis of the story of Iphigenia on that found in Rex Warner's *The Stories of the Greeks* (352-363).

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