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The three works that this study examines are very different in time-frame, setting, tone and techniques. They have in common, however, the use of metamorphosis – in one case an attenuated variant – as the principal vehicle for protesting woman's dependent condition. None expresses protest directly, or even makes an overt statement of the problem, although it obviously lies at the heart of both the action and the radical adaptation portrayed.

Originally the script for a five-part «telenovela», *Vegetal*[1] retains much of its spoken, theatrical character, frequently approaching the dramatic monologue. The most contemporary of the three in its setting – a present-day Barcelona apartment – it has only one important character, and excepting the indefinite time-span, essentially fulfills the dramatic unities. Secondary characters exist entirely in function of the protagonist and serve to convey additional data relevant to her relationship to external reality, i.e., they present a view of reality diverging from that of the principal character, and thereby for most of the work prevent a full incursion into the realm of fantasy.

Marta is a conventional, bourgeois widow of perhaps fifty, economically quite comfortable but ill-at-ease existentially. Two years of widowhood have not sufficed to free her from the patro-

[1] The works referred to in this article are:

Joaquim Molas, «Pròleg» to Mercè Rodoreda, *La meva Cristina i altres contes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1967, 5-13.

Geraldine Nichols, «Exile, Gender and Mercè Rodoreda», *The Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica*, 2 (1986), 189-97.

Maria Antònia Oliver, *Vegetal* i *Muller qui cerca espill*, Barcelona, La Llar del Llibre, 1984.

Mercè Rodoreda, *La meva Cristina i altres contes*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 1967.

nizing, paternalistic tyranny of her late husband Joan, who still conditions her conscious and unconscious acts, as she continues to live within male-inscribed boundaries. An obsessively neat housekeeper, Marta cleans every speck of imaginary dust from furniture she has silently detested for thirty years, but tolerated because it was chosen by Joan. Her monologue is punctuated with references to what her late husband would have said, done or thought as a result of each of her actions or reflections. Each evocation of the departed summons his *shadow* which recites exactly what she imagines he would have said, or enacts what she has already foreseen that he would have done. Clearly, Marta was never allowed to decide anything for herself, and however paternal, patriarchal control of her life was absolute. Her feeble attempts at revolt were smothered with patronizing tolerance. The title motif and work's major symbol derives from the residue of Marta's defeats in her mute struggle for self-expression. A recurring silent battle involved her having plants, of which Joan disapproved, objecting to any semblance of initiative or personal opinion on her part. Although he objected that having plants was unhealthy, he smoked to such an extreme that the plants died. Two years of solitude barely suffice for Marta to accumulate enough autonomy to purchase plants again and to rearrange the future in order to accommodate them. Thus breaking the constraints of her submissive role, Marta loses the support and defenses that it provided, so that the transition to autonomy finds her utterly vulnerable. She commences talking to the plants and responding to replies audible only to her. Groping toward self-definition, she repeatedly changes the apartment, finally disposing of the despised, dark, heavy furniture that symbolized the subjugation of her tastes and preferences.

Conversations with the plants document the progress of her psychic instability, as she confesses her jealousy of her son's fiancée, her sense of rejection, and her satisfaction in being able to caress the plants at will: «Ara ja puc tocar les plantes sempre que vulgui... abans havia d'anar alerta durant els dies dolents...»(26).

Her leafy friends are moved to advantageous positions so that they, too, can watch TV. The disaffection of her only son, Carles, who prefers an apartment with his live-in fiancée, Júlia, removes another support of her archetypal role and Marta has had no exposure to newer ideologies which might offer a theoretical bulwark. Unequipped to enter the job market, she is especially vulnerable to loneliness and alienation. Nevertheless, she continues to struggle, suffering the physical and psychological crises of feminine aging as well, and with the passing of time she manages to exile the shadow of Joan and change the apartment to reflect her own tastes and personality, making of the dark enclosure formerly crowded with somber furnishings a light, airy garden space. Exchanges with the plants reveal that Marta has no other pastimes, such as reading, for her husband did not approve: «Ningú no m'ha ensenyat a llegir llibres... En Joan deia que era perdre el temps, llegir...» (30). An unexpected visit from her friend Fina, who drops by with her small grandsons, brings Marta to the verge of hysteria as the children defoliate her favorite azalea, and Marta quarrels with Fina when the latter indicates that plants aren't people. This incident typifies the functions of the secondary characters in heightening the visibility of Marta's increasingly psychoneurotic peril. Her internal contradictions and ontological anxieties manifest themselves in behavior which symbolically converts the plants first to friends, then to family, transferring her emotional dependency to them.

An indefinite time later, Marta is dressed in flowered cretonne, and the plant population has exploded. Changes in her appearance visibly evince her search for self-definition, while the dangers are seen in the proliferating plants and an increase in behavior perceived by the other characters as bizarre: Marta has begun to collect all sizes and shapes of clocks, mirrors and calendars, strategically placed so the plants can see them and themselves. Clocks, mirrors and calendars are all rather obviously emblematic of the aging process, and the time motif is reinforced by Marta's reading aloud to the plants from Virginia Woolf's *Els*

anys in Catalan translation — a passage concerning a funeral, which serves to reveal her mute relief at Joan's death: «Jo, quan es va morir en Joan, no sentia cap dolor...» (44). Her confession reflects a marriage which was a result of societal conditioning and her submissive acceptance of the role created for her by a male-dominated culture. Although not romantically in love with Joan, she mechanically acted out her role, feeling little more than numbness when his death freed her, terminating the performance.

Another surprise visit from Carles and Júlia and their startled reactions upon finding the kitchen overflowing with plants brings Marta's explanation that she has nothing else to fill her time and keep her company:

> Tota la vida he estat com elles... posadeta dins un test com un estaquirot, per fer bonic, per fer companyia... i res més. Per això ens avenim tan bé, perquè som iguals..., però si no vaig alerta em tornaré com una planta de debò, una fúcsia, o una heura, o un ficus... (51)

Not only does she specifically identify with the plants in comparing herself to a hot-house flower, placed in a conspicuous spot to look pretty all her life, but she recognizes the danger to her human self at the same time she underscores the essential parallel perceived between her role and that of the plants, setting forth the «object» nature of both. Her recognition of the peril of becoming completely plant-like provides dramatic anticipation for the daring use of metamorphosis in the denouement as Oliver gives visible form to the deleterious effects of the wife's lifelong treatment as a decorative possession.

Recognizing the encroaching menace, Marta attempts desperately to find employment, not because she needs the income, but to bolster her self-esteem and aid in self-definition. Rejected even as a neighborhood volunteer because of her lack of experience and training, she turns to a priest for counsel but is advised not to be selfish and to content herself with the life she has alrea-

dy lived: «Què vol dir, viure la teva vida, Marta? Tu ja l'has viscuda, la teva vida, amb el teu marit i el teu fill (...) Només el record ja t'hauria de bastar, filla, per omplir totes les hores de la teva vellesa...» (55). The vaguely surrealist symbolism of Marta's proliferating clocks, mirrors and calendars is clarified by the rector's reference to «filling the hours of her old age». This representative of the patriarchal establishment reaffirms the underlying code of male sexual dominion and female subordination and dependence, reducing woman's existence to that portion of her days which she is able to devote to the men in her life. Failure to find support in the Church removes one more potential means of Marta's escaping her fate.

Marta is forced to face the existential realization that only her plant family wants or needs her:

> És clar, com que no sé fer res, doncs no serveixo per a res... (...) [*escolta una planta que li parla*]... Sí, tens raó, us tenia por a totes vosaltres... Tenia por d'estancar-me entre vosaltres, de tornar de debò com vosaltres... i he intentat fugir... però ja no en tenc, de por... (61)

With the loss of her fear of becoming a plant, Marta clearly has begun to lose the battle, although she continues to struggle, failing time and again to penetrate the workplace. Each day's repeated failures bring modifications in Marta's appearance or that of her abode, as she is also losing her sense of identity and instinct for self-preservation. It is thus part of a sustained progression that she eventually appears in a leafy, flowery garb with her hair full of leaves. With plantlike serenity, she plans to discard the few remaining possessions — clothes, papers — which tie her to the human sphere. The metamorphosis is becoming visible in her color: «Que no ho veieu, quin color tinc?... verd de fulla tendra, transparent... Sí, sóc un vegetal...» (64). A final visit from Fina functions to elicit the clarification that Marta is not merely passively retreating from an unfeeling world but defiantly rejecting the constraints of a lifetime as a bourgeoise a wife in which she was unable to be herself but was obliged to dress, act and think to

please her husband and to conform to social expectations. Her rejection could not be more explicit: «això s'ha acabat... no vull ser més una... senyora» (67).

Superficially it may appear that Marta is in the process of achieving liberation, but actually the reverse is true. Her change in attitudes, dress and behavior is simply accommodation to her situation, just as she had accommodated to paternalistic domination. Retreating from the freedom which she is existentially and psychologically unprepared to handle, Marta prepares to embrace the one course of action open to her. A last attempt is made to find a conventional escape, as Marta plans a trip around the world as a final grasp at the human condition, for once protesting clearly that she does not really welcome her fate: «De cada vegada em sento més vegetal... i és agradable, sí, molt agradable... però no vull. No vull» (69). This final existential gesture comes too late, however, and she is last seen preparing a bonfire in the living room with the few objects binding her to her human condition. The next visit by Carles and Júlia finds only a pile of ashes, the open suitcase forgotten in a corner, and in the bedroom, a strange, new plant, larger than the others. Julia's femininity enables her to intuit the transformation, and she recalls what Marta had warned.

Oliver's use of metamorphosis is daring because it is at considerable risk of misinterpretation. Given the objectivist nature of her medium (in which the camera, as narrative voice, does not comment or interpret, and symbols must be conveyed nonverbally) much more is left to the perceptive powers of the reader or viewer. Some undoubtedly interpreted the ending not as a feminist statement but as a kind of science fiction or «Twilight Zone» episode. The more conservative public probably concluded simplistically that Marta could not survive without her nurturing, paternalistic husband. That neither accords with Oliver's intent is abundantly clear not only from the few passages cited, but from the repetition of the device of metamorphosis or an attenuated variant in another work which conveys a comparable message.

Marta is much like Augusto Pérez in Unamuno's *Niebla*, a character in search of identity, and much like Augusto, she is annihilated by the indifference or rejection of others, which communicates the message that she does not exist as a meaningful entity. But unlike Augusto, Marta must also struggle against the archetypal mould into which traditional society has cast her, preparing her only for one role in life and having no further use for her when no longer need for the functions of mother and wife. Hers is a tragedy in the modern sense of a totally unequal struggle by a basically good character against overwhelming odds, a silent, bloodless tragedy which society ignores or is unprepared to perceive either as wrong or as tragic: after all, as the vicar observed, Marta had had a «good» life; she was not abused, murdered, raped or starved, and did not even have to work for a living. Oliver does not make any explicit statement of unhappiness, and leaves only implicit the stifling of Marta's individuality at least since marriage and probably from childhood. Neither does the writer go so far as to suggest that what Marta might have contributed to the world as an original talent will never be known; all such possible speculations and conclusions are left to the reader or viewer. Marta's plight could easily be generalized beyond the feminist context to the situation of the «senior citizen» in most of the Western world. In both cases, those whose useful or productive lives are over are relegated to a second-class status, forgotten by society and often even family members, and frequently considered a burdensome responsibility to be avoided whenever possible. The message is susceptible of further generalization, for Marta's loneliness and existential solitude are constants of twentieth-century life. Oliver's thrust is not debilitated by the broadness of her aim, and the powerful symbol with which she ends the work has the necessary ambiguity to permit interpretation on varying levels of significance.

As a feminist statement, the denouement constitutes a symbolic protest against the dehumanizing effects of total dependency, of having no separate or autonomous existence but being

considered a possession, a mere extension of someone else (in Marta's case, Joan's wife and Carles' mother). Metamorphosis makes visible the results of man's inhumanity to man — or more exactly, to woman — in making of her something which at birth she was not: inhibited, repressed, submissive, convinced of her own inferiority and accepting her second-class status, reduced to a possession, an object, and finally, a vegetable.

Vegetal treats the end result of a long-term process. In another work, linked by similarities of form and the presence of a variation upon the theme of metamorphosis, Oliver portrays the beginning of that process in a small Catalan town about 1970. In *Muller qui cerca espill*, Oliver employs a milder variant of metamorphosis, supported by a series of rather explicit visual symbols. As a group, these objects convey the themes of imprisonment or entombment of the female protagonist. They are the more effective since they are objects chosen from the realistic, quotidian context and belong naturally, almost inevitably to the ambient in which they are portrayed — their presence is not contrived. Their allegorical significance is posited on the basis of heightened visibility, achieved partly by careful selection of images and props, resulting in an absence of distractors. On another level, this constitutes a subliminal reinforcement of the absence of alternatives.

Muller qui cerca espill, a «woman in search of a mirror», presents a demythologized vision of engagement and wedding preparations from the perspective of the reluctant bride, a victim of tradition and her conservative parents' absolute conviction that, as a dutiful daughter, she will not study or pursue a career but sew her trousseau and marry an acceptable provider — such as dull, paternalistic Martí, her fiancé — and forget her ambitions of becoming a movie star. Mariona's longings for independence, fame and fortune are only dreams, for she lacks the will to revolt and the preparation that might enable her to be autonomous. She shares no real intimacy or communication with Martí, and resentment at having to sacrifice her freedom leads to petulance and meanness in relating to her mother and fiancé, but this is not

translated into more positive action, despite her criticism of conformity in others.

Details of the setting are calculated for their potencial to mutely illumine the limits of the wife-mother role, and by so doing, to reveal it as restrictive, imprisoning. Thus the smallness of the room in which Mariona sits embroidering her trousseau is a transparent visual allegory – one which could easily be missed by virtue of that very transparency. Her tiny bedroom with its single window is not totally cell-like, but the only adornments besides a painting of the Virgin Mary are photos of weddings and First Communions. These symbolize the Franco regime's emphasis for female acculturation and value internalization: virginity, marriage, motherhood. The gathering darkness which envelops Mariona without her noticing while she sews, is likewise symbolic, as is her mother's being perpetually dressed in mourning. That Mariona's situation is intended to be stereotypical or generic rather than individual is evident in the exactly identical appearance of her house and all the other houses.

Oliver's demythologization of marriage is a two-edged sword, employing the unconsciously negative perspective of the mother, Magdalena, in counterpoint with the faint enthusiasm of the daughter. For different reasons, neither speaks for the idealized, romantic view. Magdalena voices a Victorian concept of morality which saw sexuality as necessary for procreation, but otherwise condemned it. Mariona's father is a watchdog of female morality, the more so because, as he openly admits, he has not always been circumspect himself. The visual symbol of the parents' view of married sexuality is the long-sleeved, heavy, high-necked nightgowns Magdalena imposes as part of Mariona's trousseau. The daughter's distaste evinces an intuitive rejection of the kind of marriage this puritanical sleepwear represents: lacking not only in eroticism, but openness, freedom, naturalness, vitality. The girl's protest, «semblen mortalles» (76), reinforces the impression of lifelessness in the parents' view of marriage by comparing the granny-gowns to a shroud or burial sheet. The fil-

my, vaporous, low-cut gowns Mariona wistfully prefers are dismissed – along with the frank sexuality they connote – as suitable only for prostitutes and actresses.

Mariona's girlhood dream of becoming an actress has been suppressed by her parents along with her sensuality. The emphasis on the trousseau, with its duplication of unwanted items, and later on the wedding presents – which reiterate the duplication – visualizes the material and economic bases for matrimony, subliminally intensified by Mariona's lack of romantic illusion, her listless assent to the wedding preparations, her visibly disenchanted appearance. Mariona will walk numbly down the aisle because, like nearly all her friends growing to adolescence in the sixties, she has not been allowed to prepare for anything else. Lacking a career, college education or vocational training, she is obliged to depend on her father until she depends on her husband. The father clearly perceives Martí as his successor and expresses his patriarchal concept of the marriage relationship in his remark to his future son-in-law, «A veure si la pots dominar, tu...» (99). Metamorphosis in this dialogued novelette is less radical than in *Vegetal*, relying on the combination of flashbacks or dream sequences with visual images and symbols to convey the transformation of the once-spontaneous, coquettish, sensual adolescent into an embittered, inhibited, frustrated adult, thanks in large measure to her father's sexually anachronistic attitudes and her mother's echoing of tradition. The parents, of course, are in turn merely symbols of society at large. The flashback to a time some six years before permits contrasting the vibrant, vital, sparkling teen-ager with the colorless, dull, frigid, prematurely aged woman of twenty-five, implicitly juxtaposing the visual symbols of the green dress – with all its connotations of eroticism, youth and hope – and the white granny-gown, or the long, shining mane flying free and the hair imprisoned in plastic curlers.

The other variant of metamorphosis, again a subtle one, contrasts the reality of Mariona on her wedding day – scarcely more than a mannequin in her passivity as she is dressed and coiffed by

seamstress and hair-stylist – and the dynamic vision of her fantasy, in which she is active, commanding, triumphant. Again it is a metamorphosis realized largely thanks to visual symbols: Mariona's cell-like room becomes a star's dressing-room and the family wedding and First Communion portraits are replaced by dozens of Hollywood press releases and publicity photos and posters, while the prim wedding dress yields to a low-out costume intended to reveal the charms of Mariona Fox in her starring role. The characters in her life are likewise transformed, both in appearance and in altered roles, as the leading lady is surrounded by servants, secretary, handsome admirers, a fan club – and her father is reduced to a servile janitor or messenger.

Another recurring image throughout this work is the mirror, which Mariona frequently consults in her moments of attempted self-encounter, and which serves to reveal her suppressed sensuality, supplementing the impression provided by the flashbacks. The mirror and the calendar, both symbolic of passing time, of Mariona's irrevocably lost opportunities, are key images in the final fantasy sequence as well. Mariona's glorified image of herself fades with the arrival of her father and the bridegroom, and as the couple's eyes meet in the mirror, her expression of wonder changes to anger while the weeping mothers embrace and ecstatically praise the love-birds. Mariona, no longer able to meet her own eyes in the mirror, looks for the movie poster but finds only the calendar. She covers the mirrored face with her hands, and in a last futile gesture, breaks the glass.

The symbolic importance of the mirror is greater in this work than in *Vegetal*, while the visual impact of the milder metamorphosis is less. In both cases, Oliver eschews feminist rhetoric and any explicit statement of feminist ideology in favor of the implicit protest conveyed by the device of metamorphosis. The failure or refusal of the patriarchal family as a microcosm of paternalistic society to consider the preferences, wishes, and ambitions of the girl or woman, and – particularly in the case of Spanish society under Franco – to provide viable alternatives to the wife-mother

role, deforms or destroys not only potential but personality, as the writer shows. In *Muller qui cerca espill*, the deformation is made visible through the attenuated metamorphoses of the flashbacks and fantasy sequence, loss of potential through the destruction of Mariona's image as she breaks the mirror. *Vegetal* combines both in its extended presentation of the stages of metamorphosis.

Rodoreda's tale, «The Salamander», from the collection *La meva Cristina i altres contes*, employs a metamorphosis as radical as that of *Vegetal*, but adds a degree of violence which infuses a sense of terror not found in Oliver's work. Because of the timeless, mythic framework and non-specific, rural locale, it has a universality transcending the more specifically twentieth-century Spanish contexts of Oliver's works. Although a realistic reading of metamorphosis must either view it as a manifestation of psychosis or classify the work as fantasy, both Oliver and Rodoreda present the most complete physical change within the context of almost pedestrian reality. Nevertheless, there is also a mixture of lyricism and the grotesque in Rodoreda's story, in which a simple village girl, seduced and exploited by a married Don Juan, is accused by his jealous wife of witchcraft and eventually burned at the stake by superstitious villagers. Driven nearly insane by pain and fear, she metamorphoses into a salamander, and takes refuge in her lover's house so she can continue to adore him from under the bed. Discovered by the wife, she is again tormented and dismembered, both by human persecutors and later by eels, finding no safe haven even in the mud at the bottom of a pond.

Like Marta, Rodoreda's nameless protagonist abstains completely from criticizing the actions of the man, and in no way protests the unfairness of her treatment. Indeed, both protagonists exhibit a mixture of resignation and unawareness: neither possesses the feminist consciousness which would perceive the injustice of her situation. A major difference is that metamorphosis is not the ending in the case of «The Salamander», but only the beginning of a prolonged torment which has not terminated when

the story ends. And while Marta seems to have managed to escape into oblivion as a plant, the salamander continues to perceive and to remember, presenting her own horrorific experience as the narrative voice. The fact that Rodoreda's story is told by a consciousness still partly human situated beyond the loss of her human condition gives far greater immediacy and prominence to the motif of metamorphosis, as well as imbuing the narrative with a sense of the depth and intensity of suffering which contrasts violently with the numbness of Oliver's characters. Obviously, this is not a case of a victim without a crime, as in *Vegetal.* The crimes, as well as the criminals, are multiple, and the seducer is not at all clearly the worst of the lot. Even though his initiation of the relationship is suspiciously close to rape – he encounters the girl walking in the woods, chases her when she runs away, and pins her to a tree until she can struggle no more – it is the least of the outrages she suffers. When he accosts her in the same way the next evening, she inquires, «And your wife?» to which he replies that she is his wife, assuring her, «Only you». With this promise she accepts him, even though they are immediately afterward discovered by the wife who offers no word of reproach to the man but calls the girl a witch. Almost instantly, people in the village change their treatment of her, shun her, and soon begin an anonymous persecution, hanging dead animals on her door, stoning her, and finally bringing an ecclesiastical procession to exorcise the house.

The situation is strongly reminiscent of *The Scarlet Letter*, with the difference that here the adulterous man is known and goes scot-free, and hypocritically deserts her when the public reaction becomes violent. In both cases, the adulteress is left alone to pay the price of ostracism, public disgrace and official punishment, although since the salamander is also accused of witchcraft, that punishment is even more severe. Obviously, Rodoreda's target is not the limitations imposed by the archetypal wife/mother role, although she coincides with Oliver in presenting a situation in which society views the woman in a certain way because of her re-

lationship to a man, and that view affects the woman negatively while the man is privileged. But Rodoreda presents a much more radically negative effect upon the woman who has in essence accepted a wifely role outside of matrimony. If Rodoreda intended the salamander to symbolize a specific figure in Spanish society under Franco, it would have been the common-law wife, or the woman who – like Presencia, in Quiroga's *Algo pasa en la calle* – accepted a paramarital relationship with a man who was legally separated yet could not obtain a divorce in Spain. Obviously, she may also have been alluding to the «other woman» generally, whether in Spain or in all countries and all times, and the degree of ostracism which the concubine has suffered since biblical times to the present, or to the stoning of the adulteress by a patriarchal society, as depicted in the Bible. Whether or not the salamander has an identifiable counterpart, and wheter or not Spanish society is targetted, there is no question that Rodoreda is indicting the double standard of morality, as well as any society which tolerates adulterous or extramarital relationships for the man but does not accept the same conduct by a woman. While the official, ecclesiastically sanctified wife and mother may suffer in her secondary, submissive role, Rodoreda seems to suggest, there is far greater potential for torment in the situation of the woman whose role is not so sanctified and receives little if any social support. If she chooses to live with a married man, she is also choosing to live against most of society and its institutions, and if the man abandons her as not infrequently happens, she finds herself completely alone and defenseless, as did the salamander.

Certainly Rodoreda indicts a great deal of society, of the establishment, for all take part in the persecution of the salamander, from the elders and the priest, to the young men who come to break down her door and drag her from the house, to the boys who take part in the piling on of the wood, and the old woman who goes for baskets of dry heather when the fire fails to start. The hypocrisy of the seducer who attends the burning with his arm around his wife does not prevent the salamander's going to

his house, and she does not leave even when she hears him tell his wife, just as he had said to her, «Only you». Obviously, the metamorphosis is symbolic of the marginal, solitary state of the «other woman», and the «trial by fire» of her emotions and constancy. The loss of self-esteem through ostracism and disgrace and the change in societal perceptions of the woman who thus defies sexual or marital convention may also be visualized by the physical change to a lower animal, one which must crawl on its belly and live in the mire. Yet much of the salamander's societal conditioning and values remain with her, as evinced by her crawling out from beneath the bed each night to pray at a spot where moonlight and windowpane projected a luminous cross upon the floor.

Discovered by the wife who gives chase, abetted by the neighborhood boys, the salamander is stoned and again barely escapes with her life, crawling helplessly into the woods with a broken hand dangling by a sinew. Slipping, dragging herself to the pond, which she desperately envisions as a haven of refuge, she is set upon in the water by three eels who eat off her broken hand. The transparently phallic nature of the eels and their taking advantage of the salamander's helplessness when she has been driven from her place of hiding beneath the lover's bed suggests an allegory of societal relegation of the «fallen woman» to prostitution, especially because the eels play with their victim until they tire of the game, leaving her in the slime.

The events thus summarized might easily degenerate into melodrama or bathos in the hands of a less skillful narrator, but the tone of the salamander is completely matter-of-fact, understated, almost impersonal, with no reference to her sentiments and little if any to her physical pain. The victim's emotions and suffering must be deduced from her behavior and the logic of events themselves. While a certain horror in the events per se carries an implicit condemnation of the double standard and its cruelty in the extremes portrayed, the impact would have been considerably reduced without the device of metamorphosis and

the consequently altered perspective which the salamander supplies after her transformation.

Individual stories in *La meva Cristina i altres contes* are undated: Joaquim Molas in his «Pròleg» indicates that the various tales were written 1957-64, with the majority being composed in 1960 (12). «La Salamandra» was thus almost certainly written prior to *El carrer de les Camèlies* (1966), and quite possibly before *La plaça del Diamant* (1962) as well, but belongs to the period of gestation of Rodoreda's most profound and significant meditations upon the feminine condition. «La Salamandra» is not the only tale in the collection to exploit the theme of metamorphosis, and perhaps it is important that in each case there is a close relationship between the character undergoing metamorphosis and water: the protagonist of «El riu i la barca», an amateur fisherman who is something of a «fish out of water» among humankind because of his alienation from society is metamorphosed into a fish, while the shipwrecked mariner in «La meva Cristina», swallowed by a whale like the biblical Jonas, becomes a parasite who eventually kills his host(ess). Transformed to a pearl in the process, he is subsequently unable to readjust to life in the outside world. Geraldine Nichols has seen «La meva Cristina» as being «about swallowing-as-salvation» and «about femaleness – existing as a person defined by/as orifices» (Nichols, 194). What is most evident is that metamorphosis provides some sort of survival mechanism for the male, but not for the female (and in «La meva Cristina», the feminine whale eventually pays with her life for her role in the mariner's rescue). Viewing «La Salamandra» within this context, it becomes still clearer that the story's function is that of a feminist fable or myth. The protagonist's role, like that of Cristina, is as archetypal victim, victimized by man and patriarchal society in the case of the salamander, and by man and her attempt to save him in the case of Cristina.

Considering «La Salamandra» together with *Vegetal* and *Muller qui cerca espill*, it is evident that in addition to utilization of the primal device of metamorphosis, the three works coincide in

their use of a feminine narrative consciousness, concentration upon feminist concerns or issues, and the presence of female protagonists, each of them in varying degrees a victim of the patriarchal value system. Although the metamorphosis in *Muller* is not so radical as to intrude upon the realm of the fantastic and the fantasy sequence itself is susceptible of interpretation as a dream of the protagonist, fantasy is indeed operative in *Vegetal* and «La Salamandra». The two writers treat the fantastic quite differently: the reader willing to admit that a lonely widow's talking to her house plants falls within the bounds of reality will perceive Oliver's dependence upon the fantastic as limited to the denouement. The more literal-minded may contend that the fantastic is, in fact, only implicit in Oliver's conclusion, since the writer never states in so many words that Marta has metamorphosed into a potted ficus. The stage is set and suggestions planted in the reader's (or viewer's) mind so that that conclusion will be drawn after Marta's unexplained disappearance. By contrast, Rodoreda introduces the fantastic metamorphosis relatively early in «La Salamandra», and it signifies neither a loss of consciousness (as in *Vegetal*), nor resignation (as in *Muller*), but continuation and intensification of suffering. The salamander's torment and expiation is much more horrorific than anything which happens in Oliver's two works, and takes place in a timeless, universal context, while Oliver's protagonists suffer their trials in a specific, contemporary frame of reference.

Divergences between the two writers go beyond the differences in the seventeen-year span between the publication of «La meva Cristina» (1967) and that of *Vegetal* i *Muller qui cerca espill* (1984); perhaps they also transcend the thirty-five-year difference in birthdates (1909, 1946). Not only do the authors belong to distinctly different generations, but Oliver was born late enough to escape the traumatic experiences of civil war and exile, as well as the worst repression of the early postwar years. Therefore, while Oliver's protagonists suffer in subtler ways (treated as objects or possessions, lacking independence and the opportunity for self-

realization), Rodoreda's must undergo physical as well as mental torment in silence, unquestioningly, without protest. Oliver's protest is couched in irony yet not totally bereft of hope, while the physical and emotional abuses heaped upon the salamander suggest a cosmic anguish, an infinitely more bitter protest.

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