

MYTH AND MASCULINITY IN DOLORES MEDIO'S NOSOTROS, LOS RIVERO

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Abstract:

The early life of Dolores Medio is apparent in her first novel, Nosotros, los Rivero. In this early work, Medio draws upon a rich history of Spanish exploration in the New World. Elements of the mysterious faraway land and culture were brought back to Spain and became part of the modern history. As in her other works, she portrays masculine protagonists as weaker than their feminine counterparts but does not neglect to emphasize any strong points they may have. The feminine spirit, although greatly challenged, triumphs over personal obstacles.

Key words: legend, adventure, wine, butterflies, curse, destiny

Although her personal life and experience is deeply entrenched in peninsular Spain, Dolores Medio reveals a fascination with the exotic life that both ancient and modern explorers had in Cuba and South America. This is evident with the protagonist Lena Rivero in Medio's first novel, Nosotros, los Rivero, as Lena reminisces on the life her father. This man is known as an "indiano" and the episodes of his life abroad are linked to a mysterious curse that affects the entire family.

Much of the story is told as Lena as an adult returns to her home city of Oviedo. She reveals her childhood in the 1920's as a young girl who was filled with restless longing and imagination as she passes from childhood to adulthood.

The senior Rivero, as most of Medio's other male characters, lacks the moral stamina and perseverance to be a successful spouse or father. Despite his shortcomings, in Lena's mind Sr. Rivero "...era un hombre encantador, cuyo vida romántica y aventurera iba y venía entre los comentarios de la ciudad" (Nosotros 46). Everything he earned was squandered and he became a person who "llegaban precedido de una fama escandalosa de aventurero y rodeados de una leyenda inquietante" (Nosotros 46).

The purpose of introducing this legend is more than a reference to the weakness of the male character. Medio strives to show that destiny often is formed by forces out of the control of the individual. Thus, the Rivero family cannot control its own destiny. Sr. Rivero lives under a curse that dictates that no

Rivero will ever die quietly in his own bed. The curse began in the remote past broke with tradition and dared to purchase land that the Catholic Church had lost through expropriation.

The story itself is vague and mysterious. Obviously Sr. Rivero is dead after going out one night to visit a wine shop, never to return. As an absent father, he remains an undeveloped character but even from beyond the grave his influence over Lena is profound. She is linked to the curse through him. Yet, the lure of the exotic captivates the young girl. The domestic life of the mother holds no fascination for her. Lena is drawn to the distant horizons seen by the father, despite the dangers lurking there.

The presence of the legend in the novel shocks the reader and offers contrast to the predominant social realism depicted by Medio. When an uncle visits the house and begins to tell a story about black birds and the family curse, Lena is eager to hear more. Lena's mother is drawn to convulsive tears and clutches a rosary as she begs the uncle to stop.

As she hears these stories, Lena senses the supernatural powers that affect the family. She thinks that "Parecía como si sus antepasados se hubiesen escapado de algún cuento de brujas y encantamientos.

"Ya tenía puesta en marcha la imaginación figurándose a los Rivero como seres fantásticos, destinados a morar en un mundo aparte..." (Nosotros 41).

In the context of the legend in the novel, symbols of birds, including eagles, frogs, and butterflies have mythical meaning. For the Rivero's, they help display that there is a family in transition.

Medio uses the nicknames of animals to identify the family members. These nicknames introduce symbolism that surrounds the legend.

Sr. Rivero is referred to as "El Aguilucho." As an eagle, he symbolizes the father. The life of the family started with him. He calls his children little "aguiluchos." The proud image of a noble eagle is tarnished with Sr. Rivero's personal failings, however. His beautiful daughter, Heide, is the product of a steamy affair with a Creole woman he encountered on his way home to Spain from the New World. If this affair does in fact tarnish the aura of the nobility of the eagle, the Aguilucho's response to a call to adventure inspires his daughter Lena to do the same.

Although Lena's brother Ger is the logical person to follow in his father's footsteps, Medio portrays the younger Rivero male is somewhat weak and a young man who spends too much time with his mother. Ger, who has physical beauty inherited from his mother and the virility of his father, is somewhat unjustly accused of being too dependent on the material figure.

Lena's nickname, "Ranita," symbolizes natural fertility. The frog is an amphibious creature that represents "the transition of the Element of earth to water" (*A Dictionary* 109). It is the daughter that holds the creative potential of the family.

Lena is the chosen child to continue the adventurous spirit and life in a separate world. The remark of the senior Rivero reveals some of Medios' perception of women as the stronger beings with characteristics that traditionally are attributed to the male. El "Aguilucho" tells his daughter: "¡Tú si que eres todo un chico! Si fueses un muchacho, y ate habría enviado a América. Pero Ger tiene miedo al agua..." (Nosotros 32).

When Lena sits on her father's knee, he learns that she is a restless spirit with a big imagination who is thrilled with his adventures of the past. He tells her the stories of his favorite things—the picture of the plantation in Cuba where he lived, the "tallar" of his favorite horse, a marble Indian head, pistols, coins, and maps. A blue envelope with a torn corner is the most intriguing of all (Nosotros 59).

Despite the fact that he considers Lena a "capitana," he warns her to hold back her longings until she

is a woman who knows life better. Even after his death, though, Lena desires to break out of the traditional domestic mold set for women. As her Aunt Meg tells Lena a story about an old fort in Oviedo, Lena thinks that the fort has come to life and Lena "...era la castellana, the princesa cautiva que aguardaba a su valiente libertador" (Nosotros 73).

The longings were confined to Lena's imagination, demonstrating the strong hold tradition had on young Spanish girls who wanted to become empowered and more independent. Lena wants to be in control of her destiny, not a victim of tradition like her mother. Lena plays among the ruins with little boys and "...prefería ser capitán" (Nosotros 73).

Despite the desire the adventure, Medio represents the family as traditional Catholics. The past curse does not keep the family from adhering to the Church's teachings. For instance, when Sr. Rivero returns from his adventures in the New World, he seeks out a proper Spanish wife. The nostalgia of his previous life drove him back to his traditional roots in Spain.

One day after his return, Sr. Rivero spotted two sisters walking down the street. The first, dark-haired and dressed in pink, represented to his staid upbringing a woman with a looseness of character. The other sister, dressed in white, impressed him more. Medio points out that the second girl was "...la mujer fuerte de las Sagradas Escrituras y hacia ella se incline su corazón" (Nosotros 56).

After they married, Sra. Rivero went to work in her husband's wine shop. She dreaded the employment and did not want to be seen as a shopkeeper in front of her friends. The shop, the Uva de Oro, symbolizes sacrifice on the part of Sra. Rivero for her family. According to Cirlot, grapes often symbolize sacrifice as wine is the color of blood as well as fertility due to their being a fruit (A Dictionary 116).

The steady rhythm of life is interrupted one day, though, when fire destroys the store. Realizing that they have no insurance, the family must face the prospect of financial ruin. The bright and magnificent flames are but a harbinger of disaster. Once again the people of Oviedo look on the family as cursed. They begin to whisper that the legend is more than myth. The loss of the Uva de Oro is a sacrifice to the curse, just as el "Aguilucho" himself is, for he dies on his way to the second Uva de Oro that is to replace the shop that was destroyed by fire.

This untimely death of Sr. Rivero breaks the special emotional chain that bound the family together. While Sra. Rivero manages the wine store, Lena continues to reject tradition. She plays the rebel. The death of Sr. Rivero seems to be a test to see if the four little "aguiluchos" can carry on alone. All of them, after all, carry the Rivero blood in their veins, and, with this, all the storehouse of uncertainties and an uncontrollable desire to fly to new horizons (Nosotros 71).

This spirit is not present in the personality of Sra. Rivero. Lena recalls that every room in the Rivero household displays the personality of its occupant, including habits and character. Lena thinks that her mother's room is "...anónimo, impersonal, sin estilo ni vida propia" (Nosotros 102).

The room that Lena shares with her half-sister Heide, is different. Even the sun smiled on Heide's balcony, Lena thinks. Heide filled the room with lithographs about love, had lace curtains on the windows, and fresh flowers. Everything in the room suggested "...una señorita frívola, de clase media" of the 1920's (Nosotros 107).

The destiny of Lena reflects a darker side to her personality. A prediction of a gypsy woman is that Lena will have to make another sacrifice. In fact, Lena will have to kill...that there will be blood on her hands. The dire prophecy is fulfilled, however, in a rather ordinary way when Lena kills a chicken and gets blood on her hands (Nosotros 151-156).

The presence of Heide in the Rivero household remains mysterious throughout the novel. Medio does not explain why Heide came to Spain with Sr. Rivero, nor why she lived a sheltered, cloistered and protected life within a monastery until Sr. Rivero married. Yet, she represents both the charm of a nymph or a fairy and a reminder of the scandal surrounding Sr. Rivero's past.

Medio describes Heide as a life-long charmer, a being that was "...entre mujer y hada" (Nosotros 63). Heide was a product of the tropics and all the myth and passion that this represented. She carried the stigma of the family legend and also had the "loca sangre" of the Rivero's (Nosotros 86).

As her step-mother, Sra. Rivero carries a resentment of Heide as the attractive and light hearted young woman raises gossip in Oviedo. Young men like to pass under Heide's window, causing some to feel that Heide is too free with the boys. The bitter rejection of Heide by Sra. Rivero, who calls her a "golfa," pushes Heide to run away (Nosotros 88).

The escape of Heide is not an isolated incident. For Medio, all the Rivero's carry a secret need to run away from home. Early in the novel, Lena tries to follow Heide's example and runs away from home in an attempt to escape to the sea, only to be returned by the Guardia Civil, thus ending Lena's early adventure.

Medio never fully explains the loss of Heide. This departure is just another part of the mystery of life that has many happenings with no particular reason or conclusion. Lena is left with a dark presence, though, that permeates her being throughout her life. References to black butterflies represent dark thoughts in Lena's mind.

At the end of the novel, Lena contemplates her visit to Oviedo. She remembered the events of her childhood and her adolescence. The legend appeared from time to time but even years of life experience offered no real reason for the events that affected the life of the Rivero's. The last line of the novel is "¿Qué habría de cierto en la curiosa leyenda que los Rivero arrastraban como una cadena?"

As a technique of Dolores Medio, the mysterious legend introduces a call to adventure and adds an element of mystery to a traditional Spanish family in the years before the tumultuous Spanish Civil War. Subtle symbols contrast with the monotonous daily life and give a mythical perspective to the novel. Most importantly, they let young Lena, who is a semi-autobiographical character based on Medio's early life, give in to flights of imagination which empower her as a woman. In this way, Lena can identify her goals as a woman based on the history of the family.

Since both Lena and Dolores Medio are artists, Medio draws on her personal experience to project this activity to Lena, who uses her ability to supplement the family income. Lena returns to Oviedo as a successful author that reflects Medio's own career. The author recalls:

...en la primera de mis novelas, Nosotros, los Rivero, he aprovechado mis observaciones sobre mi familia y sobre la sociedad en que nuestra vida se desenvolvía, incluyendo en la novella otro suceso importante de nuestro tiempo, la Revolución de Asturias, en el 34, que tan hondo impacto me había causado (Atrapados 167).

In addition, the retrospect about her brother Ger, whose death in 1934 marked the events that ushered in the Spanish Civil War reminds Lena of how Ger gave her political advice. In fact Ger "...serves to locate Lena within her social and historical context" (Galerstein "Dolores Medio" 46). Margaret Jones also notes:

...the choice of period is doubly appropriate since the freedom symbolized by the advent of the Second Republic and the resultant rejection of the Monarchy (symbol of the parental image) simultaneously parallels Lena's individual freedom" (Dolores Medio 63).

Lena, like Dolores Medio herself, will break with tradition. Despite restrictions and obstacles caused by inheritance and environment, Lena always will strive to be the "capitana" of her own destiny.

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