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FONCHITO Y LA LUNA: EROTICISM IN MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S CHILDREN LITERATURE

*FONCHITO Y LA LUNA: EROTISMO EN LA OBRA
INFANTIL DE MARIO VARGAS LLOSA*

Resumen

El trabajo analiza la obra infantil de Mario Vargas Llosa, *Fonchito y la luna* como su tercera obra erótica. Según este artículo, *Fonchito y la luna* es la precuela de *Elogio de la madrastra* y *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*. En *Elogio de la madrastra* y *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, el hijo de Rigoberto y Lucrecia, Fonchito, es el protagonista. En la primera obra se encuentra a un Fonchito pre-púber quien seduce a la madrastra con su descarnada inocencia emulando la exuberante sensualidad de los dioses griegos. En *Los cuadernos*, Fonchito es un púber fascinado por la obra de Egon Schiele, el artista austriaco. Las pinturas sensuales de Schiele y su discolia vida interesan a Fonchito quien encuentra semejanzas en la obra, vida del artista y la de él. En *Fonchito y la luna*, la primera obra infantil de Vargas Llosa, Fonchito es un niño de 8 años en pleno despertar a la sexualidad. A través de las referencias al arte erótico y a los dioses griegos, al igual que en las obras anteriores, la narrativa de esta obra infantil describe el inicio de la curiosidad sexual del protagonista, que será, más adelante, la característica primordial de Fonchito.

Palabras clave: Vargas Llosa, literatura infantil, erotismo, literatura latinoamericana.

Abstract

This essay analyzes Mario Vargas Llosa children's short story, *Fonchito y la luna* as his third erotic work. This article argues that *Fonchito y la luna* is the prequel of *In Praise of the Stepmother* and *The Notebooks of don Rigoberto*. In *In Praise of the Stepmother* and *The Notebooks of don Rigoberto*, Rigoberto and Lucrecia's son, Fonchito is the protagonist. In the first novel, the reader finds a pre-pubescent Fonchito, who seduces his stepmother with his subtle innocence. Fonchito emulates the prolific sensuality of Greek gods and goddesses in this novel, through various references to the Greek pantheon. In *The Notebooks of don Rigoberto*, Fonchito is a pubescent fascinated by Egon Schiele's work. The sensual drawings and paintings of the Austrian artist draw Fonchito immensely. Fonchito finds resemblance between Egon Schiele's life and work and his own. In *Fonchito y la luna*, Vargas Llosa first children's work, Fonchito is an eight year-old boy. Fonchito's sexuality is awakening and his curiosity is made patent. By means of various references to erotic art and Greek mythology, *Fonchito y la luna's* narrative describes the beginning of Fonchito's erotic initiation, which would be the protagonist primordial and more distinctive characteristic.

Keywords: Vargas Llosa, children's literature, eroticism, Latin American literature

1. Introduction

Mario Vargas Llosa, born in Arequipa, Peru (1936 –), is part of the Spanish American Boom authors that appeared on the world literary scene in the sixties and seventies. Vargas Llosa has written novels, essays, plays, and short-stories, among other texts, and his vast oeuvre has been translated into more than forty-five languages (Fernández-Lamarque, 2016: 1).

Vargas Llosa has returned to previous characters in his novels including Sergeant Lituma (Vargas Llosa's most repeated character). In *Fonchito y la luna* (2010), Vargas Llosa also recasts his characters from *Elogio de la madrastra* (1988) and *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* (1997), Vargas Llosa's two erotic novels (Fernández-Lamarque, 2016: 1).¹ In his penultimate novel *El héroe discreto* (2013), Vargas Llosa's reader again encounters Fonchito, Rigoberto, Lucrecia, and Justiniana. For practical reasons, the three novels will be referred with their abbreviated titles as *Elogio*, *Los cuadernos* and *El héroe* respectively throughout the paper.

This essay poses the idea that *Fonchito y la luna* (2010) is Vargas Llosa's third erotic work. The essay also critically expands Margaret Anne Sheperd's thesis that the short story is a "prequel" of both previous novels (2011: 155). Sheperd's argument is based on the fact that the main characters in *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos* are repeated in *Fonchito y la luna*, she also quotes some of the similarities among the works, when describing Fonchito's sexual allusions and/or advances to Lucrecia in *Elogio* and/or *Los cuadernos*. However, this essay argues that the three main axes of *Fonchito y la luna* as an erotic narrative that coincide with *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos* are not only the main characters or the inter and intratextuality among Vargas Llosa texts found already by Sheperd. My study focuses on the art and myth signs flowing in the narrative in connection with the conceptualization of eroticism. In other words, Fonchito's erotic initiation starts with the short story, *Fonchito y la luna*, dedicated to children and his sensuality continues to develop and establish in the three Vargas Llosa's novels studied in this paper.

2. Analysis

Eroticism in children's literature has been studied mainly in nineteenth century works in English. More specifically, the Victorian era and its portrayal of the romantic childhood, for instance, have produced studies on the child as an erotic visual object. Krugovoy Silver (2000: 39), for instance, argues that nineteenth-century British social critic John Ruskin had a deep predilection for young girls. Ruskin's friendship with children's book illustrator Kate Greenaway influenced the artist drawings of young girls. Krugovoy Silver explains using Ruskin's letters to Greenaway his view of girls as highly erotic subjects to be represented as such in art. Eroticism in children's literature has been studied most recently with depictions of erotic friendships in an article by Louise Joy (2016), or as "queer eroticism" in Gabrielle Owen's discussion about Jacqueline Rose's "The Case of Peter Pan" (2010). In Latin American children's literature the topic of eroticism has been rather scarce.

Vargas Llosa is not a children's literature writer per se, nevertheless. As a matter of fact, *Fonchito y la luna* is his first oeuvre of this genre. His main character Fonchito has been the protagonist of his two first erotic novels *Elogio* and the sequel *Los cuadernos*. Fonchito also appears now as an adolescent in Vargas Llosa penultimate novel *El héroe*.

1 Some critics consider *Travesuras de la niña mala* (The Bad Girl, 2006) thematic axis as eroticism but also cosmopolitanism, femininity, masculinity and other topics (Weld-Basson, 2017, 40). Nevertheless, *Travesuras de la niña mala* is not considered an erotic novel per se.

In *Fonchito y la luna*, the protagonist is younger than in the afore mentioned erotic novels. Fonchito is probably around 8 or 9 years of age and is infatuated with a classmate, a girl named Nereida. Fonchito requests a kiss on the cheek from Nereida while on the playground, and the girl asks for him to bring the moon in exchange. After giving this impossible task much thought, Fonchito brings the moon to Nereida by a stratagem. He actually brings the reflection of the moon in the water and finally the girl lets him kiss her. The story is simple as it is dedicated to small children. However, as in *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos*, eroticism in the form of Greek myths and art are central to the story.

The girl's first name is Nereida, as are also nominated nymphs in Greek mythology. The nymphs are fifty daughters of Nereus and Doris as they are depicted as sea creatures that aid seamen on their hardships during maritime voyages. They live with their father in the profound waters and usually escort Poseidon, the Greek God of the sea. Nereida is also described in *Fonchito y la luna* as "la niña más bonita de su clase" (Vargas Llosa, 2010: 1) with long beautiful hair. Coincidentally, Nereides in ancient art are portrayed as beautiful young girls with extremely long hair, and in Greek literature they are depicted as playful and accompanying Bacchus, the god of parties and games: "Bright, watery dolphins, sonorous and gay, well-pleased to sport with Bacchanalian play" (2013: 24) is how Nereids are described in *Orphic Hymn to the Nereides*. In Martha Chicote Juiz' illustration of Nereida in *Fonchito y la luna*, the girl is portrayed as the Nereids. (Fig 1)



Fig 1.

In *Elogio*, Greek mythology is also paramount to the story. As I have previously discussed in "Mujer y sexualidad como espacio negado en *Elogio de la madrastra* de Mario Vargas Llosa" (Fernández-Lamarque, 2016: 76), Rigoberto, Lucrecia, Justiniana and Fonchito are compared to gods and goddesses from the Greek pantheon. Hermes, Diana, Venus and Eros are portrayed as Rigoberto, Lucrecia, Justiniana and Fonchito respectively, as their alter egos. Nereida is Fonchito's first love and muse, and who awakens his erotic curiosity. He is thankful to "the gods", when he finds the way to descend the moon for Nereida in the water: "Se fue a acostar, feliz y agradecido a la casualidad o a los dioses" (Vargas Llosa, 2010: 15). Nereidas in the Greek pantheon inhabit seas and oceans and personify creativity and nature. Water is linked to all that flows gently, the fluids in nature and humans, and are the quintessential fertile containment that embodies humans in salty, amniotic waters. Their habitat, water, also represents "our mother of mothers" (Ronnberg, 2010: 36), the beginning of life, and for Fonchito, the young boy, the beginning of his erotic life.

In all three works, Greek gods are central to the micronarratives embedded in them. Greek gods' exuberant sexuality and eroticism are highlighted in *Los cuadernos*. Lucrecia is compared one more time with another Greek goddess, in "Imperativos del sediento viajero". Again art and Greek myth reflects in Gustav Klim's painting "Danäe" to express Rigoberto's erotic remembrances of Lucrecia, his ex-wife. Unlike other pantheons in the religious realm, Greek gods and goddesses' eroticism is plentiful and egregious, and they express the exuberant sensuality of the characters.

In *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos*, art is rooted within the novels. The works by Fernando de Sizzlo, Jacob Jordaens, Francis Bacon, Fra Angelico, Tiziano and François Boucher in *Elogio* serve as thematic axes for seven chapters. *Los cuadernos* is primarily focused on the Austrian painter Egon Schiele, who frames Fonchito's erotic fantasies through his work. For instance, in chapter III "El juego de los cuadros" (Vargas Llosa, 1988: 75), Fonchito invents a game using Schiele famous paintings: "Reclined Nude with Green Stockings", "Mother and Son", "Nude Man and Women Entangled" and "Two Girls Nude and Entangled." Fonchito directs the reenactment of the paintings using himself, Lucrecia and Justiniana, Lucrecia's maid, as models. Rigoberto's son is an avid reader of Schiele's life and a vast *connoisseur* of the renowned artist *oeuvre*. Fonchito is constantly reflecting upon the painter's private affairs and fascinating work. The boy finds resemblance between women that Schiele used for his paintings and his stepmother, and also, finds physical and emotional similarities between the artist and himself: "Yo me parezco a él (Schiele) y tú te pareces a sus modelos" (I look like him [Schiele] and you look like his models)² (Vargas Llosa 1988: 75). He also compared the Zyszlo's painting "Camino a Mendieta 10" with Lucrecia in *Elogio*. Fonchito finds that the contemporary Peruvian artist's abstract work is the representation of eroticism incarnated in his stepmother, Lucrecia. He tells her: "En el cuadro de la sala estás tú" (That is you in the living room painting) (Vargas Llosa, 1988: 141).

In *Fonchito y la luna*, in similar ways, eroticism is expressed through art. Vargas Llosa's reader encounters Schiele's aesthetic in Martha Chicote Juiz' illustrations. Early in the book, on the first page, the illustration shows Fonchito looking from the corner of his eye, very subtly, at three girls on the school playground. (See Fig. 2B) The reader cannot see the girls' faces, as they are shown only from the waist down in the drawing, displaying the end of their skirts, part of their legs and shoes. The legs are predominant in the picture as well as Fonchito's face, who walks passing inadvertently behind the girls. Fonchito's face and torso is occupying the whole page with his hands behind his back and his eyes are turned towards the girls to the left corner. On the other page, though, the girls' legs are

2 Translations from the Spanish version are mine.

the only visible part and it seems to be also Fonchito's only/exclusive view. Chicote Juiz illustrations are not erotic per se, nevertheless. At least they are not erotic in the sense of Anne Higonnet book on children representation, or John Ruskin's ideal of children.

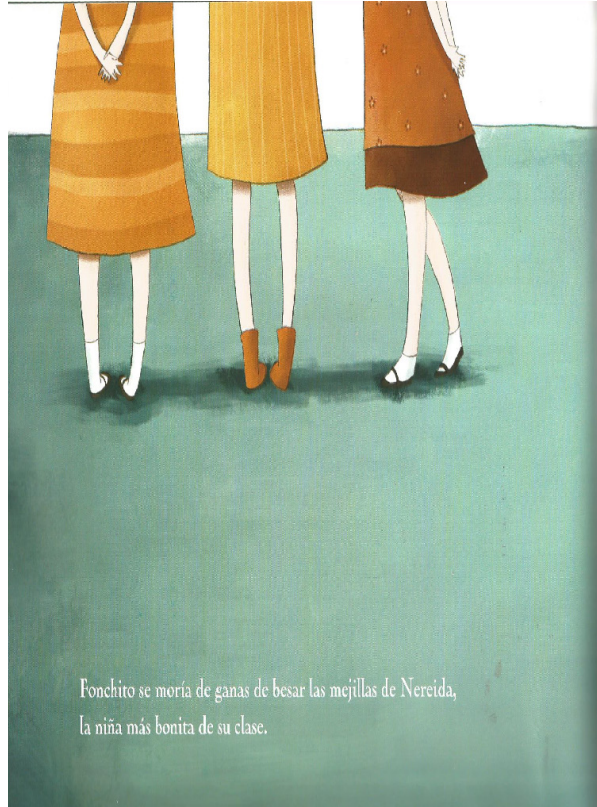


Fig. 2A

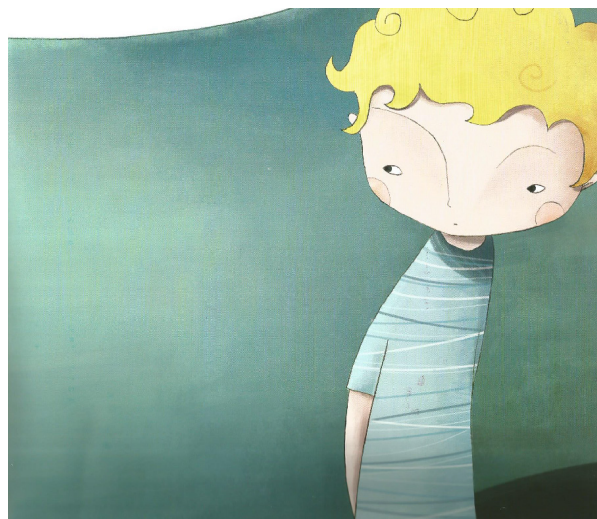


Fig. 2B

In Schiele's famous sketches women's legs as central in the work are also displayed. "Woman Standing Wearing Red," "Seated Female Nude with Green Boots," "Seated Nude with Violet Stockings," "Seated Nude Gril" and one of his most known paintings "Seated Woman with Bent Knee" highlight the inferior extremities of Schiele's women models, and places them in the core of the art work. In *Cuadernos*, one of Rigoberto's erotic fetiches are, as Schiele's, legs and stockings. He expresses it in his diary: "Te desnudarás ante el espejo de luna, conservando las medias negras y las ligas rojas" (You will undress before the moon keeping only the black stockings and the red lingerie) (Vargas Llosa, 1997: 309). The first two and the last two illustrated pages of *Fonchito y la luna* accentuate the legs resembling as the technical aesthetic of Buñuel's (son) film *La Femme aux Bottes Rouges* (1974). In the film, Catherine Deneuve's legs (aka Francois LeRoi) are shown as a POV shot in the center of the screen at the beginning and end of the film, similar to the illustrations in *Fonchito y la luna*.



Fig. 3

The prequel *Fonchito y la luna* offers the reader an antecedent of the sexually precocious child, Fonchito. As a very young boy, he is drawn to and appreciative of the human body and has curiosity for its pleasures. Fonchito's first advances with Nereida, his classmate are, perhaps, the initiation of his sexual interests, which will be later developed in *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos*. In *Los cuadernos*, Fonchito's erotic sophistication transforms from his sexual awakening in *Elogio* inspired in Fernando de Szyszlo's painting, before mentioned, to his infatuation with Egon Schiele's erotic art. In *El héroe*, Fonchito's character has matured intellectually and is a cultured adolescent who has kept his "devilish/goodish" nature and inquisitive mind. In all three works Fonchito's inherent duality is pointed out.

In *Elogio*, when Fonchito tells Rigoberto about his essay inspired in Lucrecia his stepmother, Rigoberto thinks: "Sí, ahí estaba Fonchito, observándolo con su bella cara beatífica. 'Así debía ser Luzbel' pensó" (1988: 175). (Yes, there he was, observing me with his angelic face. That is how Lucifer should be, he thought). In *Los cuadernos*, Lucrecia also finds this characteristic in Fonchito and tells him: "porque en ti, hay un viejo y un niño. Un angelito y un demonio. (1997: 200), (...because, in you, there is something of an old person and of a child. An angel and a demon) and in *El héroe* is the priest Donovan who tells Rigoberto about Fonchito, his son: "y aunque a ustedes les haga gracia. Un angelito, por qué no?" (2016: 177). (...and even though you might find it funny. A little angel, why not? [referring to Fonchito]).

Another characteristic is the parallel between Greek gods and Greek heroes. In ancient Greece, heroes were revered as gods. The quintessential example of Greek heroes as gods is Achilles, *The Iliad* hero, who chooses glory and death (*klēos*) over living a common and discreet existence. Greek heroes overcome difficult tasks and have outstanding achievements in their life journey such as Achilles, Odysseus or Heracles among others. In *El héroe discreto*, the heroes are individuals who fight for their own values and beliefs (Fernández-Lamarque, 2016: 2). The *klēos* (ethics) is entrenched in their quests but they are "discreet" not apotheotic, fulgurant, hyperbolically as Greek gods. In *Fonchito y la luna*, Fonchito must overcome an impossible task to attain his goal: the pursuit of pleasure. In Greek mythology, Nereids are characterized as dancing creatures bathing in rivers, lakes, and oceans either at midday or at midnight with a full moon. Greek folklore recounts that the encounter with a Nereida during her daily midnight bath at moonlight can bring madness passion for humans. Nereida's request is directly related to the full moon and Fonchito task will be accomplished by means of water. The perfect match, moon and water for Nereids folkloric tradition, will capture and draw Fonchito to her infatuation.

Nereida imposes on this little hero (Fonchito) a task to accomplish, before reaching his wish: the reach of pleasure. In this sense, Fonchito, as a hero, is more similar to Odysseus than Achilles. Odysseus is *per excellence*, the hero that attains its goal and returns home. For Odysseus, his journey is worthy and his penuries are minimized, because of his yearn to attain his goal: the return to Ithaca. For Fonchito, on the other hand, fulfilling his task will bring him back to the sequel narratives, through his initiation in the art of eros and consequently his reappearance in the narrative one more time.

Fonchito's task is to obtain the moon for Nereida. One night, Fonchito finds a clever way to accomplish his task. While Nereida's mother and father are not at home, Fonchito visits the girl secretly and brings the moon to her. Fonchito indeed brings the moon to Nereida, or what is in reality, the reflection of it in the water. The relationship between the moon and the name of the girl is relevant to the narrative as well. In astronomy, the Nereids are the namesake of Neptune's moons. The moon influences the tides, the forces of the oceans and seas. It also has an impact and incites human and animal moods of various kinds from spiritual to sexual, magical and lunatic dispositions are known to be subject to the moon. The celestial body is a symbol of various cycles such as conception, pregnancy, the agricultural and any kind of coming into being. For this reason, Fonchito's imposed "labor" to reach the moon for Nereida has metaphorical undertones. In the poetic sense, bringing the moon to Nereida seems to bring life, the opening of a cycle, a cycle of Fonchito's erotic experiences and this act also means the explorations and beginning of his mature sexuality. The moon phases resemble Fonchito's erotic phases as well, which will start in *Fonchito y la luna* as a very young boy. In *Elogio*, Fonchito enters erotism within the frame of sacrifice and transgression. Fonchito's actions transgress the societal norm and lead to "death", as Bataille calls it, becoming a sacrificial act. Sovereignty seems to be attained in all principal characters.

In *Los cuadernos*, Fonchito's eroticism has become subliminal. He experiences the erotic realm through the art of Egon Schiele, and has access to multiple pleasures through a sacred phase. Fonchito is reconstituted and reaffirmed in erotic excess and exhilarant comparisons through art. In *El héroe*, Fonchito has matured to a cultured and sophisticated adolescent. His curiosity and extravagant eroticism has been polished and become more exquisite and refined. Fonchito is concerned with theoretical problems about life, death, god, religion, profanity, sacred in relation to human thoughts and values. In this novel, Fonchito's physical sensuality is not put into practice or is made obvious to the reader, unlike it is clearly shown in the other three works. Fonchito is much more serious, yet playful at inventing an imaginary friend, Edilberto, with whom he discusses these various topics about life. Fonchito seems to have crossed the age of discovery and attain the age of questioning. In his encounters with Edilberto, "the ghost", Fonchito inquiries about religion and the fundamental dogmas of Christianity. According to Bataille, eroticism is primarily a religious matter, because it focuses on the individual inner experience. His attraction to eroticism is intact but in this novel, Fonchito's relationship with it is metonymical. His erotic experience is in another stage, a theoretical theological one, not pragmatically as it was in the former two erotic novels.

3. Conclusions

As it is shown in this analysis, *Fonchito y la luna*, not only revisits former characters in Vargas Llosa's novels in a clear autoreferential narrative fashion, and creates a textual dialog between iconic mythological archetypes and sensual art.

The short story introduces as well a two-faceted character in *Elogio* and *Los cuadernos*, Fonchito, and his initiations as a seductive and sensual individual. Featuring Rigoberto, Lucrecia, and Fonchito in three of his works, esthetically frames its thematical axis, and also builds in retrospective Fonchito's sensual coming of age.

In these works, ingeniously, none of the recurrent characters seem to be the only main protagonist. Eroticism per se seems to be built also as the main protagonist incarnated in Fonchito as its paradigm and novice pupil. Vargas Llosa splendid pen navigates the reader through an erotic journey as a human experience, natural, fresh, without taboos and extent from the common vulgarity often times related to erotic themes. All works flow with the unequivocal depiction of literature as art. Children's literature is considered the "Cinderella" of genres for its intensively discussed questionable literary aspect. (Dutheil de la Rochère, 2016: 2) Nevertheless, this short story contradicts this vision strongly as Vargas Llosa, majestically and paradoxically returns the dual-face protagonist Fonchito/eroticism in his only work dedicated to children. Not only Vargas Llosa's work for children has the esthetic components of a literary work but is also a sophisticated erotic novel. *Fonchito y la luna* proofs that literature aimed to the children audience can also pose complex ideas, and rich subjective characters, that are able to only add and enhance the literary realm.

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