

«GATHER THOSE FLOWERS»: WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S *CYMBELINE* IN SALVADOR ESPRIU'S
MRS. DEATH

«Coged aquellas flores»: *Cymbeline*, de William
Shakespeare, en *Mrs. Death*, de Salvador Espriu

Dídac LLORENS CUBEDO
Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)
dllorens@flog.uned.es

Recibido: julio de 2013; Aceptado: agosto de 2013; Publicado: diciembre de 2013
BIBLID [0210-7287 (2013) 3; 189-209]

Ref. Bibl. DÍDAC LLORENS CUBEDO. «GATHER THOSE FLOWERS»: WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE'S *CYMBELINE* IN SALVADOR ESPRIU'S *MRS. DEATH*. 1616: *Anuario*
de Literatura Comparada, 3 (2013), 189-209

RESUMEN: El poeta catalán Salvador Espriu abre su libro *Mrs. Death* con un verso de *Cymbeline*: «Whiles yet the dew's on ground, gather those flowers». Esta cita nos remite a imágenes y temas clave del poemario, compartidos con la obra de Shakespeare y con *Mrs. Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf. Al presentar la muerte como liberación, los poemas de Espriu recuerdan a la canción de Guiderius y Arviragus, citada en momentos cruciales de *Mrs. Dalloway* («Fear no more»). Dos de los temas centrales de la novela, la muerte y la destrucción bélica, lo son también de la poética de Espriu. También merece atención la fascinación que el poeta debió sentir por ciertos personajes de *Cymbeline* (en especial Posthumus o Cornelius) y el énfasis en la paz y el perdón que domina la última escena de la obra, cercano a las esperanzas de Espriu para Cataluña y España después de la Guerra Civil.

Palabras clave: Salvador Espriu, *Mrs. Death*, William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Literatura Comparada.

ABSTRACT: The Catalan poet Salvador Espriu opened his book *Mrs. Death* with a line from *Cymbeline*: «Whiles yet the dew's on ground, gather those flowers». This epigraph may lead to examining key images and themes in Espriu's book, bringing them into relation with Shakespeare's play and with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. In giving to death connotations of relief, Espriu's poems are close to the dirge sung by Guiderius and Arviragus, quoted at crucial points of *Mrs. Dalloway* («Fear no more»). Two of the central themes of the novel, death and the destructive power of war, would define Espriu's work very precisely. Also worth considering are the appeal that some of Shakespeare's characters (especially, Posthumus and Cornelius) must have had for Espriu and the emphasis on peace and forgiveness in the last scene of the play, which can be associated with Espriu's hopes for Catalonia and Spain after the Civil War.

Key words: Salvador Espriu, *Mrs. Death*, William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Comparative Literature.

The book *Mrs. Death* (1952), by the Catalan poet Salvador Espriu (1913-1985), opens with a citation from William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* (1610). This is the most explicit allusion to English literature in the encyclopaedic *oeuvre* of one of the greatest Catalan poets of the twentieth century.

Esriu defined his cohesive and highly allusive poetic work as a «meditation upon death» (Batista 1985, 64). *Mrs. Death*, containing forty poems originally published with an intriguing English title, is probably the best example of this endeavour. Death is presented as innate to life, perceived as disturbingly present or dangerously drawing near. A strong sense of the nearness of death is communicated to readers in those poems whose lyrical speakers are sick, old people –see «Matrimoni» («Couple») and «Les germanes» («The Sisters»). Along with an atmosphere of impending danger, and with foreseeable images and symbols (for instance, the scythe and the women in black from «Els captaires» [«The Beggars»] or the shadow drifting along the streets and stopping at one's door in «Els fumadors» [«The Smokers»]), there is a less conventional, grotesque vein, often associated with popular forms of entertainment, such as puppet shows, the circus or bullfighting.

One of the most effective grotesque scenes is in the first poem, «Mentre representem» («While We Perform»), where humans are imagined as puppets being moved by «the large hands» inside their bodies and being

given squeaky voices. These living puppets wish for the end of the show; they beg to be put back into their box:

Dits, domini! Titelles
 prou espallats supliquen
 llur repòs, que ja caigui
 la cortina, que cessin
 les paraules dictades,
 veus d'espinguet. Sabíem
 quant dolor, quin inútil
 foc teatral imposen
 les grans mans enguantades
 de nosaltres.

[Fingers, skill! Badly damaged puppets begging for rest, wishing the curtain would fall, the prompted speech cease –those shrill voices. We knew about all the pain, about the useless theatrical fire imposed by the large hands that wore us as gloves]¹.

There could be an echo, in the initial poems of *Mrs. Death*, where life is equalled to a theatrical performance, of the well-known opening of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The Shakespearean citation from *Cymbeline* lends credence to this hypothesis and coheres with the English title, also perhaps an ironic device to play with the readers' expectations or to create a gap between title and content.

As Espriu himself explained, in the prologue of an edition of his complete works, he knew but had forgotten that the Germanic etymon for the English word *death* is masculine (1980, 9-10). In an Anglophone context, therefore, the personification of death as a woman is strange, and Espriu was uneasy about his seemingly awkward title after the publication of the book. Without alluding to the gender of death in Germanic languages, Vallverdú suggests that Espriu might have chosen to call this collection of poems *Mrs. Death* in order to «avoid the sentimental explicitness of its Catalan equivalent» (1989, xxx).

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), which has been called «a poet's novel» (Cunningham 2004, xxii), also comes to mind. An influence on the Catalan poet is uncertain: the poems in *Mrs. Death* and the modernist novel are not imaginatively linked. However, it seems more than likely that

1. Quotations of Salvador ESPRIU'S poems are from the *Obres Completes* (1985). Individual poems are identified in the text by specifying their titles. Prose translations into English by the author of the present article are provided.

Esriu knew the early (1930) translation of *Mrs. Dalloway* into Catalan by Cèsar-August Jordana. Also, that Esriu would have been smitten with the enthusiasm of one of his closest friends, Maria Aurèlia Capmany, with whom he always maintained an intense intellectual exchange; Capmany used to refer to Woolf as her most admired writer (qtd. in Godayol).

Further, it is well-known that, before writing her novel, Woolf had been profoundly impressed by *Ulysses* (Duffy 2004, xi). So had Esriu, who apologetically compared James Joyce's mythical method to his own writing (Pàniker 1995, 89). Woolf's Clarissa may or may not be identifiable with Esriu's *Dama*, but the novel has been declared to be «substantially about risings from the dead», and the protagonist's party compared to «a kind of All Souls Day», a day «when the dead are thought to return» (Cunningham 2004, xii).

Apart from these immediate links, there exist other relevant points of contact between Esriu's major poetic concerns and *Mrs. Dalloway*. As has been pointed out, Esriu used his verse as a vehicle to «meditate upon death». His purpose is wonderfully expressed in the closing stanza of the *Mrs. Death* poem «Versos, enllà del camí» («Verses, Along the Path»):

Trist i lliure, camino,
davant la mort que mira,
a la llum, per la plata
antiga dels meus versos.

[Sad and free, I walk, the gaze of death behind me, towards the light, along the old silver of my verse].

This meditative disposition is shared by Clarissa Dalloway. At the beginning of the novel, as she walks in central London, on her way to the flower-shop where she will buy flowers for the party, Clarissa thinks of life in the city after her death:

Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? (Woolf 2004, 6).

Shortly after, Clarissa and the other people in the street on that morning are awed at the passing of an imposing car which –everyone imagines– drives a royal or a statesman. These people, who will surely go down in history, are thought of as immortal and opposed to the city of London and its dwellers, whose memory will eventually perish. The narrator, having access to Clarissa's mind, expresses this as follows:

[G]reatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand-breadth's from ordinary people who might now, for the first and last time, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth. The face in the motor car will then be known (Woolf 2004, 13).

The passing car appears as a reminder of mortality that sets people thinking of their dead (Woolf 2004, 14-15). Later in the novel, the sight of a homeless woman causes Peter Walsh, Clarissa's old friend and Platonic love, to come to a similar reflection. This beggar, this «battered woman» who sings of love and spring, is elevated to immortality against the changing city, compared to the passers-by, who will return unto dust:

Still remembering how once in primeval May she had walked with her lover, this rusty pump, this battered old woman with one hand exposed for coppers, the other clutching her side, would still be there in ten million years, remembering how once she had walked in May, where the sea flows now, with whom it did not matter –he was a man, oh yes, a man who had loved her (Woolf 2004, 71-72).

Clarissa's meditation upon death lead her, as a young woman, to build a theory that Peter recalls on the day of her party. Clarissa believed that only a relatively small part of our being is manifested during our lives, the remaining hidden facets being revealed in other people's existence, perhaps after our death. That is why Clarissa used to experience a strange feeling of identification with unknown others:

It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe [...] that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death... perhaps –perhaps (Woolf 2004, 135).

Woolf's heroine's belief resembles Espriu's conviction that one's existence transcends death in order to achieve completion –a metaphysical concept that he called «perdurabilitat» and was inspired to him by Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe* (Batista 1985, 66-67). Years after entertaining this vision of life as streams crossing the frontier of death, Clarissa will come to think of the latter as liberation. She seems to have a flash of insight

in the context of her party, after learning from Dr William Bradshaw's wife that a patient whom he was treating has committed suicide: «in the middle of my party, here's death» (Woolf 2004, 162).

Knowing very little about Septimus Warren Smith, Clarissa understands that Dr Bradshaw, whom she has always disliked, could have never been helpful to the patient in his crisis. She cannot help comparing her own life to Septimus' and sees a dignity in his death that her life lacks:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate, people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death (Woolf 2004, 163).

Septimus' surrender to death is directly linked to the horrors of World War I. In Regent Park, in the company of his wife Rezia, Septimus sees the ghost of his friend Evans, a fellow soldier killed at war, who approaches him, followed by an army of «prostrate men» (Woolf 2004, 61). War has left Septimus mentally unstable but, more dramatically, it has deprived him of the capacity to feel, it has made him totally insensible. The narrator coldly explains that Septimus was proud that no bereavement followed the death of his closest friend at the front:

They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other. But when Evans [...] was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference (Woolf 2004, 75-76).

Espru would certainly be interested in a novel that has as two of its central themes death and the destructive power of war, since these themes would very precisely define his own work. The idea of surrendering to death, of which Septimus' suicide would be the clearest example in the novel, could also be exemplified by Espru's symbolically killing himself: the third part of the book *Les bores* is dedicated to the deceased Salom (Espru's heteronym), who died on July 18, 1936, the first day of the Spanish Civil War.

Relevant links between Woolf's novel and Espru's work can be observed, and the two writers' confluence in a Shakespearean text is

indicative of a comparable vision of literary tradition, prized as a means to interpret and portray modern experience. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Cymbeline* can also be approached comparatively. Although Clarissa and Shakespeare's Queen have little in common as characters, they both express a wish that is relevant in terms of imagery, themes and plot: having flowers. «Mrs Dalloway thought she would buy the flowers herself» (Woolf 2004, 1) is the very first sentence in the novel. The Queen, on the other hand, commands her maids to collect some flowers for her: «Whiles yet the dew's on ground, gather those flowers» (1.5.1)².

But there is a more significant intertextual link. The line «Fear no more» (from *Cymbeline*) appears at several points in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Clarissa first reads it in the book displayed in a book-shop window (Woolf 2004, 7), as she reflects on her own mortality, on her relationship with those she loves best and on the historical moment they all live in. She later speaks the line to herself, voicing her disquiet at finding out that the aristocratic Lady Bruton has invited her husband Richard –and not her– to lunch (25). The line appears once more as Septimus muses in his sitting room (123), shortly before he jumps through the window to his death. Finally, «Fear no more» echoes in Clarissa's mind during her party after the shocking news brought by the Bradshaws:

[T]he words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like him –the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on living (Woolf 2004, 165).

The Shakespearean line connects the two main characters and their critical situations. In the play, «Fear no more» is the refrain of a dirge sung by King Cymbeline's sons when they bury the young wanderer Fidele³. In this dirge, death is viewed as the end of all strife and menace. According to Butler, references to it in *Mrs. Dalloway* «are a leitmotif expressing Clarissa's confrontation with ageing and the withering of her sexual identity (from reproductive “heat” to barren “winter”）」 (Butler 2005, 23, 1n). The scope of Butler's interpretation can be widened, since Clarissa's meditation –like Espriu's– reaches much further: she is not concerned merely on becoming old and infertile, but on the meaning and worthiness

2. See «References» for the edition used. All subsequent quotations, where act, scene and line numbers are indicated are from this edition.

3. Fidele is in fact not a boy, but Cymbeline's daughter (Imogen) in disguise. She is not dead, but profoundly asleep after taking a potion.

of her own life, indeed of abstract Life, on her mortality, on death as an absolute end. In Woolf's novel, all this comes to be encapsulated in the line «Fear no more».

Fidele's burial place is strewn with flowers that are compared in their withering to human lives. The scattering of these flowers «schematically reverses the Queen's malicious use of flowers» (Butler 2005, 191, 220n) and her command, quoted by Espriu. Thorne has also noted the imaginative opposition between the Queen's flowers and those brought for the dead Fidele: «The flowers of poison form an ironic contrast to the flowers of love, which are to protect her body [Imogen's, dressed as a boy] from the weather» (1969, 151).

The image of gathering –rather than scattering– flowers, which clearly harks back to the Queen's command, appears in one of the poems in *Mrs. Death*, «Cementiri de Sinera» («Sinera Cemetery»)⁴. There are no other obvious allusions to Shakespeare's play in the rest of the book. The place name in the title «Cançó de Llundun» («Song of Llundun») is the translation of London into the language of the Spanish gypsies. This enigmatic poem tells of a «laughing mad king» who cannot be identified with the wise benevolent Cymbeline. We also hear the collective voice of a desperate community about to flee Llundun, which, similarly, cannot be identified with Cymbeline's capital, Lud's Town (London). Finally, the lyrical speaker of «Les oliveres» («The Olive Trees»), being a «llegidor de profètics / vols de falcons» (interpreter of the prophetic flights of falcons), is reminiscent of the soothsayer in the play, who, seeing an eagle flying westward, predicts the Roman victory first (IV.2) and then the reconciliation of Romans and Britons (V.4). Rather than dealing with specific allusions to *Cymbeline* in *Mrs. Death*, it will be more productive to focus on several aspects of the play that Espriu must have found particularly appealing, given his concerns and aims as a poet.

The Shakespearean epigraph has received scarce critical attention; yet, Castellet and most critics after him have pointed out that quotations and allusions in Espriu's works are never gratuitous and are chosen for a reason (1984, 89). The line that opens *Mrs. Death* is spoken by King Cymbeline's consort, the unnamed Queen, on one of her first appearances on stage. The Queen's command («gather those flowers»), out of its context, would appear to rephrase the old *carpe diem*, or more specifically the literary commonplace

4. In his poems, Espriu refers to Catalonia as *Sinera* and to Spain as *Sepharad*. Sinera (the name of the coastal town that the poet's ancestors came from, Arenys, read from right to left) stands for Catalonia, proud of its past but suffering under repression.

collige virgo rosas. These clichés, however, seem rather superficial, even unsuitable to become integral components of Espriu's far-reaching poetic project: namely, as explained above, to «meditate upon death».

The key to explaining the inclusion of the Shakespearean citation may very well be its echo in «Cementiri de Sinera». Here the sentence «són collides ja les flors» («the flowers have been gathered») presupposes a notion of death as preparation and indicates the lyrical speaker's readiness to transcend into a new form of existence: «camino a l'oblit» («I walk towards oblivion»). This is consistent with Walters' identification of a regeneration motif running through the book and determining a transition from sickness to health, from confusion to peace and from death to resurrection (2006, 92). Accordingly, «gather those flowers», in the context of *Mrs. Death*, might be interpreted as meaning «prepare your life in order to face death».

In giving to death connotations of relief, Espriu's poems are close to the dirge sung by Guiderius and Arviragus and quoted, as we have seen, at crucial points of *Mrs. Dalloway*. They also share their hinting at resurrection. The images of withering and blooming that the dirge contains correlate with the supposed death and symbolic resurrection of Imogen. Over her body, Cymbeline's lost children scatter flowers, ignorant that Imogen (who has passed herself off as a lordless boy, Fidele) is in fact their sister and that she will soon awake from her death-like sleep.

But the quoted line in question does not call for an interpretation in Shakespeare's play: Cymbeline's Queen is literally asking her ladies to gather fresh flowers for her. Espriu's *Mrs. Death*, therefore, has a title that fails to anticipate its content and an opening quotation that is ambivalent on its own and misleading for readers unfamiliar with its source. Such authorial choices, post-modern in their intellectual playfulness, require us to answer the following questions: Who is Mrs. Death? How does the Queen's line, and by extension, the whole play, relate to Espriu's poetic explorations?

It could be argued that Espriu's Mrs. Death is no other than Shakespeare's Queen who, spurred by her ambition, will not doubt in using death as a means to her end: causing her son Clotten (not Cymbeline's son) to ascend the throne, so that she can pull the strings and rule the kingdom herself. Her husband, an old yet dignified king, and her stepdaughter Imogen, the legitimate heiress to the Crown, are obvious impediments for the fulfilment of her plans, and it transpires at the end of the play that it was her intention to poison them.

Espriu dedicates *Mrs. Death* to his brother Josep, a doctor «que lluita contra la Dama» («who fights against the Lady»). The poet was especially fond of his doctor brother and, years later, when his heart problems

worsened, Espriu trusted his brother wholeheartedly (Batista 1985, 66). In Shakespeare's play, it is precisely the court doctor, Cornelius, who fights the Queen by failing to provide her with the lethal poisons that she asks of him –deceiving her with weaker drugs instead– and controlling her worrying use of deadly substances, which she tests on animals. In the play's last scene, news is brought that the Queen is dead, and Cornelius undermines the remnants of Cymbeline's trust and affection for his wife with his report of her evil aims, based on his knowledge and on the Queen's own deathbed confessions. As explained above, she intended to murder Imogen first and then her father, Cymbeline. Her plans, however, are frustrated by the princess' escape from the court –in order to meet her lover Posthumus in Rome– and by the king's confinement, concerned as he is about his daughter and about the defence of Britain against the Romans. Thus speaks Cornelius to his king:

Your daughter, whom she bore in hand to love
 With such integrity, she did confess
 Was a scorpion to her sight, whose life,
 But that her flight prevented it, she had
 Ta'en off by poison.
 [...]
 She did confess she had
 For you a mortal mineral which, being took,
 Should by the minute feed on life and, ling'ring,
 By inches waste you (V.4.43-47; 49-52).

Cornelius' revelations cause the king to call his wife «most delicate fiend» (V.4.47), which echoes an unnamed lord's reference to her as a «crafty devil [...] hourly coining plots» (II.1.46-53), in a scene that contextualizes the action and introduces the characters. Through her apparently inconsequential gathering of the flowers the Queen introduces the menace of death into the play, since those flowers will be used to make poisons. Significantly, the Queen ends her last appearance in the play by wishing death on Imogen («Gone she is / to death or to dishonour», III.5.62-63) and on her father («May / this night forestall him of the coming day», III.5.68-69).

The box that the Queen obtains from her doctor and which, she believes, contains lethal poisons, becomes important insofar as it allows the romance branch of the complex plot to progress. Describing its contents as the finest cordial, she gives the box to Pisanio (I.5), Posthumus' servant and Imogen's only ally at court. Pisanio in turn gives the box to Imogen as they part in Wales, hoping it might be useful to her in case she fell ill (III.4).

Later, Imogen feels sick, takes the drugs and is thought to be dead (IV.2). But Cornelius, as pointed out above, had foreseen the Queen's murderous intentions and had filled the vials with substances whose only effect is to induce a temporary death-like sleep.

The Queen's actions, leading to death, must have interested Espriu, but also, most probably, her grotesque potential, exploited in recent stagings of the play. We may identify Shakespeare's character with Espriu's *Dama*, and it might be conjectured that Cornelius, the wise and sensible physician, made the Catalan poet think of his brother. It must have also been very easy for him to relate to another character in the play, Posthumus.

As indicated by his very name, Posthumus was born after his father's death; his mother died in labour and his two older brothers in battle. Even though Espriu was not an orphan, the successive deaths of relatives and of his closest friend Bartomeu Rosselló-Pòrcel (also a talented poet), together with his own poor health, darkened his childhood and youth and ultimately caused his poetry to revolve around the dualism life-death. By the time *Mrs. Death*, linked to *Cymbeline* through its epigraph, appeared in 1952, its author had lost his sister Maria Isabel (in 1924, aged 7), his brother Franscec (in 1926, aged 14), his father (1940) and his mother (1950). It is not unlikely, therefore, that, seeing or visualizing Posthumus' ghost family on stage, pleading for him before Jupiter (in V.3), Espriu should remember his deceased parents and siblings.

Posthumus, the son of a dead father, is branded by death since his birth, but, as Espriu emphasizes in his poetry, we are all bearers of mortality from the very moment we are born. This idea is translated into images in several poems included in *Mrs. Death*: in «Díptic de vivents» («Diptych of the Living»), the living are said to have traces of ashes in their hearts and on their lips; in «Versos, enllà del camí» and «Coèfor», a characteristically Espriuan image, appearing also in other books, is to be found: the lyrical speaker, looking into a mirror, suddenly recognises the face of death under his own, familiar facial traits.

Posthumus came alone into this world (according to the ghost of his mother, he «came crying 'mongst his foes», V.3.133) and, somehow, there seems to be no end to his misfortunes. Cymbeline cared for him and provided for an education at court, but his secret marriage to Imogen results in his banishment, as the plotting Queen had persuaded the king that his daughter should marry her son Clotten. In Rome, the exile makes a bet with an Italian gentleman, Iachimo, who boasts that he could easily seduce Imogen, and actually manages to deceive Posthumus into believing that he has done so. Enraged, Posthumus commands his page to kill the princess, but Pisanio believes in Imogen's innocence and advises her to escape,

dressed as a boy and calling herself Fidele. Back in Britain, Posthumus heroically and decisively fights against the Romans. Afterwards, in sheer desperation, and regretting his arrangements to put an end to Imogen's life, he changes into Roman costume and lets himself be caught as a prisoner by the Britons, knowing that he will be executed.

Having been made prisoner and believing that Pisanio has executed his commands, with Imogen's death heavy on his conscience and ready to die, Posthumus is going to receive unexpected preternatural help. His dead relatives, a chorus of ghosts, will invoke Jupiter and beg him to have mercy on a man who does not deserve to end his life as sadly as it began. Posthumus' father, Sicilius, leads the plaintive prayer to the Gods:

SICILIUS No more, thou Thunder-master, show thy spite on mortal flies.
[...]

Hath my poor boy done aught but well, whose face I never saw?
I died whilst in the womb he stayed, attending nature's law,
Whose father then—as men report, thou orphans' father art—
Thou shouldst have been, and shielded him from this earth vexing smart⁵
(v.3.124; 127-130).

In this scene, Jupiter is portrayed as the fearful God of Job, Posthumus as the least deserving target of an unjustifiable cruelty. Despite his reprehensible treatment of Imogen, audiences tend to see Posthumus, especially after he has voiced sincere regret in his preceding monologue, as frail, a defenceless victim of fate. The family ghosts express their complaint in a style that echoes Job's poem and the supreme thunder god answers «Whom best I love, I cross» (v.3.165).

Espriu was always deeply interested in the book of Job and often alluded to it in his poems (Castellet 1984, 107). In *Mrs. Death*, some of these allusions are hidden behind or associated with grotesque imagery. The poem «Dia de rebre» («Visiting Day») is an example of satire in which social codes—such as those in custom when bourgeois ladies visit one another—are exposed in all their banality. An unhappy God does not care about humans and their petty lives, does not listen to their lamentations. The world where they live, and which he created, looks like a cul-de-sac to him, and the human voices coming from it like frogs croaking:

5. Unlike previous editors, who have tended to split these verses into tetrameters and trimeters, Butler has chosen to reproduce the verses spoken by Posthumus' ghosts as the iambic heptameters they originally were.

A l'atzucac de l'obra
mancada, tan inútil,
Déu, l'entristit, escolta
mil clamors de granotes.

[God sadly listens to a thousand frogs croaking in the cul-de-sac of his failed and utterly useless work].

Posthumus feels that the gods forsook him long ago and, persuaded that Imogen has betrayed him, he no longer wishes to go on living. His jailer marvels at his stoicism in facing death («I am merrier to die, than thou art to live». Posthumus tells him in v.3.231). Although he rejected suicide (Fuster 1963, xxxvii), this is an attitude that Espriu must have found engaging, since it connects well with his poetic world: those who inhabit it are surrounded by destruction and barrenness, and can only find solace in their memories from a happy past or in the hope of a better life –after death.

In *Mrs. Death*, the poem «Díptic de Difunts» («Diptych of the Deceased») marks the lyrical speaker's entering a new sphere of being: «en silenci acabaré de viure» («in silence I will end my life»). There is a change in the tone of the book, from cynical, grotesque and hopeless to peaceful and mystical. Significantly, the last poem of the book under analysis conveys clearly the ideas that only death gives life a full meaning and that it is the threshold to true freedom:

Mira
quanta nit, quina extrema
solitud se t'emporta,
per la rialla, a l'home
justificat i lliure
que neix del teu silenci.

[It is so dark, and you wonder what extreme solitude takes you –through laughter– to the justified and free man that is born of your silence].

Alone in his cell, Posthumus awaits death as an end to his grief, he hopes for redemption and for an existence beyond death that will compensate for his mortal suffering. The simple-minded jailer is unable to apprehend such anachronistic Christian notions: to him, death does not carry with it the possibility of eternal life or the perfect communion with the divine, but an abrupt separation from the living and the gods. The difference of outlook on transcendence between the prisoner and his jailer is clear in the lines below. The latter identifies death with darkness and physical blindness; to Posthumus, physical blindness is not an obstacle to access the eternal-moral

blindness, affecting those who «wink» and are not prepared for the afterlife, is the true impediment:

POSTHUMUS I tell thee, fellow, there are none want eyes to direct them the way I am going, but such as wink and will not use them.

JAILER What an infinite mock is this, that a man should have the best use of eyes to see the way of blindness! I am sure hanging's the way of winking (v.3.243-347).

Blindness is a characteristically Espriuan image, present in almost every one of his works. The blind man in Espriu's poetry, often a beggar, if not a street musician or storyteller, is a prototypical Job figure: a man abandoned, lost, distrusted or even feared, a living token of human suffering –in short, the extreme version of what all humans are in essence. Espriu's blind men are often soothsayers, although their predicting power is a curse rather than a blessing, since their visions are nightmarish and tormenting. These characters are modelled not only on Job, but perhaps more directly on Tiresias, the mythological Greek fortune-teller, and, like him, they are the embodiment of a paradox: they cannot see what surrounds them, but they do see into the future, although tragically, they are unable to fight or alter it.

In a collection like *Mrs. Death*, which detects the presence of *la Dama* in a number of situations and circumstances, it makes sense to consider blindness as the anticipated intrusion of darkness (death) in people's lives. In «Cançó de Tirèsias» («Song of Tiresias»), the loss of sight is thought of as either death's warning or its inevitable consequence; at the same time, death is personified as having powerful eyes that blinded and lost creatures (like Tiresias, like Espriu's blind beggars, like all of us) cannot hope to escape. There is another poem, «Els músics cecs», in which a group of blind musicians are seen returning to their death-like existence after having played at a party. Their music is rendered insignificant by comparison with the terrible sound of trumpets on Doomsday. Their portrayal, as they walk along muddy paths, is ghostly and full of pathos:

Qui sap a quina festa
han guanyat un difícil
tros de pa. Vènen ara,
vacil·lants, per la via
plena de fang, per l'aigua,
cap al repós de nínxols.

[Who knows at what party they lingered, hoping for a stale piece of bread. They now return, stumbling along the muddy, flooded path, to rest in their tombs].

The closing poems of *Mrs. Death*, in which a tonal shift is obvious, have been referred to above. The moment of liberating death is arrived at after a journey through nature and its elements, full of excitement and trepidation; a journey through nature's purity, its richness and risks. Trees (cypresses and firs) are part of the imagery of the intense conclusion; previously, they were compared to human silhouettes, crying for help, raising their arms/branches in desperation. This is a favourite image with Espriu, found in other works and coherent with his interest in the imploring Job, as well as in the forsaken, isolated blind. This is the opening stanza of «Festa de la Mort» («Feast of Death»):

Pel crit avancen arbres,
com homes que tinguessin
les mans alliberades.

[Along the scream trees advance, like men whose hands have been released].

In *Cymbeline*, we find «a preponderance of floral and faunal imagery, emphasizing images of trees, flowers and birds, which contribute subtle levels of association to the action» (Thorne 1969, 154). The two father(ly) figures (i.e. the king and Belarius) are identified with trees. Belarius is the long banished courtier who, out of spite at the unfairness of his punishment, stole Cymbeline's sons (Guiderius and Arviragus) and brought them up in Wales. Years later, the princes and their adoptive father shelter the lost Imogen, whom they intuitively love, despite her disguising as Fidele. Before the princess' arrival, Belarius tells his children of his past fame as a soldier and of how he lost the king's favour overnight:

O boys, this story
The world may read in me: my body's marked
With Roman swords, and my report was once
First with the best of note. Cymbeline loved me,
And when a soldier was the theme, my name
Was not far off. Then was I as a tree
Whose boughs did bend with fruit; but in one night,
A storm or robbery, call it what you will,
Shook down my mellow hangings, nay, my leaves,
And left me bare to weather (III.3.55-64).

Belarius was a fruitful tree that decayed with unexpected misfortune. In Jupiter's enigmatic oracle, written on a tablet and left besides Posthumus while he is fast asleep, the end of his plight is predicted and said to coincide with two other joyful events: Cymbeline's reunion with his children, whom he thought dead, and the end of the war against the Romans. When Posthumus awakes and reads aloud, it becomes clear that the dead cedar that will sprout with new life is no other than Cymbeline, the branches being his children:

[W]hen from a stately cedar shall be lopped branches which, being dead many years, shall after revive, be jointed to the old stock, and freshly grow; then shall Posthumus end his miseries, Britain be fortunate and flourish in peace and plenty (v.3.204-207).

In the last scene of the play, a veritable tour de force in which all the plot complications are finally disentangled, Posthumus and Imogen renew their marriage vows through a symbolic association also involving a tree: they compare themselves to an elm that lends support to a growing fertile vine. However, the comparison is one among the several heterodox surprises in the play, since the traditional referents to these symbols are reversed: «It is notable that in this case the female partner is the supportive elm and the male the fruitful vine, rather than (as we might have expected) the reverse» (Butler 2005, 236, 263-4n). The reversal could be attributed to Posthumus' weakness of character (his problematic, sickly jealousy), opposed to Imogen's solid integrity throughout the play, or as Butler suggests, to the orphan's clearly inferior social status, as compared to the princess who, before the reappearing of her brothers, was meant to become the heiress to the throne (2005, 36).

These tree images –where the weakness of the tree equals a critical moment in the lives of the main characters and its robustness their regained happiness– are part of a regeneration symbolism that must have been of interest to Espriu, especially since a connection exists between them and the end of war: according to Jupiter's oracle, the tree representing the king will become robust again and the nation «will flourish in peace». Shakespeare's emphasis on peace and forgiveness in the last scene of his play, echoing the politics of his time, can be associated, as we will see, with Espriu's hopes for Catalonia and Spain after the Civil War.

It is generally accepted that the way Cymbeline punishes crime and rules his kingdom mirrors the foreign policies of James I –reigning when the play was written and first performed. These were based on his refusal to engage in war and on the convenience of a lasting peace for Britain. After all the successive revelations and reunions, by means of which the

gods have struck the king with «mortal joy» (v.4.235), he does not sentence Arviragus to death for having killed Clotten, he embraces Belarius as a brother, and decides to spare the lives of Lucius (the leader of the Roman campaign against the Britons) and the rest of war prisoners:

All o'erjoyed
Save these in bonds. Let them be joyful too,
For they shall taste our comfort (v.4.401-403).

Following Cymbeline's gesture, Posthumus forgives Iachimo, the one who endangered his relationship with Imogen. The monarch approves of Posthumus' mercy:

Nobly doomed!
We'll learn our freeness of a son-in-law:
Pardon's the word to all (v.4.420-422).

In his closing speech, Cymbeline exposes the terms of his peace with Rome, based as much on his nation's military victory as in his compliance to pay the tribute to the empire again:

Well,
My peace we will begin. And Caius Lucius,
Although the victor, we submit to Caesar
And to the Roman empire, promising
To pay our wonted tribute, from the which
We were dissuaded by our wicked Queen,
Whom heavens in justice both on her and hers
Have laid most heavy hand (v.4.456-463).

The play's contemporary audience would undoubtedly have received this speech as «echoing their own monarch's pride in the stable empire that he alone guaranteed» (Butler 2005, 41). Unlike Elizabeth I, during whose reign religious and political conflicts had followed one another, James I was proud to be saluted as a pacifist ruler:

For James the value of Britishness was the peace that it promised, internally at home and externally across Europe (where he hoped his status as monarch of several peoples would give him weight as a political arbiter). He saw himself as *Rex Pacificus*, and the pageantry for his accession contrasted his firm government with the disturbances that had dogged his predecessor: unlike Elizabeth's unstable female rule, James's masculine state would bring peace and quietness. The speeches at his 1604 entry

compared him to Augustus, under whom the whole world was at peace (Butler 2005, 40).

During Augustus' reign, Cymbeline's England supposedly rebelled against Rome. More importantly, the rules of Cymbeline and Augustus are contemporary with the birth of Christ. The conclusion of Shakespeare's play relies on historical coincidence and on parallelisms between the three rulers (Augustus, Cymbeline and James I) to set into relief the ideal of a new era of peace beginning (Butler 2005, 23).

Moreover, besides from putting an end to aggressive international policies, James I represented the peaceful coexistence of the nations of Britain. Espriu would have wished the Spanish Civil War to have been replaced by genuine peace, by an agreement between the two factions that fought it, so that the peoples sharing the «bull's hide», with their different languages and cultures, could have progressed and live together without being politically repressed. The Catalan poet expressed this frustrated wish in the final monologue of the play *Primera història d'Ester*, where the Altíssim gives advice that the people of Spain (Sepharad) had not followed: to establish a form of rapport based on forgiveness and tolerance.

James I's unifying spirit is also echoed by Cymbeline's role in the last scene, as he welcomes back his children and is reconciled with his enemies. His family could be considered a reproduction of a kingdom where different collective idiosyncracies are respected –the antithesis of post-war Spain:

His state and family are not so much unities as hybrids: their bodies are mongrelized and miscegenated. As is signalled by their double names, the young princes have dual citizenship. They are heirs to Cymbeline but are brought up as Welshmen [...] Posthumus [...] ends dressed as a Roman and proud of his recovered link with the Leonati [his family name], an identity that suggests a different genetics of Britishness. As for Innogen⁶, she has traversed the land, and in doing so she binds together the various components of Cymbeline's heterogeneous Britain. [...] So while British identity is forged by defeating the enemy, it cannot happen without some kind of miscegenation. It is not a fait accompli dictated by the centre, nor a colonial absorption of subaltern bodies, but a process in which internal differences are accommodated and respected (Butler 2005, 53).

6. Butler convincingly argues for the princess' name to be spelled «*Immogen*» rather than the more usual «*Imogen*», since this must have been the spelling originally used by SHAKESPEARE (2005, 77).

A rule like *Cymbeline's*, based on forgiveness, reconciliation and mutual respect is what Espriu had cherished for Spain after the Civil War –unfortunately, loss of freedom and fascist repression ensued and went on for decades. The book we have focused on so far contains poems that could be read in the light of the recent history of Spain: in «Els toros» («The Bulls»), the alleged splendour of post-war Spain is portrayed as a grotesque combination of bloody entertainment (bullfighting as a celebration of risk and death) and religious ceremony displayed by a politicised church.

There are other examples of Espriu's rather cryptic allusions to the political reality around him. With the twin poems «Un home flac de Meir» and «Un home gras de Meir», Espriu enacts social division in post-war Spain⁷. In the second of these two poems, dedicated to the fat man, the lean man assumes the lyrical voice and describes his undignified role as the former's servant, calling him his enemy and comparing himself to a dog. Both men live, as it were, under a rule of hate, and the lean man's imposed servitude makes him the thirstier for vengeance, so that he wishes he could see the fat man hanged:

Al vespre,
 en retornar, quan criden
 venedors de diaris
 el crim més bell del segle,
 se m'acut que podria
 l'odi meu millorar-lo,
 si trobés la impossible
 sequoia gegantina
 per al teu pes, samugues
 resistents, prou gruixudes,
 amb les quals em plauria,
 fent-te la tria eterna,
 a la fi decantar-te
 del costat del dimoni.

[At evening, back from work, when newspaper sellers yell the most beautiful crime of the century, I think of improving it with my hate. If I found the unimaginable gigantic sequoia to bear your weight, tough ropes and thick enough, I would gladly use them to make an eternal choice and finally bring you to the devil's side].

7. Meir is an Egyptian town located near an ancient necropolis. Espriu, who studied history at university, was especially interested in Egyptology. In his poetry, he often links ancient history and myth to his contemporary reality.

In *Cymbeline*'s final address to his court, he blames the dead Queen for having induced him to stand up against Rome. Since the refusal to pay the tribute was the ultimate cause of war, the Queen is not only responsible for invoking death into the play by preparing her poisons, as we observed, but also for instigating war. Butler pairs not only James I and *Cymbeline*, but also Elizabeth I and the Queen, whose defiance is representative of «the old Elizabethan rhetoric of English separateness» and of a «feminized and aggressive model of nationhood» (2005, 42-43).

With this reference to the Queen, we come full circle. Death and war being the two thematic parameters that best define Espriu's poetry, it is not surprising that the Queen, who somehow allegorizes the two, was a fascinating character to him, deserving to be quoted. Death and war are also at the heart of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Significant themes are common to Espriu's work and Woolf's novel: the completion of life after death, the psychological and social consequences of war, suicide as a dignified escape. Further, *Mrs. Dalloway*, like *Mrs. Death*, quotes *Cymbeline*: the line «Fear no more» echoes through Clarissa's day, becoming fully meaningful as she reflects on her past and future.

The analysis of the Queen's line, as well as its most and least immediate contexts, has proved revealing and especially suitable for the study of *Mrs. Death*. Other characters have been examined: Cornelius, the doctor who checks the Queen's murderous schemes, and more importantly, Posthumus, whose unhappy existence, determined by death and suffering reminiscent of Job's, will finally turn to joy alongside Imogen. Images appearing in both Shakespeare's play and Espriu's poems have been identified, described and contrasted: trees compared to human beings and their feelings; blindness as an image of death. Finally, *Cymbeline*'s kingdom (inspired by Britain under James I) has been related to Espriu's dream of concord for Spain, the opposite of what he experienced for most of his life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BATISTA, Antoni. *Salvador Espriu: itinerari personal*. Barcelona: Empúries, 1985.
- BUTLER, Martin. «Introduction». In SHAKESPEARE, William. *Cymbeline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 1-72.
- CUNNINGHAM, Valentine. «Introduction». In WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Vintage, 2004, pp. xv-xxiii.
- DUFFY, Carol Ann. «Introduction». In WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Vintage, 2004, pp. xi-xiv.

- ESPRIU, Salvador. «Pròleg». In *Años de aprendizaje. Poesía 1. Obras completas*. Trans. Andrés Sánchez Robayna and Ramón Pinyol Balasch. Sant Boi de Llobregat: Edicions del Mall, 1980, pp. 6-10.
- *Obras completas. Anys d'aprenentatge 1. Poesia 1*. Ed. Francesc Vallverdú. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1985.
- FUSTER, Joan. «Introducció a la poesia de Salvador Espriu». In ESPRIU, Salvador. *Salvador Espriu. Obra poètica*. Barcelona: Albertí, 1963, pp. xiii-xxii.
- GODAYOL, Pilar. «Traductores de Virginia Woolf al català» (abstract). In *XIV^e Col·loqui de l'Associació Internacional de Llengua i Cultura Catalanes* (Budapest, 2006). <http://aillcbudapest.elte.hu/index.php?oldal=programa_cientific/GO_DAYOL_PILAR.html&vissza=2> (28 abril 2013).
- PÀNIKER, Salvador. «Salvador Espriu dins Conversaciones en Catalunya». In REINA, Francesc (ed.). *Enquestes i entrevistes, I (1933-1973)*, 2 vols. Barcelona: Centre de Documentació i Estudi Salvador Espriu/Edicions 62, 1995, Ediciones, pp. 83-90.
- SHAKESPEARE, William. *Cymbeline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- THORNE, William Barry. «Cymbeline: "Lopp'd Branches" and the Concept of Regeneration». *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 1969, 20, pp. 143-159.
- VALLVERDÚ, Francesc. «Introduction». In *Selected Poems of Salvador Espriu*. Ed. and trans. Magda Bogin. New York: Norton, 1989, pp. xxv-xxxiii.
- WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. London: Vintage, 2004.