

Playing the Game of Life in Antonio Buero Vallejo's *Casi un cuento de hadas*

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Despite the many allusions to games and play in Antonio Buero Vallejo's dramas, relatively little has been written about the playwright's affinity for the ludic and its significance in his work.¹ Examples of games in Buero's plays include the chess set in *En la ardiente oscuridad* (1946), the lottery in *Hoy es fiesta* (1956), the guessing game in *El tragaluz* (1967), and the multifaceted ludic aspects of *La fundación* (1974). Games can play an ancillary symbolic role (as in *En la ardiente oscuridad*, *Hoy es fiesta*, and *El tragaluz*) or can be central to a play's development (as in *La fundación*). In *Casi un cuento de hadas* (1953), game playing takes on a significance that foreshadows its importance in *La fundación*. Games pervade every aspect of the narrative and affect every character. In fact, without them, the play, like a house of cards, would fall apart. On the surface, games may appear to be a frivolous form of escapism, but their role in *Casi un cuento de hadas* is, at times, deadly serious and closely tied to questions of identity and survival.² The characters play with one another's lives and play to save their own. In addition to the games that are an integral part of the drama's plot, the work itself can be considered a kind of game that Buero plays with his audience in an effort to communicate certain messages about post-Civil War Spain, human nature and responsibility, and the liberating power of imagination and creativity.

Since the publication of Johan Huizinga's pivotal book *Homo ludens* (1938), scholars have struggled to develop a clear definition of the term *play* and to establish a foundation for what Robert Detweiler calls "ludic literary criticism" (61). For the purposes of this essay, I use Detweiler's definition, which combines salient points on the topic of play from several important theorists including Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Wilhelm Fink, Jacques Ehrmann, and Michel Beaujour. The three headings that Detweiler uses to define play are *agon*, *mimesis*, and *alea*, which he explains as follows:

¹ Terrence McMullan has written specifically about the ludic aspects of *La fundación*, and Luis Iglesias Feijoo has referenced game playing in some of Buero's plays in his *La trayectoria dramática de Antonio Buero Vallejo*.

² McMullan says the following regarding the potentially tragic result of playfulness: "... lo lúdico puede tener ramificaciones muy serias, incluso trágicas..." (168). That appraisal certainly applies in *Casi un cuento de hadas*, in which game playing leads to Armando's death.

Insofar as a work of fiction is a contest between author and material, or author and reader, or text and reader, or insofar as the plot is based on conflict, the work, the composition of the work, and the reception of the work are a form of *agon* and are naturalistic—an elementary struggle between opposing forces. Insofar as the author follows other authors or the work is modeled upon historical, typical, or conceivable life situations, the work is mimetic and symbolic. Finally, insofar as the author exercises his ingenuity or the work's parts cohere into an organic artistic object, the work is aleatic and creative. (59)

These three headings, which are used by Detweiler to focus primarily on the self-conscious nature of ludic fiction, will also be used to analyze the types of games and play within Buero's drama and to understand his characters' relationships with playing. Detweiler reminds us that "[n]o novel or story is purely agonistic, mimetic, or aleatic" (59), and that assertion is certainly the case in Buero's *Casi un cuento de hadas*, which exhibits characteristics of all three in the plot and as a self-conscious piece of fiction.

A good starting point might be the title of Buero's play, which itself is agonistic, presenting the reader with a puzzle to be solved. Why is the play "almost" a fairy tale? Although Buero has explained the *casi* in relation to a pivotal moment in the story's development ("Comentario" 382), its meaning outside the text as it pertains to the relationship between the author and reader is also fundamentally important.³ The reader should immediately be on guard because the text has been presented as a kind of challenge, the *casi* suggesting that all is not as it appears and that the careful reader will need to get to the bottom of its meaning. In that regard, according to Detweiler, "the text is the ludic object (the toy) in the game between author and reader" (60). *Casi un cuento de hadas* is, in effect, a game about playing games.⁴

To make matters even more interesting, Buero chose the fairy tale tradition on which to base his play and, not only the tradition, but a specific fairy tale written by Charles Perrault in the seventeenth century. Buero, by referring to an earlier time, genre, or work, posits *Casi un cuento de hadas* under the mimetic category of play, according to Detweiler's definition. The fairy tale, which today brings to mind the idea of child's play and happy Disney movies, was originally a complex genre whose readers were not children but adults (Zipes 17) and whose premise was not happy and positive, but dark, suggestive, and potentially dangerous (Zipes 14). The advent of the fairy tale genre was itself based on a kind of parlor game created by the *conteuses* of seventeenth-century France.⁵ Those women played the game to find a voice in the patriarchal society in which they lived. For

³ For a study on the meaning of Buero's *casi* and the importance of the fairy tale tradition see my article, "The Enigmatic 'Casi' of *Casi un cuento de hadas*: Buero Vallejo's Homage to Perrault and the Fairy Tale Tradition."

⁴ Detweiler notes that "In all of this fiction as game with the reader, the reader is challenged to dispense with the willing suspension of disbelief in order to play another game. The hermeneutical point of departure is the destruction of the old fictional illusion, of the traditional agreement between author and reader, to make way for the game in which the author says, 'I will not allow you to inhabit an integral fictive world while you read my novel; instead, you must constantly and self-consciously connect the artifice of my narrative with the problematical real world you live in' " (56).

⁵ See Patricia Hannon, Christine Jones, and Jack Zipes for information on the *conteuses* and their role as the original authors of fairy tales.

them, game playing and being experts at *préciosité*⁶ provided a path to independence and freedom. They were, in a sense, attempting to write themselves into (literary) existence. The fairy tale game involved two players: the author who would attempt to create a most ingenious tale and the readers or listeners who were challenged to uncover the story's hidden meanings.

In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, Buero invites his readers to participate in a similar type of game in which they can be either passive recipients of a love story or more inquisitive players who attempt to untangle the puzzle of the play in order to discover truths about themselves and their relationship to the fiction they are reading, the relationship between fiction and the real world, and their relationship to that real world. The challenge to readers is indeed daunting: if they want to attempt to understand the fictive world of *Casi un cuento de hadas*, then they must ponder not merely why it is only “almost” a fairy tale, but also its relationship to Perrault's “Riquet à la houppe” and the latter's allusions to classical myths,⁷ as well as the rich fairy tale tradition in general. That implied challenge from Buero to his readers is a clear example of Detweiler's self-reflexive *agon*.

Buero's recourse to the world of the fairy tale and his reworking of myths⁸ are important aspects of ludic fiction according to Detweiler who explains that “in the fiction that plays with older literature, the classical myths or their reworkings are revived and perverted to show the death of unified, closed world views and the need for creative attitudes that risk leaps of the imagination into the unknown because there is nowhere else to go” (56). The idea of there being “nowhere else to go” brings to mind closed and rigid systems such as the one in place in *Casi un cuento de hadas*, which is reflective of the post-Spanish Civil War period when individuals were controlled by the rules of Franco's game. The fairy tale, built primarily on a liberating impetus, has the potential for enlightening careful readers. However, as we will see later in this study, the fairy tale is perverted in *Casi un cuento de hadas* and itself turns into a game that represents a closed system in which the characters are trapped. The challenge for characters enlightened enough to recognize their plight, as well as for readers who care enough to understand how that plight might relate to them, is to find the original liberating impetus on which the fairy tale was built and the fundamental freedom associated with the concept of play (Huizinga 8). In that search for freedom from closed systems, readers have to be willing to immerse themselves in an imaginary world in order to intuit answers about the world around them.

Before delving into an analysis of the players and the types of games played in *Casi un cuento de hadas*, a brief overview of the plot may be in order. The play focuses on Riquet, an ugly prince who at birth receives a gift from his fairy godmother Oriana: to make the woman he loves intelligent. A few years later in another kingdom, Oriana attends the birth of twin princesses: Leticia, who is born beautiful but ignorant, and Laura, who is born ugly

⁶ Jacques Barchilon and Peter Flinders define *préciosité* as “the refinement of thought resulting from a learned use of words, the application of intelligence to knowledge, and the cultivation of psychological insight into feelings, a renewing of language through metaphor, a certain fascination with the exquisitely difficult turn of phrase, the sublimation of erotic drives through ingenious language” (32).

⁷ For an explanation of the relationship between myths and play, see Huizinga (4-5, 129).

⁸ In the final chapter of *El teatro de Buero Vallejo: Una meditación española*, Ricardo Doménech addresses myths in the works of Buero. See also Victor Dixon's “La fundación de Buero Vallejo, una re-creación de *La vida es sueño*” and “H.G. Wells en la vida y en la obra de Antonio Buero Vallejo.”

but intelligent. Oriana gives Leticia the ability to make the man she loves handsome. She does not, however, give Laura any special gifts. As the girls grow up, their natural gifts and flaws grow with them, and soon the beautiful Leticia is cast aside due to her ignorance, while the brilliant Laura becomes the center of attention because of her great wit. Leticia is left alone to play with a doll that represents her ideal fairy tale prince, while Laura's resentment at not being beautiful grows daily. Riquet, having been given a picture of Leticia, goes in search of her with three goals in mind: bestowing intelligence upon her, marrying her, and becoming handsome through Leticia's love. His plans are derailed by Leticia's mother Queen Juana, Laura, and the handsome Armando, who wants Leticia for himself. As the play reaches its denouement, Riquet is split into two separate entities: Riquet the handsome and Riquet the ugly, both of whom appear on stage portrayed by different actors to represent the prince's torment and angst. Driven to violence by Armando's cruel taunts, Riquet kills his nemesis in a duel. After Armando's death, Leticia tells her mother that she wishes to marry Riquet even though he is not the queen's choice for her daughter and does not fit Leticia's own image of a fairy tale prince. The marriage represents an awakening to several painful truths for Leticia and Riquet, many of which are elucidated by way of game playing throughout the drama.

In act three, Armando states that life in the eighteenth century has become a game: "Es el siglo que ha logrado la difícil virtud de convertir la vida en un juego" (294). Buero's decision to situate the play in that century is no accident and constitutes one of the mimetic aspects of the drama. Huizinga explains the following regarding the eighteenth century and its relationship to play:

Statecraft had never been so avowedly a game as in that age of secret cabals, intrigues and political filibustering. . . . Ministers and princes, as irresponsible as they were omnipotent and unhampered by any troublesome international tribunals, were free to gamble any time they liked with their countries' destinies, a smile on their lips and with an exquisitely polite flourish, as though they were making a move on a chessboard. (186)

In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, we see that same sense of superiority among certain characters who play with people's lives almost as a whim, but with the ultimate goal of winning, which is at the core of agonistic play (Caillois 15). Armando explains that, in his century, passions and colors have been replaced by gallantry, a game in and of itself that leads to a lack of belief in anything: "Nuestro tiempo es sabio y viejo. Ya no cree en nada. Ni siquiera en aquellas feroces pasiones que antes torturaban a las personas..." (295). He explains that any kind of problem, "Ahora todo lo resolvemos... jugando" (295). Armando's definition of game playing suggests a glossing over of feeling and a numbing of senses. Although the purpose of that kind of game may seem light and frivolous, it carries with it an undercurrent of absolutism. Armando's references to "[l]a educación" (295) and Darío's (the monarchs' advisor) allusions to "protocolario" (258, 274) are reminiscent of Don Pablo's "moral de acero" in *En la ardiente oscuridad*. Everyone is expected to live by (or play by) strict societal rules (that is, the rules of the game) and to live up to certain predetermined expectations.⁹ The individual who does not conform is the "spoil-sport" who "reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world . . . [and] robs play of its *illusion*"

⁹ Huizinga states that the rules of play are "absolutely binding and allow no doubt" (11).

(Huizinga 11; emphasis in original). Due to their inherent power to destroy the illusion of the game world, spoil-sports (those who stand in opposition to the rules or deviate from the expectations of the dominant players) are at risk of being oppressed and ostracized.¹⁰

The idea of life as a game is actually an aberration of the definition of play, which, according to Huizinga, always exists outside “ordinary life” (9). Caillois explains, “Above all, play is a parallel, independent activity, opposed to the acts and decisions of ordinary life. . . . [T]he game remains separate, closed off, and, in principle, without important repercussions upon the stability and continuity of collective and institutional existence” (63). Nevertheless, when princes or dictators turn their countries into game states, life does become a kind of perverted game. Whereas the world of play is designed, according to Caillois, “to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life” (19), the confusion of contemporary life (in the form of oppression and despotism) is the game in *Casi un cuento de hadas*, symbolizing the Franco era when people were forced to join in a game of collective silence and forgetting in order to survive (Pennington 9). The only consolation when confronted with such closed and oppressive systems is to remember that, as games, they must, by their very definition, come to an end (Caillois 6). In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, the characters are literally trapped within the confines of the game that is the play, but even they have the potential to achieve a figurative escape depending on their ability to become proficient players. Although they cannot escape the fictional realm, they can affect the world outside their closed environment through identification with the audience (Caillois 120-25).

In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, there are two types of players: those who wish to preserve the repressive status quo characterized by the strict rules of the game of gallantry (Juana and Armando) and those who seek to escape it (Oriana, Leticia, Riquet, and eventually Laura). The first group is agonistic to the extreme, morally blind, and bent on winning at all costs,¹¹ while the second is enlightened and creative, representing the mimetic and aleatic sides of the game (according to Detweiler’s definition). The anagnorisis of the second group is hard won; each character must reach the brink of defeat and take on a semblance of participating in the game (mimesis) before he or she can learn how to use intellect, emotion, or creativity to gain the upper hand and become the stronger player. How well the individuals play the game of life determines their continued existence in a hostile environment.

The first character who represents the repressive status quo is Queen Juana. She is an able player whose need for power and control permeates all she does. At the beginning of the drama, she forces her apparently unintelligent daughter, Leticia, to play mindless solitary games and not to think whatsoever: “Juega, juega, pobrecita. Juega y no pienses. Tu madre vela por ti . . .” (247-48). Juana’s mode of watching out for her daughter is to keep her in an ignorant state and to control her. She is not concerned about Leticia, but rather her own reputation and continued hegemony. Since Leticia does not conform to the norm

¹⁰ Caillois notes that “Play is in no way a refuge for the defective or the abnormal. It repels them . . .” (167). In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, Riquet, Leticia, Laura, and Oriana all are considered to be different and do not fit into the fabric of the gallant game.

¹¹ Caillois explains that when *agon* becomes corrupted, “The rules of courteous rivalry are forgotten and scorned. . . . Implacable competition becomes the rule. Winning even justifies foul blows” (54).

and is not up to the gallant games of the time, she can be considered one of Huizinga's spoil-sports. Her mother restricts her to playing with dolls while she tries to find a suitor who will resolve the problem her daughter represents. As we will see later on, Juana does not understand that by restricting her daughter to solitary games, she unwittingly allows Leticia's creativity and imagination to take root.

As the play progresses, we realize Juana's entire life has been a game of wits that she has played well in order to get ahead. She admits to Leticia that her relationship with the king is based on manipulation and the playing of a role. When Leticia laments that Armando thinks she is ignorant, Juana says, "lo importante es que él te vea alegre. Yo lo hice al principio con tu padre, y ya ves el resultado" (283). In other words, she pretended to be something that she was not (mimesis) in order to get what she wanted. In that regard, Queen Juana can be compared to the cheat in the game world. Such an individual, unlike the spoil-sport, is not cast from the game, because, although manipulative, she still plays by a version of the game's rules and can therefore continue to reside within its fixed borders (Huizinga 11). Instead of allowing Leticia to live the game Oriana has preordained for her with Riquet, the queen attempts to change its course by placing the status quo, in the form of Armando, squarely in her daughter's path. When Riquet unexpectedly kills Armando, Juana attempts to regain control by proposing a war against the ugly prince. She will stop at nothing to avoid having Riquet, the abhorrent social misfit, in control of the kingdom. Expecting Leticia to placidly agree with her plan to destroy Riquet, Juana is stunned when her daughter definitively wrests control away from her mother by requesting permission to marry the ugly prince. Juana loses the game she set up for Leticia in *Casi un cuento de hadas* because she focuses on winning through might. In her efforts to preserve the status quo at all costs, she unwittingly demonstrates her weakness and moral blindness.¹² Her lack of self-awareness and awareness of others leads to her ultimate defeat.¹³

Armando, another supporter of the established order, is an arrogant and unfeeling character who shows signs of humanity, and perhaps a glimpse of a reality outside his closed world, only in the moments immediately preceding his death. He is initially a pawn both in Juana's game to control Leticia and in Laura's game to belittle Riquet in order to win him for herself. Armando represents the epitome of the game of gallantry by not showing emotion and aligning himself with the prescribed norms of the day. He agrees to marry Leticia not for love, but for the political gains that marriage will afford. Convinced by Laura that Leticia may still be harboring hidden feelings for Riquet, Armando allows himself to be drawn into the younger twin's game to humiliate the ugly prince. He challenges Riquet to a game of checkers and, being the most gallant of gallants, is confident in his superiority and his ability to win. Throughout his speech about how life is a game and the inoffensiveness of the times, Armando figuratively takes Riquet apart piece by piece by pointing out, in a

¹² See Martha T. Halsey's *Antonio Buero Vallejo* for an explanation of the two kinds of blindness in Buero's theater (41).

¹³ Doménech discusses the falseness of society in the following quote, which sums up Juana's existence in *Casi un cuento de hadas* and brings to mind her role as "cheat": "... vivimos en una sociedad organizada desde y para la mentira, una sociedad que se empeña en convencernos de que no somos ciegos, es decir, de que somos libres y felices, cuando en realidad no somos libres y somos desgraciados" (76). Juana's moral blindness and lack of self-awareness prevent her from realizing the falseness of her own existence and her lack of freedom.

passive-aggressive way, why the ugly prince does not fit in the world of the status quo and therefore is not fit to play the game.

The progressive degradation of Riquet is mirrored in the various stages of him losing the game of checkers. After implying that Riquet is a coward, Armando says, “Creo que os voy ganando” (295). Riquet, resigned to that apparent truth, replies, “Así parece” (295). Then, Armando indirectly calls Riquet a “bufón” (“fool”) and tells him to make his next move: “¡Jugad!” (296). Riquet loses by the move, and Armando, relishing his defeat of Riquet, exclaims “¡Dama!” (296). Looking at the game piece and then at Leticia, Riquet resignedly says, “Es vuestra” (296). Riquet appears to give up (the game and Leticia) without much of a fight thereby epitomizing the passive player who, true to Caillois’ definition of *alea*, resigns to outside forces instead of using “his resources, skill, muscles, or intelligence” (17). Just as the dismantling of Riquet appears on the verge of completion, Armando goes too far, underestimating his opponent’s character and resolve. Although Riquet withstands Armando’s personal attacks, he refuses to abide the gallant prince’s mockery of Leticia’s intelligence. Furious, Riquet stands abruptly and tips over the game, thus bringing it to a literal and symbolic end. That particular game of wits within the broader game of the play is over, brought to a halt by the spoil-sport who has broken the illusion over which Armando mistakenly thought he had control. Riquet takes out his dagger and exclaims, “El siglo se ensombrece. El bufón puede ser temible. ¡Apuntad al corazón, porque yo voy por vuestra vida!” (298). Instead of shying away from the court in acceptance of what he appears to be—a fool and a coward—Riquet shows a different side of himself. He is a man who is outside the times, an anomaly, and a man of feeling and passion who will fight for what he believes. In that instance, he too exhibits *agon*, not in its corruptive and destructive form, but as a means to defend himself and the one he loves. Armando, for the first and only time in the play, feels an emotion, fear, and, as a result, is able to glimpse reality outside the game of gallantry. He sees Riquet transformed into the impossible, handsome prince. Of course, Armando’s recognition that passion does exist and that life has meaning beyond the game comes too late, and he goes to his grave intuiting the falseness of his existence and the times in which he lived.

Whereas Armando and Juana’s games have specific goals—to win at all costs (corrupted *agon*) and to preserve the status quo and the rules of the game—Laura’s relationship to game playing in *Casi un cuento de hadas* is much more complex. If Laura, as Iglesias Feijoo writes, represents reality (129), then it makes sense that she would have trouble adapting to the false games of gallantry played by those around her. The first image we have of Laura involved in games is when the ladies and gentlemen in waiting deceive her while playing blind-man’s bluff. Shortly thereafter, Laura, knowing that her servants will again trick her, abandons a game of hide-and-seek. Her restlessness with those silly games reveals her inner struggle. She yearns for something real and true, but everything around her is false and shallow (a game). Neglect and a lack of sincere affection lead Laura to become a bitter and vindictive person who does not believe in love. When talking about the doll that represents Leticia’s fairy tale prince, she muses to her sister, “¿Prometidos? ¿Amantes? ¡Ni tú, ni yo podemos tenerlos! Tú, a tus muñecos, y yo, con los caballeros... Otros muñecos” (253). Since love is not possible in Laura’s mind, the only option is to continue playing a meaningless game in which the *caballeros* are as false as the rag dolls with which her sister plays.

Laura's ability to see the falseness of the world around her should be a boon, but she considers it to be an impediment and another factor, along with her ugliness, that serves to isolate her. Not ready to accept her own tragic existence, she instead casts blame for her plight on Leticia and Oriana. Like many of Buero's symbolically blind characters, Laura, at that stage in the play, is incapable of accepting responsibility for achieving "[e]l conocimiento de la verdad propia [que] es ... el primer paso necesario para llegar a obtener la libertad" (González-Cobos Dávila 57).¹⁴ It is easier for her to enact a plan to destroy her sister than to look at herself and admit that she is inhabiting a false world. Oriana, recognizing Laura's hatred for Leticia as a displaced emotion (270), invites her to quit the palace and retreat to the tower to embark on a different kind of game: "El de jugar, como una niña, a los muñecos." Laura asks, "¿Cómo hacía Leticia?" Oriana responds, "Como hago yo. Tu destino es el mío. Serás una niña eterna y aprenderás a jugar con muñecos vivos" (270). Laura, still in a state of denial, brusquely turns down Oriana's offer and sets out instead to enact a game of her own, in which she will indeed play with human dolls, but to negative and deadly ends.

The motivation for Laura's new game is vengeance and hatred. She feels alone after Leticia discovers her intelligence and the *gentilhombres* abandon her for her sister. Dejected, lonely, and convinced that love and affection are impossible, she decides, out of spite, to take Riquet away from Leticia. When her efforts to woo the ugly prince through manipulation and play fail, she turns to Armando for help. Laura explains what she wants the gallant prince to do to Riquet: "Humillarlo ante ella. Hacer ver a los dos que le superáis en todo. Herirle en lo más vivo, para que aprenda humildad y no se obstine en conseguir lo que no le corresponde" (293). In that vindictive request, we see shades of Laura's mother and corrupted *agon*. The conversation and checkers game that ensue are all part of Laura's twisted game to destroy Riquet so she will be able to control him and prove herself superior. Much to Laura's surprise, Riquet is not defeated by Armando, but rather becomes stronger, putting his life on the line to defend Leticia's honor. When Riquet challenges Armando to a duel, Laura recognizes her tragic mistake. She says, "¡Santo Dios, qué he hecho! ... ¡Riquet lo va a matar! ¡Y sólo era un juego!" (298). Playing with her human dolls costs Armando his life.

Although Laura loses her vengeful game, she wins something much more valuable in the process: the realization that love does exist (Iglesias Feijoo 129). She also understands that games can be deadly and that winning at the expense of others is corrupt, dangerous, and wrong. With that newfound awareness, Laura retreats to the tower, thereby accepting Oriana's offer to play with human dolls, but to do so for good rather than evil purposes.

Whereas Laura is a realist who, until her catharsis, mistakenly sees game playing as a tool to take vengeance for the lot she has been given in life, Leticia is a dreamer who, through games, yearns to be accepted by those around her. At the beginning of the play, she is restricted to playing solitary games because she is supposedly too clumsy and ignorant to play any kind of game that involves human interaction or the use of intellect.¹⁵ There are indications, however, that Leticia is not as ignorant as everyone thinks. She listens to

¹⁴ Similarly, Robert L. Nicholas explains that we can only achieve freedom by confronting our fears and being responsible for our actions (188).

¹⁵ Leticia's resignation to being controlled by others is a good example of the player who is ruled by *alea*.

everything that is going on around her and is able to recognize deceit in others. She is also capable of dreaming, as can be seen in her taking care of the doll that represents her ideal suitor. Although the image that she has of her prince is initially unrealistic, she nevertheless has the capacity to intuit a world beyond the realm of the gallant court (something that her mother, Armando, and Laura—at least initially—cannot do). Her ability to make believe posits her within the realm of mimicry (Caillois 22) or mimesis (Detweiler 58). Caillois explains that that kind of play defies “submission to imperative and precise rules. . . . *Mimicry* is incessant invention” (22-23). In that sense, Leticia, unlike the other players in the drama, finds a kind of loophole in the overarching, rigid game fabric and enters a place (in her mind) where she is free to create another world. Her forced rejection from the gallant world, isolation, and confinement to childish games allow her to access an imaginary world in which relative freedom exists and love is possible (Iglesias Feijoo 126).

Once Leticia discovers her latent intellect, her ability to play games becomes at once more sophisticated and manipulative. She invites her sister to play checkers and beats her. Leticia delights in humiliating Laura and uses the game as a form of vengeance, in much the same way that her sister had done previously. She also engages in the game of gallantry with the *gentilhombres* and flirts with them to make Riquet jealous. To her, Jorge and Félix are nothing more than living dolls with which she plays in order to hone her coquettish skills. Leticia's actions are agonistic, for her focus is on success and winning. Her participation in the game of gallantry reaches its zenith (and the beginning of its demise) in her encounters with Armando. Although she attempts to play the game deftly, she soon realizes that there is a disconnect between her idea of what she wants Armando to be (a fairy tale prince) and what he is (a cold, emotionless dandy). Armando and his ilk do not believe in love, dreams, or childhood games, which are an important part of who Leticia is and which define her as “other” in a positive way that cannot be appreciated by the gallants. Even though Leticia intuits an important truth in her encounters with Armando, she does not understand how self-indulgent her games are until Riquet kills the handsome prince. With Oriana's help, Leticia comes out of her deluded haze, recognizes the false games in which she has been participating, learns to accept her otherness and power of imagination as gifts, and begins to hone her agonistic and creative talents.

With her newfound awareness, Leticia is ready to start a fresh game grounded in reality and diametrically opposed to the game played in the gallant court. Intent on not becoming like her mother or Armando and not succumbing to the games that represent the status quo, she decides to continue feigning ignorance in the court even though she is more lucid than ever. In that way, she subverts the overarching game. She, in essence, chooses to become a spoil-sport while pretending to be controlled by the whims of those around her. As Huizinga notes, “It sometimes happens . . . that the spoil-sports in their turn make a new community with rules of its own. The outlaw, the revolutionary, the cabbalist or member of a secret society . . . a certain element of play is prominent in all their doings” (12). Instead of being a pawn in other people's games, Leticia decides to create her own secret society, (much like the one created by Oriana and in which Laura resides at the end of the play). In such havens, the enlightened players seek refuge from the cruelty of the world around

them, not as a form of escapism, but rather as a means of survival as more authentic human beings.¹⁶

Riquet is both a participant in games designed by others and the creator of his own games. His goal in playing is to win Leticia's hand and, in the process, become handsome. Laura refers to Riquet's courting of and love for Leticia as a ridiculous game that he will lose (289). If the game of gallantry is cold and emotionless, the game that Riquet plays with Leticia is quite the opposite. Apart from Oriana, he is the only person who treats Leticia with kindness and respect. His game involves awakening Leticia's intelligence through love, which is foreign to those who represent the rule-bound status quo. The motivation for Riquet's game is at once selfish and kind. He needs Leticia to make him handsome, but he also appears to care about her fate. As long as Riquet is in Leticia's presence, he is able to maintain control of the game. The moment that he leaves, however, Leticia is subject to the games of others (Armando and Juana), and Riquet's careful scheme begins to fall apart.

Prior to the duel, when he is seemingly rejected by a confused Leticia, Riquet becomes two separate entities: Riquet the ugly and Riquet the handsome. In a moment of existential anguish, the two actors playing those roles turn to the audience and pose their questions about who and what they are, thereby indirectly inviting the spectators to join the game that is the play.¹⁷ Riquet, the ugly, asks, "¡Oh, Dios, Dios! ¿Cómo somos? ¿Qué somos en realidad? Cada uno nos ve a su manera. ¿Cómo nos ves tú? ¿Cómo me ves? ¿Qué soy yo para ti?" (291). He then says, "Me ves como me has hecho. Horrible. Así me vieron siempre los demás . . ." (292). By blurring the lines between the fictional and real worlds, Buero allows his characters to communicate with his spectators. The latter come face-to-face with questions that they cannot help but ponder: Do they judge others by their appearance? Do they belittle the Riquets of the world and turn their backs on them because they do not fit squarely with the parameters of the game? Are they really just like all the others? Are they a party to the perverted game played by the Juanas and Armandos of the world? The main question that resonates with spectators after the two-sided Riquet's impassioned queries is, do they want to play the game differently going forward or succumb to the complacent status quo? As Elizabeth W. Bruss points out, "The player" (here the audience) "must be more than a 'receiver' of communication or risk manipulation, gross deception, and ultimate entrapment" (154). The doubling of Riquet on stage and the actors' implied interaction with the audience create a new space between the two worlds in which a challenge, not dissimilar to the metatextual one posed by Buero's enigmatic title, is cast.

At the end of the play, Riquet agrees to become a participant in Leticia's new game, in which fairy tale princes do not exist and physical ugliness can never be redressed.

¹⁶ Those secret societies may fit Detweiler's definition of the aleatic thrust of play. The new games (societies) created by Leticia and Oriana are played within the broader game framework of the gallant court and the game that is Buero's play. As such, they form part of a multilayered organic whole that is, when all is said and done, a created "artistic object" (59).

¹⁷ Dixon views the use of two Riquets on stage as an "immersion-effect" ("The 'Immersion-effect'"). In *Casi un cuento de hadas*, spectators first experience that kind of effect through Leticia's eyes and then alone when addressed by both Riquets. Each spectator becomes an implicit character or player in the drama, thereby making the "immersion-effect" even more profound. Jean-Paul Borel also discusses the psychological and dramatic effect of Riquet's doubling on spectators, who are invited to experience the character's complexity and angst (250).

Nevertheless, that new world, steeped in truth, is better than their impossible dream, which, as Iglesias Feijoo notes, “ignoraba el dolor de la vida y así no pudo prosperar” (128). Both Riquet and Leticia have to be stripped down and demoralized before they can realize and accept who and what they are. At the end of the play, they decide that an authentic existence is preferable to the false life they were living as pawns in everyone else’s games. Even in their disillusionment, however, they both recognize the importance of dreaming and understand the difference between frivolous desires and hopes that are grounded in reality.

Oriana is the master of the game in *Casi un cuento de hadas*. The fates of Riquet, Laura, and Leticia are predetermined by a carefully orchestrated plan that Oriana put into play when they were born. In that regard, she can easily be seen as what Halsey terms an “author surrogate,” who not only speaks for Buero, but also possesses a kind of authorial control over the narrative.¹⁸ Halsey describes Oriana as a “humanized fairy” (*Antonio Buero Vallejo* 50) who, through her own suffering and pain (she, like Riquet and Leticia, was cast aside by an unfeeling society), has learned, through her intelligence, to free herself from the gallant game and to create her own secret society in which she plays with living dolls. Her game, unlike those played by Juana and Armando, is not selfish but altruistic and designed to help others out of their blindness.¹⁹ Although Oriana exercises considerable control in *Casi un cuento de hadas*, she purposely lets Riquet, Laura, and Leticia learn through their own errors what it means to be prey to the gallant game. They must discover for themselves who and what they are and their relationship to the game before they can be free of it. The three newly enlightened characters must also continue to fight in order to keep their hard-won, relative freedom in a parallel game world.

Games and playing are at the core of *Casi un cuento de hadas* and are, in fact, its reason for being. Buero presents us with games of skill, games of make believe, and games of artistry at intratextual and extratextual levels. By masterfully blurring the lines between different kinds of games and realities, he draws his characters and spectators into a complex maze of questions about fiction, life, oppression, and freedom. He turns the liberating impetus of play on its head by making the rules of the game so restrictive that the characters appear to have no freedom at all. In that subversion of the liberating impetus of play, Buero makes a symbolic allusion to the post-Spanish Civil War dictatorship, in which people became pawns of an all-too-real and deadly game that appeared devoid of freedom. The closed, corrupt, and agonistic game worlds of *Casi un cuento de hadas* and Franco’s Spain have weaknesses that nevertheless can be exploited by able players. Leticia and Oriana, by creating their own games within the broader gallant game, manage to subvert the oppressive regime and recover a glimpse of the freedom that is endemic to an uncorrupted version of play. Similarly, Buero, by writing enigmatic, self-conscious plays such as *Casi un cuento de hadas*, manages to play with censorship, hiding his meanings in words and fictional worlds. As author of *Casi un cuento de hadas*, Buero becomes the

¹⁸ See Halsey’s “Women as Author Surrogates in Four Tragedies of Antonio Buero Vallejo,” which addresses female characters in Buero’s later plays who serve as mouthpieces for the dramatist. See my article “From Perrault’s ‘Riquet à la houppe’ to Buero Vallejo’s *Casi un cuento de hadas*: The Evolution of a Formidable Female Voice” for an explanation of how Oriana fits into the category of “author surrogate.”

¹⁹ See Iglesias Feijoo for an explanation of Oriana’s altruism (130) and Carmen González-Cobos Dávila on the relationship between acquiring personal freedom and helping others to find their own truth (60).

ultimate spoil-sport; he is the "other" who has the gumption to attempt to break the deadly illusion of the game world that was post-Civil War Spain.

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