

LEOPOLDO BRIZUELA

*One Ona**

from Act III of *Inglaterra: Una fabula***

All of this, said Sir Gielgud after a long pause, all of that long fable William Shakespeare read in the gestures of that Indian, while the pirate Sir Stephen exhibited him before the members of the court. But there was still more. Because the King and his procession finally arrived and joined the group, and Sir Stephen said: “The nation of which this cannibal was king, although without palaces and visible riches, held a unique treasure—its language, which according to the wise, is the richest in all the universe.” A murmur of surprise and approval rose in the crowd: they were accustomed to attend exhibitions of the most spectacular variety, but never had anyone attempted to astound them with words, especially those who had become familiar with the incomparable wealth of Shakespeare. For a moment, that same William harbored an unexpected hope: maybe now the Indian, from the opposite side of the world, would bring him a new word with which to name his silence, this intolerable void in his heart.

“Oy, speak monster,” the pirate shouted haughtily, as if he had dreamed about this scene for months, the most appropriate act for a coronation ceremony a man could conceive. “Talk, tell them what I taught you.”

“*But the Indian,*” according to the chronicle, “*uttered not a word.*”

“Oh, speak, Caliban, speak, mooncalf,” the jester mimicked inappropriately. . . . And maybe it was due to this that Sir Stephen began to lose his patience because suddenly he drew out a whip and lashed it against the garden path, just in front of the native and less

***Ona* is the name of one of the Indian peoples of Tierra del Fuego who were massacred to the point of extinction at the beginning of the twentieth century, the time in which most of this novel takes place. (translator’s note)

***Inglaterra* is the Spanish word for England. I have kept the original title in order to convey the free invention of this novel, which is set, according to Brizuela, in a place imagined freely from the point of view of an Argentine author for whom the real England has been both the greatest love and the worst enemy. (translator’s note)

than a hand span from the feet of the joker. The jester, exaggerating his fear, screamed.

“But the Indian,” repeated the chronicle, *“uttered not a word.”*

A low hum of alarm ran through the crowd: it was obvious that this number was going too far, transgressing the customs of courtesy and those of the feast. The puritanical knights turned their severe gazes upon the King, who, fascinated by the idea of a new language that would allow him to rule the world, remained immobile before the exhibition. Even the Queen approached him and whispered that this was too cruel for a lady, and she dared suggest that it was necessary to detain the beast of Stephen as soon as possible or it would end up tarnishing the brilliance of the party. The King, smiling, consulted his adviser Gonzalo, but it was too late: Sir Stephen, indignant now because of the hardheadedness of the savage, lifted his whip and unleashed it over his captive. *“And a painful Oh!”*—the chronicles recount—*“erupted from the crowd.”*

The jester howled. *“But the Indian uttered not a word.”*

And we know that when Sir Stephen raised his whip, primed to kill the Indian if he didn't give in, someone suddenly shouted “No!” and the exhibition took an unexpected turn. It was Shakespeare who let his mask fall and walked slowly toward them, like a new word amidst the terrible silence of the crowd.

What could the Indian have seen in that man in the red cape—Sir Gielgud asked himself—in that effeminate old man that dared confront Sir Stephen and the uncomfortable stares of the crowd . . . ? We can not know either. But, without a doubt, he must have noticed this man was different from the rest because he lacked all enthusiasm and his curiosity was desperate, and mendicant. At once one of the masked actors approached and advised the poet that this savage boy—who of course, looked at him with hate—was a caliban and that, according to Sir Stephen, “a cannibal is one who eats only human flesh.” But Shakespeare was not even capable of hearing this advice, hypnotized by those black eyes whose silence conversed with his own silence. It was a dialogue, according to the chronicles, unbeknownst to the subjects and the King himself: it was an encounter between two poets. And even the Great Pirate stepped back, realizing at last that this scene was much more important than the one he had dreamed of.

“But let us presume,” the great William then thought, trying to make each thought read in his wide open blue eyes, “let us suppose that you are the Caliban that I imagined. Let us suppose that as soon as the English departed from your island you began to cultivate, assisted by your Ariel, the paradise of poetry. But meanwhile, here, Fernando and Miranda rose to the throne, and out of the error of this union, this Empire of ours was born; and obeying the Empire, Sir Stephen one day returned to your island and brought you here . . .”

“But the Indian uttered not a word.”

“Let us suppose,” Shakespeare thought, “that you now refuse to obey and Sir Stephen kills you and leaves your island without your guidance and England without your message. Who then would be capable of returning to us the comprehension? That which is happening to you is not only your lot. This has happened to us as well, the only difference being that we can no longer understand it. We enslave the world in order not to see ourselves enslaved.”

Suddenly, the fireworks began to scatter stars, circles, and comets high above the sky of Greenwich, and although nothing has been chronicled about how the Indian reacted, it’s most probable that he unleashed a terrified grimace, because Shakespeare came forward to protect him and the Indian recoiled and burst out in a growl, as if ready to attack.

“Do not be afraid wild child,” the poet thought, quivering himself in concealed terror, “I am not like them. I just want you to read in me what my mind cannot comprehend, the heart of an age that kills you and ignores you. Only you possess the key, wild child, prophet child.”

“But the Indian uttered not a word.”

“Speak Caliban,” pleaded Shakespeare while the crowd outside the ramparts cheered at the sky. “You believe yourself to be a slave, but you have us in your hands. If you refuse to speak we will all perish. I will help you . . . I will write . . . I will no longer let just England pass through my mouth, but also your whole island. If you speak to me,” he concluded, “I will make with your word a new poetry for everyone else.”

“And it was thus that Caliban,” the relator concludes, “appeared to decide to give his message. To the relief of Sir Stephen, who reeled in the whip and once again smiled, the Indian looked everyone, one

by one, in the eye. Suddenly, once again looking at Shakespeare, he opened his mouth wide and stuck out his tongue. Sir Stephen became alarmed but did not have sufficient time to react. And with a skill that maybe came from some ancient cannibalistic rite, Caliban, in only one bite, cut off his tongue.”

The court began to scream in full, while outside the rabble cheered scandalously at the new fireworks. The relator did not add more regarding the destiny of that child; but he says that the great William, thus stained with blood and silence, went back to his home in London where the worst part of his life was about to begin.