Juliet of the Tropics: A Bilingual Edition of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's La cuarterona (1867*).* Tr. John Maddox. Cambria Press, 2016.

At first glance, the relevance of Alejandro Tapia y Rivera's Romantic tragedy about race and class in the Caribbean, *La cuarterona* (1867), for twenty-first century readers or spectators may seem questionable. How can a classically-structured nineeenth-century play that takes place in interior spaces and has, at least initially, the ambiance of a drawing-room comedy, speak to readers or spectators who still struggle with the poisonous legacy of slavery and racist violence today in the Americas? As the author of this elegant and lively translation, John Maddox, argues in his thoughtful introduction:

> Tapia was a man of his times and a man beyond his times. Though Tapia was not an advocate for unconditional political independence, nor Antillean federation or annexation by the United States, like some thinkers of the time, he wanted the same political autonomy for Puerto Rico as the mainland Spanish provinces had, and he wanted liberal government reforms, based in part on the Constitution of Cádiz.... Few national literatures can say their founding father was an outspoken feminist, but Tapia portrayed women's rights as central to his interpretation of the Rights of Man. In his best moments, he was driven by an urge to understand the Other: women and the enslaved. Reason and democracy did not coincide with what he saw in the Caribbean, and he scoffed at spurious theories of tropical inferiority when he first performed this play in 1863. (4-5)

A foundational figure of Puerto Rican literature, Tapia's politically moderate liberal stance paradoxically also led him to question patriarchal and racist attitudes that were all-too-common even among other more radical political and cultural leaders, in Spain as well as in the Caribbean and Latin America. Thus, despite its genteel appearance and language, *Juliet in the Tropics* enacts a serious debate on issues that have continued to bedevil societies in both North and South America, long after slavery was abolished in both continents.

It should also be remembered that open discussion of slavery was severely censored by the Spanish authorities both in Cuba and in Puerto Rico, although not in the Spanish Metropolis itself. Tapia was already a prominent writer when he published *Juliet in the Tropics* in Madrid in 1867, and was keenly aware that his expression of abolitionist views could have produced retaliation from the Spanish colonial authorities of Puerto Rico, since he had supported other abolitionist members of the Puerto Rican intellectual community when they insisted at the Junta Informativa of Madrid in 1866 that abolition should proceed in Cuba and Puerto Rico with or without compensation to the slaveholders.

In the current times of Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns and their attendant social movements calling for greater racial and class equity, one can still find eerie echoes of the same interplay between private and public spaces and discourses visible in *Juliet in the Tropics*; echoes of critiques and debates that necessarily take place in low voices and in enclosed spaces, as private events lead invididuals to reckon with the violent and horrifying personal and collective consequences of racial injustice.

Professor Maddox cogently proposes his new version in English of the play's title, *Juliet in the Tropics*, as a more accessible version of the original *La cuarterona*, which could be roughly translated to "The Mulatta" or "The Quadroon"—both terms that today would require lengthy historical contextualization. Maddox's new English title also underscores Tapia's contacts with the English language and with the works of Shakespeare (who by the mid-nineteenth-century had already been elevated to hyper-canonic stature), particularly with *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Like Shakespeare's tragedy about young and doomed lovers in a hierarchical society torn apart by sectarian divisions, Tapia's plot moves inexorably from the protagonist Carlos's hopeful wish to fulfill his love for Julia, the orphaned mulatto girl who was brought up by Carlos's mother, the Countess, as his adoptive sister, to a tragic ending than ensues when Julia realizes that her own and Carlos's illusions of happiness face insurmountable odds.

Twenty-first century readers may find familiar not just the Shakespearian subtext but also the Countess's authoritarian use of strategies of manipulation by means of insistent lies (now commonly known as "gaslighting") as well as by the invocation of absolute societal norms, such as the incest prohibition. The latter occurs when the Countess brings down Carlos's resistance to the arranged marriage with the wealthy Emilia by telling him that Julia is actually his half-sister on his father's side—a not unlikely scenario, although one that is false, as the play makes clear in one of the Countess's asides: "Just the idea!... If I must. Wait. Time is of the essence. Why hold back? It is a forgivable solution. Necessary." (76).

The incest taboo is "weaponized" (to use current parlance) by the Countess by virtue of its ambivalent significance: the very same (adoptive) sibling status that brings Julia and Carlos together is used as an instrument to keep them apart when their love grows stronger. It should be recalled that incest was a recurrent trope in the social discourse of slave societies in both North and South America (regarding North America, see Connolly) and is particularly visible in Cuban antislavery narratives, from Tanco y Bosmeniel's "Petrona y Rosalía" (1838) to Suárez y Romero's *Francisco, o las delicias del ingenio* (1839) and Villaverde's *Cecilia Valdés* (1882).

John Maddox's supple translation ably captures the shifting moods of Tapia's play, from hopeful expectation to shocking tragedy. Almost without anachronism, it brings Tapia's play into the English language and to the twenty-first century, where its grim message still resonates.

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