Module 5
5.2. Lorquian tragedies

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If, up to this point, the theatrical labours of García Lorca had centred on more minor genres, which enjoyed limited recognition and were often disparaged, Bodas de Sangre would represent a sea change, bringing his work into the mainstream tragedy genre. Yet (as always, in this phase of Lorca’s theatrical trajectory) we find the tragedy model has been subtly nuanced, modified and updated. Lorca’s supposed withdrawal from the marginal, the less-travelled domains—his move toward the predominant centre—is only partial. In fact, in this piece he also remains on the margins. This is a constant theme in Lorca’s theatrical oeuvre: every one of his productions modifies the typical norms of theatre of the time, yet stops short of a violent break with tradition. His experimentation consists of generating differences, not only in terms of the dramatic ‘codes’ that shape the audience’s outlook and expectations of a tragedy, but also at the very heart of his productions, each one modifying the one before (Fernández Cifuentes, 1986: 135–40).

The opening of Bodas de Sangre in Madrid, in 1933, would see García Lorca finally recognised as a playwright, and even more so following its successful performances in South America, news of which soon reached Spain. The piece was conceived, in principle, as the first part of a trilogy of tragedies, to be followed by Yerma. The third work, although alluded-to several times by the author, never saw the light of day.

In writing Bodas de Sangre, García Lorca drew on real-life events that had taken place some years earlier in Nijar (Almería). The work introduces us to two peasant families making preparations for the forthcoming wedding of their children. The Mother of the Bridegroom (all the characters, with only one exception, are referred-to in terms of their place in the family, rather than by name) lives with an obsessive hatred toward the Félix family, who killed her husband and one of her sons. The Bride, who is not in love with the Groom, loves Leonardo Félix (the only character whose actual name is used), who is also in love with her. Shortly after the wedding ceremony, the two run away together. The Groom and his Mother leave in pursuit of the runaways, in an attempt to repair the family’s honour, and eventually catch up with them. The Groom and Leonardo ultimately stab each other to death.

The plot unfolds into a tragedy because it is governed by blind destiny, beyond the free will of the characters, who act not out of freedom, nor their own decisions, but rather driven by their fatum. In the denouement of this cruel destiny, repetition provides the key motif and formal device (Fernández Cifuentes), appearing in every piece of news about the past, while pointing to what will inevitably occur in the future. In this ritual exercise of repetition, from the outset the characters are defined by their family relationships. They are not individuals, but rather nexuses in a family web, their function in the text shaped by a series of events and family circumstances—and their fate, by repetition.
Similarly, repetition defines the nature of the language and communication among the characters. They provide us with news of what once came to pass and what is yet to come, within a framework of repetition rather than one-off happenings. The two central events of the piece—the wedding and death—are linked to that framework from the very beginning. Hence, the language and words used, the particular forms of speaking and telling, are always at the service of doom, conveying messages about inevitable repetitions and death.

The timing of the piece also responds to that structure, with repetition being established in Act One as the motif and the underlying formal device. And the very composition of the acts responds to that framework, as they reiterate the same events and messages. We find names (or a lack thereof, the empty space they leave) such as Bridegroom, Mother, and Girl surrounded by a vagueness that performs a similar function to that of masks or puppets, in this case on the general premise of a certain family connection. Leonardo, the exception, is granted his own name, distinguishing him from the others and bestowing a certain individuality and uniqueness.

Language also brings us news about time: it announces that the present of which we are a part is not a linear concept and is not, therefore, impossible to recover. On the contrary . . . return and repeat. Language intervenes, along with the unfolding of events, to provide the audience with another dual perception of time. One the one hand, we have the timing that quite clearly marks the duration of the piece, which the observer can objectively time; and on the other hand we receive verbal notification that this present is not only taking place now—and therefore irretrievable—but is a fresh re-production of the past, whose origins and ultimate fate is repetition. The present, then, is at once a specific occurrence and also a general manner of happening that cannot be distinguished from others, either past or present, except in insignificant variations (Fernández Cifuentes). But in García Lorca’s conception of returning, repeating does not necessarily involve adding a second and third time to the first, but rather can mean raising the first time to the power of the infinite.

Yerma, the second of Lorca’s tragedies, opened in December of 1934 in Madrid, performed by Margarita Xirgu’s theatre company. That same year, he was to reflect: “Yerma is the tragedy of the infertile woman. This, as you know, is a classical theme. But I want it to have a fresh take and a new purpose. This is a tragedy with four characters and song (as all tragedies should have).” In line with the classical model of tragedy, it has barely any plot or geographical context—even less than in Bodas de Sangre. Yerma is obsessed with bearing a child, but to no avail. Her husband, Juan, is unconcerned about the matter and is not interested in producing heirs; meanwhile, Yerma has harboured a secret longing for Victor for many years. With the help of the Old Pagan Woman, she undertakes a fertility rite, after which she has a terrible argument with her husband. Juan attempts to make love to Yerma, after telling her he does not want children, and she kills him.

Once again, we are dealing with an unavoidable fate and with honour as a motif (here, Yerma’s inability to leave her husband or to have sexual relations with another man), in this case used to fulfil the will of destiny.

The few references offered by the text do not so much set geographical or social coordinates as erase them and impede the audience from establishing them. The same phenomenon occurs with language, which, in this work, is stripped of expressions or accents. But this stripping-down is not
limited to geographical pointers: the semantic function of language is also reduced, as a device for conveying facts or tales. The interventions made by each of the characters rarely tell of something that is actually happening or has happened, despite the fact that there is no action other than language and what the protagonists choose to share or keep to themselves. The entire work centres on the search—or the need—for words or, conversely, their negation. The fundamental happenings of the piece are not events or actions, but words—words that are used not to communicate, but to do or undo.

From the moment the play opens, sterility appears to be associated with silence, and words with fertility, not in a metaphorical sense but quite tangibly: desperate to become pregnant, Yerma implores her husband to utter the words she longs to hear. But, denying her these words, he also denies her the possibility of procreating. Her very name, Yerma—meaning ‘barren’—reveals the mark left by language in the information it conveys about her inevitable fate. Throughout the entire play, words are the focus of attention for the audience, who witness how Yerma shifts from beseeching the language she so fervently seeks (from her husband, from the Old Pagan Woman, and from Victor) to her cry for the ultimate silence. Her final act, the killing of her husband and, with it, her definitive assimilation of childlessness—as she repeats at the end of the play “I myself have murdered my son!”—is the outcome of the failure of words, marking their ultimate absence (Fernández Cifuentes, 1986: 163–81).
Bibliography


