Lorca and Greek Tragedy

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY has been rich in would-be Greek tragedies. The 1930s and 1940s yielded an unusual number: O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), Eliot's *The Family Reunion* (1939), Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943), Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944), and another *Antigone* by Brecht (1948), to name only the best known. But none of these, after their initial novelty, has succeeded in convincing a wide audience that they are more than allusions to Greek tragedy; and George Steiner rang down the curtain on the whole enterprise in 1961 when he said, in *The Death of Tragedy*, that 'the decline of tragedy is inseparably related to the decline of the organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic, and ritual reference'.[1] If we cannot think like tragedians of the past, we cannot expect to write tragedies.

When Steiner wrote, Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) and his three 'rural tragedies' of the 1930s were not part of the argument at all. Lorca had been assassinated at the outset of the Spanish Civil War without seeing his last play performed. Under Franco, his fate and his plays remained a dark secret, and it was only with the arrival of democracy in Spain in the 1970s that his reputation began to climb to its present height – where it might credibly be claimed that he fulfils Steiner's desiderata to the letter, and is the one Greek voice in twentieth-century tragedy. It is the aim of this article to suggest some of the parallels between Lorca's tragedies and Greek drama, but it might be useful to begin by asking why Lorca could have been in a better position than an Eliot or an Anouilh to achieve what he did.

Perhaps the very backwardness of his Spain was beneficial, in giving Lorca access to that 'mythological, symbolic and ritual' frame of reference that modernity dispels. Spain was still in the birth-pangs of modernity, and its Church was still attempting to wield a Counter-Reformation authority

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[1] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London 1961) p. 292.

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(it taught that voting for a liberal candidate was 'a mortal sin'[2]). Lorca was a freethinker, but not so much that he did not walk barefoot in a procession of *penitentes*, dragging a giant cross, during an emotional crisis in 1929. The country's violent political swings between Fascism and Republicanism in his lifetime also opened up the same central question it might be said the Athenian polis did, of how to exchange outer discipline for inner discipline without lapsing into chaos. And the Andalusian culture of Lorca's childhood (he was born near Granada) gave him a deep insight into the paradoxical relations of passion and restraint, in its obsession with honour. No European country defined 'manhood' more anxiously than Spain, or showed itself more alive to the connection between passion and death.

Another suggestive fact about Lorca is that he was born on the land, but educated in the liberal circle in Madrid that included Manuel de Falla, Buñuel, and Dalí. He thus leapt several centuries in his own lifetime, from the village world where his father was the largest landowner and he had more than forty cousins, to the self-conscious modernity of Madrid. Because of his upbringing his ears were full of Andalusian folk-song and flamenco, and his first career was as a guitarist under Manuel de Falla. It was only by degrees that he became a lyric poet, and then a playwright, the latter as much in response to the public need as to his own development. The reforming Republic of 1931 financed a touring company of students, La Barraca, to take Lope de Vega and Calderón to the rural population, most of whom had never seen a play, and a third of whom were still illiterate. Lorca was charged with training the students, adapting the plays, and arranging the lighting and music; and, as a reporter described an open-air performance of *Life Is A Dream*, he was rewarded with 'row upon row of peasant faces, smiling, in ecstasy, above all expectant, fearing and desiring what was going to happen next on the stage. And suddenly the expectation was relieved in a burst of laughter and applause'.[3]

His practical training came as close as any modern writer's could to Shakespeare's, reviving the classics, acting on stage one day and writing the next, and making theatrical magic for the semi-literate out of costumes, music, and gloriously expressive language. His world was craving a public forum for the discussion of the intimate trauma of the clash between time-honoured pieties and the freedoms of modernity, and Lorca saw the theatre as that forum: 'an open tribunal where the people can introduce old and mistaken mores as evidence and can use living

[2] J. B. Trend, *The Origins of Modern Spain*, quoted in Ian Gibson, *The Death of Lorca* (St Albans 1974) p. 30.

[3] Ian Gibson, *Federico García Lorca: A Life* (London and Boston, Mass. 1989) p. 332.

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examples to explain eternal norms of the heart'.[4] As the seriousness of the dramatist's role was borne in on him, his plays modulated from puppet dramas and farces into the 'rural tragedies' of the 1930s, where we can see him touching the keynotes of classical tragedy with deep understanding.

The opening of *Blood Wedding* (1933) is ostensibly a dialogue between a mother and her son, just leaving for the vineyard. But the son is on the point of marriage (Lorca calls him Novio, 'the Bridegroom'), his mother has lost her husband and another son in a feud, and the son has asked her for a knife to cut the vines:

> *Mother* (*muttering and looking for it*). The knife, the knife... Damn all of them and the scoundrel who invented them.
> *Bridegroom*. Let's change the subject.
> *Mother*. And shotguns... and pistols... even the tiniest knife... and mattocks and pitchforks...
> *Bridegroom*. Alright.
> *Mother*. Everything that can cut a man's body. A beautiful man, tasting the fullness of life, who goes out to the vineyards or tends to his olives, because they are his, inherited...
> *Bridegroom* (*lowering his head*). Be quiet.
> *Mother*... and that man doesn't come back. Or if he does come back it's to put a palm-leaf on him or a plateful of coarse salt to stop him swelling. I don't know how you dare carry a knife on your body, nor how I can leave the serpent inside the chest.[5]

The simple act of the son's departure uncovers potentially tragic tensions: life beginning (the son has just acquired the vineyard, which is why he can marry) juxtaposed with a memory of life ending (his father's and brother's corpses); and a sense of the beauty and vitality of the human body ('a beautiful man, tasting the fullness of life', 'con su flor en la boca'[6]) and the smallness of the knife, like the bite of a 'serpent', which is all it takes to turn it into putrefying flesh. The play's paradoxical title, *Blood Wedding*, will be justified: new life will be extinguished in blood at the very moment of its arrival.

The world of the play is profoundly familiar from Greek drama: it is one in which the circularity of the blood-feud has never been arrested, and no

[4] Federico García Lorca, *Three Plays*, trans. Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata (Harmondsworth 1992), introduction, p. xii.

[5] Federico García Lorca, *Plays: One* [*Blood Wedding, Doña Rosita the Spinster, Yerma*], trans. Gwynne Edwards and Peter Luke (London 1987) pp. 33–4. All references are to this edition unless otherwise stated.

[6] Federico García Lorca, *Bodas de Sangre*, ed. H. Ramsden (Manchester 1980) p. 4.

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one wants anything better. It is the world of the *Oresteia* without Athene; or, perhaps more precisely, the world of Sophocles' *Electra*, where submission to the revenge ethic produces strange excitements and peculiar satisfactions. The Greek note is struck both in the fanatical adherence to 'honour' in the play, which makes the death of the two male protagonists inevitable from the start, and in the unnaturally submissive role allotted to women. Their part is simply to bear sons, to mourn them in silence, and wear black, in Electra-like loyalty to the past. The Bridegroom's mother has mourned her menfolk indoors as village propriety demands; she says, 'It's twenty years since I went to the top of the street' (p. 37), and she is half-maddened from stifling the 'scream' inside her: 'I have to force it down again and hide it in these shawls' (p. 65).

The world Lorca is describing is one where, for lack of Athene and the polis, both Apollo and the Furies are flourishing in their worst aspects – and the brunt of the damage is borne by women. What he brings before the 'open tribunal' in this play is the waste and squalor of a moral code in which honour takes precedence over any claim life can make. Not even the women can admit to any allegiance to Dionysus, the love of life for its own sake: the cult of masculine honour has been forced on them so brutally that they have internalised it as much as the men, and it is the Bridegroom's mother herself who sends him off to vengeance or death at the climax of the play, striking a note indistinguishable from weary satisfaction: 'The hour of blood has come again' (p. 73: 'Ha llegado otra vez la hora de la sangre').

But since life is something that must be tossed away when honour requires, the Furies claim their own satisfactions by underhand means. They lurk in the Mother's ferocious attachment to her own blood, to the red liquid itself:

> It takes a long time [to bear a son]. That's why it's so terrible to see your blood spilt on the ground. A fountain that spurts for a minute and has cost us years. When I reached my son, he was lying in the middle of the road. I wet my hands with his blood and I licked them with my tongue. Because it was mine. You don't know what that means. I'd put the earth soaked by it in a monstrance of glass and topaz. (p. 65)

The nakedness of this emotion goes all the way back to the Furies' reverential excitement over Orestes' blood, the 'bitter-swallowed drench' they anticipate with such rapture in the *Eumenides* (l. 266, trans. Lattimore). Blood, divorced from full humanity, becomes a value in itself – the 'materiality' of the Furies seen at its worst in a loving mother.

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As the play becomes more dreamlike and moves onto an openly symbolic plane in Act III, Lorca expresses the peculiar exhilaration of blood-thinking in a dialogue between the Moon and Death. The Bride has run away from her own wedding, with the son of the family that killed the Bridegroom's father and brother. The Moon is supplying the treacherous moonlight the pursuers need, and Death, in the shape of an old beggar-woman, will point the way. Both of them are impatient, sensing the pleasure to come:

> *Moon.* Now they come near.
> Some through the ravine, others by the river.
> I shall light up the stones. What do you need?
> *Beggar Woman.* Nothing.
> *Moon.* The wind is starting to blow hard, and double-edged.
> *Beggar Woman.* Light up the waistcoat, open the buttons,
> For then the knives will know their path.
> *Moon.* But let them die slowly. And let the blood
> Place between my fingers its soft whistle.
> See how my ashen valleys are awakening
> With longing for this fountain and its trembling rush.
>
> (p. 78)

In this lascivious exchange, Lorca hints at the subterranean connections between barrenness and bloodthirstiness, sensuality and pain. The moon's 'ashen valleys' long for the rush of blood as an orgasmic irrigation; the fingers take terrible pleasure in the blood's 'soft whistle' ('su delicado silbo'). The note of intimacy with death is compellingly caught in the Beggar Woman's focus on waistcoat buttons: once they shine, the knives themselves will know their way ('las navajas ya saben el camino'). Although, at the level of the dialogue, no one has wanted this disaster, and even the errant lovers resist their flight to the last, the play enforces the feeling that no other end was desired or desirable, and the Moon and Death have appetites in which everyone shares.

We sense the Furies of unfulfilled passion, too, in the little that gets said about the lovers' feelings. As the loveless arranged marriage approaches, Leonardo, the cast-off lover, feels the 'silver wedding-pins | Turned [his] red blood black' and his flesh fills 'with poisonous weeds' (p. 82). The Bride feels her heart has 'putrified from holding out' ('podrido de aguantar'). Repression has only made everything worse:

> *Leonardo.* To keep quiet and burn is the greatest punishment we can heap upon ourselves. What use was pride to me and not seeing you and leaving you awake night after night? No use! It only brought

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the fire down on top of me! You think that time heals and walls conceal, and it's not true, not true! When the roots of things go deep, no one can pull them up!

Bride (*trembling*). I can't hear you. I can't hear your voice. It's as if I'd drunk a bottle of anise and fallen asleep on a bedspread of roses. And it drags me along, and I know that I'm drowning, but I still go on.

(p. 57)

It is in this sleepwalking mode that the lovers leave the wedding, compelled by a passion neither can analyse or name. Leonardo asks, 'Which hands | Strapped the spurs to my boots?' and the Bride simply answers, 'These hands, that are yours' (p. 81). In emphasising the involuntariness of their motions, Lorca recreates something like the atmosphere of the end of the *Bacchae*, and perhaps for the same reasons. When passion has been repressed as ferociously as here, it returns as an irresistible, nameless power that destroys what, under different circumstances, it would have fertilised. The Bride can only say to the Bridegroom's Mother that she did want to marry her son, as desperately as a woman on fire from sores, inside and out, craves a little water ('un poquito de agua'). But 'The other one's arm dragged me like a wave from the sea, like the butt of a mule, and would always have dragged me, always, always, even if I'd been an old woman and all the sons of your son had tried to hold me down by my hair!' (p. 90). This is not so much passion as possession, Pentheus-like, by Dionysus.

After the 'two long, piercing screams' that mark the mutual slaughter of the Bridegroom and Leonardo, the plot springs one last surprise. Even though the First Woodcutter has spoken so confidently of what will be happening while the hunters search 'They'll have mixed their blood by then' (p. 75) – and even though our last glimpse of the Bride and Leonardo is of their perfect unity – 'Nails of moonlight join us, | My waist and your hips . . . If they separate us it will be | Because I am dead' (p. 84), nonetheless, what the Bride says in her terrible last confrontation with the Mother is that her honour is still intact: 'I want her to know that I'm clean [*limpia*], that even though I'm mad [*loca*], they can bury me and not a single man will have looked at himself in the whiteness of my breasts' (p. 90). The moment seems bizarrely Spanish: so much drama about a code that is not, finally, broken, is potentially an anticlimax. But if it is not Lorca's ultimate concession to the prejudices of his audience, the insistence that two men have died for something that did not happen may be the sharpest of all his effects in the play. For the honour code, at its worst, is merely about appearances, and the Mother who sends her only son unhesitatingly in

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pursuit of the family honour is left to grieve over the meaninglessness left behind by such over-insistence on a code. She cannot even cut the Bride's throat, though the Bride offers it to her (it would be 'less effort than cutting a dahlia in your garden'):

> What does your honour matter to me? What does your death matter to me? What does anything matter to me? Blessed be the wheat, for my sons lie beneath it. Blessed be the rain, for it washes the faces of the dead. Blessed be God, for He lays us side by side so we can rest. (p. 91)

In the light of this barren ending we can better understand the puzzling lullaby that Leonardo's young wife and mother-in-law sing in Act I. Its central motif is of a great stallion standing by water that it refuses to drink. The horse is exhausted, its hooves are bleeding, but its resistance to the water is still stronger:

> Horsey will not touch the bank,
> Even though the bank is wet,
> Even though his mouth is hot,
> Streaming tiny drops of sweat.
>
> To the mountains cold and hard,
> He could only call and neigh,
> Horsey's throat is hot and parched,
> And the river bed is dry . . .
> (p. 40)

It is something in the stallion itself that prevents it from slaking its thirst in the water, and the river seems to stop flowing in sympathy. The blocking of the fertility that water connotes in a hot, dry country, and the blocked sexual energy it connotes by extension, could not be more powerfully expressed.[7] There will be no truly human satisfactions in this play, only the satisfactions familiar to Apollo and the Furies at their worst, in their confrontation in the *Eumenides*: the remote and abstract one, for Apollo, of knowing that the Bridegroom's family honour has been saved; and for the Furies, the perverted fusion of pain and bodily ecstasy that lurks in the knife's entry into human flesh. Lorca ends the play as he began it, with an intimate meditation on knives and bodies:

[7] The song is an adaptation of an Andalusian lullaby: 'A la nana, nana, nana, | a la nanita de aquel | que llevó el caballo al agua | y lo dejó sin beber'. In a lecture on lullabies, Lorca referred to six versions he knew, and commented on the 'mysterious, strange anguish' ('una rara angustia misteriosa') of its central motif, the horse that is taken to the water but not allowed to drink. As he adapts it, the restraint is inside the stallion himself (*Bodas de Sangre*, ed. Ramsden, pp. 76–7).

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> *Mother.* Neighbours: with a knife,
> With a small knife [*cuchillito*],
> On a day appointed, between two and three,
> The two men killed each other for love.
> With a knife,
> With a small knife
> That barely fits the hand,
> But that slides in clean
> Through startled flesh [*las carnes asombradas*]
> And stops at the place
> Where trembles, enmeshed,
> The dark root of a scream [*la oscura raíz del grito*].
> (p. 92)

In the wasteland of infertility described by the play, watered only by blood, it is not surprising that only the knife knows the pleasure of entering another body; or that all it quickens in the body's deepest recess is 'the dark root of a scream'.

In *Yerma* (1934), a year later, Lorca was quite consciously retreading classic terrain, and feeling now that his subject was best expressed in the figure of a woman:

> *Yerma* will be the tragedy of the barren woman. The theme, as you know, is a classical one. But I want to develop it in a new way. A tragedy with four main characters and a chorus, as tragedies should be. It is necessary to return to tragedy. The tradition of our theatre compels us to do so.[8]

Seneca's *Medea* and Sophocles' *Electra* were revived in Spain in the same year, and it cannot be coincidental that the play unites themes from both: the power of a maddened woman over an unwitting husband, and the living death of sterility in a patriarchal culture. Lorca finds in the despair of his female figure the ultimate logic of the code of his culture: when the law of absolute honour, which Yerma entirely respects, meets head-on the equally imperious demands of nature, it perverts a loving, creative woman into pure destructiveness. And the confidence of his treatment shows in the new name he gives her, which is not a name at all, but the word for land that is unsown, untilled, waste: 'tierras yermas'.

[8] From an interview given in 1934: Gwynne Edwards, *Dramatists in Perspective: Spanish Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (Cardiff 1985) p. 103.

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Yerma's suffering enables Lorca to pose the question perhaps only Euripides has framed so clearly before, though so many tragic plots take it for granted: 'Why are the Furies female?' And Lorca's implicit answer is much the same as Euripides' – that women stand in a different relation to nature from men. This may be why, in spite of the *Medea* and *Electra* parallels, the boldest effects in *Yerma* are more reminiscent of the *Bacchae* than any other play. Lorca leads us from a village world in which Pentheus apparently reigns supreme – Yerma is confined to the *oikos* under twenty-four-hour supervision, while Juan, her husband, goes about his manly business out of doors – to a shrine high in the mountain, a Spanish Mount Cithaeron. Here, a living folk-custom, the pilgrimage barren women make to a saint to plead for children, is revealed as a Dionysiac outburst of the kind Pentheus was most afraid of, with masked dancing, wine, bawdy songs, and bands of single men roaming by night to give religion their assistance:

> If you come to the Romeria
> To pray for a filled-out belly
> Don't come to it dressed for a funeral
> But put on your best Sunday blouse.
> Come along by the path near the wall
> To where the fig-trees grow thickest
> And I'll furrow you into the ground
> Till the cocks shout break of day.
>
> (p. 201)

Yerma is offered a new, fertile husband there by a Pagan Crone (Vieja Pagana[9]); and she refuses, bearing out what was said of Dionysus in Euripides – that 'even in the rites of Dionysus, | The chaste woman will not be corrupted' (*Bacchae*, ll. 317–18, trans. Arrowsmith). But the price of so much restraint is fearsomely high. And when it breaks down, as it finally does (Juan has followed Yerma to the mountain, and she fights him off as he attempts to make love to her), the strength of a bacchant arm, which can uproot pine trees, is also the terrible strength of Yerma as she throttles her husband.

Lorca follows Euripides in making Yerma an unwilling bacchant: she is married modesty incarnate, and her prayer at the shrine is reverentially Catholic: 'Listen to the prayer of this penitent | on your holy pilgrimage. | Open your rose within my body | Though it be covered with a thousand thorns' (p. 199). She begs the old woman to explain to her why she is still childless after so much effort:

[9] Spanish quotations are from *Yerma*, ed. Robin Warner (Manchester and New York 1994), p. 86.

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Pagan Woman. What can I tell you? I just lay flat on my back, started to sing, and kids came like water. You've got a lovely body. Why don't you do something about it? There are plenty of stallions kicking at the stable door . . . Men like to pleasure us, girl. They like to undo our plaits and give us water to drink from their own mouths. That's what makes the world go round.

Yerma. Yours perhaps; not mine. It's my mind goes round and round and all I feel and all I think about is where is my son? When I give myself to my husband it's just for that. Not for pleasure – never for pleasure.

Pagan Woman (patting Yerma's stomach). No wonder that's still empty.

(pp. 168–9)

In her own chaste and docile way, Yerma is denying the godhead of Dionysus as much as Agave in the *Bacchae.* The Pagan Woman's phrase 'the children came like water' is the clue to her plight: fertility flows of its own accord, and the free exchange of pleasure is its conduit. It cannot be made a means to an end, any more than water can; the Dionysiac flow of life is its own value.

There is one character in the play, Victor, in whose presence Yerma feels these things (significantly enough, he has a beautiful singing voice that 'flows . . . like a fountain', p. 173). But Juan was her father's choice for a husband, and she submitted to patriarchal authority:

Yerma. My father found him for me and I took him. Happily. And that's the honest truth. Then from the moment we were engaged I had no thought but – children. When I looked at him, I could see myself reflected in his eyes, very small, very docile, as if I were my own child. (pp. 168–9)

'Perhaps that's why you haven't got kids yet', comments the Pagan Woman. Lorca could not convey more ironically than through such candid testimony as Yerma's the diminution of passion implicit in these patriarchal arrangements. She sees herself as reflected in her husband's eyes, so very small and manageable ('muy chica, muy manejable') that she could be her own child. Lorca also conveys the contempt for Dionysus implicit in the Catholic teaching that marriage is for the bearing of children only, in which Yerma so ardently believes. Saner women in the play can say that there are other things to live for – 'we are all here for a reason', says Maria ('cada criatura tiene su razón') – but Yerma knows only children.

The intensity of Lorca's concentration on her as a figure is remarkable; here he dramatises the conflict between 'old and mistaken mores' and the 'eternal norms of the heart' just as he promises. On the one side are the

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obsession with male honour which confines women to the *oikos* – one husband, one set of walls – and the religious dogma which tolerates sexuality only as a means to an end. And on the other is Yerma's hunger to be a mother, to be a conduit for life itself: the deep, unassuageable passion to bring new life out of her body and into the world. Masculine restraint and female creativity meet in her person, and torture her. Although she ends the play as a murderer, it is clear that she herself is dying by inches, much as Euripides' Phaedra is dying in the *Hippolytus*. Phaedra's dilemma is that her body and her honourable will are at variance, so that she consents to sin merely by staying alive; and Lorca achieves a similar conundrum in Yerma, who, once she has internalised masculine values, finds that her own body is her enemy.

Because Yerma is a sympathetic figure, Lorca can delve deeper into the mystery of how creativity becomes perverted than writers who take the femaleness of the Furies for granted. In Yerma's rapturous dreams of giving birth, he evokes the miraculous power of female fertility in language that returns us to the miracle on Cithaeron, where the earth nourished the women, and the women nourished the earth's creatures. The ground spurted milk and honey for the bacchants, and new mothers suckled baby animals at their full breasts:

> *Yerma*. Just pick up the babies and wash them in fresh water! Animals lick them, don't they? With my own child, that wouldn't disgust me. I have the notion that women who have just given birth are glowing inside, and that their babies sleep on top of them for hours and hours, listening to the stream of warm milk that goes on filling their breasts so they can suckle, so they can play until they don't want any more, until they pull their heads away. 'Just a little bit more, my child . . .'. And their faces and chests are covered with white drops![10]

The reverent sense of fertility here, of the unbidden power of the female body, and the utter relief, physical and metaphysical, of giving birth, means that Lorca can pass to the description of the torment inherent in barrenness with no explanation. Simply to be denied the hope of this relief is agony enough: 'Every woman has blood enough for four or five sons. But if you don't have them your blood turns to poison', says Yerma (pp. 164–5). It 'pricks my belly | As though it were swarmed by wasps! . . . A childless woman is like a bunch of thistles – something fit for God's rubbish heap' (p. 185). The more years go by in her barren marriage, the more Yerma feels herself being turned into the same kind of thwarted, black-clad creature as

[10] *Yerma*, in *Three Plays*, trans. Dewell and Zapata, pp. 99–100.

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her warders, her husband's unmarried sisters, whom the neighbours compare to the big plants that flourish unpleasantly on graves ('esas hojas grandes que nacen de pronto sobre los sepulchros').

The way 'red' blood turns 'black' and the flesh itself can fill with 'poisonous weeds' was shown in *Blood Wedding* too. But now Lorca gives it a classic context: not merely human passion, but the profoundest of all passions, life's passion to renew itself. The centrality of his vision shows how readily Yerma's predicament could be expressed in terms of the relation of the Furies to the Eumenides. For the Furies' frenzied, swarming, plague-bringing intensity is only the perversion of their other powers as well-wishers, *eu-menides*: to bring fertility to Athens, fattening the cattle, ripening the crops, and marrying men to women in happy fruition. It is only because her body cannot be claimed by fertility that Yerma becomes destructive – because the flow of life goes round her, not through her:

> I'm sick and weary. Weary of being a woman not put to proper use. I'm hurt, hurt and humbled beyond endurance watching the crops springing up, the fountains flowing, the ewes bearing lambs and bitches their litters of pups, until it seems the whole countryside is teeming with mothers nursing their sleeping young. And here I am with two hammers beating at my breasts where my baby's mouth should be. (p. 186)

In her mounting despair she expresses the classic dream that Hippolytus and Jason dreamt before her, when they too were baffled by the terms of human existence: 'I know a child's born of man and woman. Oh, if only I could have one by myself!' (p. 193).

Lorca's treatment of her husband Juan, the physical reason for Yerma's barrenness, may also remind us of Euripides. Like Jason, Juan sees things in broad outline, but without insight – so that his first account of their marriage is quite cheerful: 'The farm's doing well, and no children costing us money' (p. 160). Like Pentheus, he also receives many warnings about the minefield through which he is striding and does not recognise them until Yerma's powerful hands are on his throat. We are told that his family have had trouble producing children for generations: 'a miracle that any one of them put a girl in the family way. They've nothing but gobs of spit between the lot of them', says the old woman (p. 203). But more than that, he does not actively want children. He would sooner work his fields than lie with Yerma, and we see him fending off the sexual reality of marriage: 'I've got to irrigate the fruit trees all night . . . You go to bed and get some sleep' (p. 174). His fundamental argument with his wife is about what deserves to be called reality. Juan's values are attached to trees, flocks, and land – so that Yerma's hunger for what is missing seems quite mad:

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Juan. Once and for all stop crying for the moon, for things that are only in the air and in the darkness of your mind things that have nothing to do with real life.
Yerma (*with dramatic surprise*). With real life? That have nothing to do with real life!
Juan. Yes. We can't control things that haven't happened.
Yerma (*violently*). Go on! Go on!
Juan. This thing means nothing to me, d'you understand! Absolutely nothing! There! It's time I said it. What matters to me is what I can hold in the palm of my hand and see with my own two eyes. . . .
Yerma. And do you never think how much it means to me?
Juan. Never.

(pp. 204–5)

Here again is an expression of that male rationality, like Jason's, which makes rationality a kind of vice: sensible as Juan's attitude is, it does not encounter the greater realities above and beyond it, like the necessity for life to reproduce itself, and Yerma's need to be part of that process. And as with Jason, Juan's 'firmness' is actually hubris asking for its nemesis. It will be returned to him by Yerma with interest, as the power born of despair in her two strong hands.

This dialogue is the one that leads to the murder, and it is an impressive last twist of the plot that makes Juan here, for the first time, reach out physically to Yerma. Against the Dionysiac background of the Romeria, by moonlight, and with masked dancers acting out songs like these, he feels something quite new to him:

Female Masker. Ah, how love garlands the secret places
And pierces them with thrusts of molten gold.
Male Masker. Seven times she groaned
Nine times she rose,
And fifteen times they coupled
Under the jasmine in the orange grove.
Third Man. Now give it the horn!
Second Man. No rose without a thorn!

(p. 201)

The maskers move offstage, and it is against the background of 'a great chorus of song' in the distance (p. 204) that Juan asks Yerma to accept that there will be no child, and, at the same time, that he can still be her lover:

Yerma. You won't ever change?
Juan. Never. Accept it.

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Yerma. Childless.
Juan. Peaceful. You and me together in peace and happiness. Hold me! (*He holds her*)
Yerma. What do you want?
Juan. I want you. In the moonlight you look so beautiful.
Yerma. That look in your eyes – hungry for flesh but not for me.
Juan. Kiss me . . . like this . . . and like this.
Yerma. That, never . . . never like that.

(*Yerma gives a shriek and seizes Juan by the throat. She forces him backwards and slowly she strangles the life out of him. Again the singing is heard from the Romeria.*)

(pp. 205–6)

If Juan's Dionysiac impulse is the last drop in Yerma's cup of bitterness, it is because it is a hunger 'for flesh but not for me' (literally, 'like a dove you want to devour', 'comer una paloma'). It is still not an act of communion that could give birth to a child, but a gross parody of it – a hunger for what he can see with his eyes and hold in his hand. What kills Juan, and Yerma too, in every sense that matters, is the classic issue she has already articulated: that it takes a man and a woman to bear a child. And the play ends with desolate clarity on her recognition that now she has killed whatever chance she had of having one. As people start to gather round, she cries, 'What do you want to know, that I've killed him? Yes, I've killed him. I've killed my son' (p. 206; '¡Yo misma he matado a mi hijo!')

In *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936) written on the brink of war, Lorca's concentration on women reaches its climax: there are no male roles in the play at all. The entire cast is Bernarda's female household ('la casa') – five unmarried daughters, a grandmother, and the servants. Men are only offstage, being buried (the play opens with the funeral of Bernarda's husband), telling lewd stories on the patio, singing on the way to harvesting, or riding under girls' windows; the potent figure of Pepe el Romano, who dominates the girls' imaginations, is never actually seen. But the stagecraft is expressive of Bernarda's whole frame of mind: no outsiders are welcome, but men are the supreme enemy, and she protects the honour of her *casa* with ferocious vigilance. The play is subtitled 'A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain' (*Drama de Mujeres en los Pueblos de España*), with the pointed rider, 'these three acts are intended as a photographic documentary' ('un documental fotográfico').[11] Lorca is bringing to the

[11] English quotations from *Three Plays*, trans. Dewell and Zapata; Spanish quotations from *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, ed. Allen Josephs and Juan Caballero (Madrid 1996).

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'public tribunal' something he has seen for himself in Andalusia, and indeed grew up with:

> In the house immediately next to ours lived 'Doña Bernarda', a very old widow who kept over her spinster daughters an inexorable and tyrannical watch. They were prisoners deprived of all freedom of choice and I never spoke with them; but I saw them pass like shadows, always silent and always dressed in black.[12]

At the same time, however, Lorca's determined exposure of Spanish village life sends resonances out to Greek drama: for *casa* is an excellent translation of *oikos*, in terms of the family's public honour, and also in terms of the power of the mother over her children before they cross the threshold. What Lorca reconstructs in his darkly glittering, Goya-esque portrait of Bernarda Alba, is the apogee of maternal power. But Bernarda, like Yerma, has also internalised the masculine code of honour, for which she will sacrifice anything – not excluding her children's lives. Once again, in this play, we see the fearful cost of control which refuses to compromise with life itself. And beyond the drama of Bernarda's family we see foreshadowed the fate of the whole of Spain, embarking in this same year on a civil war that will terminate in ferocious Fascist control, and require the silencing of all its major artists. Lorca himself was shot without trial soon after he had put the finishing touches to this play.[13] The centrality of Aeschylus' question in the *Oresteia* – how can the Furies and Apollo be reconciled to one another before they annihilate Athens? – could not be more painfully demonstrated than by *The House of Bernarda Alba.*

The precision of Lorca's framing of the play in terms of one *casa* in one *pueblo* shows in the implicit commentary on the nature of village life. Villages are inhabited by families, not citizens, and they settle their own problems by 'wild justice', in Bacon's phrase, because they cannot imagine any higher courts of appeal. Thus Lorca evokes with unsentimental clarity the settled hatreds that dwell behind each front door, and the sense in which each *oikos* is enduringly at war with its neighbours. It is a world of secrecy and slander, hypocrisy and ineradicable mistrust. It has modernised to the extent that brides now wear white veils 'like in the big cities' and wine is drunk bottled – 'But inside we rot away [*pudrimos*] over

[12] In conversation with Carlos Morla Lynch: Edwards, *Dramatists in Perspective*, p. 116. More precisely, it was at his cousin's house that he saw this family, and he used their real name, 'Alba': Gibson, *Federico García Lorca*, p. 436.

[13] Lorca was taken out of hiding and shot by the Nationalists on 18/19 August 1936. His crime was his liberal politics, but undoubtedly his homosexuality, as a classic threat to Spanish masculinity, was an additional motive (as is revealed in the testimony of one of the men involved); see Gibson, *Federico García Lorca*, pp. 464–8.

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what people will say', says one of the daughters (p. 131). Even a servant of thirty years is felt as an outsider to the 'family circle' (p. 149), and Bernarda expresses her deep resentment at having to invite her neighbours into the house after the funeral by immediately having the floor scrubbed: 'You would think a herd of goats had walked on it!' (p. 126). She talks with hatred of the *pueblo* as a place with no river, only wells 'where you always drink the water fearing that it's poisoned' (p. 125). And while it is true that her guests are muttering 'Dried-up old lizard!' ('¡Vieja lagarta recocida!', p. 124), as they drink her lemonade, it is also true that she is a great poisoner of the public wells herself, worming out old secrets and using them to keep others in her power.

Lorca also touches on another key element of village life in making Bernarda so powerful over her family. In her role as a mother she is another Fury, combining the fundamental power of fertility with psychological terrorism. Her hold over her *casa* extends to her telling her daughters what they have seen, when what they saw displeases her, or regulating what can be thought in her presence: 'There are things we cannot and should not *think*! I give orders' (p. 149). She has seen two husbands into the grave – it is not accidental that the play begins with her burying the only alternative source of authority in the family – and the rampant nature of female power has rarely been so credibly expressed since Clytemnestra. She even has the source of strength Sophocles noted of Clytemnestra in *Electra*, that she colonises her daughters mentally, and fills them with a cruelty like her own: it is her voice that they use to hurt one another. Men may rule the world beyond the threshold, where they pay whores for their pleasure, and marry coolly for land and oxen; but Bernarda's matriarchal power is primary, and she can prevent her daughters getting access to husbands as long as she wishes. As Lorca makes the youngest daughter say, echoing Medea, 'To be born a woman is the worst punishment' (p. 144).

But as with *Yerma*, part of Lorca's theme is the deadly effect of adding masculine values to female power. Spain has not evolved an Athenian way of harmonising the two, so that neither gets a chance to display its vices. On the contrary, each is provoking the other to do its worst – so that Bernarda is the vehicle both of rampant, blind maternity and extreme authoritarianism, in the relation of her *casa* to the outside world. She brings to the job of containing female disorder a heavy literalism, more characteristic of the Furies than Apollo. She is fascist in a quite literal sense – she carries a cane and beats her daughters with it – and like Pentheus, she is driven to talk of chains and imprisonment: 'I have five chains for you, and this house my father built.' (p. 149). She reminds herself of the necessity of keeping order with a kind of passionate self-pity: 'I must use a firm hand with them. Bernarda, remember: this is your duty!' (p. 149; 'Bernarda: acuérdate que esta es tu

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obligación'). But no matter how vigilant she is, her daughters are at the windows, peeping out of doors, making assignations, and dreaming over stolen pictures. She cries,'how one must suffer and struggle to get people to behave decently and not like savages!' (p. 129; 'no tiren al monte demasiado'[14]) – with a despairing aversion like that of Pentheus or Hippolytus, contemplating the disorderly mass of womankind.

The struggle is so demanding that she cannot take cognisance, any more than Pentheus, of the fact that their behaviour is being provoked by the extremity of her restraint. She only knows that what she is doing is right, and the one way of keeping the family beyond public reproach. But we may suspect deeper motives, for which propriety offers the excuse: the jealous rancour of old age, the hatred of infertility for fertility, and pleasure of doing to others as she has been done by. These motives can be discerned in the way she clamps her daughters into far deeper than obligatory mourning, just as it was in her own generation. And she anticipates the darkness and stagnation of her *casa* with a true Fury's satisfaction:

> During our eight years of mourning, no wind from the street will enter this house! Pretend we have sealed up the doors and windows with bricks. That's how it was in my father's house, and in my grandfather's house. In the meantime you can begin to embroider your trousseaus. I have twenty bolts of linen in the chest from which you can cut sheets. Magdalena can embroider them. (p. 126)

The only one of her five daughters who will be allowed to contemplate marriage during these eight years is Angustias, the eldest, who has a sufficient dowry and has been asked for by Pepe el Romano. But the engagement is cynical on his side: Angustias is old and frail, and he loves Adela, the youngest and most beautiful, the only daughter who dares defy Bernarda. Meanwhile, Martirio is hungering for Pepe, too. The knowing old servant, Poncia, tries to tell Bernarda what passions are building up inside her *casa* – but Bernarda's rage and arrogance prevent her from hearing, in an exchange of Pentheus-like *hubris*:

> *Poncia.* For Pepe to be with Angustias seems wrong – to me, and to other people, and even to the air. Who knows if they'll get their way!
> *Bernarda.* Here we go again! You go out of your way to give me bad dreams. And I don't want to listen to you, because if things turn out the way you say, I will have to claw you to pieces [*te tendria que arañar*]!

[14] The metaphor is from goat-herding,'breaking loose' in a proverbial spirit the Greeks would have understood: 'la cabra siempre tira al monte' (the goat always runs back up the hill).

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Poncia. The blood wouldn't get as far as the river!

Bernarda. Fortunately, my daughters respect me and have never gone against my will.

Poncia. That's true. But as soon as you turn them loose, they'll be up on the roof.

Bernarda. I will bring them down soon enough, by throwing stones at them!

Poncia. Of course you are the strongest!

Bernarda. I've always been able to hold my own. [*¡Siempre gasté sabrosa pimienta!*[15]]

(pp. 151–2)

It is striking how naturally Spanish village life yields Lorca motifs that Athenians might recognise: the mayhem implicit in women climbing out of the *oikos* to be publicly visible on the roof, the necessity of 'stoning' them into decency, and the revelation that parental authority may come down to being the 'strongest' ('la más valiente'). And even more classical is the violence of the explosion, when it comes.

There is a premonitory first explosion outside the house at the end of Act II, which operates as a kind of commentary on the dialogue above. Something has brought a 'big crowd' into the street and 'all the neighbours are at their doors!' as the maid excitedly says (p. 153). An unnamed young woman – typically, she is only called 'Librada's daughter, the one who's not married' – is being dragged down the street, and Poncia comes rushing in with the news. The girl has given birth to an illegitimate baby:

Poncia. And to hide her shame, she killed it and put it under some rocks. But some dogs, with more feelings than many creatures, pulled it out, and as if led by the hand of God, they put it on her doorstep. Now they want to kill her. They're dragging her down the street, and the men are running down the paths and out of the olive groves, shouting so loud the fields are trembling [*estremecen los campos*].

Bernarda. Yes! Let them all bring whips made from olive branches and the handles of their hoes! Let them all come to kill her!

Adela. No. No! Not to kill her!

Martirio. Yes, let's go out there, too!

Bernarda. Any woman who tramples on decency [*pisotea la decencia*] should pay for it!

(*Outside, a woman screams, and there is a great uproar.*)

Adela. They should let her go! Don't go out there!

Martirio (*looking at Adela*). She should pay for what she did.

[15] Literally, 'I've always used strong pepper!'

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Bernarda (*in the archway*). Finish her off before the police get here! Burning coals in the place where she sinned! [*¡Carbón ardiendo en el sitio de su pecado!*]

Adela (*clutching her womb*). No! No!

Bernarda. Kill her! Kill her!

CURTAIN

(p. 154)

Lorca ties together a number of effects with this climax. At the level of plot we now know that Adela identifies with Librada's daughter, and her sister Martirio understands why she is clutching her womb, though Bernarda is still blind to it. But Lorca also throws into dramatic relief the repulsive mixture of emotions with which the community responds to the sexual transgressor. She is their legitimate prey, to be dragged, whipped, and trampled upon as she trampled upon the community's code. There is joy in finally having an appropriate outlet for their envy and self-suppression: fertility has got loose and it must be annihilated before it spreads (not for nothing is she Librada's daughter). Bernarda is the chief Fury in calling for her to be burnt alive in the very location of her pleasure and fruitfulness: 'Burning coals in the place where she sinned!' She shows herself contemptuous of the public law that would spoil their revenge ('before the police get here!'), and for the sake of urging the crowd to such an orgy of cruelty, she breaks her iron law against being seen out of doors – she stands in the archway of the house. But the other Furies are not far behind. Martirio wants to 'go out there, too!', for some savage compensation for her own way of life, 'martyred', sanctimonious, and bitterly envious of her younger sister. And the men pour excitedly out of the olive groves, shouting loud enough to make the ground tremble: Lorca could not convey more economically the interplay of sexual repression and sadism in the revenge code (the same interplay he showed in *Blood Wedding*, but now expressed in human figures), or the sense in which the appetites represented by the Aeschylean Furies never go away.

It is an associated idea, as in *Yerma*, that when fertility is not allowed natural expression it cannot be held 'on ice', but festers, and emerges in squalid forms: the murdered baby under the rock, or the intimate sadism of Bernarda behind the mask of decency. The whole culture, those within the code as much as those outside it, is paying the price for failing to negotiate any better relation between law and fertility, or admit any other solution than repression, and more repression. Lorca ironically indicates the fatuity of putting Dionysus in chains by the tremendous thuds that are heard through the wall at the beginning of the last act. Bernarda has a large herd of horses and is about to put a magnificent stallion out to breed with her new

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mares. He kicks so furiously against confinement she is forced to let him out 'before he kicks down the walls' (p. 156); and her pride in the stallion's virility – 'He must be hot', she whispers ('debe tener calor', p. 155) – and her willingness to admit that he is beyond her mastery, contrast pointedly with her presumption that she can master Dionysus in every other form. The coming explosion is the direct result of her arrogance.

In fact, Adela has been meeting Pepe el Romano every night. 'He takes me into the reeds at the edge of the river!' she proudly asserts to her jealous sister, and no punishment will ever make her repent:

> I can't stand the horror of this house any more, not after knowing the taste of his mouth [*el sabor de su boca*]! I will be what he wants me to be. With the whole town against me, branding me with their fiery fingers, persecuted by people who claim to be decent, and right in front of them I will put on a crown of thorns, like any mistress of a married man! (p. 166)

Knowing how deeply encoded in Lorca's symbolism is the impossibility of ever reaching the water – the water the stallion does not drink, the water no man gives Yerma from his mouth – we can appreciate the depth of resonance he intends to give the lovers' meeting-place, 'the reeds at the edge of the river'. Adela, among all her tortured, starved, and baffled sisters, and unlike Yerma, claims her share in the fullness of life. And she invokes the holiest symbol of Christian suffering, the 'crown of thorns', for her pagan right. In Spain Christ has no monopoly on the bitter dignity of withstanding the sadistic crowd – so must 'any mistress of a married man!' Adela is the first heroine in these plays whose bacchic energy finds an outlet – 'I could bring a wild stallion to his knees with the strength in my little finger!' (p. 166) – and who chooses in full awareness of what she is doing: 'I saw death under this roof, and I went out to look for what is mine, for what belongs to me!' (p. 165).

It only takes a whistle from the corral to bring the denouement about: Pepe is waiting in the dark for Adela, and her jealous sister, Martirio, alarms the sleeping household. Lorca crowds an impressive number of effects into a mere two pages of dialogue. The different reactions of the sisters to the scandal, and Bernarda's wrath, are only part of them; the sisters divide between wanting to turn Adela out and insisting she stay. Angustias, as Pepe's fiancée, says 'You're not leaving here – you and your triumphant body! [*tu cuerpo en triunfo*] Thief!' (p. 167). The high moment of liberation is when Bernarda lifts her avenging cane for the last time and Adela seizes and breaks it in two: 'this is what I do with the tyrant's rod! Don't take one step more' (p. 167). We also see Adela's triumphant reliance on Pepe's male strength and authority: after all the false control of

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Bernarda, the true master of the *casa* is acknowledged at last. This is the final threat that goads Bernarda beyond herself:

> *Adela.* No one gives me orders but Pepe . . . I am his woman. (*to Angustias*) Get that into your head – and go out to the corral and tell him. He will be master of this entire house! He's out there, breathing like a lion!
> *Angustias.* My God!
> *Bernarda.* The gun! Where is the gun?
> (*Bernarda runs out.*)
>
> (p. 167)

While the sisters wrestle with one another, there is the sound of a shot, and Bernarda comes back to say with fierce satisfaction, 'I dare you to find him now!' She has only succeeded in scaring Pepe el Romano off her land, but the jealous Martirio uses the occasion to twist the knife: 'That's the end of Pepe el Romano!' And this is enough to bring the catastrophe about: for Adela, who was strong enough to live, is strong enough to die, and the next thing we hear after she runs wildly out calling 'Pepe! My God! Pepe!' is a 'heavy thud' as she hangs herself in the next room.

When Bernarda sees the body from the threshold she screams. But she does not run to take it down. That would be tantamount to an admission – and her immediate response is to deny what has happened and rearrange reality, at whatever price. The gargantuan effrontery of Adela and Pepe can, and must, be resisted. And, standing at the edge of chaos, she re-establishes order in two merciless speeches, in which Lorca sounds all the keynotes of the play with brilliant economy. She closes the lid on the family sarcophagus, and we hear the dull thud:

> *Bernarda.* Pepe, you may go running off alive, through the shadows of the poplars, but one day you will fall. Cut her down. My daughter has died a virgin [*ha muerto virgen*]. Carry her to her room and dress her in white. No one is to say a thing. She died a virgin. Send word for the bells to toll twice at dawn.
> *Martirio.* She was fortunate a thousand times over – she had him.
> *Bernarda.* I want no weeping. We must look death in the face. Silence! (*to another daughter*) Be quiet, I said! (*to another daughter*) Tears, when you're alone. We will all drown ourselves in a sea of mourning [*un mar de luto*]. The youngest daughter of Bernarda Alba has died a virgin. Did you hear me? Silence! Silence, I said! Silence!
>
> CURTAIN
>
> (pp. 168–9)

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Bernarda is not a monster – 'we will all drown ourselves in a sea of mourning', and some of the tears will be hers – but we recognise now that every decision she is making guarantees the prolongation of the sickness, in and out of the *casa*. Even the 'sea' of mourning will doubtless become an aspect of the general perversion; and for the sake of the neighbours, there will neither be truth ('My daughter has died a virgin') nor audible grief ('Silence!'). Inside they may 'rot away over what people will say'; but iron control is the only method Bernarda knows. Lorca lets a note of triumph be heard, however, even through Martirio's jealousy: 'She was fortunate a thousand times over – she had him.'

Felicity Rosslyn

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