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García Lorca’s *Yerma*: A Woman’s Mystery

García Lorca’s *Yerma* (1934) is a modern reworking of an ancient mystery which might have been enacted at Eleusis, Samothrace, Venusberg, or any other sacred shrine. It involves the dramatization of secret doxologies and initiation rituals, of verbal and gestural symbols.

In that *Yerma*, a three act tragedy, deals with a woman’s barrenness, the numerous happenings focus on fertility. Originally part of agrarian family cults, fertility rituals, and this is implicit in *Yerma*, include protective or enombing ceremonies (I. i; II. ii), purification rituals (II. i), and a lysis (III. i, ii); sacred sequences when the mystai thrash out the religious experience directly. Because such exteriorizations of pronominal encounters have lived in the cultures and psyches of peoples through history, they can be said to be of mythic proportions. *Yerma* is no exception.

Because *Yerma* is a myth (from the word mythos, meaning “fable” and logos, “discourse” or “reason”), the happenings in *Yerma* transcend linear time; they live in a kind of eternity. Nor are the events dramatized to be considered necessarily personal; they are also collective: not something invented for the sake of entertainment, though it may be also that, but rather a living and burning reality that exists in the Spanish culture and psyche as a whole and in Lorca’s own vision. *Yerma*, then, is to be approached as both an individual and collective happening, with emphasis focused on woman, on Mariolatry in particular and its inherent polarities (saint/sinner); and on the victimization of son/husband by a would-be Mother.

In that *Yerma* is a mystery and mythic in quality, its protagonists are not to be looked upon as flesh and blood human beings, but rather as archetypes. The collective and eternal powers peopling Lorca’s stage, live on the most primitive levels and act in keeping with their own inherited and biological patterns of behavior. *Yerma*, the protagonist of Lorca’s tragedy, makes us privy to the agony of the barren woman: she has been married for two years when the play begins and seven years pass between Act I and II, and still she remains sterile. The archetype of the infertile woman is not unique, as attested to in the Bible. Not only did some women long after the child-bearing age give birth to children, but several of them were even visited by angels before the birth: Sarah had Isaac; Rebecca, twins; Esau and Jacob; Hannah, Samuel; Moseah’s wife bore Samson after the event was announced to her by an angel; the same was true for Elisabeth, John’s mother, for Anne who conceived Mary immaculately, and for Mary who was told that she was “highly favored” and “blessed” among women before giving birth to Jesus. Nor are such births requiring the help of divine intervention unknown in ancient times: Isis bore Horus through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, Kamotef.
That Yerma’s desire for a child is her sole raison d’être is understandable. Though it is intimated that Victor, the shepherd, had been the object of her desire, as an obedient daughter she agreed to a loveless marriage to Juan. Nor does her wanting to become a mother violate the dictates of her culture. On the contrary, it would have enhanced her stature in the community: she would have been exactly like the others and not differed from them. Her inability to become pregnant sets her apart, and she suffers the excoriating torments of one who is not like the others — a pariah of sorts. Yerma’s personality also distinguishes her from the typical young, jovial, loveable and natural girl. She is a woman corroded with religious and sexual problems: she is psychologically empty. Her attitude toward her husband is cold, distant, perfunctory. He is there to fertilize her: to function as a stud. Such a relationship can yield no fruit since no feeling of fire exists between them. Because the dichotomy between the two is unbreachable, Yerma’s fantasy world takes over. It alone, at least at the outset, allows her a modicum of happiness.

That the play opens with a dream vision — or a visitation — is not surprising in that we are dealing here with a mystery. It is spring: early in the morning and she and her husband are asleep. The stage is bathed in a strange light, that of atemporal happenings. “A Shepherd enters on tiptoe looking fixedly at Yerma. He leads by the hand a Child dressed in white.” Not only do the dream figures reveal a compensatory image for the void Yerma experiences in her life, but they also lend an eerie and irrational quality to the proceedings.

Who is this Shepherd about whom Yerma is dreaming? Certainly a reference to the strong and powerful Victor, the keeper of the flock; the Abel of Lorca’s mythic proceedings. While Juan, thin and pale, is, like Cain, a tiller of the soil. He works so hard inmanning the earth, that he has not time to do the same for Yerma; or in he does, he does so ineffectively. That Victor leads a Child dressed in white, suggests the arrival of the “Son of Man”: the pure, resplendent hope of her future — that element that gives her life purpose and love. If the child archetype is considered as a conjunction of opposites, it indicates a fluid relationship between the unconscious and consciousness: a condition able to pave the way for a spiritual and psychological change in the individual dreaming about such an image.

The shock of reality intrudes when Yerma awakens. The disparity between her dream (an unconscious compensatory urge) and the actual situation takes effect and arouses anger. She projects her trauma onto her husband and castigates him for his weakness and fecklessness. Still hopeful of remedying the situation, she offers him a glass of milk. It will make him more robust: “Your body is not strong enough for it,” referring to the sexual act.

That she offers him milk is in keeping with her desire to strengthen him: it is also associated with the mystery revolving around the Virgin Mary. Lactation was the only biological function she was allowed outside of the asexual act of weeping. Yerma’s gift of milk to Juan, then, is to be identified with the joy of a nursing mother in general: it is she who passes on her nourishing power to
NOTES

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