

# Baroque Lorca

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An Archaist Playwright for the  
New Stage

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## Chapter 5

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Writing for the Stage

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## 5 Writing for the Stage

The final chapter of this book examines Lorca's internationally renowned plays *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Lorca wrote the first two plays, between 1932 and 1934, with the immediate goal of obtaining commercial and critical recognition before proceeding to implement his desired comprehensive reform of the theater industry in Spain (consider his transparent statement from December 15, 1934, two weeks before the premiere of *Yerma*, about his "perfectly clear trajectory in the theater," *Obras* 545). While the writing of *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* formed a single and continued effort, *The House of Bernarda Alba* came out as an independent play in June of 1936, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and Lorca's subsequent execution by a fascist squad in Granada in August of that year. Margarita Xirgu premiered *The House of Bernarda Alba* in Buenos Aires in 1945. In the analysis of the original context of production and reception of Lorca's plays, I will limit my study to *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* for the obvious reason that he did not stage *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Nor did Lorca provide any specific clue about a potential production while he was still alive. From the perspective of textual analysis, I propose a unitary approach to these three works, as they recreate identifiable plot patterns from the contemporary genre of the *drama rural* as well as from Calderón's baroque honor plays.

As Andrew Anderson notes, acknowledging the "strategic" value of *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* should not imply that Lorca used them "merely as tools, compromising his artistic integrity or indeed succumbing to commercial considerations and pandering to public taste" ("Strategy" 217). Lorca composed and staged these two plays while he also attempted to make his whole dramatic production more visible through any means possible. In 1933, he saw staged *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*, a work banned four years earlier when it was being rehearsed by Rivas Cherif's theater club El Caracol. In the more favorable political context of the Second Republic, the play was finally produced by the Club Teatral de Cultura, a theater club recently founded by feminist activist Pura Maortua Ucelay. It was a one-night event, on April 5, at the Teatro Español, attended by a select audience

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of critics and artists only. Additionally in 1933, Lorca sent to print Acts II and V of *The Public*, published in the literary magazine *Los Cuatro Vientos*. This publication resulted in an exceptional event in view of Lorca's general aversion to publishing his dramatic works. The explicit homosexual undertones of the play, particularly in Act II, were not an obstacle for its publication. During this year of very high theatrical activity, the first two productions of *Blood Wedding*, in Madrid and Buenos Aires, took place. After the success of *Blood Wedding*, Lorca proceeded to write and stage a second tragedy, *Yerma*, a play he eventually completed in the summer of 1934. While directing rehearsals of *La Barraca* in Madrid before going out on a tour in northern Spain, Lorca expressed his satisfaction with the writing process of *Yerma* in an interview of July of 1934. Early in the year, actress-manager Lola Membrives was pressuring him to deliver the complete manuscript of the play to her—this personal episode will be discussed in more detail later. Yet, he found a way to resist her impositions. "I believe I have accomplished what I had intended to do" (*Obras* 536), Lorca claimed in this interview from mid-1934. In this same interview, Lorca famously announced his will to "return to tragedy. Our theatrical tradition obligates us to do so" (*Obras* 536). Anderson interprets this declaration as an ambitious attempt from Lorca to "immerse the contemporary Spanish stage in its origins and 'true' tradition in order to save it from crass commercialism and to bring it back on to an 'artistic' course" ("Strategy" 217). This exercise of returning to the root of the Spanish theatrical tradition in order to produce an impact on contemporary stage practices conforms to my definition of Lorca as an artist who was both an archaist and an innovator. These two interrelated terms, proposed by Yury Tynianov in his 1929 study of the dynamics of the "old" and the "new" in Russian literature, as I noted in the Introduction, fit perfectly in Lorca's constant negotiation between the tradition of the Spanish theater and the commercial practices of the contemporary theater industry. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the artists and critics around the Residencia de Estudiantes and journals such as *La Gaceta Literaria* advocated openly for a "new" and "young" art that should sweep any trace of the "old." Lorca, however, tended to avoid this rhetoric of irreconcilable extremes for most of his career. His most radical public statements came only in 1935 and 1936, in the last two years of the Spanish Republic, as I discussed in the previous chapter.

Right after obtaining the public concession of the Teatro Español of Madrid in 1930, Margarita Xirgu appointed Cipriano Rivas Cherif as her assistant director and literary advisor. One of their first decisions was to program Lorca's *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*, paired with Calderón's *The Great Theater of the World*. This was very favorable to Lorca who, upon a recent return from the United States and Cuba, saw *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife* performed in the main space of the very respectable Teatro Español. Lorca's play ran for 33 nights in late

1930 and early 1931 (Gil 122–6). In late 1932, however, Lorca could not secure the support of Xirgu and Rivas Cherif to produce *Blood Wedding*. For this reason, he sought the help of Eduardo Marquina in his position of literary advisor in Josefina Díaz's company during the 1932–33 theatrical season. Lorca's reliance on Marquina for the production of *Blood Wedding* in 1933 proves the weakness of Lorca's position as producer of theatrical commodities even after seeing *Mariana Pineda* and *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife* staged in prestigious spaces in the preceding years. The situation was very different when *Yerma* premiered in the Teatro Español on December 29, 1934, as this time Lorca was a celebrated playwright who counted with Xirgu and Rivas Cherif on his side. Xirgu and Rivas Cherif, in the fourth year of their joint enterprise in the Teatro Español, were at the peak of their career. Xirgu, recognized as the most distinguished actress in Spain, had recently received medals of honors of the Second Republic<sup>1</sup> and of the cities of Mérida, Barcelona and Badalona. At the same time, Rivas Cherif had finally fulfilled his dream of opening the first modern theater school in Spain, the Teatro Escuela de Arte (1933–36).

In light of its thematic commonalities with *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*, critics have traditionally considered *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936, premiered posthumously in Buenos Aires in 1945) as the third and final piece of the project that Lorca defined, in 1933, as his “trilogy of the Spanish land” (*Obras* 418). I agree with the idea of these plays constituting a trilogy, in broad terms. However, the particular history of *The House of Bernarda Alba* presents a different concept. First, Lorca never mentioned *The House of Bernarda Alba* in his many public speeches and press interviews from 1932 to 1936. Second, in the cases where he referenced a third title, *The House of Bernarda Alba* was not the play he had in mind. In two press interviews released before the premiere of *Yerma*, Lorca described *Yerma* as the second title of a trilogy that should end with *The Drama of Lot's Daughters* (*Obras* 545, 548). After the opening night, Lorca announced that the trilogy would end with a play he was now referring to as *The Destruction of Sodom*. This latter work was, in his own words, “practically finished” (*Obras* 552). In regard to *The Destruction of Sodom*, there is evidence that Lorca read its first act to Rafael Rodríguez Rapún and Luis Sáenz de la Calzada in the summer of 1935 (Sáenz 176–7), yet no manuscript survived. The biblically themed play contained an explicit foregrounding of male homosexuality, a direction distinct to *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. In mid-1935, Lorca also worked on *The Dream of Life*, projected as the climax of his political theater, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Additionally, he drafted ideas for plays on very different topics, from antiwar works to plays portraying violent and sexual scenes inspired by the Old Testament to a new model of musical theater that would incorporate flamenco music (Hernández Introduction *La casa* 14–40). While working on the

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various projects during the summer of 1935, Lorca abandoned the idea of a unitary trilogy of the Spanish land.

Lorca's agrarian plays were not the result of an isolated genius who obtained his inspiration from contemporary problems of women in Southern Spain. Instead, these plays came to life in explicit dialogue with the conventions of one of the prevalent genres in the contemporary playhouses of Madrid. The genre of rural drama constituted both the starting point for Lorca, who willingly staged his theater in commercial venues, and the background against which the originality of *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* was to be measured. Had Lorca had the opportunity to stage it in 1936, *The House of Bernarda Alba* would have also been evaluated as a rural drama. As noted earlier, these three plays relied, in different degrees, on previous formulas of rural dramas (Marquina's versified theater in the first two cases, Benavente's drama in prose in *The House of Bernarda Alba*) while also constituting modern revisions of the baroque honor plays. It is my view that an analysis of these three plays without consideration of their generic and intertextual affiliations will end up producing the same type of biographical criticism that Paul J. Smith denounced three decades ago (see the discussion in my Introduction). In this regard, the progressive ideology assigned to this set of three plays, a very common critical stand these days, results from a rudimentary interpretive strategy that basically consists in projecting Lorca's biography onto his dramatic works. I concur with Jonathan Mayhew, who has recently denounced that the "genuine admiration for the richness and variety of Lorca's work often shades into an uncritical sacralization of his authorial subjectivity . . . [that] leads directly to kitsch" (167). What makes Lorca a particular case, Mayhew continues, is that "the object of sacralization and kitsch is not a single work . . . but Lorca *himself*, or, more precisely, the authorial subject as constructed in the Lorca myth" (169, his emphasis). Of all of Lorca's dramatic works, his agrarian plays stand out as the ideal works for the perpetuation of the Lorca myth. According to the most accepted version of the Lorca myth, the fictional events in *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* unfold in remote geographies that are supposed to correspond to Andalusian villages whose ideological backwardness Lorca aimed to denounce. This is in spite of the absence of realistic signs to minimally corroborate this hypothesis—I am referring both to the dramatic texts and their first mise-en-scenes. In the particular case of *Yerma*, for example, when the play premiered in 1934, a number of critics could not identify its geographical and temporal settings, and some of them identified the landscape and the presence of certain animals, such as oxen, as eminently Castilian rather than Andalusian (on this debate, see Hernández "Cronología" 304–6). Alfredo Muñoz, in the *Heraldo de Madrid*, described the character of the Old Pagan Woman as "magnificently Castilian." In his review for *La Voz*, Enrique Díez-Canedo

praised the secondary female figures, “full of native folkloric flair . . . Castilian? Andalusian? No matter the accent, it will always be Spanish.” A decade later, when Xirgu premiered *The House of Bernarda Alba* in Buenos Aires in 1945, critics perceived an intentionally abstracted geography (a play “without a determined location,” *La Nación*, qtd. in Diago 154), favored the Castilian hypothesis (“the harsh geography of Castille,” Francisca Chica Salas in *Saber Vivir*, qtd. in Diago 162), and defined Lorca’s last play as a homage to Calderón, a play free of “picturesque elements” that stood out as an example of “authentic Hispanism” (in *La Vanguardia*, qtd. in Diago 164).

Continuing with the Lorca myth, the pattern of repression that Bernarda Alba exerts over her daughters is also a material that lends itself very well to anachronistic interpretations of the play, as it often occurs when *The House of Bernarda Alba* is read as an allegory of Francisco Franco’s military regime. Theater scholars and practitioners who are unaware of the existence of the genre of the rural drama, and the importance of star actresses in Lorca’s time, tend to overemphasize the role of contemporary politics in his tragedies. Discussing his own production of *Blood Wedding* in 2001, for example, director Roberto D. Pomo defined Lorca’s play as one that “contains a strong statement with regard to the social conditions of its time, as Spain saw herself embroiled in a chaotic political whirlwind that culminated in a bloody civil war” (277). As Delgado has shown (112–3), international productions of *The House of Bernarda Alba* have routinely approached this play as a portrayal of Lorca’s own death at the hand of repressive forces. These are political readings that only function retrospectively, of course, according to a logic that consists in interpreting Lorca’s drama as one “in which his future death is at once anticipated and commemorated” (Smith *Body* 110). Temporal and geographical incongruities are listed to serve the cause, as was the case at the London’s Gate Theatre production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, in 1992, which featured the entire Alba family saluting “il duce” at the end of Act Two (Anderman 303; Delgado 112–3). In Spain, a number of recent productions, such as Jorge Eines’ 1941, *Blood Wedding*, have distorted the most basic layers of meaning in Lorquian texts in order to convey the expected political message (for a list of incongruities of Eines’ production, see Rafael Fuentes’ review).

As noted above, the commonly accepted idea that *The House of Bernarda Alba* constitutes the third installment of Lorca’s “rural trilogy” is the result of a posthumous editorial move. In this chapter, I still view the idea of an identity linking together *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*, as the three works constitute modern rewritings of baroque honor plays. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the agrarian plays are the climax of Lorca’s artistic progression. This teleological view has been applied to the trilogy itself but also, in retrospective mode, to all of Lorca’s production. I disagree

with the received idea that the tragedies “represent the culmination of all the character types, themes, and techniques that Lorca developed throughout his career. The plays are the result of artistic refinement and maturity” (Klein 9–10). A careful analysis of Lorca’s writing activity from 1930 until his death in 1936 shows the absence of a linear pattern. *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* are embedded between the earlier *The Public* and *As Five Years Pass*, one the one end, and *The Dream of Life* and the drawing-room drama *Doña Rosita the Spinster*, on the other. Of the very diverse projects he was entertaining in 1935–36, the first act of *Dreams of My Cousin Aurelia*, a continuation of *Doña Rosita The Spinster*, has survived (it only became known to scholars in the late 1980s, for an exhaustive analysis, see Torres “Del Teatro”). Moreover, as noted earlier, *The House of Bernarda Alba* is a play that stands on its own, the result of a very straightforward writing process that took place in spring and early summer of 1936. Contrary to Lorca’s customary practice of vividly describing the plots of his plays to friends and journalists even before beginning the actual writing process, he did not share *The House of Bernarda Alba* with members of his inner circle until he had the manuscript ready in late June of 1936 (Gibson 663), just a few days before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. It is worth noting, following a point raised by Andrew Anderson, that Lorca “was very much concerned” with the ‘impossible’ plays “*throughout* the 1930s, notwithstanding his other compositions or commitments,” and that “he on occasions almost dismissed the plays of his which *were* produced” (“Strategy” 217, his emphasis). It is precisely because Lorca wrote for the contemporary stage that he was willing to adapt and react to its conventions and demands by trying with different formulas at the same time. In view of this reality, in this book I abstain from privileging one specific path. Instead, I propose a map of creative vectors within Lorca’s dramatic production.

Lorca composed *Blood Wedding* in 1932 aware of the horizon of expectations set by a recognizable theatrical genre, the rural drama. This genre had its origins in the regionalist drama of Josep Feliu i Codina (*La Dolores*, 1892) and Àngel Guimerà (*María Rosa*, 1894; *Low Lands*, 1896), whose peasant plays featured passionate female characters in recognizable parts of Spain. Playwrights who cultivated this genre made great emphasis on local customs, geography and folklore while also claiming to reflect regional dialect variation in what eventually became an artificial deformation of everyday speech catered to the bourgeois audiences in Madrid (see Paco 143–4 for an exhaustive list of recognizable linguistic traits typical of this genre). Benavente canonized the genre in *Señora ama* (1908) and *The Unloved Woman* (1913), and the genre was still popular in the 1910s and the 1920s thanks to playwrights such as José López Pinillos and Manuel Linares-Rivas (Paco 155–62). In 1927, Xirgu staged Marquina’s *The Hermitage, the Fountain, and the River*, a rural play that enjoyed a run of more than one hundred performances.

The existence of this genre explains Lorca's initial adoption of a certain set of characters, motifs and landscapes for his agrarian tragedies. In addition, both Benavente's *The Unloved Woman* and Marquina's *The Hermitage, the Fountain, and the River* contain collective scenes that precede similar ones found in Lorca's tragedies, particularly in *Yerma*.

In line with the approach I have adopted in this book, my aim is to discuss *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* in the broader context of Lorca's contemporary theatrical industry. I cannot proceed in the same manner regarding *The House of Bernarda Alba* due to the fact that it remained unknown after Lorca's death in 1936 until Xirgu staged it in Buenos Aires in 1945. To demonstrate Lorca's willingness to initially accept the rules of the theater industry, I want to first discuss an extended preview feature of *Blood Wedding* that appeared in *Sparta* magazine four days before the play premiered in the Teatro Beatriz of Madrid. As a weekly entertainment magazine, this publication profited from a model that combined robust cultural reviews (theater, music, film), advertising of events and cosmetic products and a full calendar of cultural and sports events with information provided by the central office in Madrid and its branches in Barcelona, Valencia, Zaragoza and Lisbon (Nieva "La polémica" 13). The issue of March 4, 1933, included a one-page preview of *Blood Wedding* that featured an interview with Lorca, actress-impresario Josefina Díaz and playwright Eduardo Marquina. There are two aspects of importance in this text, signed by Felipe Lluich. First, Lluich portrays Lorca as "a poet, above all," an artist whose "strength" consists precisely in not being a "man of the theater." Lorca's alleged condition of outsider is emphasized to the point that he is described as somebody who is oblivious to "the tricks and mechanisms" of the theatre industry. Second, Lluich refers to Marquina as the *de facto* director of *Blood Wedding*. Marquina's involvement in the production is so crucial, Lluich argues, that it is difficult to distinguish between Lorca and him (the two "speak, confusing their thoughts . . . because the collaboration is so intimate that it is no longer known who has put more affection in the work, Lorca or the director"). This testimony contradicts the accepted idea that Lorca was the sole director of the play.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the evidence corroborates the information published one day before, on March 3, in *La Voz* newspaper (*Blood Wedding* is presented as a play "under the joint direction of Eduardo Marquina and Federico García Lorca").

It has become a common place to speak of Lorca's frustration with the cast of Díaz's company during the rehearsals of *Blood Wedding*, as most of the actors had little experience in tragic roles and little training in delivering verse, as his brother Francisco first observed (335; see also Gibson 539–40). If anything, I interpret this as an indicator of Lorca's willingness to tolerate what he might consider poor acting in order to escape the elitism of the Residencia group and connect with a broad commercial

audience. Establishing a pattern that continued with *Yerma* a year later, Lorca avoided the “new versus old” dichotomy by negotiating his definitive incursion in the commercial arena. This did not only occur with Marquina, but with other representatives of the establishment. In the opening night of *Blood Wedding*, distinguished members of the Residencia circle (among them, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén and Vicente Aleixandre) were predictably in the playhouse, sitting alongside a good number of young actors from La Barraca, fervent supporters of Lorca (Gibson 540). At the same time, it was possible to spot Jacinto Benavente and the Quintero brothers in the audience, the same authors who were the targets of Alberti’s attacks in the premiere of his *The Uninhabited Man* back in 1931 and the incident mentioned in the previous chapter. Lorca’s will to compromise with commercialism was obvious since Díaz’s ensemble specialized in the Quinteros’ light Andalusian comedies, a formula that had been enormously profitable for years—in the 1927–28, for instance, the Quintero brothers had 50 plays on stage in Madrid and premiered four plays, two of them reaching the number of 123 and 214 performances (see Dougherty and Anderson 295).<sup>3</sup> This pattern continued in 1934, when the general rehearsal of *Yerma* constituted, as journalist José Luis Salado reported for *La Voz*, a truly unprecedented event, one that gathered “a distinguished audience, something never seen before in these rehearsals” (*Obras* 550). Salado confessed to never witnessing “such a diverse crowd” (*Obras* 550) in a general rehearsal, an audience characterized by the contrast between Lorca’s “entourage” of young admirers and the presence of three respected authors in their late sixties (“three distinguished beards”) with very different trajectories in the theater. First, Benavente, leading representative of bourgeois drama and favorite target of avant-gardist groups in the 1930s. Second, Miguel de Unamuno, probably the greatest intellectual in Spain after Ortega y Gasset, and author of a corpus of philosophical theater with very reduced impact on the commercial scene. Third and final, Ramón M. Valle-Inclán, famous creator of the grotesque *esperpentos* and a controversial figure well known for his strained relationship with the theater industry. The year before, Lorca had defined Valle-Inclán’s work as “mostly mediocre” while also condemning his admiration for Benito Mussolini after a recent stay in Italy (“he has returned a fascist,” *Obras* 423). But now Lorca found a way, thanks to Rivas Cherif’s intercession, to recruit the Galician author to publicly support *Yerma*. In his review of the premiere of *Yerma*, a day after the general rehearsal, Enrique Díez-Canedo noted that not only did frequent theatergoers attend it, but the theater was also filled by “a different audience.”

Going back to the preview of *Blood Wedding* in *Sparta*, the protective role of Marquina was evident when he declared his intention to make Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* a commercial success. Marquina wanted it to become “the first play authentically written by a young author, in other

words, new, that it comes with full force, with complete efficiency to the public.” This statement reflects the harmony existing between Marquina and Lorca, as the older playwright was not simply sponsoring Lorca but, most importantly, he was defining him as someone who was in a very unique position—for the first time, Marquina argued that one of the “young,” “new” authors could produce a full impact on the Spanish audience. It is highly significant that Marquina had participated in a quarrel between the old and new in 1931, less than two years before this open endorsement of Lorca. Marquina had defended the establishment playwrights (the so-called “*putrefactos*”) by publishing an essay in response to Alberti’s avant-gardist provocations in the opening night of his *The Uninhabited Man*. Marquina responded to Alberti on his own territory, the avant-gardist *La Gaceta Literaria*, in its issue of March 15, 1931, an episode discussed in the previous chapter of this book. Moreover, Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* came out at a time when Marquina had recently brought to the stage a total of six rural dramas, all in verse, from 1926 to 1932. Marquina had returned to a genre he had abandoned around 1908. After Marquina’s final rural play, *Los Julianes* (1932), Lorca adopted this genre for his own reformist agenda. His incursion in the genre of rural drama happened with the approval of Marquina, who defended this ‘new’ playwright in his search of a large audience. In favoring Lorca, Marquina was also protecting his artistic legacy<sup>4</sup> as opposed to it being overshadowed by Alberti and other avant-gardist authors who took their aggressive rhetoric into the playhouses in the early 1930s.

The momentous year of the dethronement of King Alfonso XIII and the subsequent institution of a republican government in 1931 had been, incidentally, one of artistic realignment for Marquina. With the precedent of *The Hermitage, the Fountain, and the River* (1927), Marquina initiated a collaboration with Xirgu and Rivas Cherif that began with the production of *The Hidden Fountain*. This new rural drama premiered in the Teatro Español in January of 1931. María C. Gil Fombellida argues that Rivas Cherif became interested in Marquina’s theater in verse because it suited Rivas Cherif’s plan to combine innovative productions with commercial success guaranteed by a renowned playwright (173–4). This rural play, written in verse and located in Marquina’s native region of Catalonia, constituted a great commercial success for the Xirgu-Rivas Cherif duo. With a run of more than one hundred nights, *The Hidden Fountain* was unanimously praised by the critics. A year later, in 1932, Xirgu and Rivas Cherif staged Marquina’s *The Julianes* also in the Español. However, this rural play set in Castille only lasted a total of 40 nights and did not receive the same critical acclaim.<sup>5</sup> The vitality of the genre of the rural drama was already coming to an end after almost four decades of existence. Signs of exhaustion were already evident in 1929, when theater critic José Luis Salado published a piece titled “Why Do All the Rural Dramas Look the Same?”. A year later, previewing

the upcoming 1930–31 theatrical season, critic J. González Catoyra sardonically announced that the spectators would get to enjoy plenty of rural dramas featuring conservative country men “who will spend most of the time talking about the harvest and comparing the earth with the female” (qtd. in Dougherty and Vilches *La escena madrileña entre 1926* 160). Each one of these plays, González Catoyra wrote, would end with a violent scene in which a man stabs his wife’s seducer in the chest. In this context of Marquina’s return to rural drama in 1931–32, Miguel García-Posada has described *Blood Wedding* as Lorca’s adoption of Marquina’s formula with the same purpose he had when he imitated the conventions of the other genre associated to Marquina, the historical drama, in *Mariana Pineda*. Lorca’s decision to write *Blood Wedding* in late 1932, in the wake of Marquina’s rural drama, was, according to García-Posada, Lorca’s second “pact” (Introduction 12) with the commercial circuits. There was the added peculiarity that this time *Blood Wedding* also benefited from the popularity of Lorca himself, as the author of the book of poetry *Gypsy Ballads*. While García-Posada’s description is accurate, it is also true that Marquina gravitated toward the Xirgu-Rivas Cherif and, indirectly, toward Lorca, for the reasons discussed previously.

One last aspect of interest in the *Sparta* preview of *Blood Wedding* involves its harsh final sentence in which Lluch announced his hopes about Lorca’s play signaling the beginning of a new art “that should purge the stage from the rotting routine and mortal rigidity that, in these days, annihilates and drowns the theater.” In late 1928, Lluch joined Rivas Cherif as assistant director and stage designer of El Caracol theater club, a chamber theater that Rivas Cherif had created to host a number of playwrights without access to the commercial stage of the time. On February 6, 1929, Lluch witnessed the governmental closure of the theater, on the grounds of pornography, while the rehearsal of Lorca’s *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden* took place (on Lluch’s design work for this production, see Aguilera and Lizarraga “Los tres” 116–8). With these final words, less nuanced than Marquina’s, Lluch expressed his belief in a radical change of the Spanish theater industry. Lluch anticipated the critical discourse that Lorca voiced, more prominently, in 1935–36.

After studying a record number of 53 press reviews devoted to the three productions of *Blood Wedding* that Lorca saw staged in Spain (Díaz, Madrid, 1933; Membrives, Madrid, 1935; Xirgu, Barcelona, 1935), Fernández Cifuentes concludes that its overwhelmingly positive reception was something “surprisingly exceptional” (*García* 136), especially in view of the patent ideological divisions in the Spanish press during the years of the Second Republic. In addition to the political instability, the theatrical industry lived immersed in a state of crisis due to many factors (excessive dependence of a reduced number

of playwrights, mostly authors of light comedies; abundance of revue spectacles; increasing popularity of cinema; these were constant topics of discussion in magazine *Sparta* in 1933–34, see Nieva “La polémica”). Fernández Cifuentes argues that the almost unanimous critical approval of *Blood Wedding* was due to the reduction of dialogues in verse, in comparison to *Mariana Pineda*. Lorca referred to this compositional method in terms of a new “formula” (*Obras* 411) in an interview held a few weeks after the premiere of *Blood Wedding*. In addition, by situating himself within the tradition of the genre of rural drama, Lorca was able to operate on secure ground, as the Madrid audience came to the playhouse already accepting the primitive nature of the rural figures in the play. Also, as Fernández Cifuentes observes, a good part of audience and critics took Lorca’s book of poetry *Gypsy Ballads* as a form of fictional referent to situate the ‘tragic’ story of *Blood Wedding* (*García* 137–8). One last factor was that, in writing *Blood Wedding* as a partial recreation of a real crime widely covered in the national press in 1928, Lorca produced a certain reality effect that guaranteed a certain degree of verisimilitude. With all these controlling factors in play, *Blood Wedding* was praised by a group of critics who felt comfortable facing something that was not radically “new” (*García* 139–40). Lorca’s second “pact” with the industry, therefore, was a matter not only of developing a different writing technique, but also of working within very specific performative signs that could be accepted by a general audience and a wide ideological spectrum of theater critics. *Blood Wedding* only needed two years (1933–35) to become Lorca’s most produced play in his lifetime (for a detailed chronology of productions, see Edwards “*Bodas*”). In analyzing the success of *Blood Wedding* in Spain and Argentina, the existence of a set of generic conventions shared by Lorca and his audiences cannot be overemphasized. It is worth noting that the Buenos Aires audience that so positively judged *Blood Wedding* in late 1933 did so with the plays of Marquina, Benavente and the Quintero brothers in the immediate background. In the time Lorca spent in Argentina, from October 1933 to March 1934, Lola Membrives’ company not only staged *Blood Wedding*, *The Shoemaker’s Prodigious Wife* and *Mariana Pineda* but also produced four recent plays by Marquina (two historical dramas, *St. Teresa of Jesus* and *The White Monk*; and his rural dramas *The Hidden Fountain* and *Los Julianes*). The same company staged three of Benavente’s dramas between late 1933 and 1934, among them Benavente’s internationally renowned rural drama *The Unloved Woman*. In addition, the Andalusian comedies by the Quintero brothers were very popular in Buenos Aires, with three of them being performed in theaters of the city during the time of Lorca’s visit (Larrea 92–4). This historical evidence shows that the positive reception that *Blood Wedding* had in Madrid and Buenos Aires in 1933 was due in great part to the spectators being equipped with an intertextual memory that put them

on solid ground to then accept the “newness” (a term that recurrently appeared in the reviews of the Madrid premiere, Fernández Cifuentes notes, see his *García* 136–7) of the play.

Lorca’s five-month stay in Buenos Aires and Montevideo is remembered in connection to Membrives’ production of *Blood Wedding*, but Lorca’s letters and press interviews from this period also contain valuable information about the making of *Yerma*. In February of 1934, for example, Lorca, who after the success of *Blood Wedding* felt entitled to hold the rights over the next installment of the rural trilogy, hid the manuscript-in-progress of *Yerma* from Membrives. It had been Membrives’ idea to take Lorca out of Buenos Aires, where he enjoyed a status of local celebrity (Gibson 558–9), and seclude the Spanish author in a hotel in Montevideo with the hope of him writing the third and last act of *Yerma*. “She kidnapped me and brought me here” (*Obras* 507), Lorca declared in his first encounter with the press in Montevideo (on Membrives’ orders to the hotel’s concierge to not let visitors disturb Lorca, see Mora *Federico* 211–2). Contrary to Membrives’ plan, however, Lorca wanted to have *Yerma* represented in the Teatro Español by Xirgu and Rivas Cherif once he returned to Spain that spring. In March, during his last days in Buenos Aires, Lorca offered a public reading of two scenes of *Yerma* and promised that the play would be finished in time to have it staged by Membrives in April (it is believed that at that point he tried to reach a compromise by encouraging two parallel productions in Argentina and Spain, by Membrives and Xirgu, respectively; see Hernández “Cronología” 296–7). While figuring out how to negotiate the egos and the financial interests of Membrives and Xirgu, Lorca was very aware of the importance of *Yerma* in securing his next move in the Spanish theater industry. Back in Spain, in July, while rehearsing with La Barraca before going out on a summer tour around the northern provinces, Lorca famously declared: “We must return to tragedy. Our theatrical tradition obligates us to do so. There will be plenty of time to make comedies, farces. Meanwhile, I want to give the theater tragedies” (*Obras* 536).

The tragic nature of Lorca’s agrarian trilogy has constituted of a rich subfield of Lorca studies since the emergence and constitution of this scholarly industry in the 1960s. For half a century, critics have discussed such topics as Lorca’s awareness of the general principles of the Aristotelian tragedy (Greenfield, for example, thinks Lorca lacked any theoretical rigor), the presence or absence of the idea of “poetic justice” (González del Valle and Halliburton sustain opposite views), and the real existence of the element of the classic chorus in Lorca’s plays. *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* have been object to individual analysis numerous times. As early as 1962, for example, Calvin Cannon defined *Yerma* as the only Lorquian tragedy “in the classic sense,” given that *Blood Wedding* is “pre-tragic,” with characters that are “not

heroes but unindividuated parts of ancient folkways” (85). Meanwhile, *The House of Bernarda Alba* constitutes, in Cannon’s view, “a drama of sick people . . . clearly akin to the ineffectual heroes of modern tragedy” (85–6). There is no consensus as to the extent to which the most recognizable elements of Greek tragedy (hamartia, hubris, catharsis) operate in Lorca’s agrarian plays. After numerous essays on the subject, it is up to the audience to accept that when Yerma kills her husband Juan “the Aristotelian catharsis is felt to the full” (Martínez 235), or, on the contrary, the ending of *Yerma* is characterized by “a sense of hopelessness” (Edwards “Way” 288; Edwards also extends this conclusion to the denouements of *Blood Wedding* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*). My aim is not so much to discuss the agrarian plays in connection to Aristotle, rather, to look at them through the lens of the baroque concept of honor. I see this as a logical response to Lorca’s call, in 1934, to return to a specifically Spanish tradition (“our theatrical tradition”). One year before this explicit call to come back to the roots of Spanish tragedy, Lorca was already revealing the baroque substratum of his theater. In 1933, referring to the imminent premiere of *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*, Lorca described Don Perlimplín as a grotesque figure whose struggle is not tragic precisely because he refuses to apply the honor code<sup>6</sup> of Calderón’s wife-murder plays. In an interview with the *Heraldo de Madrid*, Lorca defined the play as

theater of human puppets, one that begins in mockery and ends in tragedy. The hero, or antihero, who is made the cuckold, is Spanish and Calderonian; but he does not want to react in a Calderonian manner, and therein lies his struggle, the grotesque tragedy of his situation. (*Obras* 406)

One can only speculate about what Lorca would have written had he not been executed by a fascist battalion on August 19, 1936. However, in the particular instance of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, there is enough evidence to assert that this play was more of a new beginning to him, rather than the third installment of the trilogy that featured his two greatest commercial successes *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. As many critics have noted before, Lorca’s consistent use of prose in *The House of Bernarda Alba* constitutes a feature that distinguishes this latter play from its two predecessors. This is an aspect that lends itself very well to progressive narratives, for it is easy to argue that as Lorca matured as playwright his trilogy evolved in form a la Henrik Ibsen, that is, from verse to prose. This was subject of discussion among the Argentinian critics who attended the premiere of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in Buenos Aires in 1945, with Samuel Eichelbaum being the first one in openly defending the idea that “Lorca’s posthumous work represents a victory of the playwright over the poet” (qtd. in Diago 159). Also, from a compositional

standpoint, there is a second aspect of *The House of Bernarda Alba* that needs to be considered here. I am referring to its condition of ‘drama,’ as opposed to tragedy, a structural marker Lorca himself indicated in the play’s subtitle, “A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain.” The genre that Peter Szondi defines as “drama”<sup>7</sup> was dominant in Europe until the rise of subjectivism in late nineteenth century. The subjectivistic trend was exemplified by Strindberg’s dream plays, “a sequence of scenes whose unity does not reside in the action but in the unchanging psyche of the dreamer, who is, perhaps, the hero” (Szondi 28). Maurice Maeterlinck’s static plays constitute another example of a type of theater far removed from the idea of action as result of present, interpersonal, events. The early decades of the twentieth century witnessed the proliferation of montage techniques and the partial displacement of mimesis by diegesis (see Puchner *Stage*), crystalizing into what Szondi refers to as the “epic *I*” that culminates in Bertolt Brecht’s own version of “epic” theater (Szondi 6). A good part of Lorca’s dramatic production contains mediating figures such as fictional authors and directors as well as characters who play the role of commentators, and in terms of subjectivist aesthetics one can recognize *The Public* as the most daring exercise in interwar Spain. In contrast, *The House of Bernarda Alba* maintains itself strictly within the confines of nineteenth-century realist drama, operating under the principles of unity of action and space. In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Lorca solved the temporal transitions by means of three self-contained acts with two ellipsis that create the illusion of contiguity. Everything occurs in the present, without flashbacks or flashforwards, and without any type of subjective perspectivism.

Discussing the absence of tragic metabasis, or hero’s change of fortune, in *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Gina Beltrán argues that this work is a drama—and, I would add, a drama in the Szondian sense—since “its plot is self-contained . . . there is not metabasis because nothing changes for better or for worse; instead, the closed structural construction of the play ensures that the play ends at the same point where it started” (39). As Beltrán rightly observes, the play opens with Bernarda Alba demanding “silence” instead of tears, and imposes an unrealistic period of eight years of mourning over the death of her second husband. The play ends with the same call for “silence” after the suicide of her youngest daughter Adela is revealed, and Bernarda telling her daughters to contain their tears and prepare themselves to “drown in a sea of mourning” (*House* 78). Beltrán also notes that in *The House of Bernarda Alba* “the dramatic space corresponds to the private space, while in Greek tragedy it constituted the public space. This indicates that Lorca’s play is not a political happening, like Greek tragedy, but instead a domestic drama” (40). Bernarda processes the death of her second husband, and the death of Adela, as strictly domestic issues (the idea of receiving people at her husband’s funeral disgusts her, as she expresses in

Act I: “They’ve trampled all over [the floor] like a herd of goats,” *House* 12). This is the complete opposite of the inherently social affair that was the result of the Bride running away with Leonardo in *Blood Wedding*. It is also a situation radically different to Yerma’s taking her frustration to the public sphere, asking the Old Woman for advice, visiting a sorcerer and, finally, joining barefooted women in religious pilgrimage (her husband Juan has recruited his two unmarried sisters to unsuccessfully keep her at home). In *Yerma*, the protagonist’s public plea escalates to the point that she ends up strangling Juan on the mountain where hundreds have gathered in pilgrimage.

Bernarda’s obsession to maintain her daughter’s passions within walls resembles a modern version of what William Egginton defines as “the baroque house” represented in several of Cervantes’ novellas, among them *The Jealous Extremaduran* (1613). In this text, the insanely jealous character of Felipe Carrizales intends to protect his young wife Leonora by placing her in a house with two walls, of which the interior space can only be accessed by virgin women. Yet, it is precisely all these precautions that ends up sparking the curiosity of a male seducer (a *virote*, someone with strong sexual power, a figure similar to Pepe el Romano in Lorca’s play). In his reading of Cervantes’ novella, Egginton observes how “the physics of baroque architecture decree that the very walls that one doubles up, in the interest of protecting an interior purity, have the intensely disturbing effect of rendering that interior space impure” (*Theater* 30). The very title of Lorca’s last play highlights the importance of the house as the materialization of Bernarda Alba’s desire to fully insulate her daughters from the sexually aggressive males in town. In the opening scene, Bernarda has only allowed women to enter the house to attend the funeral, yet the threatening presence of the men is still felt as they gather outside and openly discuss sexual matters. “There she was behind the window listening to the men’s talk. Filth, of course. None of it worth listening to” (*House* 16), says the housekeeper La Poncia when she finds Angustias, Bernarda’s eldest daughter, listening to the men by her bedroom’s window. La Poncia then reports to Bernarda that the men were openly talking about last night’s episode involving Paca La Roseta: “Last night they tied her husband to a cattle trough and took her off to the olive grove” (*House* 16). In Act II, La Poncia tells the daughters about the arrival of the harvesters: “Far away. From the mountains. They’re full of joy! They sing and throw stones! And yesterday a woman came. She had sequins all over her dress and she danced to a tambourine. Twenty of them made a deal with her and took her to the olive grove. I watched them” (*House* 41). When Adela proposes to her daughters to watch the reapers from the window of her room, La Poncia advises her to not open the window (“Open it just a crack and they’ll push it open wide,” *House* 43). This climate of moral degradation is what Bernarda attempts to combat by preventing any contact between

her daughters and the exterior. As she puts it in the opening scene, “We will brick up the doors and board up the windows. We won’t let in a breath of air from the street . . . Mourning will last for eight years” (*House* 13). In the end, Bernarda’s baroque house will not resist all the external threats, and Pepe el Romano becomes the man who causes the final destruction of the Alba family.

An analysis of how an internalized code of honor determines the actions and behaviors of certain characters in the agrarian plays can also shed light on a question that was widely discussed since the moment Lorca premiered *Blood Wedding* in Madrid in 1933. I am referring to his symbolic technique of characterization, one that in the case of *Yerma* borderlines the allegorical mode. The critics who reacted to *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma* tended to interpret Lorca’s shift from realism (as codified in the genre of rural drama) to symbolism as a dominance of the poet over the playwright. They praised Lorca and Marquina’s production of *Blood Wedding* yet expressed reservations about the change of registry in the scene that opens the third act of the play. In a fantasy forest, still in the same night of the wedding, the Bride and Leonardo express their love in a highly poetic verse. The couple is surrounded by three symbolic characters (the Woodcutters, the Beggar Woman and the Moon) that foreshadow<sup>8</sup> the deaths of the two men, Leonardo and the Bridegroom, in a knife duel that takes place offstage. Critic José de la Cueva described *Blood Wedding* as a “drama that logically leads to inevitable catastrophe,” but objected to Lorca’s use of symbolic characters in the third act, a decision he attributed to “the poet” in Lorca. In his review for *Informaciones*, based on his impressions of the general rehearsal, de la Cueva lamented that this ruined the “marvelous sensation of horror that [the play] had already awoken within us,” and concluded that Lorca’s first incursion in the genre of rural drama was a “frustrated tragedy, undone drama . . . but its fragments value the worth the whole of the perfect play.” The day after the premiere, a second theater reviewer, this time for *ABC*, celebrated Lorca’s talent for characterization (“Some principal characters could be torn from Sophocles’ pages”), in agreement with de la Cueva, who had celebrated the “three central types” of the Mother, the Bride and the Bridegroom. The *ABC* reviewer also endorsed the simplicity of the play’s plot yet he deemed the third act “inferior to the other, because the appeal to the poetic symbol is exaggerated.”

Lorca, aware of this criticism, quickly reacted in an interview published scarcely one month after the play’s premiere. His favorite moment of *Blood Wedding*, Lorca declared, was precisely “when the Moon and Death intervene, as motifs and symbols of fatality. The realism that presides the tragedy until that instant suddenly breaks and disappears, giving way to the poetic fantasy” (*Obras* 412). The presence of the terms “realism,” “tragedy,” and “poetic fantasy” in the same sentence was indicative of Lorca’s struggle to define, and defend, his technique of characterization

in *Blood Wedding*. From *The Butterfly's Evil Spell* (1920) and *Mariana Pineda* (1927) up to *Blood Wedding*, he had been categorized as a lyrical talent with insufficient dramatic skills—the preview in *Sparta* went even further, portraying him as an outsider with no knowledge of the ins and outs of the theater industry. By resorting to the fuzzy concept of “poetic fantasy,” Lorca was attempting to justify, unsuccessfully, his tendency to merge realist and abstract patterns of characterization. In the case of the forest scene in *Blood Wedding*, my thesis is that its writing was influenced by Lorca’s experience as reader and director of Calderón in the summer of 1932, at the very same time when he worked on his first tragedy. That summer La Barraca began its travels around Spain with visits to eighteen different towns featuring its first repertoire, consisting of four interludes by Cervantes and Calderón’s *auto sacramental Life is a Dream*. Lorca initially chose to program Cervantes’ comic playlets and Calderón’s allegorical play to address two different audiences, a “popular” and a “more limited spectatorship,” respectively, as stated in an internal memorandum of La Barraca.<sup>9</sup> Lorca’s attraction for Calderón’s allegorical characterization—Lorca famously played the role of Shadow when he staged *Life Is a Dream* before political authorities in Madrid in late 1932—provides a background to understand his defense of the ‘fantastic’ figures of the Moon and the Death (Old Beggar) in *Blood Wedding*. When *Yerma* arrived in Valencia in November of 1935, after sensational runs of the play in Madrid and Barcelona, Lorca was in a better position to verbalize Calderón’s influence. “The root of my theater is Calderonian,” he declared to the press in Valencia. Lorca defined the pilgrimage scene that ends *Yerma* as an exercise of transition “from the real to the symbolic real,” one that creates, very much in alignment with Calderón’s allegorical technique, “embodied ideas” (*Obras* 612).

With *Yerma*, Lorca took the simplicity of the plot that characterized *Blood Wedding* one step further. In declarations to the press on the inaugural day of the Barcelona production, on September 17, 1935, Lorca defined *Yerma* as “a play that has no plot” (*Obras* 582 and 583). He announced “a tragedy, pure and simple” (*Obras* 583), one to revolve around a single “theme,” Yerma’s maternal obsession. Barrenness, he insisted, was a theme, not a plot (*Obras* 582). It was not simply a matter of simplifying the intrigue, but also of reducing the main character’s psychological depth. This second aspect, the psychological design of *Yerma*, remains an issue consistently ignored by scholars who propose politically progressive, if not revolutionary, readings of this female figure. In early 1934, when asked by the Uruguayan press about his common practice of writing roles for actresses, Lorca explained that “women are more passionate, they intellectualize less, they are more human, more vegetal [*más vegetales*]” (*Obras* 501). From today’s perspective, these words do not stand out as feminist, one of the central traits ascribed to the Lorca myth, and it is not surprising that scholars have consistently

avoided discussing this very important statement from early 1934. What I propose is a reading of Lorca's words not in absolute terms but, rather, in the context of his full commitment to the genre of rural drama between the years of 1932 and 1934. Once again, I am approaching the theory and practice of Lorca's theater putting them in the perspective of the theater industry of his time. My view is that Lorca's words about the female psyche matched well with the principles of the dramatic genre he was adopting—and adapting—to finally gain the favor of the theatergoers. Since its beginnings in the last years of the nineteenth century, as Mariano de Paco notes, the rural drama was a genre “made by and for the bourgeoisie,” one that identified the Spanish peasantry with “clear-cut models of behavior, innocent sentiment and rudimentary ethics” (142). This dramatic genre relied on the contrast established between the psychological primitivism of its characters and the more ‘civilized’ status of the theatergoers who lived in urban areas. Lorca's words acquired a sense of coming from someone who, at one point of his life, was willing to accept this dichotomy. This interview from 1934 also offers an important clue about Lorca's interest in writing roles for female figures, as he confessed it would be “very difficult” (*Obras* 501) for him to access the stage with plays featuring strong male roles. While the official version he gave to the Uruguayan press was that there was a lack of “good actors” (*Obras* 501) in Spain, he was perfectly aware of the fact that the way to conquer the commercial scene was through the actress-managers. The tailoring of roles for certain actors and actresses had been denounced by such theater critics as Enrique Díez-Canedo and Luis Araquistain for two decades in Spain (Jiménez León 281). In the 1930s, the rule of actress-managers was so dominant that Díez-Canedo concluded, in a 1935 piece for *La Nación*, that playwrights “must write tailor-made roles for star actresses, or resign themselves to never seeing staged what they have written.”

After the big success of the Madrid production in the first half of 1935, Lorca had numerous opportunities to explain *Yerma* while touring Barcelona and Valencia, accompanying Xirgu and Rivas Cherif, in the fall of 1935. In Valencia, in November, he declared himself most proud of depicting Yerma's “obsessive process” [*proceso obsesivo*] in a way in which she “talks in the same way from the moment she enters until the moment she leaves the stage” (*Obras* 613). This reference to Yerma's “obsessive process” echoed what had become a recurring term in the newspapers of Madrid and Barcelona, prone to describe Yerma as an “obsessive” and “pathological” figure (see excerpts from reviews in *La Época*, *Diario de Madrid*, *Informaciones*, among many other news outlets, in Fernández Cifuentes *García* 163–4). Taking up a subject he had commented on in early 1934, while still working on the play in Argentina and Uruguay, Lorca now presumed of being “deliberately careful to eliminate all evidence of mental elaboration” (*Obras* 613) in

Yerma. Lorca also justified his decision of portraying Juan as a “weak man” in order to avoid a true conflict materializing in “a problem play” that would oppose his view and Yerma’s (*Obras* 613). This description of Juan as a weak individual who cannot interact or enter in true dialogue with his wife Yerma was indicative of Lorca’s will to not write a drama based on interpersonal relations but rather a symbolic play with very attenuated action. When *Yerma* premiered at the Teatro Español of Madrid on December 29, 1930, its simplicity was object of debate. A.C., author of a negative review for *ABC* newspaper, opened his text acknowledging the uniqueness of Lorca’s play, “one that cannot be judged according to today’s theatrical standards.” The critic found fault with the lack of dramatic progression in the play, arguing that only its third and last act contained true “dramatic incidents.” In the *Heraldo de Madrid*, Alfredo Muñiz held the opposing view by defining Yerma as “a symbol” that, as such, is forced to irremediably follow the tragic trajectory that has been established from very beginning. When *Yerma* opened in Barcelona, in September of 1935, María-Luz Morales wrote in *La Vanguardia* that Lorca’s play was “another world, beyond exposition, rising action, climax, resolution, and other nonsense . . . [Lorca] manages to elevate characters, passions, ambiance, until they reach abstraction, without losing the human touch.” The play, Morales observed, consists of one long “painful monologue” by Yerma, while the rest of the characters stay in the background.

To conclude this chapter, I now propose a brief reflection on the concept of honor in the agrarian plays with a special emphasis on its thematic implications as inferred from a reading of the three dramatic texts that is not necessarily predetermined by feminist positions well in tune with the myth of Lorca as a revolutionary playwright. The idea of a type of social pressure asphyxiating the Lorquian heroines has been repeatedly explained through the ascendancy of Catholicism in Lorca’s contemporary society. Gibson, for example, states that Yerma’s sense of shame is due to “the severity of Spanish Catholicism” (550). In a similar vein, Bilha Blum has recently argued that the figure of The Mother in *Blood Wedding* “embodies the renunciation of the desire for happiness as elaborated by Christianity . . . endemic in 1930’s Spain” (85). According to this logic, the female heroines in Lorca’s tragedies are supposed to fight Catholic values and social conformity embodied by such oppressive characters as the Mother in *Blood Wedding*, Juan in *Yerma* and, of course, Bernarda Alba. Roberta Johnson summarizes this position when asserting that *Blood Wedding* “centers on a marriage arranged for reasons of social class and economics” (262–3). Johnson states that, in addition to this theme, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba* foreground social issues such as “women’s confinement to the home” and, in the specific case of *Yerma*, “the importance of the divorce legislation that was promulgated [in Spain] shortly before the play was written” (263).

As a consequence of these premises, if a play such as *Blood Wedding* remains topical today it is because it denounces the unfairness of arranged marriages. However, as I have argued elsewhere in this chapter, I disagree with the idea that Lorca's agrarian trilogy should contain a set of messages to be defined as politically reformist, not to mention revolutionary (the latter would be the case of *The Dream of Life*, for example, but not of the tragedies).

Jesús García Maestro, who distinguishes three anthropological axis of human existence (the political-social, the natural, the religious), observes that Lorca's tragedies do not operate in the realms of the political or the religious. Rather, he argues, they function in a natural space that is foreign to anthropological and theological reasons alike. Lorca's thought, García Maestro posits, is "passionate, natural, instinctive, Nietzschean" (17). His tragedies present not some kind of formalized political message, but "human passions in their most elemental and irrational state" (18). In his discussion of the particular case of *The House of Bernada Alba*, García Maestro observes that there is nothing feminist about a group of single women willing to betray each other in order to copulate with a man, Pepe el Romano, who is basically the only male figure that their mother allows to be in the vicinity of house. In this regard, there is one passage I consider to be of special relevance when assessing the allegedly feminist message of *The House of Bernada Alba*. Adela, Bernada's youngest daughter, often romanticized as the heroine of the play because of her final suicide, verbalizes her evident sexual submission toward Pepe el Romano. As she states in a heated dialogue with her sister (and rival for Pepe's sexual favors) Martirio: "He can marry Angustias. I don't care anymore. But I'll go off to a lonely little house and live there so he can see me whenever he wants to. Whenever he needs to" (*House* 74). Adela's blind submission to such an essentially masculine figure like Pepe is not an action that creates a space for progressive sexual politics. Moreover, because Lorca operates at the deepest, or simplest, biological level known to us, what unfolds within the walls of Bernada's house is not a feud between sisters but a full-fledged Darwinian struggle. The latent presence of Pepe ends up destroying what we regard as the most elementary ties between the sisters, those of kinship, in the third and last act of the play ("We're not sisters anymore," 73). From the same standpoint, the case of *Blood Wedding* is even more disconcerting than *The House of Bernada Alba*. The general opinion is that in this play Lorca vehicles a feminist message by portraying a Bride who confronts the social norms of contemporary rural Spain. She does so by refusing to marry the Bridegroom and running into the woods with her true love, Leonardo, who incidentally is the only character individualized with a name. As Linda Materna observed three decades ago, the reason why the Bride never married her former lover Leonardo is as simple as his modest upbringing (Materna 268). Leonardo recriminates to her in their

first dialogue in *Blood Wedding*: “Two oxen and a tiny house are worth almost nothing. But that’s all I had. That’s where it wounds me” (*Blood* 35). According to this mercantile logic it would be Leonardo himself, and not the Bride, the one who should be considered the main victim of social conventions. Moreover, in today’s political terminology, it is hard to find a female character that shows less agency than the Bride, who ends up running away with Leonardo because “Oh, this is such madness / . . . / Because you drag me along / And when you say ‘Go!’ / I go” (*Blood* 70). Materna explains in very clear terms how the Bride embodies a traditional depiction of female figures as irrational beings whose sexual identity exists in contrast to archetypal men. While repressed sexual desire is the cause that makes Lorca’s female characters fight against authority figures, one must bear in mind that these burning passions only drive these women to offer themselves in sacrifice to the “natural” dominance of the male, as Materna notes (271–2). The perfect dramatization of this idea is found in the third and last act of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, in the exchange that takes place between Bernarda and Adela after it is revealed that Adela has had sexual intercourse with Pepe el Romano. Bernarda fiercely approaches Adela, who then reacts: “This is when your judgments end! (*Seizes her mother’s stick and breaks it.*) So much for the oppressor’s stick! Don’t you dare come close to me. No one has any power over me now. No one but Pepe!” (*House* 75). Adela, the same person who previously revealed to one of her sisters her decision to leave the family house and establish herself as Pepe’s mistress, finally verbalizes the full extent of her actions. She tells her mother that she will only accept the tyranny of a man.

In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Adela eventually commits suicide believing that her mother has killed Pepe el Romano. The opposition between a young heroine (Adela) and an oppressive figure with proto-fascist traits (Bernarda) seems obvious at first sight. However, as Isaac Benabu argues (136–8), a dramatic character like Bernarda Alba is not a masochistic dictator but rather a figure of tragic stature who witnesses, with impotence, how her world crumbles. When the play opens Bernarda is widowed for second time, impoverished, struggling to maintain alive the past glory of the Alba dynasty. She is aware that four of her five daughters are unmarriageable unless she accepts to give them away to the villagers she despises (only her eldest daughter, Angustias, has a dowry to offer; this is precisely the reason why Pepe el Romano has been courting her). In Act I, Bernarda, offended by La Poncia’s insinuations about the age of her daughters, declares: “There’s no one within a hundred miles of here who can touch them. The men here are simply not of their class. Do you want me to hand them over to some farmhand?” (*House* 18).<sup>10</sup>

In Calderón’s tragedies, in particular those that bring to the foreground the concept of honor (*Secret Insult, Secret Vengeance; The Physician of His Honor; The Painter of His Dishonor*), the main character never dies.

Instead, Benabu notes, this character “is condemned to a life of suffering and silence” (130). A review of the ending of the three tragedies confirms Benabu’s theory on the nature of Lorca’s tragic drama. In *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Adela’s suicide condemns Bernarda, and her daughters, to an irreversible social death. In *Yerma*, she eventually kills her husband, sabotaging the only biological path to conception that she is willing to accept, as Yerma’s honor makes her refuse any proposal from other men. In *Blood Wedding*, the Mother ends up mourning in silence the death of her second son, the last male in his family. The Mother refuses to punish the Bride even though she offers herself in sacrifice for the violence she has caused. In accordance with Benabu’s main point, it can be asserted that these three denouements are strictly *calderonistas* in the sense that they form part of tragedies that do not portray the killing of those figures who are guilty of moral errors. I am particularly interested in one related aspect, namely how the characters’ actions in the agrarian plays are determined by the baroque idea of honor that they have internalized so dearly. From the perspective of the cohesiveness of the fictional worlds created by Lorca, the results are unequal, for in some cases the external manifestations of the characters’ internal code of values come up as contradictory. Predictably, this occurs in *Blood Wedding*, Lorca’s first attempt at creating the ‘formula’ of a new rural drama. To prove my point, I will now quote extensively from the climatic dialogue between the Bride and the Mother in the last scene of the play:

BRIDE. Because I went with the other one, I went! (*Full of anguish.*)  
 You would have gone too. I was a burnt woman, full of wounds inside and out, and your son was a little drop of water from whom I expected sons, land and health; but the other was a dark river, full of branches, who brought to me the sound of his rushes and the singing between his teeth . . . I did not want it. Listen to me! I did not want it. Your son was my goal and I never deceived him, but the arm of the other dragged me on like waves of the sea and would have dragged always, always, always, even though I had been an old woman and the sons of your son dragged me back by the hair! (*Blood* 80).<sup>11</sup>

This speech reveals, very transparently, the Bride’s complete lack of agency. Immediately after these words, however, she invokes her honor to frontally defy the Mother to a duel of purity: “I am honorable, as honorable as a newborn child. And strong enough to prove it. Light a fire. We’ll put our hands in the flame: you for your son, me for my honor. And you’ll take yours out first” (*Blood* 81). This is an implausible turn of events, as the Bride stands out as a character who justifies her being dragged by the powerful sexuality of the male (“I did not want

it”) and, at the same time, she boasts about her virginity in a way that includes a public challenge to the mother of the man who was supposed to be her future husband. Scholars who defend feminist interpretations of *Blood Wedding* systematically disregard the contradictory nature of the Bride’s behavior. Johnson, for example, ignores these controversial aspects in order to present the Bride as an empowered woman who, in Johnson’s words, “*prefers* to risk all by running off with Leonardo immediately following the ceremony” (267, my emphasis). The speech I quoted above contains no indication of the Bride being in a position to ‘prefer’ anything, quite the contrary. Johnson also argues that despite the fact that her elopement with Leonardo triggers the deaths of the two men, “Lorca provides her the opportunity to vindicate her actions and garner the audience’s sympathy with several lengthy speeches at the end of the play” (268). I also remain skeptical about this idea. Similarly to Johnson, María T. Vilches de Frutos interprets the final confrontation between the Bride and the Mother in terms that are patently favorable to the former at the expense of ignoring basic textual evidence. “Despite the misfortune,” Vilches de Frutos explains, “*with courage* the Bride defends her actions to the Mother” (20, my emphasis). This idea of the Bride acting ‘courageously’ before the Mother is simply inaccurate and has no place in this scene.

In the case of *Yerma*, the honor code to which the protagonist so firmly adheres to represents an ideological discourse that she proudly internalized years after getting married to Juan. Yerma uses, on repeated occasions, the term “*mi casta*.” This noun, frequently translated by “my kind,” “my lineage” or “my family,” also contains, potentially, the social implications of “my caste.” In the second scene of Act II, Yerma brings up the superiority of her “*casta*” when she complains to her friend María about the presence of Juan’s two sisters in the house: “They think I might be attracted to another man, and they’ve no idea that even if I were it’s decency that comes first in my family” (*Yerma* 101) [*lo primero de mi casta es la honradez*]. In the first scene of Act III, Juan, accompanied by his two sisters, finds Yerma visiting Dolores the healer. He is worried about the gossip around her, yet Yerma replies to him by invoking the purity of her blood lineage: “You and your kind imagine that you are the only ones who have a reputation [*honra*] to look after, and you don’t realize in my family [*mi casta*] there’s never been anything to hide. Come on. Come here and smell my clothes; come here! Try to find a smell that’s not yours, that’s not from your body” (*Yerma* 115). According to Pilar Nieva, the problem affecting Yerma is that she is caught up in a situation in which “her husband cannot provide her children and she cannot have them with another man, outside of the marriage” (“Identidad” 160). This is a very controversial statement in view of the fact that Lorca provides no indication whatsoever about who is to blame

for Yerma's inability to conceive. If anything, the signs point toward her (in the second scene of Act II, Juan accuses her of not being "a real woman" [*una mujer auténtica*]; in the first scene of Act III, Yerma confesses to the old woman Dolores that "he does his duty by covering me in bed, but his body feels cold and lifeless against mine" (*Yerma* 111). In addition, the idea that Yerma cannot have a child out of the wedlock due to societal constraints is not completely accurate. When in the final scene of the play Yerma refuses the offer from the Old Pagan Woman ("My son is sitting waiting for you behind the shrine. Our house needs a woman. Go to him and the three of us will live together," *Yerma* 129), a mimetic interpretation of Yerma's actions results insufficient. According to Nieva, for example, the reason for Yerma's rejection of the proposal to have sex with another man is that she is "very aware of what her social status would have been as an adulterous woman" ("Identidad" 168). Yerma, however, has internalized the ideology of the honor code to the extreme that the idea of looking for a second man seems 'unnatural' to her. Yerma's proud speech shows no indication of fear a potential social backlash:

I can't go out looking. Do you seriously think I could sleep with another man? What about my honor? Water can't flow uphill, and the full moon can't shine at midday. Get out of my sight, I'll go my own way. Do you really think I could submit to another man? Go groveling to him for what's mine, like a slave? (*Yerma* 129)<sup>12</sup>

Honor and caste stand out as the central motives for Yerma's actions. She eventually fulfills her destiny when she chokes Juan to death ("Barren, barren, but now I'm certain!", *Yerma* 133), in strict correspondence with the portrayal that Lorca made of her when the play premiered in Valencia, in November of 1935. Yerma, Lorca asserted, "has a limited freewill because she is chained by the concept of Spanish honor, a concept that runs through her veins" (*Obras* 614).

## Notes

- 1 Xirgu and Rivas Cherif had developed a close relationship with the authorities of the Second Republic. Its first Prime Minister, Manuel de Azaña, was a longtime friend and collaborator of Rivas Cherif who became his brother-in-law when Azaña married his sister in 1929. In 1932, Xirgu and Rivas Cherif staged Azaña's play *The Crown*.
- 2 Gwynne Edwards considers the first production of *Blood Wedding* "particularly interesting because its director was Lorca himself, and the production therefore provides valuable evidence of the way in which he wanted to see his plays staged" (470). This statement needs to be partially rectified to account for Marquina's involvement.

- 3 In an interview from August 1933, a few months after this first production of *Blood Wedding*, Lorca openly criticized the theater of the Quintero brothers, distancing himself from their Andalusian comedies (*Obras* 423).
- 4 *St. Teresa of Jesus* (1932), a historical play assembled as a sequence of lyrical *tableaux*, was Marquina's last notorious success in the Spanish stage. The role of St. Teresa was enacted by Lola Membrives, the same actress who took Lorca's *Blood Wedding* to Argentina a year later. When the Spanish Civil War broke on July 18, 1936, Marquina was in Argentina. There he published literature supporting Franco's side to eventually return to Spain in 1938. Marquina passed away in New York, serving in diplomatic mission, in 1946.
- 5 See Gil (174–8) on the critical reception of Marquina's *The Hidden Fountain* and *The Julianes*.
- 6 The idea that a baroque code of honor is present in Lorca's agrarian plays was not accepted without resistance from one part of the Lorquian industry. In the early 1970s, Luis González del Valle defined Arnold G. Reichenberger's brief incursion in the arena of Lorca studies—a two-page argument on the “universality” of Lorca embedded in a larger discussion on the “uniqueness” of the Spanish *comedia*— as “deplorable” [*lamentable*] (238n7). González del Valle, a twentieth-century critic with special interest in Lorca, accused Golden Age scholar Reichenberger of not being equipped to make an excursus outside his period of specialization. Reichenberger had defined honor in Lorca's tragedies as “the great superhuman power which drives the protagonists to destruction” (165). González del Valle affirmed that if bad things eventually happen in *Blood Wedding*, it is due to the Bride's moral flaw that makes her escape with Leonardo the night of her wedding. Honor, according to González del Valle, has no relevance whatsoever in triggering the action (the Bridegroom chasing the Bride and Leonardo resulting in both men killing each other in a duel). González del Valle's aggressive stance against Reichenberger constituted one of the first cases of disciplinary territorialism exerted by critics ascribed to the Lorca scholarly boom.
- 7 Szondi's definition of what he conceptualizes as the modern genre of “drama” includes a list of features that correspond, one by one, with Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*. I am listing, very briefly, the following characteristics from Szondi's classic study *Theory of the Modern Drama*: Dominance of dialogue that reflects the “reproduction of interpersonal relations” (8); existence of an illusionistic frame (“It can be conscious of nothing outside itself,” 8), with no intrusions from the dramatist; complete separation between spectators and the stage, although spectators can identify themselves with the characters speaking; illusionistic acting (“the actor-role relationship should not be visible,” 9) and, finally, an action that always takes place in the present (“time unfolds as an absolute, linear sequence in the present,” 9), and primarily in the same space.
- 8 Edwards has referred to a “sense of inevitability” that is reinforced “by a network of specific references and allusions to fate and destiny” throughout the three agrarian plays. It is his view that *Blood Wedding*, Lorca's first tragedy, is “both the most explicit and the most theatrical, for in the final act the three axe-wielding woodcutters, the fearsome figures of la Luna [Moon] and la Muerte [the Death, represented by the Beggar Woman], and the girls' unwinding of the ball of red wool, become the physical manifestations of those fateful and fatal forces at work upon the human characters” (“Way” 283).

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- 9 See excerpt from the document from early 1933, first reproduced by Sáenz de la Calzada in the 1970s, in Huerta “Cervantes” 5.
- 10 In this dialogue, Poncia confronts Bernarda and exposes the social implications of the gradual impoverishment of the Alba family:
- LA PONCIA. You could have looked in another village.  
BERNARDA. Oh yes, and sold them!  
LA PONCIA. No, Bernarda. Not sold them. Married them . . . Of course, in other places it might be you who’d look poor!  
BERNARDA. Shut that vicious mouth of yours! (*House 18*)
- 11 I have modified the translation slightly. My translation of the original “*yo no quería*” is “I did not want it,” instead of “I never loved him,” as Clifford proposes.
- 12 I have modified the last sentence of the translation by Macpherson and Minett in order to highlight the noun “slave” [*esclava*] that appears in Yerma’s refusal (“*¿Qué yo vaya a pedirle lo que es mío como una esclava?*”).