

Toward The Dionysiac: Pagan Elements and Rites In *Yerma*

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"What a terrible loss not to be able to feel the teachings of the ancients!"¹

Second in García Lorca's trilogy of rural tragedies, which includes *Bodas de sangre* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, *Yerma* examines human sexuality in a perspective differentiated from that of its companion works. In *Yerma*, Lorca assesses the nulliparal state of his titular protagonist, the attendant frustration brought about by her unfulfilled desire for a child of her own, and the tragic consequences of her despair.²

But the play is not only a study of maternal instinct gone awry. It is also a powerful statement on two polarities that govern the characters' lives and effect massive changes thereof when the contrasting systems are placed in direct and open conflict.

Yerma's is a distinctive struggle between two diametrically opposed aspects of European life in general and Spanish life in particular--the venter of the Christian ethos and the substratum of pagan tradition. Lorca's protagonist is victimized by the social and religious codes of a Christian milieu, codes which frustrate human drives and are, therefore, *contra natura* in the eyes of the playwright. In sharp contrast is the naturalness of those who follow the old pagan ways, especially in instinctual and sexual matters; theirs is a

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holistic state, a wellness both of body and spirit, as Lorca sees it, for they have attained a state of integration in which the Apollonian and the Dionysiac modes are in harmony.³ Out of this cohesiveness comes the fullness of human potential.

Throughout *Yerma*, Lorca focuses on the contrasting forces at work on the protagonist, as well as on the means towards their resolution. He does so by introducing natural factors that are in obvious opposition to the unnatural state of affairs in Yerma's relationship with each of the three men in her life--her husband Juan, her dream man Victor, and her potential lover (the son of La Vieja). Simply put, Yerma rejects all three in one manner or another; she views Juan only as a means to an end--procreation legitimized--and never as a man to be desired for himself; Victor, the only man to have aroused her sexual instinct, was not chosen by her father to be her husband and she neither protested nor sought him as a lover; and the virile young man who awaits her, meaningfully behind the church, is never given the opportunity to make love to her. For Yerma, only that which is socially and morally legitimate can be considered as a potential cure for her barrenness. Thus, she spends herself berating Juan for his callous indifference to her maternal need, or envisioning Victor with a child that might have been theirs had she been given to the shepherd in marriage,⁴ or indignantly rejecting La Vieja's celestinesque pandering on her son's behalf. The temptation of that which is illicit cannot overcome her resolve to live within the social and moral bounds of her Christian upbringing.

Yerma comes closest to crossing that barrier when she makes a desperate visit to Dolores the Conjuror. The old crone, who services the more esoteric needs of the villagers, leads Yerma to the nearby cemetery, where prayers are offered and conjurations performed to cure her infertility. This, Yerma's first inclination towards the pagan, is the result of the inevitable surfacing of instincts long suppressed; these emanate from her pagan substratum and threaten to erode the protagonist's Christian bulwarks. Put in other terms, the primal forces of Dionysus are arrayed against the civilized minions of Apollo, and Yerma is to be the battleground.⁵

The most pervasive and, therefore, notable factors that Lorca marshalls against the Christian ethos and its Apollonian counterpart are the four cardinal Elements: Earth, Water, Air and Fire. The lore of the Elements has its origin in antiquity and manifests itself in all inhabited continents of the world, having various and diverse associations with the four seasons of the year, the four "humors" that characterize human temperament, the four points of the compass, as well as colors, gender, signs of the Zodiac, deities, totems and the ages of humanity.⁶ Wherever they appear, the four Elements constitute the foundation of all that exists. So pervasive was this belief, that it survived in Europe in Hermeticism, Alchemy and rudimentary sciences until the Apollonian "Age of Reason" caused the demise of many of the ancient world's

concepts. And yet, the Elements survived, if metamorphosed into symbols of lesser impact.

The four Elements begin to appear in the very first scene of *Yerma*, either singly or in combinations, and continue to be a major frame of reference in the rest of the play. Through the Elements, Lorca is able to create a symbolic pattern that is both ironic (in that it is Yerma who most frequently and intuitively refers to the pagan Elements, yet cannot assimilate them) and portentous (in that they build towards the full manifestation of the Dionysiac in the final scene of the play).

Earth is the first Element introduced. It is manifested, if somewhat indirectly, in an off-stage lullaby at the very beginning of the play:

For the baby, baby, baby,
for the baby we will make
a cute little hut in the field
and refuge in it we'll take. (11)

"The field" (*el campo*) is the manifestation of the Element Earth. As such, it is the foundation for a "hut" (*una chocita*) which will shelter the child and the singer of the lullaby. If the singer is the mother, then Earth, child and woman are immediately bound together. This relationship demonstrates the traditional view of this Element's association with birthing and nurture, of Earth as the Great Mother out of whose womb came many living things. Earth is, therefore, a female Element in ancient systems of belief.⁷

Just as many living things originate in this Element, Lorca's drama begins with "the field" and goes on to establish Yerma's relationship to Earth. Early in the play, Yerma herself makes the significant connection when she explains to her friend María: "Often at night I go barefoot into the patio to feel the earth, without knowing why." (20) Although she does not know what motivates her, she follows the instinct that prompts her to tread the ground with bare feet. Yerma senses that she must be in physical contact with the soil underfoot, thus identifying with Earth.

Yerma's husband, Juan, also has an association with the soil. His long-standing commitment to it is evident in the time that he devotes to farming and in the way that he speaks of the fields: "My life is in the fields." (5) But Juan fails to recognize in Yerma the other soil that he must fertilize towards her personal fruition as a mother. He desires in her only the pleasures of sexual union, abhorring the thought of procreation. Juan also experiences the soil in a physical manner, but his involvement with it culminates in its fecundity.

The attention that Juan gives his wife pales in comparison. Unlike the soil that he perpetually tills, plants and sleeps on, Yerma is uncared for, has not been impregnated, and is frequently left to sleep alone. Thus, she must find a way to attract Juan as much as the soil that he farms if she too is to

become fertile. Since Juan is seldom at home, Yerma must go where that productive life is lived, to the fields.

Yerma trudges daily to those fields to fulfill her obligation of bringing her husband his food. What she has yet to learn is that she must also feed his other appetite--for the lover that he craves to find in her. But she must give herself wholly, like the earth to the farmer, in order to attain the fulfillment of her potential as a woman. Like La Vieja, who tells her "I've lain on my back and started to sing." (27), Yerma must willingly lie prone on the earth and let its chthonian powers arouse her senses toward the sexual enjoyment of her husband as a man. For that end to be realized, Yerma must undergo a major transformation: only with her rebirth as an earthy woman capable of satisfying her husband's passion for her earthy body will she find herself as productive as the fields that Juan farms. Only then will Victor's words to Yerma at the end of the first scene--"*iqué ahonde!*"--be fulfilled by Juan. The verb *ahondar* means to dig, to deepen, to go deep into, to penetrate; Victor is telling Yerma that Juan must enter her deeply, tilling her into fecundity, as he does the earth. Yerma repeats his words passionately--"Yes! Let him penetrate!" (24)--but immediately returns to the thoughts she had expressed in an earlier soliloquy:

Oh yes, I would say, my child,
for you I'd be severed and torn.
How painful this waist has become
where first your cradle will be!
When, child of mine, will you come?
When jasmine has perfumed your flesh! (24)

Yerma has clearly misinterpreted the intent of Victor's words. Instead of comprehending the strongly sexual connotation of the phrase, which he had underscored with a knowing smile, Yerma has taken it to signify a means to quite a different end--the fulfillment of her maternal desire. What she has failed to recognize is that she must put aside her fixation and yield to Juan; she must become "severed and torn" for her husband, not for the dream child that she addresses. She must become lover before she can become mother. Only when she abandons her egocentricity and accepts this natural state will she possess that scent of jasmine that will herald her body's fecundity. She will only become like the earth when she opens herself to the Dionysiac.

Even so, other factors must come to bear before the natural course of events can follow. Despite Juan's intense attention to the fields, it has been very difficult for him to make them productive. But even if his labor takes its toll on his body, as Yerma reminds him, Juan sees strength rather than weakness in his situation: "When men are (*enjutos*) dried up, they become as strong as steel." (12) Yet, if the condition of steel is improved by its dryness, the state of man is not. The word "*enjuto*" means wizened, shrivelled up, arid, dry; when applied to Juan, "*enjuto*" indicates a serious lack in his constitution.

What Juan lacks is symbolized by the second Element, Water. The soil that Juan works so diligently must be irrigated by the scant water allotted to him by a community cursed with little precipitation and few rivers. As Juan tells Yerma: "I'll spend the whole night irrigating. What little water there is belongs to me until the sun comes up and I have to keep watch for thieves." (40) Just as he has minimal amounts of water to give the parched soil, so too is he unable to quench the thirst of his wife. It is a situation that Yerma herself brings to the fore when she expresses her concern and proposes a solution to Juan: "I would like to see you go to the river and swim, see you go to the roof when the rain drenches our house." (12) Yerma's invocation of two types of water--the river water and the rain--harkens back to an ancient conception of the Element's dualistic nature. The water of the river, like all water present on the surface or in the innards of the planet, was referred to in antiquity as "Lower Water" and symbolized actuality; the water that came down in the form of rain or dew was thought of as "Upper Water" and symbolized potentiality.⁸ Dew, furthermore, was symbolic of semen.⁹

Intuitively, Yerma wants these symbols of what exists and what could be to come together in her husband. She wants Juan to swim in the river so that its water may reinforce what is already in his being; she wants him to be exposed to the rain so that its water may stimulate a new vitality in his body. The respective activity and receptivity would construe beneficial rites of passage. Swimming in the river (an immersion) and being sprinkled by the rain (an aspersion) represent two forms of initiation. They also signify both an annihilation (or "death") of the old identity by a symbolic drowning in the water of reality and a regeneration (or "rebirth") of the life force by a symbolic reemergence through the water of potentiality, as that of the womb. Exposed to these aspects of Water, Juan would no longer be *enjuto*; rather, as Yerma believes, he would be able to impregnate her. Just as lower and upper waters work together to stimulate seeds to take root and thrive, so too would Juan's revitalized semen instigate growth in Yerma's womb.

Victor, the dream man in Yerma's life, needs no such rite of passage. His association with Water is consistent and positive, as evident in Yerma's encounters with his virility in their youth. This is established in the first scene when Yerma tells La Vieja of her reactions to Victor's exuberance: "He took me (*me cogió*) by the waist and I couldn't say anything to him because I couldn't speak. Another time, when I was fourteen, that same Victor (who was very big) took me (*me cogió*) in his arms to jump over a water ditch; I was shaking so much that my teeth rattled." (28) The symbolism that attaches to his jumping over the irrigation ditch with Yerma in his arms clearly associates Victor with Water--his is the fluid that could flow through the channel that is Yerma, just as water is intended to flow through the irrigation ditch. Furthermore, the use of "*me cogió*" in Yerma's narration of both incidents may refer to the sexual possession implicit in Victor's embraces if the verb *coger* is

given the prurient interpretation that it has in some areas;¹⁰ to do so would reinforce the symbolism of Victor's fluid flowing through Yerma.

Unlike the Earth-Water axis in the Yerma-Juan relationship, the symbolic union of these Elements when Victor carried Yerma over the irrigation ditch was positive, highly charged and potentially fruitful. That these factors are still evident years later is attested by the encounter of Yerma and Victor in the second scene of the first act. There, having heard a man singing off-stage, Yerma listens intently to his words, but when the singer emerges, she is surprised to find that it was Victor who sang so movingly: "How well you sing! I had never heard you. . . . And what a gushing voice. It's as if a torrent of water fills your mouth." (36) Her association of Victor with water, and in particular with a torrent of water emanating from his mouth, reinforces the image that La Vieja had stated earlier: "We have to have men we like, girl. They have to undo our tresses and give us water to drink from their own mouths." (29) It was also La Vieja who had told her that "Children come like water." (27) But it is now too late for Yerma to drink the water from Victor's mouth. Because she is married, her mores will not permit an illicit dalliance even though her need to quench her maternal thirst might be thought of as justifying the means, particularly when her husband "Has an arid nature." (36) and Victor is aquaeousness personified. So great is Victor's affiliation with life-giving Water, that the intense silent struggle between him and Yerma over their natural but impossible love culminates in the crying of a child that only she hears, a child that very close by "was crying as if drowned". (38) The child that could have been theirs must forever be drowned in that water that Victor symbolizes.

Since it is impossible for Yerma to become the conduit for his fluid, the natural flow is impeded. Thus, in the opening scene of the following act, Victor's torrent of water is replaced by "the cold brook" (43) in which gossiping women wash the laundry--water having become only a means to a routine end. Significantly, the very first item referred to in their laundering song is "*tu cinta*", the sash associated with pregnancy (*Estar encinta* means to be pregnant), but here it is being washed in the "cold brook" that represents both Victor's inaccessibility and Juan's cold aloofness.

In Yerma's encounters with both men, Water has been dealt with as a male-oriented Element. However, Water is traditionally, with Earth, a female Element in most ancient religions and mythological systems because of its capacity to bear life. This is encapsulated in a saying attributed to Moses: "Only Earth and Water bring forth a living soul."¹¹ Earth and Water are also female procreative Elements in the *Corpus Hermeticum*¹² and numerous other esoteric writings, where they are frequently interlaced: Water is the fluid of the Earth Mother's womb and the substance of the Sea, in both of which life is nurtured; Water is the sustaining life-fluid (sap, milk, blood) of all Nature; Water in springs, fountains and wells is the sacred emanation of the female numen resident in Mother Earth. Seen in the female orientation, the river

water and the rain by which Yerma wishes Juan to be bathed are meant to infuse in her husband the feminine Element as a complement to his masculinity. But whereas Juan's present state makes him incomplete, Victor's condition is one of wholeness for he contains the fecundizing fluid which could engender Yerma's child.

Unable to motivate Juan to perform the ablutions she desires, Yerma must bring the sacred water to him. Her daily task of going to the fountain for water is, therefore, of larger import than that of a mere household task. In her role as water-bearer, Yerma daily recreates the ancient pagan custom of pilgrimage to places where water rises from the earth; in this case, she goes to the fountain at the center of the village (Water is at the center of life). When Yerma fills the earthen jars with water, the vessels become female symbols of plenitude for they hold the numinous emanation of the deep, the Water of Mother Earth. Quite in contrast, the same jars filled with the same water become symbols of sterility in the hands of Juan's spinster sisters.

But Yerma's daily rite is to no personal avail because the water in the earthen jars remains only a symbol of potentiality. Earth and Water may be the only Elements capable of bearing life, but in reality the female must be impregnated by the male if procreation is to occur. Yerma may, despairingly, see men negatively--"They are stones that stand before me. But they don't know that if I wanted it, I could become the rushing water that would carry them." (64)--but she cannot conceive without the semen of the male; thus, the water that she says she could become would be as that of the "cold brook," unsuitable for anything more than the menial task of laundering. Similarly, the process of completion cannot occur without the co-joining of the male Elements.

In those cosmogonies which consider it the primary Element, Air is held to be male and active because of its association with the "breath of life" (as in the Old Testament, when Yahweh performs the ultimate act of creation by breathing life into Adamic Man),¹³ with the dynamics of storms and winds, and with the concept of flight (into the male dominion of a god, such as Saturn or the Gnostic's Unknowable God). Furthermore, Air is the medium through which movement occurs, as well as the Element which surrounds all things in Nature, envelopment being suggestive of the male's sexual embrace of the female.

There are many and varied references to Air in the play. In the first scene, Yerma bemoans the irony that even worthless plants are caressed by the pollen-bearing air, flaunting "their yellow flowers in the air" (14), and that "the wind sings in the trees" (15), agitating the numerous leaves. Seeking the same plenitude, Yerma "raises her arms in a beautiful yawn" (15), a ritualistic deep inhalation of the air that has made nature fertile. But Yerma fails to recognize the fact that she cannot be passive like the flowers and trees; in order for her own fruition to take place, she must actively manifest her sexuality. This is the lesson that La Vieja tries to instill in her through example: "I've always been

a woman with her skirt in the air" (26); her "free as air" attitude has fulfilled her as a lover, having had two husbands, and as a mother, having given birth to fourteen children. But Yerma finds it impossible to follow her lead for she lives by one code and La Vieja "lives on the other side of the river" (26), where the pagan way of life thrives. Nonetheless, when La Vieja tries to end the fruitless conversation, Yerma makes a last effort to arouse the old woman into answering her searching questions--"and you, knowing everything, leave with your mighty airs" (30)--but to no avail.

When, in time, Yerma's unwillingness to change brings increased frustration over her barren condition, Air is cast in a negative role. In a dreamy soliloquy, after an encounter with Juan, Yerma bemoans the fact: "I ask to suffer with child, and the air / offers me dahlias of a sleeping moon." (61) After a later heated conversation with her husband, she alludes to herself as the victim of "the evil airs" (83), comparing her state to that of the good wheat that bad winds have blown to the ground. Ultimately fed up with her lamentations, Juan turns on her and berates her for the fixation "with things that drift in the air" (98), that is, beyond reach.

But the most telling function of Air in *Yerma* is described in one of the early stage directions. After a conversation with Victor at the end of the first scene, Yerma "goes to the spot where Victor has stood and breathes deeply, as if inhaling mountain air" (24). This ritualized breathing of air is very distinct from the earlier generalized inhaling of the air that fertilized the flora. It is Victor's specific virility, symbolized in the breath he has exhaled and in the air that has surrounded him, that Yerma inhales so fervently, as if taking into her being the air that touched him could in itself make her fecund.

It is appropriate for Yerma to associate the male Element with Victor because he is the embodiment of maleness in the play; as such, Yerma realizes, if too late, that he has always had the potential to satisfy her fully. Such is the power latent in Victor. To breathe in the air of a potent man is, therefore an action full of sexual significance; furthermore, the stage direction refers to Yerma as inhaling "*aire de montaña*", the cold, hard-edged and penetrating mountain air that Nietzsche has termed phallic.¹⁴ This sexual connotation is reinforced by one of the washerwomen, who sings: "And the tents of the wind cover the mountains." (52) The coursing wind covers the mountains just as potent men cover women during coition. Such is the role of any male worthy of the name in the context of the work, as another washerwoman gleefully sings: "Through the air is coming / my husband to sleep." (51) "Sleep" (*dormir*) is the lightly veiled reference to sexual intercourse, and Air is the Element that conveys the male's potency.

But, as with the sterile union of Earth and Water, the joining of Earth and Air is ineffectual here. Yerma may be symbolically united to Victor in their respective associations with Earth and Air, female and male Elements, but there is nothing to change their inert status into an interaction towards procreation. As in the mixture placed in the athanor, the alchemical furnace,

there must be present an agent of transmutation. That catalyst is the final Element, Fire.

Fire is the other male Element. In esoteric traditions, it functioned as an agent of purgation (the purifying fire of the ascetic), of transmutation (the alchemical fire that changed base metals into gold), and of regeneration (the consuming fire out of whose ashes rises the Phoenix). Fire also has a traditional association with well-being or ill-health, depending on the fluctuations of body heat between normalcy and extremes beyond or under it. Its relationship to the Sun in ancient religions and mythologies is universal, often being considered as worthy of deification itself as an emanation of the heavenly body.¹⁵ Sometimes, as in Celtic Europe, fire was the focus of major rituals in which bonfires, torches and hearth fires were lit to propitiate ancestor spirits, to stimulate the fertility of fields, animals and humans, or to magically attempt to forestall the Sun's departure in winter (as in the festival of Samhain), or to herald the Sun's return in spring and welcome all its blessings (as in the festival of Beltane). In Christian times, many pagan symbols were taken over and adapted, among them Fire, both in its negative aspect (reinterpreted as the fires of Hell) and in its positive aspect (visualized as the inspirational fire-tongues of Pentecost).

Many such symbolic uses of Fire appear in *Yerma*. Passion, of course, is symbolized by this Element, and the lack of passion is an early concern of the protagonist when she addresses her husband: "Now your face is as white as if the sun hadn't shone on it." (12) Juan's face lacks the color of life--the ruddiness of blood--of passion, of fire. He is pale, not having been touched by the fire of the sun's rays, and morose. In contrast, when Yerma sees Victor, she notices a mark on his face that is "like a burn" (37) and he explains "It must be from the sun." Victor's passionate nature is symbolically evident on his face, as if an inner fire was burning through in an attempt to manifest itself outwardly. Victor possesses the signs of a sanguine personality--the ruddiness, cheerfulness and hopeful spirit which in early physiology were the outward signs of abundant, healthy blood and an active circulation. Again, Victor epitomizes the potentiality of an Element, in this case, Fire.

Yerma is also involved with the Element, but not in the positive context of Fire's basic symbolism. Her capricious embrace of her husband, "she taking the initiative" (14), is not expressive of the fiery passion of sexual desire; rather, it represents her ardent quest to become pregnant, with copulation considered only as the means to that end. Because of Juan's antagonism, Yerma's maternal drive has no proper outlet. Her fixation with fecundization is a flame that sears her very being, as she admits: "I don't think it's fair for me to be consumed here." (20) Yerma's association with Fire, therefore, is as a victim. As one of the washerwomen says of her situation: "With every hour that passes the hell in that house increases . . . for the greater the dazzle of the household, the greater the burning inside." (47) Yerma would like to exchange

that victimizing fire for one that would enliven her womb: "I sense that those who have given birth recently possess something like an inner glow." (76)

The possibility that Yerma has decided to pursue the illicit Fire that would fulfill her maternal need becomes plausible when, at the end of the second act, one of Juan's spinster sisters searches for her with a large candle, itself an ironic symbol of maleness in her hand. When the bells of Victor's flock of sheep is heard off-stage, it would appear that Yerma has indeed gone to seek out Victor.

But Yerma has not taken that course. What she has done is steal away in pursuit of another Fire, that of esoteric knowledge. Yerma has taken a direction which, if not illicit, is certainly borderline in terms of her moral stance; she has gone in search of Dolores the Conjuror, the village wise-woman. The ritual to which the hag subjects Yerma in the cemetery is not shown but subsequent references to it indicate that it contained a syncretic mixture of pagan incantations--"The laurel petition twice" (79)--and Christian orations--"and the prayer to Saint Ann at midday"--which Yerma is to continue daily. The need to placate the pagan gods is emphasized more than the need to pray to the Christian saint. The greater efficacy of the Dionysiac is thus underscored.

After the ritual, Yerma explains how the hope of having a child is kept aglow in her being: "Sometimes, when I'm certain that it'll never, never happen . . . something like a surge of fire goes through my feet . . ." (77) But such feelings occur only when she is alone; when in bed with Juan, matters are very different: "When he lies on me, he's doing his duty; yet, his waist is cold against me, as if his body were dead. And I, who have always been disgusted by passionate women, would like to be a mountain of fire at that moment." (78) Juan's lack of passion is pitted against Yerma's flaming desire; the consumption implicit here will be effected in the climax of the tragedy.

Yerma's words unify two of the Elements--Earth (*montaña*) and Fire (*fuego*); earlier, she had similarly brought together in herself Water ("I could be rushing water") and Air ("and breathes deeply, as if inhaling mountain air"). This need to have all the Elements coalesce in her being proceeds from Yerma's view of men as useless in her life and from her subsequent desire to be self-sufficient in the context of child-bearing: "Oh, if only I could have them by myself!" (78) But Yerma's androgynous daydream cannot be and so she must continue to weigh her need against the social and religious constraints that she has chosen to honor. The presence of Victor is ever a reminder of what might have been; it is also a temptation.

First associated with Air and now with Fire, the male Elements, Victor combines the maleness requisite to interact with Yerma's femaleness. The natural conjunction Earth-Fire, which the union of Yerma and Victor would represent on one plane, would be enhanced on another level by the conjunction Water-Air, their other axis, thus bringing about that tetralogical unification of the Elements necessary for fecundity. Yerma had longed for this very

union in the first scene of the play where, threading a needle (a symbol of sexual integration), she soliloquized in an imagined dialogue with her child:

O child, what is it you seek from afar?
 White mountains that lie on your breast.
 Let branches wave wildly in sunlight
 and fountains leap high all around! (16)

The soliloquy unifies the Elements--"mountains" (*montes*) and "branches" (*ramas*) Earth; "wave wildly" (*agiten*) and "leap" (*salten*) Air; "sunlight" (*al sol*) Fire; "fountains" (*fuentes*) Water--but only in Yerma's dream dialogue. In her reality, the integration of the Elements is not actualized because Yerma cannot give herself to the natural course, the Dionysiac, that would end her distress. The Fire of Victor is never permitted to burn in the Earth of Yerma, nor is his Air allowed to permeate her Water.

Having erected the structure and developed the symbolic interaction of the four Elements in the lives of his principal characters, Lorca proceeds to show the contrasting pattern in the lives of those who follow the pagan, that is, the natural way, by having the Elements cohere in the last scene of the play, where the Dionysiac is dominant in its encounter with the Apollonian.

Whereas the pagan substratum of the society in *Yerma* is viewed intermittently during the rest of the play, and primarily through dialogue rather than action, the "Romería" scene is the enactment of a pagan fertility rite within the setting of a Christian pilgrimage. Yearly, the barren women of the vicinity tramp to the mountain sanctuary (Earth) of an unnamed male saint to pray for his intercession in attaining the grace of fecundity. After drinking holy water (Water), the women process barefooted, feet in direct contact with the soil (Earth), through the night with the solemnity of candles (Fire) and chants that pervade the air (Air). Each woman brings an offering to the male saint.

Both the trappings of Christianity and the married state of the women are mocked immediately upon the start of the scene in an off-stage song which sets the tone and defines the real purpose of the "Romería":

I couldn't be with you
 when you were a maid,
 but now that you're wed
 I'll take you to bed.
 And naked I'll make you,
 you pilgrim and wife,
 when out of that darkness
 the bell tolls midnight. (86)

The lecherous cynicism of the song is reinforced by La Vieja's cutting remarks to the solemn women: "You come to ask the Saint for children and every year more men come alone on this pilgrimage; just what is going on?" (87) Her laughter punctuates the rhetorical question which, unanswerable, establishes the hypocrisy of the women. The offerings by the women to the male saint will be less efficacious than those to be made to the numerous males present. Another female bystander amplifies the count of males at the "Romería" and in the process reestablishes the symbolic association of men and Water: "A river of single men comes down from those hills." (88) It is this river of unaccompanied males coming down the mountain slopes (Earth) that will fertilize the women, not the grace of God sought through the saint's intercession, for as La Vieja said of God earlier: "When are you going to realize that he doesn't exist?" (30) For the miracle of fecundity to take place, the women must give themselves to that river of men, as do the sierras to the water that runs down their slopes. Yerma had the opportunity to do just that with Victor but, realizing that she would not act dishonorably, he has left the village. Under the circumstances, not to take the natural course towards fulfillment--sexual relations outside of the non-productive marriage--is to court even greater frustration. Such is the case of the woman who "Has been coming for eight years without result." (87) For those who only pray, the "Romería" has no miracles and only serves to demonstrate the inefficacy of Christian prayer. Thus, Yerma and her fellow supplicants must help themselves if they are to satisfy their maternal need. The "Romería" provides both the setting and the means for that activity which must precede the fecundity they seek.

The revels of the modern pagan feast are remnants of the Dionysian worship that spread through the Mediterranean world in antiquity. Dionysus was a nature deity and as such was associated with many of its manifestations, including the products of the earth, grapes and corn among them; one particularly important affiliation was with the fig tree and its fruit, symbolic of the female. Besides his relationship to flora, Dionysus was also manifested in the form of various fauna, notably the goat and the bull, animals which symbolized his status as a god born with horns.¹⁶ What's more, Dionysus personified the male principle in Nature, entering the female (the Earth Goddess) by dying after the harvest, making her fecund again in the spring with his resurrection. Dionysus, therefore, was a fertility deity whose cyclical death and resurrection brought together the male and female principles in a natural bond. The copulation that marked his worship imitated the sacred union and was, therefore, an act of sympathetic magic that sought to ensure the fertility and continuity of all life, even in the face of death.

It is this ancient tradition that permeates the "Romería" scene in *Yerma*. After the staid, funereal Christian procession of the barren women at the opening, the inner scene of the Dionysian love feast bursts upon the senses. Nubile girls enter running, gracefully twirling ribbons symbolic of pregnancy.

Their entrance is announced by the ringing of many different animal bells, themselves symbolic of the procreative energy of the fauna. All this commotion heralds the appearance of two unusual figures.

(The noise increases and two traditional masked figures appear. One is male and the other female. They wear large masks. El Macho has the horn of a bull clenched in one hand. Rather than grotesque, they are of great beauty and possess a quality of pure earthiness. La Hembra shakes a neckpiece of large bells.) (90)

The children, with typical Christian ignorance of pagan tradition, misidentify the masks as the Devil and his wife.¹⁷ But El Macho and La Hembra are popular representations of the age-old symbols of fertility associated with Dionysus and his consort, the Earth Goddess; thus, Lorca identifies them as being "of pure earthiness."

In this powerful dance scene with dialogue, the Elements are finally brought together towards actualization in the women who will follow the pagan way. As La Hembra sings first of the barren wife, her words show that all the Elements are indeed at hand:

In the river of the mountain
the mournful wife would bathe.
Over her body, the spirals
of water would ascend.
The sand of the shores
and the air of morning
brought fire to her laugh
and a shiver to her back.
Oh, how naked was the maiden
who bathed in the water! (91)

Like Yerma, the woman in the ballad has all the Elements within her reach and needs only the natural inclination to cojoin them in a procreative way within herself. It is during the Dionysian "Romería," which celebrates that most fundamental of human encounters, mating, that the time is propitious for such action; as La Hembra proclaims: "When the night of the revels comes round / I will shred the ruffles of my petticoat." (91) Only by tearing apart her own under-garments (a rending akin to that in the Dionysian rites and, here, symbolic of Yerma's need to shred her oppressive Christian mores) will the woman be able to find the fruition that she seeks. Thus, El Macho sings of her as he moves the phallic horn suggestively: "Poppy and carnation she'll then become / when El Macho spreads his cape on the ground." (92) Just as nature flowers in spring through the rebirth of Dionysus, so will the married woman who gives herself freely to a virile man. Then El Macho, approaching

La Hembra with the patent sensuality of the gypsy *tablao flamenco* and the overt sexuality of the Dionisian bacchanale, sings of how the orgiastic spirit must resolve itself into the sexual union of one man and one woman:

Go by yourself behind the walls
where the fig trees are densest
and there bear my earthen body
till the white whimper of dawn. (92)

The encounter will take place where the fig trees are densest, the fig being symbolic of the vagina ("densest" [*cerradas*] could also be taken literally as closed, thus the closed vagina is to be opened in the sexual union). In that Dionysian setting, El Macho's earthiness (*cuero de tierra* could also be earthy body, body made of earth, or body that belongs on or to the earth, as with that of the dying-resurrected Dionysus) will transform the barren wife into a mother. Once again, Fire is the Element that will serve as the agent of the transformation. As she undergoes the Dionysian initiation, the woman will respond with the same fiery passion that La Hembra shows in her sexual dance: "Oh, how she glows! / Oh, how she glows, / oh, how the married woman quakes!" (92) The verb *cimbrear* (*cimbrar*) also means to shake, sway, bend, vibrate, tremble, or quiver. The noun *Cimbre* means subterranean passage or gallery. Used with the verb *relumbrar* (to be aglow, to shine brilliantly, to be afire with passion), "*cimbrea*" has an obvious sexual meaning, that of passionate quivering in the woman's innermost recesses during coitus. The power of Dionysus is manifested in the physical union of El Macho, the horn, and La Hembra, the fig.

The act of love simulated in the erotic dance is narrated by El Macho as a numerical extravaganza worthy of the Bacchanale's orgiastic ends:

Seven times she cried out,
nine she was aroused,
fifteen times they united
jasmynes with oranges. (93)

The numbers themselves are symbolic of sexuality and fertility. Seven, the most mysterious of numbers to many ancient civilizations and to mystics, in this context is related to the menstrual cycle of women (the lunar month on which a woman's period is based consists of four phases of seven days each); it is the cycle on which all human life depends. And the woman's moaning (*gemía*) represents both her sexual pleasure and the pain attendant on her menstruation. Nine is the marker of the transition between simple and compound numbers and is, consequently, the number of initiation (the sexual act is itself initiatory when first performed, as well as integral to entrance in many mystery religions of antiquity); it is also the number of the months of

gestation of the human fetus (Lorca emphasizes pregnancy with *levantaba*, a word descriptive of the pregnant woman's abdomen). Fifteen is a number of marked erotic symbolism and is, therefore, Dionysiac; from it is derived six ($15 = 1 + 5 = 6$), the number of harmony (as in the union of *jazmines con naranjas*, with its echo of the earlier "when jasmine perfumes your flesh"). Lastly, fifteen also stands for woman in the role of mother, a state dependent upon her union with man in the sexual act.¹⁸

All these numbers are odd, which in Numerology represents the male; thus, the seven, nine and fifteen here are male-dominant integers. In the society that Lorca depicts in *Yerma*, it is the male who instigates the copulative union through his forcefulness and animal lust. El Macho exemplifies this when he states:

In this pilgrimage
the male always commands.
Husbands are bulls.
The male always commands. (93)

The male principle always rules in a Dionysian rite of fertility. It is *el varón* (he of the rod) who represents both virility and authority, as El Macho with his symbolic horn. Thus, the sexual reward is for the man who takes the initiative: "And the pilgrim flowers / belong to the one who earns them." (93) The lesson for Juan, who is present at the "Romería" but not participating, is obvious: he must act like a lusty man and arouse Yerma's sensuality. But Juan chooses to remain a bystander while the other males--from the child to the older men--are caught up in the frenzy of the torrid dance, shouting lasciviously to El Macho: "Get her now with the horn!" . . . "Get her now with the air!" . . . "Get her now with the branch!" (93) And El Macho replies:

Come and behold the fire
of the woman who bathed! (93)
.....
Let burn both the dance
and the glimmering body
of the chaste married woman. (94)

The woman who had bathed alone in the cold water of the stream is now portrayed as being afire, purged of her earlier reluctance by the fire of passion. The Elements, which had been close at hand but inactive, have now been brought together and activated in the crucible of shared passion. It is fitting then that the fertility ritual end with words which herald the procreativity of the woman:

Heaven has its gardens
with rosebushes of joy,
between one bush and another
is the rose of marvels. (94)

This fruition of nature is symbolic of that achieved by the barren wife who has given herself wholly to the Dionysian spirit. The "rose of marvels" (*rosa de maravilla*) represents the child, the flower that turns a woman into a mother.¹⁹ Such is the reward of those women who follow the pagan way.

What remains is for Yerma to emulate those women. And yet, despite the exhilarating rite of passage that she has witnessed, Yerma refuses La Vieja's offer of her virile son as lover. The approaching tragic consequences of her obstinacy are underscored in the ensuing dialogue by the negative use of the Elements as applied to her; Yerma's references to Water are exemplary: "poisoned pond." . . . "What you offer me is a small glass of well water." . . . and "*iMarchita!*" (95-97) This last word, more negative than her own name, denotes a condition without hope of reversal. In her own eyes, Yerma has withered; lacking the wherewithal for life herself, she sees no possibility of ever giving life to the child she has so ardently desired. Thus, her husband has no further purpose in her life and, when he belatedly tries to make love to her in the sexual spirit of the "Romería," she rebels against his impassioned embrace. Uttering a primal scream, she strangles him with frenzied force until his body lies inert on the ground, as ironic and useless in death as it was to her in life.

Juan's demise is the culmination of a series of rejections. Besides turning his back selfishly on Yerma's maternal hope, Juan has also rejected a natural principle. Like Pentheus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, who went to the Dionysian feast to mock the god and his rites, Juan attended the "Romería" with cynical disdain. Both Pentheus and Juan failed to give Dionysus his due and, as a consequence, each forfeited his life as a sacrificial victim. The death of each represents not only the deletion of the individual in life but, especially, the termination of his line: an irreversible sterilization. Just as Pentheus will be incapable of continuing the male line of his noble family, so Juan can no longer be the potential sire of a child. In contrast to the Dionysian symbolism of the god's death and resurrection, the execution of these males who failed to honor the god will not result in even a symbolic rebirth.

Yerma, of course, has been the most obvious rejecter of Dionysus. In her youth, she accepted as her husband a man she did not love, never revealing that Victor was the one for whom she cared. Consequently, she never wanted Juan as lover, only as the man who could legitimately give her the child she craved. Yet, when he failed her, she neither sought out Victor nor La Vieja's son to satisfy her need. Even facing the revels of the god, Yerma stood steadfast against the Dionysian spirit.

In her refusal to cojoin the male and female Elements through the Dionysiac, Yerma becomes her own victim. She has built a series of rejections

throughout the play that culminate in this denial. Incapable of loving Juan as a man, she has victimized herself by not allowing him to love her as a woman, thus eschewing the fullness of the marital state. Yerma's rejection of Juan's embrace in the final moments of the play mirrors his rejection of hers earlier; her impulsiveness in that previous encounter, together with her avowed desire to be a "montaña de fuego," can be seen through hindsight as precursory of the deadly "embrace" of the finale. Juan's consumption in the fire of Yerma's manic frustration is more than the victimization of her husband by the wife; in killing Juan Yerma has committed the ultimate act against herself; she has exterminated the possibility of ever having a child. With the approaching chorus of the "Romería" as a blatant counterpoint, Yerma rises from the ground and utters the terrible words that denote the end of hope: ". . . I've killed my son; I myself have killed my son!" (101)

Unlike a recognition scene in classical tragedy, Yerma's cognizance of her action does not contain the promise of redemption and renewal. Rather, her words close the play with a finality that indicates a rending of her being akin to the physical dismemberment in the Dionysian rites of antiquity.

This rending, as for Agave--who killed her son Pentheus during the bloody feast of the Maenads in *The Bacchae*--is one of the spirit, each woman having to live out her life in the knowledge that she has killed her own son. Such is the punishment meted out by Dionysus to those who have failed to accommodate the libidinal imperative in their lives. Pentheus and Juan may have suffered a physical death for mocking the god, but the punishment of Agave and Yerma for their crime against human nature is that of a living death.

The lesson is clear in both Euripides and Lorca's tragedies; in the confrontation between the Apollonian and the Dionysiac, each must be given its due if the human condition is to attain parity. The lesson from psychoanalysis, derived from clinical experience, is the same; repression of the libido is dangerous to the psyche, for it will force it to recoil upon that which is abnormal in the individual. Therefore, it is fundamental to the well-being of the person that the ego be allowed to function as mediator between the primitive drives of the Id and the social and moral demands of the milieu in which that individual lives.

In the symbolism of *Yerma*, the protagonist must cojoin the four cardinal Elements in order to realize her potential as a mother, thus attaining that harmonious state of being which results from the integration of the Apollonian and the Dionysiac. But Yerma's excessive adherence to the Christian ethos blocked her pursuit of that end through licit or illicit means. That she recognized the impossibility of her pursuit of that fusion long before the finale was made evident when she exclaimed to Victor: "What a terrible loss not to be able to feel the teachings of the ancients!"

Notes

1. Federico García Lorca, *Yerma* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada—Biblioteca Clásica Contemporánea, 1967) 69. All subsequent textual references are to this edition; pagination will appear in parentheses after each quote. The translations are mine.

2. For a study of *Yerma* from this perspective, see Robert Lima, *The Theatre of García Lorca* (New York: Las Américas Publishing Co., 1963) 217-240.

3. In *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), Friedrich Nietzsche differentiates two modes of human behavior, the Apollonian and the Dionysiac. For the purposes of this essay, these dual factors that create the tension of living will function as exemplary of the struggle between Christian principles and pagan tradition.

4. *Yerma's* father has chosen Juan, a farmer, over Victor, a shepherd, as husband for his daughter. The choice demonstrates an ancient prejudice among settled peoples in favor of the homesteader. The reason may be that in being tied to his land the farmer is more reliable than the wandering shepherd, at least in the eyes of the community. However, in quite a different context, it is the shepherd who wins favor. The story of Cain and Abel is, on one level, a tale of the contention between the homesteader and the shepherd. When Cain kills Abel, the given reason for the homicide is that the farmer resents the rejection of his offering and the acceptance of the shepherd's by God. The Old Testament God had a marked preference for blood sacrifices and an ironic enjoyment in having his "chosen people" live as nomads. It was, at best, a mixed blessing being a shepherd. Perhaps the rejection of Victor as a suitable mate for *Yerma* stems from a subconscious racial memory of such origins.

5. In Euripides' *The Bacchae*, the conflict is between those who deny Dionysus his rightful place in the pantheon of the gods and those who acknowledge his divinity through worship. Dire consequences accrue to those who deny Dionysus his proper place in the scheme of things. Just as the Dionysia or Bacchanale gave rise to tragedy in ancient Greece (most notably in Attica), so too the tragic manifests itself in *Yerma's* modern Dionysian revels, the "Romería" scene at play's end. The parallels will be discussed in that context.

6. See Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1959) 458. Also see Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Astrology* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1971) 20-21.

7. See Herodotus, *The Histories*. Translated by Henry Cary (New York: Appleton and Co., 1899) 226. Also see Tacitus, *Complete Works* (New York: Modern Library, 1942) 728. For the association of Earth with masculinity, see footnote 13.

8. See René Guenon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* (London: 1945), *passim*.

9. See Eithne Wilkins, *The Rose-Garden Game* (London: Victor Gallancz, Ltd., 1969) 102, 113-114, 124. Also see the Old Testament's Song of Solomon, 5:2.

10. Although not normally used in Spain to refer to the sexual act in a vulgar manner, *coger* is widely employed in that way throughout Latin America, most notably in Argentina, Uruguay and Cuba, countries that Lorca visited and where he may have come across the taboo usage.

11. In Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *The Philosophy of Natural Magic* (Secaucus, New Jersey: University Books, 1974) 43, 49.

12. The collective title of those esoteric writings centered on Hermes Trismegistus, the syncretic Mediterranean deity who ruled the four Elements.

13. Adamic Man is the protagonist of the familiar creation story in Genesis 2:7—"Then the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils and breath of life, and man became a living being"—and in Genesis 2:21-22 "The Lord God cast the man into a deep sleep and, while he slept, took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib which the Lord God took from the man, He made into a woman, and brought her to him." However, there is a *previous* creation, that of Primal Man, recounted in Genesis 1:26-28—"God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image and likeness,'. . . God created man in His image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female He created them. Then God

blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply." This *first* creature, so-called Primal Man, was not made of the earth but in the "image and likeness" of God and was a simultaneous creation of "male and female," possibly an androgynous creature representative of God's duality. The story of Primal Man ends abruptly, replaced by that of Adamic Man, a creature made of the earth.

14. Nietzsche.

15. The God of the Hebrews manifested himself as Fire on various occasions, most notably on Mt. Sinai when he gave Moses the Tablets of the Law and again in the "burning bush" episode. He could not be seen because he emitted a searing light.

16. Horns are among the oldest symbols of male sexuality and are attributes of numerous gods in antiquity, among them: the Semitic El; the Greek Actaeon, Pan and Zeus; the Egyptian Amen; and the Persian Mithras. These and other deities bore the horns of goats, rams, bulls or stags, animals whose energy and sexual prowess made them fitting symbols of their fertility gods. In Tantra, the yoga of sex, horns are the emanations of male vitality which, kept from sexual ejaculation, mounts upwards through the spine to the head in the form of mystic energy and accumulates as the outgrowths.

17. Misidentification of the Horned God as Satan is typical of Christianity, which saw all pagan traditions of fertility as inspired by that personification of evil which the religion called the Devil. The concept of the Devil's wife stated here may stem from the Jewish folkloric personage named Lilith, said to have been Adam's first mate until she rebelled against God's authority and became an evil creature: the idea may also be based on those Mediterranean goddesses associated with fertility, likewise condemned by the Church. See: Henry Ansgar Kelly, *The Devil, Demonology and Witchcraft* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1968); Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921) and *The God of the Witches* (London: 1933).

18. See "Numerology," Richard Cavendish (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974) 158-167. See also "Numbers," J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1962) 220-227.

19. The rose as a symbol of the female has a complex history. See Wilkins, *op. cit.*, among many others.

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