

Immolations: Rites of Sacrifice on the Stages of Federico García Lorca

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“When things are rooted so deeply,
no one can tear them out.”

Blood Wedding (Act II, Scene 1)

Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) was a Spaniard from Andalusia: an area of the Iberian Peninsula with an exotic intermixture of indigenous peoples, with additions by Phoenician and Greek traders, Carthaginian settlers, Roman conquerors (Baetica was the name given it), Germanic invaders (especially the Vandals, after whom the region was given the name Vandalusia, later Al-Andalus to the Moors), Christian Visigothic rulers, Islamic caliphs (for nearly eight centuries under hegemony through the caliphates of Córdoba, Seville and Granada), Jewish communities (for whom the land was the biblical Sepharad), and the imposing last addendum, that of Gypsy life and lore.

García Lorca was also a citizen of a wider world, the Mediterranean, shaped by the rich heritage of Hellenic Greece and the socio-religious culture of the Old Testament. In his first identity he manifests the folklore and traditions of his native region; in the second avatar, he demonstrates his inheritance of a cultural tradition founded on both the worlds of the classical tragedians and of the compilers of the Old Testament texts. These are the elements in Lorca's stages that “are rooted so deeply” that “no one can tear them out.” Each of these ancestral influences merits scrutiny in its own right.

An important aspect of the civic and religious life in the Hellenic world was the public homage given the gods.¹ Greek tragedies and comedies (satyr plays, among others) were performed in competitions that were part of larger religious celebrations attended by the multitude, who sat for long hours in open-air semicircular theatres. On the first plane, these plays were put on in honor of the gods and as such were preceded by appropriate sacrifices that included subtle or direct evidence of the four Elements, so important in antiquity's conception of the

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Cosmos. Among the sacrifices proffered to the gods were libations of wine spilled on the ground, holocausts—burnt offerings of grain and other produce that would rise to the gods who dwelt in the ether, and the ritual killing of animals (goats and lambs most commonly but bulls on some occasions)—whose blood would soak the altar and stage, often sprinkled on the celebrants, while part of the animal's flesh would be eaten in a ceremonial feast and part set afire to rise to the abode of the Olympian deities.

On the second plane, not only were the tragedies (and comedies) preceded by blood sacrifices, but the tragedies themselves were replete with rites of sacrifice, namely of the very tragic heroes and heroines they depicted as they pursued their hubristic quest for greatness in life and deification in death. In one form or another, the blood of tragic heroes and heroines was shed in a ritualistic manner, yet more sacrifices to the Olympian gods of Hellenic Greece.

In the *Oresteia*,² Aeschylus, the founder of classical Greek tragedy, details numerous acts of death—murder, suicide, warfare, and sacrifice—in telling the story of the royal house of Atreus, which included Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Helen, Orestes, and Electra. And in the trilogy on Prometheus,³ Aeschylus presents the feat of his hero, a Titan, in stealing fire from the Olympian gods as a gift to humanity, his punishment by Zeus, who had him nailed to a boulder and then cast into the bowels of the earth, and his ultimate accommodation with the deity. Prometheus's suffering prefigures the sacrifice of Christ. Among the best-known examples of rites of sacrifice in a human caste are those recounted in the Sophoclean tragedies,⁴ among them *Antigone*, whose protagonist is condemned to death by Creon for burying her brother against the king's command, but who chooses to commit suicide, while her example is followed by Creon's son and wife; and *Oedipus Rex*, in which the Theban king, faced with the horror of his actions, opts for a living death by putting out his eyes (thus closing the "windows of his soul") rather than commit suicide, while his mother and wife, Jocasta, does in fact take her own life. Likewise replete with sacrificial deaths are the tragedies of Euripides,⁵ namely *Alcestis*, in which the heroine dies in the place of her husband Admetus (although she is later brought back to life by Heracles); *Medea*, whose protagonist destroys the rival for the affections of her husband, the unfaithful Jason, and then kills her children by him, leaving him to a living death; and the *Bacchae*, his masterpiece, in which the women who worship Dionysus are driven to a mad frenzy during the revels and King Pentheus, who had opposed the orgiastic celebrations, is torn to pieces by the women, among them his own mother. In the broad context of Greek myth and lore, homicides and suicides are interpreted as sacrificial acts, either made to the gods as blood offerings or to satisfy their mandates, or as the result of the machinations of Clotho, Lachesis and Athropos, the three goddesses who administer Fate, that all-encompassing force.

The world of the Old Testament too is characterized by the rites of blood

sacrifice. Perhaps the killing of Abel by his brother Cain should be seen as something other than the first homicide and fratricide in the Judeo-Christian tradition; perhaps it should be interpreted as the first ritual offering of a human life to God, a misguided attempt on Cain's part to present the Lord (not yet the Yahweh of Moses) a suitable sacrifice, his own offer of the fruits of the earth he tilled having been rejected by a deity who preferred blood sacrifices such as Abel's. In killing Abel in the fields Cain proffered his brother's blood; and had The Lord's angry voice not interrupted him, no doubt the offering would have been completed as a holocaust.

The best-known of Biblical sacrifices is the result of the Lord's command to Abraham that he offer Him his son Isaac by shedding the boy's blood and then making a holocaust of the body.⁶ In this instance God ordered the staying of the hand of Abraham as the knife was about to penetrate his son's heart, but surely the terrible demand by the Lord had caused the tragic action to occur many times over in the mind of the loving father. To all intents and purposes, the sacrifice was consummated.

Later such sacrifices were performed in honor of Yahweh, the god of Moses. It was Moses who led the Israelites in the exodus out of Egyptian bondage and ultimately to the Promised Land, although the deliverer himself was not permitted by Yahweh to enter it. During that long journey, Moses not only brought the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai but also instructed his followers in the ways of the new god; among the patterns of worship he established were rituals in honor of a deity who, like other Mediterranean counterparts, demanded blood sacrifices and burnt offerings, often in combination. Indeed, one particular demand of the God of Moses, as recorded in Exodus 22, was shocking to the Chosen People. "You shall give me the first-born of your sons. You must do the same with your oxen and your sheep; for seven days the firstling may stay with its mother, but on the eighth day you must give it to me" (28-9). Notwithstanding its savage burden, this giving to Yahweh of the firstborn was adhered to as a sacred command; this requirement of sacrifice resulted in subsequent human blood offerings of first-born sons throughout the Old Testament. There is also the case of Jephthah who, fulfilling a vow made to Yahweh in exchange for victory over the Ammonites, promised that "whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites shall belong to the Lord. I shall offer him up as a holocaust" (Judges 11: 31). That person turned out to be his daughter, an only child. There are also the child sacrifices through holocausts made by King Achaz, who offered his son to Melekh or Moloch (4 Kings: 3) and by King Manasses, who "made his sons pass through the fire" to honor Baal (4 Kings 21: 6).

These, among many other examples, show that ritual sacrifice was indeed the way of life in Hellenic Greece and in the Old Testament world. But why? The psychology of ritual sacrifice is complex. It presupposes a recognition on the part

of a given society that the world of human reality is dependent upon another world—one that is invisible yet peopled by gods and other supernatural beings. In such a system, human beings have felt the need to establish a rapport with that unseen dimension, both to attempt to influence its denizens and to show obeisance to the superior beings, who were seen as controlling all aspects of life on Earth and in the Cosmos. The way most commonly, i.e. universally, chosen to attain such ends was sacrifice—the offering of something holy to the god or gods. Most sacred were the blood offerings. In performing a blood sacrifice, the offerant was making over some important personal possession—livestock, grain, or a human being (a slave or even an offspring)—which had been sanctified. And the most essential element of the rite was the aspersion of the blood over the altar and over the participants, who thus shared in the oblation to the deity. Such concepts of ritual sacrifice continued to have an impact on subsequent civilizations of Europe, particularly those founded on such cultural and religious traditions as the Hellenic and the biblical.

A case in point is that of Christianity. In the New Testament there occurs the great personal blood sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, and the consequent executions of his Apostles and other Christian martyrs. The Mass, which commemorates Christ's transubstantiation of bread and wine into His Body and Blood, subsequently shed on the Cross, is offered daily. Another example is the ongoing impact of ancient Greek drama on modern playwrights such as Ibsen, Yeats, and Valle-Inclán in Europe through Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in the United States. Ritual and blood sacrifice were part of the human continuum in ancient societies and their obstinacy in the human psyche can be seen through their ongoing presence in modern times.

Among those who verify this continuity is Federico García Lorca. The two Mediterranean cultural perspectives meet on Lorca's stages. In his plays, be they such sardonic serio-comic pieces as *El amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* (*The Love of Don Perlimplín With Belisa in Her Garden*), period dramas like *Doña Rosita la soltera o el lenguaje de las flores* (*Doña Rosita the Spinster, or The Language of Flowers*), historically-oriented plays like *Mariana Pineda*, surrealist experiments such as *Así que pasen cinco años* (*When Five Years Pass*), or folk tragedies, as in the trilogy *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*), *Yerma*, *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*),⁷ Lorca does not copy his antecedents in Greek tragedy or in the Old Testament; rather, he carries forward into his own era the spirit of the ancients, which demanded rites of sacrifice as a way of placating their deities—be they in the polytheistic pantheon of the Hellenic world or in the monotheism of the Jewish religion. But in Lorca's plays it is the codes of his polymorphous society that must be placated at any cost.

Beginning with his very first play, the dramatist embarks on a theatrical

venture that, in most cases, posits that ritual sacrifice is a way of life. This is made manifest through a variety of methods in which his characters die, physically or emotionally, either at their own hands or at the hands of others. In some instances, death is the result of too strict an adherence to social and moral codes promulgated by society through its institutions and derived from ancient Mediterranean traditions. I term this manifestation of ritual sacrifice in its many guises, immolation.

The two-act fantasy in verse that is *El maleficio de la mariposa* (*The Evil Spell of the Butterfly*, 1920) depicts an insect world in which roaches care for a wounded butterfly until, recovered, she flies away leaving behind a lovelorn young roach. As the wise Nigromantica had warned: “If you fall in love with her, beware you will die” (I).⁸

And the abandoned lover now agonizes over his lost dream:

Who gave me these eyes I don't want
and these hands that try
to grasp a love I do not understand?
It drains my life!
Who loses me in shadow?
Who ordains my suffering without wings?

(II)

These are his last words and he dies of a broken heart, as the words spoken in the prologue—“And it is that Death disguises itself as Love”—have their vindication at play's end. The Butterfly has led Curianito on a Dance of Death, leaving him to suffer the consequences of his illusory quest. Immolation here has been brought about by the destructive power of unrequited love. The perpetrator, however, literally rises above the consequences of her action, like Medea leaving behind her nefarious deed. Or, like Yahweh, leaving below the anguish caused Abraham and Isaac. Curianito's questions have the same reply as those in ancient Greek tragedy: Fate.

Mariana Pineda (1927) exemplifies immolation through self-sacrifice for love, first the love of the titular heroine for a man and, second, for the cause that the man represents. Rather than betray Don Pedro and his cause, Mariana opposes the demands of Pedrosa, their persecutor, that she disclose the names of others in the plot. Mariana becomes enmeshed in the rebellion, embroidering its flag, all for the love of a man who loves the revolution more than her. She proclaims to him in his absence:

Do you love Liberty more than your Marianita?

Then I will become that very Liberty you adore! . . .
 Pedro, I want to die for what you do not,
 for the pure ideal that shone in your eyes.

(III, 8)

Mariana is “crazed and delirious, in a heightened state of passion and anguish,” as Lorca describes her when she utters these words. Later, as she heads for the gallows, she has her apotheosis:

I am Liberty because love demanded it!
 Liberty for which you abandoned me, Pedro.
 I am Liberty, wounded by men!

(III, 9)

Mariana goes to her death with heroic stoicism, in part a victim of her self-deception about the man’s love. Her sacrifice supersedes personal love and so her immolation becomes heroic. Nonetheless, the play ends on a pathetic note:

Oh, such a sad day it was in Granada,
 that even the stones were crying,
 on seeing Marianita was dying
 on the scaffold for not testifying!

(III, 9)

As she requested—“Tell my sad story to the children that may come by”—Mariana’s tale of courage has been retold many times over,⁹ and today her statue oversees a Granadine plaza named in her honor. In her case, immolation deleted her existence but not her memory. Her heroism is like that of Antigone, defiant in the face of corrupt, oppressive authority.

The memory of the protagonist of *The Love of Don Perlimplín with Belisa in Her Garden* (written 1928; produced 1933) will also persevere after his demise, but through different means. In this serio-comic work the playwright presents a commonplace theme—the marriage of an “old” man to a young woman. Belisa, the lusty ingenue of the piece, is an egocentric, narcissistic beauty who agrees to marry the “beast” Don Perlimplín because of the arrangements made by her greedy mother (and because she intends to cuckold her husband with her current lovers). Realizing that he must win Belisa’s imagination in order to bring about a change in her egocentric attitude, Don Perlimplín embarks on an adventure to that end. He begins to write her love letters under an assumed identity and Belisa falls in love with her unknown admirer; and when Perlimplín is sympathetic to her needs, she

reveals that she loves the secret suitor because:

these letters from him . . . speak of me, of my body. . . . There's no doubt that he loves me as I want to be loved.

(Scene 2)

Pleased with the result of his deception, Perlimplín proclaims enigmatically:

Since I am old, I want to sacrifice myself for you. . . . What I am doing, no one else has done. But I am already beyond the world and the ridiculous morality of people. Goodbye.

(Scene 2)

The meeting with the secret lover arranged, Perlimplín reveals the motivation for the mysterious plan that he has set in motion:

I want her to love that young man more than her own body. And there's no doubt that she loves him.

(Scene 3)

His is an altruism of the highest order for it involves the element of self-sacrifice—by giving way to the new lover. The tryst is late at night in the garden. Belisa enters, glimpses her would-be lover from a distance and, when confronted by her husband, speaks frankly, recognizing in him a truly generous nature:

The scent of his flesh passes through his clothing. I love him!
Perlimplín, I love him! I seem to be another woman!

(Scene 4)

Elated over her admission, Perlimplín proceeds to elucidate on the play-within-a-play he has concocted, with Belisa as an audience of one. But suddenly his earlier largesse takes on a radically different aspect. Perlimplín now shows Belisa the dagger he plans to implant in the chest of her pretender. The husband then declares his true intent:

Now I will help you to mourn him. . . . Since you love him so much, I don't want him to leave you. And so that he can be yours completely, it has occurred to me that the best thing is to stick this dagger into his gallant heart.

(Scene 4)

Thus his fantasy and hers appear to be destined for a tragic conclusion. She pleads for her unknown lover's life but Perlimplín remains resolute:

He'll love you with the infinite love of the dead and I'll be free of
the dark nightmare of your magnificent body . . . Your body! . . .
Which I've never been able to fathom!!!

(Scene 4)

He leaps into the shrubbery, and moments later a red-caped figure stumbles into the garden, Perlimplín's dagger in his heart. As Belisa takes the dying lover in her arms, he reveals his identity. It is Perlimplín himself that Belisa nestles in the crescent of her arms. Speaking as the young man who wooed her away from her narcissism, Perlimplín explains:

Your husband has just killed me . . . He ran through the field and
you'll never see him again. He killed me because he knew I loved
you like no one else. As he killed me he shouted: "Now Belisa
has a soul!" . . . I am my soul and you are your body . . . Since you
have loved me so much, let me die embracing it in this final
moment.

(Scene 4)

He does die embracing the body of Belisa, to which he has added a soul born out of his imagination.

Don Perlimplin's immolation is a ritual of suicide. Yet its end is not self-serving but altruistic for he has sought, and obtained, the goal of having Belisa love another more than herself. And yet, has he not left her also to mourn the death of the "new" lover? The play, of course, is a manipulation of "Beauty and the Beast" with a different kind of happy ending—one in which the sacrificial immolation has brought about the apotheosis of Belisa. Thus, in a broad manner, the play exemplifies patterns of ritual self-sacrifice found throughout Greek tragedy and in the Old Testament, while the theme of Belisa as Narcissus also has its roots in classical myth.

The subject of self-immolation, which turns *The Love of Don Perlimplín with Belisa in Her Garden* from a comedy of manners into a play of serious dimensions, is treated very differently in Lorca's other dramatic works.

Doña Rosita la soltera (*Doña Rosita the Spinster*, 1935) presents immolation at the hands of time, which sees the protagonist become ever more enmeshed in the hopelessness of waiting for the man she loves to return and make her his bride. Like the flower after which she's named, Rosita has her blossoming and her moment of splendor but as the years of quiet desperation set in, she begins

to wither. That process is foreshadowed when Rosita's uncle recites the poem that describes the life of the rare flower he has brought as a surprise; it is called "Rosa Mutabile":

"When it blossoms in the morning,
it has the redness of blood.

.....
When full-blown at midday,
it is as hard as a coral flower.

.....
And as afternoon faints
in the violet of the sea,
it turns to white, as white
as a cheek of salt.

And when the night is sounding
its soft metallic horn

.....
its petals start to fall."

(I)

Rosita is the human counterpart of this changing rose, and her life follows the simple pattern of the flower's existence. Each act of the play symbolizes an aspect of the rose's stages of life—morning, afternoon and night. Thus, the many years which the drama covers are symbolized in the single-day existence of the Rosa Mutabile.

Because of Doña Rosita's commitment to her lover, she opts first for waiting for his return and then, upon receiving a letter saying that their wedding must be by proxy because he cannot return as yet, she is shocked. On hearing the news, the uncle unwittingly cuts the Rosa Mutabile and presents it to Rosita:

... almost without realizing it I've cut the only mutable rose I had
in my greenhouse. It was still red... If I had cut it two hours later,
it would have been white by now.

(II)

The cutting of the rose prefigures what is to follow in Rosita's love life: the Rosa Mutabile has been sacrificed while still red; soon Rosita is revealed as already a victim herself. This happens with the disclosure in Act III that she has known for eight years of her lover's abandonment for another. No longer needing to suffer the ignominy alone, Rosita settles for the living death of quiet desperation. She is now

dressed in white and, poignantly, recalls the last lines of the poem about the Rosa Mutabile. The depetalling of Rosita has begun as the play ends. Rosita has been sacrificed. In her steadfast love and self-immolation, Rosita resembles Penelope; however, Rosita's suffering does not come to a fortunate end because, unlike Ulysses, her beloved never returns.

The tenor of immolation in *Así que pasen cinco años* (*When Five Years Pass*, circa 1930) is distinctive in that its foundation is surrealism, an artistic movement whose premise is the subconscious mind, out of which arise automatism, the disassociated image, the dream, the nightmare, timelessness, displacement, the eternal return. . . . The final tableau of the play is set in the library of the house of El Joven (The Young Man); there is played out a vicious game of cards whose sole end is the termination of the young man's life. The three players who arrive together are as one in their pursuit of the same end:

We play and we win; but how difficult it is! The cards drink
savory blood while being held and it is hard to cut the thread
which unites them.

(III, 2)

Their plot against El Joven requires special care, however. But they know that in his case, their cunning will draw out his lifesaving card:

Player 2: But with this one . . . I don't think we will fail.

Player 3: I'm not so sure.

Player 1: You'll never learn to understand your clients. This one?

His life escapes him through the eyes . . .

Player 2: We must be very cautious with him to avoid a
reaction. . .

Player 1: It wouldn't be a bad idea to play our cards quickly . . .

Player 2: He has an Ace.

Player 3: A young heart against which it's more than likely that
arrows will falter.

(III, 2)

Because El Joven holds such a powerful Ace, the first player reveals that he has brought a secret weapon: arrows that penetrate any target, be it hard as iron or soft as gauze. And so, when El Joven re-enters, the game of life begins. Eager to accomplish their purpose, the sinister players proceed with dispatch. But El Joven stalls with orders to his butler to bring liqueurs or whiskey. The players, however, will not be put off; they importune El Joven with their demands:

Player 1: Would you kindly show your card? . . .

Player 2: The card? . . .

Player 3: Please . . . the card . . .

Player 1: Please be so kind as to play . . .

Player 3: You must play . . .

Player 1: It is imperative that you play your Ace.

(III, 2)

El Joven is unable (or is it unwilling?) to withstand their attack any longer. At the moment that El Joven painfully lays down his card, pointedly, an illuminated ace of hearts appears on the library wall. The first player takes out a pistol and fires it at the apparition; there is no noise for what he fires is an arrow. As the arrow strikes the target, the card disappears and El Joven covers his heart with both hands. There remains only to cut the thread of life and, having done so, the three players make a quick exit. El Joven is so alone in his intimate encounter with death that his final words echo in the empty room.

Playing one's last card, as here, is ambiguous because of the surrealistic elements in the play. Is the protagonist forced to lay down his life, as the dialogue suggests, because he must, or is he a willing participant in the game, one who knows that gambling with his life will have dire consequences? If the former, he is just another human being at the end of his tether of time; if the latter, he is someone toying with suicide because the love that he sought has eluded him and there is no hope of its attainment. In either case, his death takes place. Death is the only constant. And the implacable Fate that pursued the tragic hero or heroine is here present in the form of the three players, transvestite versions of Clotho, Lachesis and Athropos, who instigate the young man's discarding of his ace of hearts.

The bloodiest of encounters leading to immolation occur in *Bodas de sangre* (*Blood Wedding*, 1933), where the two pretenders to the Bride's hand—Leonardo and the Bridegroom—fight to the death in a rite beyond the norms of the traditional duel. There are no rules of combat here, no seconds to serve as witnesses, no doctor to stem the flow of blood should a combatant fall wounded. This is to be a duel to the death. The ritualistic nature of the combat is marked by the presence first of the Woodsmen, a chorus in the style of Greek tragedy, then by the Moon, incarnate in a young Woodcutter with a white face, and lastly by the Beggar Woman, who is Death personified. And it is the Beggar Woman who instructs the Moon:

Shine on the vest and spread apart buttons,
and afterwards knives know the path well.

(III, 1)

And the Moon, enthused by the promise of a blood rite, responds:

But may they take a long time to die. Let blood
 course through my fingers with delicate wheezing.
 See how my valleys of ashes awaken expecting
 that fountain of shuddering flow.

(III, 1)

The ritual of death is to be a sacrifice to the Moon, whose shafts of light (fingers) will receive the blood (the shuddering flow) that the combatants are fated to shed. When the Beggar Woman re-enters and spreads her cloak, it is a sign that Death has triumphed. After the two men have fallen in the duel of knives, there remain other victims—The Bride, Leonardo's Wife, the Bridegroom's Mother—three women left alone by their men, each mourning for her own reason. They are women who will lead empty lives thereafter, like the titular characters in Euripides' great tragedy, *The Trojan Women*.¹⁰ Despite their blood not having been spilt, they too have been sacrificial victims. Theirs will be living deaths.¹¹

In *Yerma* (1934), the tragedy which most resembles Greek models,¹² the protagonist yearns for motherhood but is frustrated in her hope of fulfillment, believing that the fault for her barrenness lies with her husband Juan. After attempts on her part to remedy the situation by visiting a *curandera*, a folk healer (although thought of as a witch by some in the community), Yerma makes a pilgrimage to a local shrine to seek a more orthodox intervention on her behalf by the saint. But miracles such as she desires, she learns there, are wrought only by illicit couplings. Too committed to traditional codes to change, Yerma does not follow the example of other barren women. Thereupon, the action proceeds unimpeded as it hurtles towards its tragic climax. Yerma encounters her husband and confronts him with her need once again. But Juan now vocalizes his indifference to her maternal desires and makes a declaration that he does not want children in their lives, only the pleasure of their sexual union. His grasping hands and eager mouth pursue her body as he kneels before her. Yerma stands over him despising his sexual embrace and, suddenly, with the strength brought on by frenzy over her frustration, she strangles her husband while uttering a primal scream.

Her act has dual implications: not only has she immolated Juan but she has also sacrificed herself, making it forever impossible for her barrenness to end and for her desire for fruition to be fulfilled. Besides the homicide she has perpetrated on her husband, Yerma has committed a symbolic suicide by destroying all possibility of self-fulfillment as a mother. While Juan is physically dead, Yerma has condemned herself to a living death.

Yerma's act has touchstones in both Greek and Biblical sacrifices. Unlike Abraham, whose knife poised over his son was stayed by a voice out of heaven, Yerma's immolation of Juan, and through it of her potential son, is not stopped by

supernatural means. Like Medea, who killed her own children, Yerma sacrifices her future children by killing her husband. And in the frenzy that leads to Juan's immolation, Yerma utters the shattering words: ". . . I have killed my own son. I myself have killed my son!" (III, 2). Her plaintive voice rises over the inert body of her husband, the only man with whom she would willingly fulfill her overriding need for children.

Yerma resembles Agave in Euripides' *Bacchae*, who has also killed her son in a frenzied state and who will have as punishment a living death. There can also be seen a parallel in the Old Testament story of Judith's decapitation of Holofernes,¹³ both in the execution of a man and in the inherent heroism of the act of liberation, for each woman has freed herself of the oppressor, even if Yerma's deed will bring her spiritual anguish and social retribution.

In *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*, 1936), there are no men on stage and so the rite of immolation cannot take the same course as in the earlier plays. But it is Bernarda, the mother-warden of the imprisoned, who becomes like a man upon her husband's death. Thus empowered, she condemns her daughters to a life of extended mourning—eight years—which will in fact make it impossible for them to be courted and to marry. She sacrifices their happiness for the sake of tradition. Only Adela defies her, meeting a man secretly in the stable. But upon being discovered and dishonored, the youngest daughter immolates herself by hanging. Bernarda's reaction is not the *planto*—the plaint, the traditional excessive outward manifestation of grief typical of the Mediterranean world—that one would expect from a mother who has just seen her youngest daughter's corpse; instead, she shouts at those around her with her usual authority, certifying that she is in total control even in the face of such a shocking death:

Take her down! My daughter has died a virgin! Take her to her room and dress her like a virgin. Let no one say anything! She has died a virgin.

(III)

Adela's drastic decision to immolate herself, while a self-willed act, is the direct result of an external force—her mother's ironclad tyranny. Driven to despair at the loss of hope, Adela commits the ritual act that stills the suffering of her life, becoming a sacrificial victim of Bernarda. Perhaps in ending her own life Adela sought to bring about the liberation of the remaining inmates of Bernarda's household. But it is not to be, as Bernarda's lack of maternal emotion and her final words make very clear. In this, the last of the tragedies in the trilogy, Lorca has again contrasted the physical death of a character to the living deaths of those who have been left behind in life. Ironically, even Bernarda becomes an inmate in the prison she has created for her daughters.

It is clear, too, that *The House of Bernarda Alba* is connected to the line of ritual sacrifices of offspring in Greek tragedy and Old Testament accounts. Adela's suicide is the result of Bernarda's inflexible stance and so Bernarda can be seen as having sacrificed her own daughter, as Medea crazed by hatred did her children, or his mother Agave and the Maenads did Pentheus. Or is Bernarda an ironic version, a mockery even, of the Biblical Jephthe, whose sacrificed daughter was indeed a virgin? Or is she like King Achaz and King Manasses, sacrificers of their own children to pagan deities? And what of the sacrificial victim herself? Adela resembles Antigone in that both share the plight of being alienated from society and of being imprisoned "to fade and wither in a living tomb,"¹⁴ as the Greek heroine expresses it, the first as the result of the mandated mourning for her father and the latter for her ethical stance in having buried her brother in defiance of the official prohibition.

In all of these plays, Lorca demonstrates an obsession on his part as a playwright with the immolation of his characters either through external agencies or through self-imposed acts or conditions. But in many cases, the agency is of mixed nature; by this I mean that such decisions as that reached by Adela to hang herself, are the direct result of an external force—her mother's tyranny. As has been seen, Lorca presents immolation in many guises in these plays: there is death by suicide in *Don Perlimplín* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*; death through a broken heart in *The Evil Spell of the Butterfly* and *When Five Years Pass*; death by suffering a living torment in *Doña Rosita the Spinster, or The Language of Flowers* and in the trilogy *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*; death by execution in *Mariana Pineda*; and death by homicide in *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*.

As the inheritor of an ancient dual tradition of blood sacrifice, and just as in the Old Testament and Greek religious life sacrifice was the most important religious act; Lorca becomes the purveyor of new thrusts in the same direction. The question of his motivation remains, however. The Old Testament rites of sacrifice and their counterparts in ancient Greek culture no doubt were taken by Lorca to be still exemplary of the mental disposition of the people around him, largely Mediterranean in descent, and thus the playwright found in them inherent dramatic values similar to those their people represented for the Greek tragedians. But Lorca seeks his own path among the brambles of the lives he portrays on his stages.

In the mind of the playwright, death is the most dramatic of all human states. However it comes about, it is the definitive end of physical existence. In all of these dramatic works Lorca employs ritual immolation as the principal conveyance of the action, following the lead of the Greek tragedians for whom everything in the play led inexorably to that end. And his inspiration lies in the ancient traditions of Hellenic death rites and Biblical blood sacrifices. In Lorca's theatre, immolation is a way of life and its origin is in the ancient Mediterranean ethos. As he has said,

“When things are rooted so deeply, no one can tear them out.”

Notes

1. Dionysus was the sylvan deity from Thrace in whose honor such rituals of fertility and ecstasy as gave rise to Hellenic drama—tragedy and comedy—were first performed in Dionysia in 534 B.C.E. Greek drama stemmed directly from the Dionysian revels: rites celebrating wine and sexuality, dithyrambs—ecstatic trance dances of wild abandon, parades with masked revelers, some bearing torches and others playing cymbals.

2. Aeschylus (circa 525-456 B.C.E.) wrote the *Oresteia* in three parts: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. See Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy. Agamemnon, The Choephoroi. The Eumenides*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1959).

3. Aeschylus wrote *Prometheus the Fire-Bearer*, *Prometheus Bound*, and *Prometheus Unbound*. See *Fifteen Greek Plays* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967). See also Whitney J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., eds., *Seven Famous Greek Plays* (New York: Random House, The Modern Library, 1950). See also L.R. Lind, ed., *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations* (Boston: The Riverside Press-Houghton Mifflin Co., 1957).

4. Sophocles (circa 496-406 B.C.E.) wrote *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King* (c. 420), and *The Women of Trachis* (c. 420), all tragedies which contain immolation in many aspects of the act. See Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. F. Storr (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1951). See also *Fifteen Greek Plays*, *Seven Famous Greek Plays*, and *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations*.

5. Euripides (circa 484-406 B.C.E.) wrote *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Bacchae*, among other tragedies in which a variety of suicides and ritual deaths occur. See *Fifteen Greek Plays*, *Seven Famous Greek Plays*, and *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations*.

6. Genesis, 22: “2. God said, ‘Take your only son Isaac whom you love and go into the district of Moria, and there offer him as a holocaust on the hill which I shall point out to you.’” “9. When they arrived at the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Then he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the wood upon the altar. 10. Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to kill his son. 11. But an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’ 12. He said, ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy; do nothing to him. I know now that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from me’. 13. Abraham looked about and saw a ram caught by its horns in the bush. He went and took it, and offered it as a holocaust in place of his son.” *Holy Bible. Confraternity, Douay Version* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1962) 37.

7. See Federico García Lorca, *Obras completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1971) and numerous subsequent editions. For the last three listed plays in English, see Federico García Lorca, *Three Tragedies of Federico García Lorca*, trans. R.L. O’Connell and J. Graham-Luján (New York:

New Directions, 1955).

8. All of García Lorca's titles in English and all textual translations throughout are mine unless otherwise specified.

9. See José Martín Recuerda, *The Inmates of the Convent of Saint Mary Egyptian*, trans. Robert Lima from *Las arrecogías del beaterio de Santa María Egipciaca*, Marion P. Holt, ed., *Drama Contemporary: Spain* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985) 97-138.

10. Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (circa 415 B.C.E.) depicts the plight of the women who have lost their men after the Athenian massacre of the male population of Melos, a neutral city. See *Fifteen Greek Plays and Seven Famous Greek Plays*.

11. See Robert Lima, "Blood Spilt and Unspilt: Primal Sacrifice in Lorca's *Bodas de sangre*," *Letras Peninsulares* Fall-Winter (1995-1996) 255-59.

12. See Robert Lima, "Toward the Dionysiac: Pagan Elements and Rites in *Yerma*," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 4.2 (Spring 1990) 63-82. Also in Robert Lima, *Dark Prisms. Occultism in Hispanic Drama* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1995) 69-87.

13. Judith 13, in *Holy Bible* 563.

14. Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. F. Storr (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1951).