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Honors Seminar in Dramaturgy

A House of Contradictions – A Protocol for La casa de Bernarda Alba

La casa de Bernarda Alba is a play with an image problem. In the United States, it has been the unfortunate victim of a simplistic reading, cultural whitewashing and vulgar titillation. Bernarda Alba, so the misconception goes, takes place once upon a time in the fabled lands of rural Spain. It is a psychosexual drama about five repressed daughters and their domineering prude of a mother. The tragic tale charts the downfall of these poor, pitiful daughters as they yearn for a liberated sexual identity that they ultimately cannot have. The tale culminates in a suicide, and Lorca provides us with a nice kernel of a moral. As John Corbin facetiously puts it in his essay “Lorca’s Casa,” if Bernarda, “...had had a more enlightened attitude towards sex, if she had treated it as a simple physical pleasure... then everything would have been all right.”

But this reductive reading does the play a disservice. Lorca was also a politically charged individual writing right before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. A staunch antifascist, Lorca wrote a play that gave us a microcosm of fascism in the form of Bernarda’s household. Yes, sexual repression infected the lives of her daughters, but it was a symptom of a larger political repression and domination enacted in the name of stability and propriety. It is also a play firmly rooted in a

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concrete world. Lorca grew up in rural Spain, specifically the region of Andalusia, and the village where the play takes place is almost journalistic in its attention to realism. While poetry and sensuality are certainly a key component of the play’s success and beauty, we must balance that with the harsh realism and politics the play also possesses.

Lorca completed in the play in 1936, a period of mass political upheaval in Spain. In 1931, the military dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera was overthrown. Republicans of all political factions (in this case, the term *republican* refers to anyone who supported the creation of a republic, a desire that transcended particular party lines) came together to build a new republic at what was called the Pact of San Sebastián. In April, elections were held, and the republicans came away with an overwhelming victory. Two days later, they proclaimed the establishment of the Second Republic, King Alfonso XIII went into exile, and by the end of the year, a constitution was written. However, opposition to the new republic began to build, and in 1936, a declaration of opposition to the young republic was issued by a group of generals in the Spanish Republican Armed Forces. Various conservative groups, such as fascists and monarchists, supported the rebellion, and thus the Spanish Civil War began. It lasted for three years, and by the end, a group of rebels called the Nationalists took power. Their general, Francisco Franco, came to power, and he would rule Spain for almost four decades.2

Lorca, after living abroad, came back to Spain when the Second Republic was founded. He became the head of a theatre company that toured the rural parts of

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Spain, presenting modern interpretations of Spanish classics, with the intention of bringing theatre to culturally impoverished parts of the country. The company was, in part, funded by federal money. Lorca’s commitment to social justice sprung into existence during this time. He said, “The theatre is a school of weeping and of laughter, a free forum, where men can question norms that are outmoded or mistaken and explain with living example the eternal norms of the human heart.”

In addition to his advocacy for the arts, he was a member of the Popular Front, the Marxist party in Spain. He was an outspoken socialist during his lifetime, something that worried him gravely as Franco’s nationalist forces gained more power. Three days before the Spanish Civil War broke out, fascists assassinated Lorca.

Knowing that Lorca was a socialist unlocks many of the textual workings of *Bernarda Alba*. To begin with, we have a small town of meager conditions. Everyone is confined by class, exercising what little power they have. Bernarda is not a lone tyrant in the play, though she is certainly the one that glowers most impressively. Bernarda Alba’s land affords her some semblance of power; she then dominates her maid Poncia, who in turn dominates the unnamed servant. The servant takes this a step further in Act I, when she dominates a beggar woman who comes around asking for scraps. The servant refuses, saving the scraps for herself, thus asserting authority over the one person with less power than her. A hierarchical organization captures all of these characters. Poncia is, like the daughters, a victim and prisoner of the house. She and Bernarda are not two old acquaintances who begin to spar over the course of the play. The growing fissure between the two is exacerbated by

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4 Gibson
Poncia’s economic confinement. This understanding of class also elucidates Bernarda’s obsession with idle gossip about her family. Status is one of the few goods she can hold onto in this world, and she must protect it fiercely. Sexual impropriety is only one of the myriad ways her daughters could disgrace the family name.

As an antifascist, Lorca observed how repressive, conservatives lives buttressed a flawed political system. Family is a critical unit in fascism. It maintains order and provides everyone with a clearly delineated role. Bernarda is always preoccupied with maintaining the structure of her family. She may not have loved her second husband all that much, but she behaves like a proper widow. Pepe el Romano may not love Angustias, but marriage between them would be a greater success than some love affair between him and Adela. Bernarda’s insistence that the family remain intact is pure fascism. In Act II, Bernarda remarks, “I don’t ‘think.’ There are things you can’t and shouldn’t think. I command.”5 This mindset, which prioritizes order over free though, exemplifies fascism, where the main concern is security.

At the end of Act II, the men and women in the village attack the daughter of Bernarda’s neighbor Limbrada. Poncia informs the family that the woman had a baby out of wedlock, then killed and buried the child in shame. A dog dug up the corpse, thus revealing the woman’s transgression. Bernarda rushes out to the mob, proclaiming, “Let them all come and kill her... Finish her off before the police arrive!

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A red-hot coal for her sin.”\(^6\) The simplistic reading makes this about Bernarda’s discomfort with sex. But if this was Lorca’s point, the only sin the woman would have needed to commit for Bernarda to hate her would have been to have a baby out of wedlock. Her greatest sin is that through the recklessness of all of her actions (not just the action of having sex), she invites chaos into the village. And there is no greater threat to a fascist structure than chaos. It is not just Bernarda who is afraid of this chaos; the whole town is. This is why the mob attacks. So while sexual repression is what colors the particular proceedings of this play, it is intertwined with a larger political repression, and stems from an impervious conservative culture, not Bernarda’s personal hang-ups.

Lorca knew this culture intimately. He grew up in rural Spain, in the Andalusia region, and was highly attuned to the customs of the area. Corbin, who is an anthropologist, writes of how much the play surprises him with its ethnographic realism. Bernarda’s behavior (arranging marriages, concern with her daughters’ sex lives, focus on status) is typical of the region. Lorca’s accuracy extends to the religious customs, and even the foods consumed. At one point in Act I, Bernarda references a “plate full of chickpeas,” a quintessentially Andalusian food. However, sometimes translators change this to “a plate full of beans,” thus missing the cultural exactitude of the dish.\(^7\) This exactitude extends to larger dramatic choices Lorca made. When Bernarda and the other women in the village come back from the funeral, they recite the mass for the dead, a Catholic tradition. It is critical to acknowledge that this world is authentically Catholic, which Lorca reveals through

\(^6\) Edwards and Lorca 85
\(^7\) Edwards and Lorca liii
actual rituals, not mere descriptions or references to their faith. While a highly theatrical moment, it also should be performed with precision. The Latin should be correct, their gestures accurate. Details like these cannot be glossed over in performance. Treating this as a fable, a story that is all concocted theatrical style, rather than a play governed by actual cultural rules, is a trap. Lorca had profound sympathy for the genuine repression and hardships suffered by the women in rural Spain, and this will not come through if the world does not feel grounded in fact. Accuracy and specificity, not obfuscation and ambiguity, are how the world of this play is works.

_La casa de Bernarda Alba_ is, like most of Lorca’s work, plagued by problematic translations. The burden of the translator of this play is twofold – they must overcome American misconceptions of Lorca the Dramatist and Poet as well as grapple with _Bernarda Alba’s_ odd position in his dramatic canon. Lorca is one of the most frequently translated poets and dramatists from Spain, and has ended up with the preposterous burden of having to represent the total essence of Spanish culture. When American audiences attend a production of a Lorca play, the expectation is not simply that we’ll see a play dramatizing or grappling with a facet of Spanish life, but rather we’ll see a play that gives us the totality of the Spanish experience. It will be a play brimming with eroticism and exoticism, bubbling with desert imagery and a primitive, flamenco pulse. And through the narrow window of a singular work of art, it will feed us every fuzzy conception we have about the mystical lands of Spain.

Lorca’s work was first translated into English in the forties, after his death. His popularity peaked in the fifties, when the Beat poets took him as an inspiration,
often acting as his early translators. In his book *Apocryphal Lorca*, Jonathan Mayhew
examines the image of Lorca the Poet the United States has constructed, an image
that is not genuinely Spanish, but an American perception of Spanish identity.
Mayhew writes, “...Lorca has been cast in the roles of the childlike innocent, the
naïve neopopularist, the primitive poet of myth, the gypsy singer of the *cante jondo*
and the duende, and the surrealist channeler of unconscious urges.”
He goes on to characterize this misconstruction as a desire the Beat poets had for a primitive poet,
an anti-intellectual who wrote from the heart, not the mind. Further exacerbating
this was their obsession with Lorca the man, the mysterious, the homosexual. Poetry
about Lorca, or in the style of Lorca, was popular at the time. Sometimes poets
would even take on Lorca as an alter ego, and write a poem from his point of view.
The author became as important as the text, and all of Lorca’s works became
intertwined with this crystalized, shallow persona Americans had deemed to be the
authentic representation of Lorca.  

Lorca’s English translations were highly influenced by the concept of *duende*,
an indefinable term that broadly refers to the spirit of an artwork. Lorca himself
popularized the term himself in a talk he gave entitled “Theory and Play of the
*Duende.*” He said:

> All through Andalusia, from the rock of Jaén to the snail’s-shell of Cadiz,
people constantly talk about the *duende* and recognise it wherever it appears
with a fine instinct... The great artists of Southern Spain, Gypsy or flamenco,
singers dancers, musicians, know that emotion is impossible without the
arrival of the *duende*... The magic power of a poem consists in it always being
filled with *duende*, in its baptising all who gaze at it with dark water, since

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8 Mayhew, Jonathan. *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch.* Chicago:

9 Mayhew 22-52
with *duende* it is easier to love, to understand, and be certain of being loved, and being understood.\(^\text{10}\) 

*Duende* became the buzzword for discussing Lorca, which is understandable, as he was a child of rural Andalusia, home to a large gypsy population. He was enamored of their primeval brand of spirituality, hence his obsession with *duende*. His work reveals a lyrical writer, concerned with high theatrics and, yes, magic. His earlier plays were boldly expressionistic, incorporating puppetry, fable and stylized aesthetics (Salvador Dali, in fact, did some of the sets). In his play *The Shoemaker’s Wonderful Wife*, he wrote a prologue about the need for magic and poetry on the modern stage. Lorca himself performed this prologue in the original production.\(^\text{11}\)

But this has often become the exclusive issue when discussing Lorca’s work, which essentially flattens him into a florid, bloodless poet. Mayhew points out that “Theory and Play of the *Duende*” is at the core of all analysis of Lorca’s work, but the essay itself is a dense, metaphorical document that belies easy interpretation. It is an essay that must be analyzed on its own terms, not just used as the tool to unlock the secrets of Lorca’s canon.\(^\text{12}\) If the essay is read superficially, one might assume that Lorca is a spiritualist poet, only interested in an elusive artistic energy (*duende*) that is found though emotional commitment, not careful construction of art. This is not the way to deal with *Bernarda Alba*. In fact, ignores Lorca’s own note about the play, “The poet points out that these three acts are intended to be a photographic

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\(^{11}\) Edwads and Lorca xli.

\(^{12}\) Mayhew 14
This is a carefully structured play with a purpose, not a poetic musing written on a whim.

“Photographic commentary” would not have been the way to describe Lorca’s previous plays, which can generally be acknowledged as anti-naturalistic.

Lorca aligned himself with the symbolist school of theatre; interested in the internal life of dreams and fantasies. But Bernarda Alba is a part of what critics call Lorca’s “rural trilogy,” including Blood Wedding and Yerma. These plays’ concrete settings and sociocultural plots were a shift for Lorca. But even Blood Wedding and Yerma, while more realistic then his early fantastical works, employ archetype and symbolism more generously than Bernarda Alba does.

In Bernarda Alba, his trademark poetry is present, and his attention to imagery remains (for example, he dictates that the house should be entirely white, with all black costumes, save for Adela’s green dress). But it is still an accurate account of the life of rural Spain – the importance of religion, the paltry conditions, and the sharply demarcated class divides. In fact, Bernarda Alba and her five daughters have historical counterparts. Lorca based them on his neighbors with whom he never spoke when he was a child. There is a telling moment at the top of Act III, when Bernarda is discussing the horses in her stable. Poncia cuts in, “She’s got the best stable in the whole region. A pity the prices are low.” Bernarda may not admit to financial problems, but Lorca builds in these references to economic conditions to contextualize Bernarda’s struggle as a recent widow running her own

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13 Edwads and Lorca 3  
14 Edwards and Lorca xvi  
15 Edwards and Lorca 89
This is not a fairytale about a mother who locked her daughters away in a tower. The family may be isolated from the town, but the story does not occur in a vacuum. Through small details Lorca reveals the larger societal infrastructure. In the first scene, for example, before Bernarda has been onstage, Poncia and another servant in the household discuss the funeral that was just held for Bernarda’s late husband. The two women gripe about Bernarda’s treatment of them, and Poncia reveals that none of the husband’s family came to the funeral because of their hatred for Bernarda. Thus, Bernarda’s reputation in and relation to the society at large defines her as much as her onstage actions define her. Details like this establish her as a social being, not just a theatrical monster.

The translation is of central concern in shaping how the drama will be received. Will it be an easy string of clichés or an incisive portrait of a rural community? The translator needs to balance the lush poetry without letting that poison the more colloquial dialogue. The play has a terser, coarser style than we often assume. The original Spanish is much simpler than our ostentations translations let on. And the specificity of Lorca’s language cannot be replaced by vague approximations. Take, for instance, the final fight between Adela and Martirio in Act III. My rough translation (which is intentionally very literal) of Martirio’s line is, “Yes! Let me say it with my head out in the open. Yes! Let my heart break like a bitter pomegranate. I love him!” Notice that even in this unrefined translation the language reveals itself as concise, exact, not overtly poetical except for the pomegranate imagery. It’s heightened, but not lush. There have been two major translations of *Bernarda Alba*. The first, by James Graham-Lujan, translates the line
as, “Yes! Let me say it without hiding my head. Yes! My breast’s bitter, bursting like a pomegranate. I love him!”¹⁶ The choice to use the phrase “hiding my head” is smart. In Spanish, Martirio is using a colloquial phrase that does not translate well into English, so Graham-Lujan finds the closest idiomatic replacement rather than using a word-for-word translation. But then we have the choice of the word “breast.” In Spanish, the word is pecho, which could mean heart, or breast. The linguistic juxtaposition in the original language evokes a powerful emotional turmoil for Martirio. Choosing to translate it to heart strips away some complexity to be sure, but choosing “breast” reduces this moment to mere sexual repression, a danger especially when dealing with one of the climactic moments of the play. The fight is an eruption of years of resentment, not a catfight between two heated-up hussies.

The other translation, by Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata, translates the section as follows, “Yes! Let me say it openly. Yes! Let my breast explode like a bitter pomegranate. I love him!”¹⁷ “Let me say it openly,” while certainly smoother than my rough translation, feels more formal than Graham-Lujan’s choice. It is certainly more formal the original Spanish. This translation also falls into the trap of choosing breast.

Another passage in Act II is worth analyzing for its use of language. The five daughters and Poncia are listening to the reapers in town who are passing by their window, singing. My rough translation is as follows:

Martirio: They reap in blazes.
Adela: I would like to reap so I could come and go. So I’d forget what gnaws at us.
Chorus: (singing)
Open doors and windows,
You girls who live in the town.
The reaper asks for roses
To adorn his hat.

There are a few problems with this passage. The first is the line “They reap in blazes.” The original word for blazes, *llamaradas*, refers to a flare-up of fire, and does not have an exact English translation. “Flares” or “blazes” are close options. In Graham-Lujan's translation, the word is “flames.” In Dewell and Zapata’s, they choose “blazing heat.” The problem is that the original Spanish invokes fire, which Graham-Lujan maintains, while Dewell and Zapata only invoke heat. The play is peppered with references to the elements, so it is important not to lose such a strong elemental image. Then there is the word “reap.” The original word, *segar*, can also mean harvest. Graham-Lujan uses the word “reap” in both Adela’s line and the song. Dewell and Zapata used “harvest” in both instances. But the “reaper” in the song is meant to be ambiguous – it may refer to the reapers in town, or it may refer to the grim reaper. Since the play is a tragedy that ends with Adela’s death, “reaper” resonates across the play while “harvester” has a more limited meaning. And finally there is the “hat” in the song. In the original Spanish, the word is *sombrero*. Dewell and Zapata use the word *sombrero* in their English version, so the line reads, “Roses to trim their sombreros.” However, that implies that the song is referencing a

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18 Graham-Lujan, Lorca and O’Connell 185
19 Dewell, Lorca and Zapata 242
20 Graham-Lujan, Lorca and O’Connell 185
21 Dewell, Lorca and Zapata 242
22 Dewell, Lorca and Zapata 242
Mexican sombrero, which is culturally inaccurate. In Spain, sombrero means any hat with a wide brim. In fact, if it were a reference to a Mexican sombrero, it would have been sombrero mexicano. Using the word sombrero in the English blurs the Andalusian setting, and suggests a world that is just an amalgamation of Latin and Spanish tropes. Graham-Lujan translates sombrero as “crown.”

While not an accurate word-to-word translation, it is a grander image that “hat,” but fits into the world of the play, unlike “sombrero.” This play requires sensitivity to a number of seemingly incongruous components: realism and poetry, sexuality and economic conditions, political reality and theatrical style. But Lorca had done much aesthetic exploration by the time he wrote Bernarda Alba. It was a natural progression that he would write a play that could sustain so much structural contradiction, contradiction that the translation must maintain.

The play premiered in Buenos Aires, nine years after it was completed, and six years after his death. Early in his career, Lorca befriended an actress named Margarita Xirgu, who went on to play the lead in a number of his premieres. Xirgu had a theatre company in Buenos Aires, so often his work premiered there, rather than in Spain, so that she could play the lead role. Xirgu was the director and played the role of Bernarda Alba in the premiere production. At the end of the play on opening night, Xirgu addressed the audience, “He [Lorca] wanted this play to be premiered here... but he wanted to be present and destiny has prevented it... A curse on war!” The play served as a reminder of the specter of the Spanish Civil War, and Xirgu was unafraid to tie the play to its antifascist politics. While this

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23 Graham-Lujan, Lorca and O’Connell 185
24 Edwards and Lorca xlv
historical immediacy could not be maintained, it does seem that as time went on, as the Spanish Civil War faded from collective conscious, new Western productions were less concerned with the political climate from which it emerged. One of the first American productions was at the Encore Theater in San Francisco in 1963. Reviews for the show focused on the strength of the play’s style and language, drawing little attention to the politics of the play. This loss of texture was unfortunate since that did not seem to happen in Spain, where the ramifications of the war were still brutally clear. It finally had its Spanish premier a year after the San Francisco production, in 1964, at the Teatro Goya. The director, Juan Antonio Bardem, wrote about the class relations and Bernarda’s role in the play as tyrant and mother, in his preparatory notes. Reviews praised the play’s “stylized realism,” an apt classification that indicates that this production caught the various artistic nuances of the play.

The play is a magnificently protean entity, which is both its intrigue and Achilles’ heel. It is easy to play fast and loose with cultural accuracy, and swaddle the audience in a comforting blanket of stereotypes. The challenge of any production of *Bernarda Alba* is to overcome the play’s checkered past as a sexual potboiler. Instead, we must honor Lorca’s reformist spirit, prevent the play from tipping into exploitative territory, and present the horrifying realities, political urgency and unsentimental poetry that are at the heart of this tragedy.

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25 Edwards and Lorca xlviii
26 Edwards and Lorca xlv
Works Consulted


This was my primary source I used for researching the history of the Spanish Civil War, and the events leading up to it. It gave me a great overview especially of the last ten years of the Second Spanish Republic.


While I disagreed with some of Corbin’s analysis, his essay on the anthropological precision of the play sparked my interested in studying the play’s debt to Lorca’s upbringing in Andalusia.

Dewell, Michael, Federico García Lorca, and Carmen Zapata.


This was one of the most popular and well-known translations of the play. I used it for my translation comparison.

Edwads, Gwynne, and Federico García Lorca.


While this translation is less well known, I consider it to be superior to the more popular translations, and it helped me write my
translation section. The lengthy preface provided me with substantial background on Lorca’s concerns when he wrote the play. The preface also included a production history that I incorporated into my paper.


This was the book that gave me an introduction to the biographical details of Lorca’s life.


This was the other translation of the play I used in my essay, and also one of more popular translations available.


This is Lorca’s essay on duende. Since it is such a critical term in his work, this essay helped begin to clarify the role of duende in his own art.

Lorca, Federico García, and Christopher Maurer.


Although this book is about Lorca’s poetry, it is one of the most in-depth examinations of the problems that have arisen of translating
Lorca into English. In particular, in introduced me to the history of how Lorca has been received in the US, and how American interests have shaped his persona as an author.

Morris, C. Brian. *Son of Andalusia: The Lyrical Landscapes of Federico García Lorca.*
