

Poly-Anthroponomycal Onomastic Technique in *Yerma* by Federico García Lorca

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Literary onomastics functions primarily within a stylistic perspective gyrating in a realm of imaginative prose, poetry, and drama. In this study I consider a third theoretic aspect of literary names, falling within a philosophical framework of Ontology.¹ Within this concept literary names are evaded, implied, insinuated, alluded to, or even go unmentioned. In many instances these anthroponyms are more forceful than literary names that follow formal onomastic concepts. Lorca's most symbolic and dramatic character, embodiment of frustrated parenthood, received renewed international repute with the presentation of *Yerma* in the nude by the Nuria Expert Theatrical Company. Even though there was caustic criticism in the Hispanic World of this portrayal, the personification of the primitive drives and instincts of humans in the world of nature are better portrayed burlesquely, discarding all unnatural elements.²

Through the literary onomastic microscope we see *Yerma* as a powerful masculine force of frustrated universal parenthood, unflinching and determined to fulfill her destiny with violence, even in defiance of physical limitations. Her maternal frustration reaches the epitome of desperation as *Yerma* speaks to the Pagan Crone:³

¹Grace Alvarez-Altman, "Onomastics As A Modern Critical Approach to Literature," *Literary Onomastics Studies* I (1974), 103-117. This study is not an elaboration of the 'redende namen' or the relevance of names to form but an attempt to consider a third theoretic aspect of literary names, falling within a framework of ontology.

²"Mutilación a García Lorca," *Siempre*, June, 1972, p. 10. On page 4 of this Spanish Newspaper, published in New Orleans, La., appears a large picture of the London presentation of *Yerma* represented by the Nuria Expert Company at the Adlwyche Theater. *Yerma*, played by Alicia Day, and Juan, played by Enrique Mayo, appear in the nude. This scandalized the Hispanic World, but its presentation in the large cities in the U.S. (N.Y.C., Washington, D.C., etc.) was well received.

³James Graham-Luján and Richard L. O'Connell, *Three Tragedies: Blood Wedding, Yerma, Bernarda Alba*. All quotations from the play *Yerma* in English are taken from this translation. However, at times to emphasize an onomastic concept, I give my own.

. . . for I'll do anything you tell me, even to sticking needles in the weakest part of my eyes. (I, 1, p. 112)

García Lorca's technique in nominology is versatile and unique. Common everyday objects he liked to call by fantastic and capricious names, many times invented ones, while poetic things he called by their proper substantive names. At the premier of *Yerma*, Lorca explained how his characters were authentically realistic and his themes rigorously authentic, taken from his personal observations. In *Yerma's* poetic atmosphere the secondary characters have greater individuality than in his other plays by making the poetic reality purer, for they no longer live submissive to forces extraneous and superior to themselves, but with themselves as centers. The Pagan Crone and Yerma, for example, choose their own roads in deciding their destiny.

Over twenty characters are included in this play only for the sake of action, just as the only legitimate use of color in painting is to support the finished likeness. The lyric poetry, in which most of the characters express themselves, is vibrantly reminiscent of dramatic Greek poetry:

Greek tragedy was written before there was such a thing as 'philosophy'. Dramatic poetry was the only medium known to the fifth century Greeks for practicing that activity which has usually been called philosophy, coming to terms with the meaning of life.⁴

Within the heritage of Lorca's native Granada is the belief that the "other-than-man-powers" that supervise the order of the world on occasion make use of humans in the performance of this supervision, and this for the humans, far from being a loss of freedom, is a mark of special attention or double determination. Poetic actions unequivocally equal representative qualities. Lorca reiterated that to him "the theater was the poetry arisen from the book and made human." In this manner then the theater speaks, screams, cries, and gets desperate:

If in certain scenes the audience doesn't know what to do, whether to laugh or to cry, that will be a success for me.⁵ In the *Pentateuch*, Jacob, in desperation asks, 'Tell me, I pray, thee, thy name.' And he said wherefore is it that thou ask after my name?' (Genesis XXXII. 29).

In answer to this question, Jacob received a blessing and was not killed by his brother Esau for having stolen his birthright. Moses insisted on knowing the name of the mighty God that spoke to him out of the burning bush:

⁴Leo Aylen, *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London, 1964), p. 169.

“I AM that I AM . . . is my name forever and my memorial unto all generations” (Exodus III. 13–15).

Omission of proper names for the Deity is also prevalent in Eastern cultures reminding us of the “privilege myth” of the Sufis. He who knows the true name of god or demon has unlimited powers over the bearer of the name. Basilides, a Gnostic in Alexandria during the second century, propagated the idea that nameless infinities are even more powerful.⁶

Of the thirty characters only five have literary names (Yerma, Juan, María, Victor, Dolores) representing the traditional reality of HONRA vs. FECUNDITY. María, Dolores, Victor and Juan are phases of Yerma’s personality, the individual whose tragic burden is deepened by struggles with the problems of frustrated motherhood of sterility. In Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, Ariel is man’s intellect or the spirit of Prospero, while Caliban is the ugly beastlike slave, or man’s physical aspect. In Spanish literary philosophy Unamuno forges ahead, enlarging upon a quadruple personality of humans. He is the one who after the dress rehearsal of *Yerma* in 1933 exclaimed with great emotion, “That is the play I would have liked to have written.” The four aspects of the personality of an individual according to Unamuno enter into Lorca’s nomenclature:

1. What she thinks she is Yerma-John
2. What the public thinks she is Dolores
3. What she would like to be María-Victor
4. What she really is and only god knows - the subconscious . . . Honra

The nomenclature used by Lorca may be called a polyanthroponomycal technique, in which numerous names are used for the same characters.

Yerma, an ad hoc, purely invented name, is a figment of Lorca’s imagination, for *yerma* (a) is from the Latin *eremus* “desert” and from the Greek “solitary desert,” first used in *El Cid*, 1098. The Sephardic Spanish *yerme* means “rotten or worm-eaten.”⁷ The Greek connotation of the adjective form is “hermitage” and “hermits,” popularized in the Middle Ages by ecclesiastical writers. It is apropos in view of the Hermitage of Act III in which Yerma secludes herself. The infinitive *yerमार* implies “to depopulate,” “lay waste.” In no other word for the Spanish

⁶Francisco García Lorca, “Prologue” in *Three Tragedies of García Lorca* (New York, 1955), p. 13.

⁷A. S. Peake, “Basilides and the Basilideans,,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, II (New York, 1926), p. 136.

language is the primitive, earthy, telluric, barren, fallow, arid, desert land embodied with such dramatic force. Yerma is Lorca himself crying in the wilderness for his son. Obsessed with his yearned-for son, *hijo* appears throughout Lorca's poetry twenty-nine times with the possessive *mi* or *su*, while daughter, *hija*, we read only four times. Yerma is Lorca himself from his poem "Iglesia Abandonada" (Abandoned Church):

Yo tenía un hijo que se llamaba Juan
 El tenía un hijo que no era más que suyo
 porque era su hijo . . . un hijo perdido.
 'Un hijo' 'Un hijo' 'Un hijo'.
 "Su hijo" 'Su hijo' 'Su hijo' '8

I had a son called Juan
 he had a son who was only his
 because it was his son . . .
 a lost son.
 " 'A son' 'A son' 'A son' . . .
 'His son' 'His son' 'His son' '8

When Yerma identifies herself, we are puzzled as to whom or what she represents, but we become convinced that she is only the representative of a universal concept and cosmic force:

I wish I were a woman. (I, 2, p. 119)
 I don't know who I am. (II, 2, p. 130)
 I'll end up believing I am my own child. (II, 2, p. 133)
 When he covers me, he's doing his duty
 but I feel a waist cold as a corpse . . .
 I always hated a passionate woman. (III, 1, p. 140)
 O if I could only have children by myself. (III, 1, p. 140)

John in desperation convincingly appraises Yerma for what she is: ". . . you are not a real woman . . ." (II, 2, p. 130).

A phantom, a cosmic symbol, the embodiment or personification of a forceful power has been given the epithet. Realistically, the play could be called *Yermo* since the most popular theory exposed by Balbuena Prat and others is that the barrenness and sterility lie in John. Therefore, this onomastic unit I of Yerma-Juan is inclusive of the thirty-four critical interpretations studied by Rupert Allen:

. . . ten clearly 'blame' the wife, and twenty-four clearly 'blame' the

⁷Joan Corominas, *Diccionario Crítico Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana* Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1954), IV, p. 775.

husband. The 'causes' may be tabulated as follows: Yerma is sterile - 10; John is sterile - 13; John is 'frigid' - 4; John is 'selfish' - 7.⁹

Act I opens with Yerma dreaming about her future child dressed in pure white led by a shepherd (Jesus), and hurriedly she shouts to John to take milk and nourishment for the sake of conception for it has been twenty-four months and twenty days . . . it must be about to happen. Lorca gave the husband the most popular hagiographic name, belonging to 102 saints according to the *Santoral*.¹⁰ Why not the name Josué (Josiah) "Jehova saves," or José (Joseph) "he will add"? However, the nomen is taken from John, the Hebrew *Yehohona* or *Yohanon* or *Yahve* "benevolent, charitable, merciful," the characteristics that the optimistic Yerma at first thought her husband possessed: ". . . he's my only salvation . . . my only salvation" (III, 1, p. 140).

The second concept of the quadruple onomastic concept is Pains—*Dolores*, the sorcerer street woman whom society associated Yerma with the embodiment of the pains of the Holy Virgin. In the wee hours of dawn she works on Yerma:

May my mouth fill with ants, like the mouths of the dead if I have ever lied.
You will have children. The last time I said prayers with a woman who'd
been dry longer than you and her womb sweetened . . . she had two
children down there at the river. (III, 1, p. 138).

Yerma retorts: "Mine is a pain already beyond the flesh." (III, 2, p. 151).

The hagiographic name *María*, from M-Y-R-A, Hebrew *Miriam* which in the Vulgate appears as *María*, perhaps because of the erroneous conviction that *-am* is an accusative inflection ending, for many centuries was thought to be too sacred in the Hispanic world, and that is why the popular names Consolation, Refuge, Pains, Solitude, etc., were propagated. Many etymologists give "star of the sea" as the connotation of *María*, emphasizing the biblical symbol of multitudes-sea. With *Victor* "conqueror," the third onomastic concept emphasizes Fertility:

FERTILITY

- 1 Pains—physical
- 2 Maria-Victor—physical

VS. STERILITY

- 1 Pains—spiritual
- 2 Yerma-John—spiritual

Ambivalent polarizations of these forces (F.S.) drive Yerma to the

⁸Federico García Lorca, *Obras Completas* 14th Edition (Madrid: Aguilar S. A.; 1968), p. 482–483.

⁹Rupert Allen, *Psyche and Symbol in the Theater of Federico García Lorca* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1974), p. 126.

three D's of dread, dismay and desperation, underlying severe affliction:

Yerma: Oh, breasts, blind beneath my clothes
 Oh, doves with neither eyes nor whiteness
 Oh, what pain of imprisoned blood
 is nailing wasps at my brain's base
 But you will come, sweet love, my baby . . .
 (II,2,p.131)

Male: Seven times she wept
 and nine she rose
 fifteen times they joined
 jasmines with oranges
 (III,2,p.148)

The five-year controversy of Fertility and Sterility reaches an alarming proportion. At times it favors both Fertility or Sterility, focusing on the womb:

Yerma: And our wombs guard tender infants II, 2, p. 131

Only at the end of the play does Sterility carry off the heaviest favorable balance:

Yerma: Barren, barren, but sure. How
 I really know it for sure. And
 alone. (III,2,p.153)

In *Yerma*, the culprit, the most forceful character, cosmic force, ontological impetus, the true victor is a nameless, depersonified entity, so powerful as to render useless all possible solutions to Yerma's problems. This entity causes John's brutal assassination by the overpowering cosmic force of human instinct, that is, the Sterility-Yerma, which some critics believe to have succumbed to "temporary insanity" so that even in modern judicial courts Yerma would not be condemned. Her overt action would transcend reality.

Spanish has two words for the English *honor*: *Honor* is the horizontal-social concept which society bestows on the nobility or wealthy; *Honra* is the vertical concept emanating only from God which all have at birth. In the play, *Honra* is mentioned twelve times; Yerma only four times:

First Old Woman: These are matters of honor. And I don't burn anyone's honor. (I,2,p.113)

Fifth Laundress: Whoever wants a good name (honor) let her earn it. (II,1,p.120)

John (to her sisters-in-law): My life's in the fields, but my honor's here. And my honor is yours too . . . (II,2,p.128).

John (to Yerma): An that families have honor. And that honor is a burden that rests on all. (II,2,p.130).

Yerma (to María): They don't know that even if I should like another man, to those of my kind, honor comes first. (II,2,p.133).

Yerma is in conclave with the sorceress, the Pagan Crone, and speaks in defense of her husband after admitting she doesn't love him: "By honor and by blood" (III,I,p.140). John, who surprises the conclave, wants to yell:

I'd wake up the whole village so they'd see where the good name (honor) of my house has gone to; . . . (III,1,p.141).

Yerma to John in her defense:

You and your people imagine you're the only ones who look for honor, and don't you realize my people have never had anything to conceal. (III,1,p.142)

Yerma to the Old Woman who wishes to solve her problems by offering her son:

Do you imagine I could know another man?
Where would that leave my honor?
Water can't run uphill, nor does the
full moon rise at noonday (III,2,p.151)

Honor is the true main character. In the play, however, *honra* is not even mentioned but only alluded to, which inspired the Expert Nuria Theatrical Company to portray Yerma in the nude. In her outburst before her husband, Yerma speaks:

Come close! See if you can find an odor that's not yours, that's not from your body. Stand me naked in the middle of the square and spit on me. Do what you want with me, since I'm your wife, but take care not to set a man's name in my breast. (III,1,p.142).

The main character in this play, then, is Honra, who triumphs, becomes a God, and is venerated to the point of demanding human sacrifices. Because of its tremendous force Lorca did not personify *honra*, reminding us of Basilidas, agnostic in Alexandria during the second century, who propagated the idea that nameless infinites are more powerful.¹¹ Yerma-Dolores-María and Juan-Victor are overpowered by the God Honra. (see illustration A)

¹⁰Gutierre Tibón, *Diccionario etimológico comparado de nombres propio de persona*. (México: Unión Tipográfica Editorial, 1956), pp. 291, 292, 297.

To my knowledge only two critics have considered the onomastic aspect of Yerma. Robert Skloot in *Drama Survey* writes: “. . . Yerma was born to be barren, as her name indicates . . . and her fate is announced every time her name is mentioned.”¹² Allen Rupert proposes a pseudo-onomastic interpretation when he writes: “As an auditory experience, so to speak, in an acted version of the play, the epithet Marchita finally overwhelms the epithet Yerma, which has been given forth as the title of the play. But in the end one sees, along with Yerma, that the ‘correct’ title is Marchita.” Rupert insists that since the name Yerma is heard only four times during the play (three times by her sisters-in-law and once by Dolores), while in the last two episodes Marchita occurs six times, he concludes that “Marchita” (withered) is the true name of the play.¹³

Analogously it should be valid for me to suggest that the true name of Yerma is the nomen *Seca* “Dry” which appears six times in the play ending in *a* and four times in *o*:

First Laundress: When summer dries the blood . . .
cuando el verano *seca* la sangre
(II,1,p.124)

Yerma: Why am I childless (dry)?
¿Por qué estoy yo *seca*?
(II,1,p.112)

First Laundress: ¡Ay de la casada *seca*!
Alas for the barren (dry) wife!
(II,1,p.124)

First Laundress: Pero, ¡ay de la casada *seca*!
But, alas for the barren wife (dry married woman)!
(II,1,p.126)

Dolores speaks to Yerma trying to remedy her situation:

. . . I said the prayers with a beggar woman who'd been *dry* longer than you. (III,1,p.138)

Pagan Crone: Last year two men killed themselves over a barren (dry) wife Se mataron dos por una casada *seca* (III,2,p.144)

The most convincing references as to the true name of Yerma being *Seca(o)* are:

¹¹See note 6 above.

¹²Robert Skloot, “Theme and Image in Lorca’s Yerma,” *Drama Survey* 5 (1966), p. 157.

¹³Rupert Allen, p. 156.

- Second Male: Ay, con el vientre *seco*
 Alas, with her dry womb
 (III,2,p.147)
- Yerma: Yo soy como un campo *seco*
 I'm like a dry field
 (III,2,p.151)
- Yerma: Con el cuerpo *seco* para siempre
 My body *dry* forever
 (III,2,p.153)

The play ends with Yerma calling herself *Cuerpo seco* and not *Marchita*. If *Marchita* had been intended by Lorca to be Yerma's true name, the second *Marchita* in the final episode would have started with a capital letter as are all proper nouns in Spanish. Furthermore, the intrinsic connotation of *Marchita*, "withered," implies that at one time nature was fertile and fresh. However, Yerma was never permitted the joy of fertility at any time for she was truly dried up always and forever — the dryness of the desert tumbling weed.

The five anonymical characters in Act I (child, shepherd, pagan crone, first girl who is fertile, second girl who is sterile) are poetic shadows that constitute a powerful realistic phenomenon. In Act II the nine additional innominate surrealist characters (six laundresses, first girl, baby, two sisters-in-law) are included only for the sake of action just as legitimate use of color in painting supports the finished likeness. The eleven additional single or collective nameless characters in Act III (first old woman, second old woman, pagan crone, first girl, women chorus, seven girls, live-mask-female) with the others add up to twenty-five characters. Lorca used them as the kaleidoscopic imaginings, yearnings, and dreams of Yerma to be seen and heard in song and recitations, an anticipation of a great event:

- First Laundress: A tiny child, one.
 Second Laundress: An infant weeps, a son
 Fifth Laundress: Joy, joy, joy
 of the swollen womb beneath the dress!
 Second Laundress: Joy, joy, joy
 The waist can miracle possess!
 (II,2,p.126)

The following thoughts however do not show much optimism:

- Male: Ah, how white the sorrowing wife!
 How she was shining,
 ah, how the sad wife sways!

- Third Man: Strike her now with the horn!
(III,2,p.148)
- Boy: Strike her now with the wind!
- Second Man: Strike her now with the branch.
(III,2,p.149)
- Children: The devil and his wife!
The devil and his wife!
- Second Man: Ah, with her withered womb
and her color shattered!
(III,2,p.147)

Two masks, one of each sex, that are not in any way grotesque, but of great beauty and with a feeling of pure earth, introduce the dancing, shouting and singing, implanting the spectacle of dramatic vision, that is, the “other-than-human-powers” that supervise the order of the world. We reiterate here that poetic actions unequivocally equal representative qualities. Since the poetry arisen from the book and made human lies in the twenty-five purely poetic characters, Lorca chose not to give them proper names.

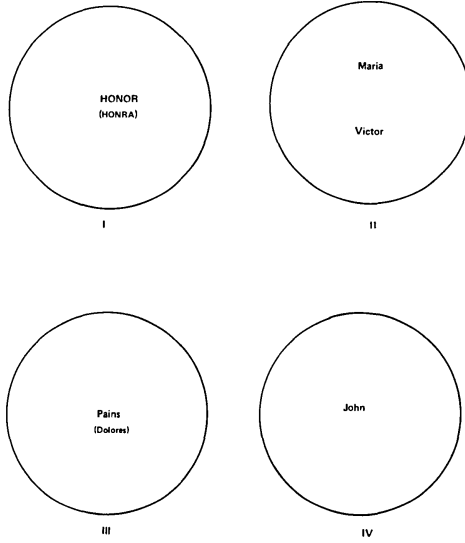
The World of Nature within this onomastic concept is the creative and controlling force in the universe acting as a guiding intelligence, an inner driving or prompting (instinct, appetite, desire) pinpointing the normality, especially prescribed by natural laws for sexual relations generating fertility. The Yerma-John ambivalence of sterility is the axle of the onomastic wheel gyrated by the María-Victor cosmic force of fertility (see illustration B).

The true protagonist in this play, understood within the literary onomastics typology of relevance to ontology, is Honra (the vertical emanation from God) who overpowers and overshadows the five characters (María-Juan-Dolores-Victor-Yerma) following the Judeo-Christian onomastic concept in the ingenious nomenclature of García Lorca.

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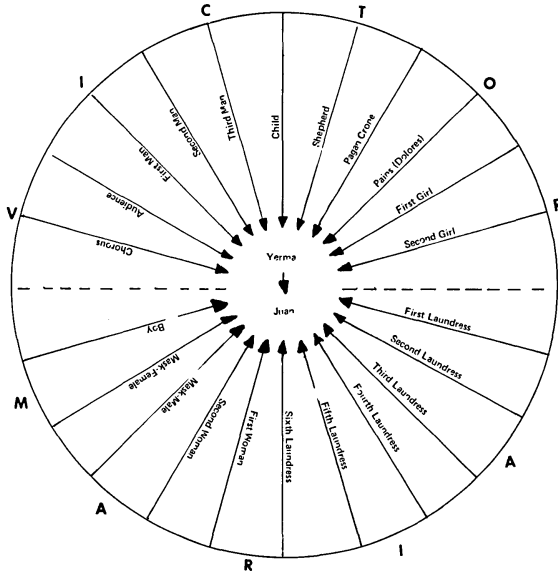
YERMA

UNIVERSAL PARENTHOOD



(A)

POLYANTHROPONOMICAL TECHNIQUE



(B)

Yerma