

## *Yerma* vis-à-vis Aristotle's *Poetics*

I'm now going to finish *Yerma*, my second tragedy. The first was *Blood Wedding*. *Yerma* will be the tragedy of the barren woman. The theme, as you know, is classical. But I want it to have a new development and intention. A tragedy with four main characters and a chorus, the way tragedies should be. We have to go back to the genre of the tragedy. The tradition of our dramatic theatre compels us to go back. There will be ample time to write comedies and farses. In the meantime, I want to give the theatre tragedies. *Yerma*, which I'm finishing now, will be the second tragedy. (García Lorca, *Obras completas* 1709 my own translation)

These were the words expressed by the Spanish poet and playwright Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) with respect to *Yerma*, the second play of his rural trilogy, which premiered on 29 December 1934 in Madrid. Lorca envisioned his play as being a return to the theatrical womb of the Western world, that is, the classical Greek tragedy. However, certain critics have questioned Lorca's assertion. For example, Jacqueline Minett is of the opinion that "Notwithstanding Lorca's claim to have kept to the canons of the Classical tragedy, *Yerma* is much less closely linked in spirit and form to the Greek model than the author suggests" (36).

What is the truth? Who is right? In order to answer these questions I believe it apropos to go back to one of the first critics of the tragedy, namely, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). This article will thus look at the points of contact between *Yerma* and the *Poetics*. Did Lorca adhere to the principles of tragedy delineated by Aristotle in his notebook over 2,000 years ago? This is the question that I will attempt to answer. Naturally, due to limits in space, I will not be able to discuss all the elements that Aristotle noted, but I will endeavour to emphasize the most salient aspects of the classical Greek tragedy.

One of the first principles described in the *Poetics* was that of the length of a tragedy. According to Aristotle "tragedy

attempts as far as possible to keep within one revolution of the sun or [only] to exceed this a little, but epic is unbounded in time; it does differ in this respect, even though [the poets] at first composed in the same way in tragedies as in epics" (7). Thus Aristotle believed that a tragedy should last no longer than twenty-four hours.

Obviously Lorca did not respect this Aristotelian principle in *Yerma* since Yerma and Juan have already been married for two years at the beginning of the play and it ends three years later. Yet even though *Yerma* does not adhere to this precept, we will see that in other more important aspects Lorca was loyal to the classical tragedy as it was practised in ancient Greece.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle offered his students a definition of the tragedy:

Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions. By "embellished speech", I mean that which has rhythm and melody, i.e. song; by "with its elements separately", I mean that some [parts of it] are accomplished only by means of spoken verses, and others again by means of song. (7-8)

In my estimation there are three key elements in this definition: 1. "a representation of a serious, complete action", 2. the fact that the catharsis is effected "by means of pity and terror", and 3. "rhythm and melody, i.e. song".

The first element is self-explanatory; the second and third require a further explanation. Valentín García Yebra, who has translated the *Poetics* into Spanish, clarified the third aspect by explaining that Aristotle was not solely referring to musical instruments, but rather to a feeling of sweetness or softness of sound. Thus "melody can occur not only with instrumental music, but also in song and even in free verse" (García Yebra 265 my own translation). Even though, as Ildefonso Manuel-Gil has noted "Only one-sixth of *Yerma* is written in verse" (23 my own translation), any spectator or reader can appreciate the poetic character of this drama, and of all of Lorca's works in general. In fact, *Yerma* commences with a song:

A la nana, nana, nana,  
 a la nanita le haremos  
 una chocita en el campo  
 y en ella nos meteremos. (1.1.41)

(For the nurse, nurse, nurse, / For the little nurse we'll make / A tiny hut out in the fields / And there we'll shelter take.)

The second act as well begins with a song by the laundresses:

En el arroyo frío  
 lavo tu cinta,  
 como un jazmín caliente  
 tienes la risa. (2.1.66)

(Here in this icy current / let me wash your lace, / just like a glowing jasmine / is your laughing face.)

And also the last scene of the play begins with an erotic song:

No te pude ver  
 cuando eras soltera,  
 mas de casada  
 te encontraré.  
 Te desnudaré  
 casada y romera,  
 cuando en lo oscuro  
 las doces den. (3.1.99)

(You I never could see / when you were fancy free, / but now that you're a wife / I'll find you, yes, / and take off your dress, / you, pilgrim and a wife / when night is dark all' round, / when midnight starts to sound.)

It is true that the Greek tragedy was never written in prose (García Yebra 265), yet Lorca was able to create, through verse and song, a poetic milieu full of rhythm, harmony and melody in the style of the classical tragedy.

The second aspect that I underlined was the phenomenon of catharsis or purgation, which is definitely a vital point of the tragedy. In fact for Richard H. Palmer, "The crux of the definition [of tragedy] lies in the concept of *katharsis*" (24). In the *Poetics* Aristotle indicated the conditions needed to effect pity and terror. As he taught his students, the protagonist's character was fundamental in order to produce those emotions:

first, clearly, it should not show (i) decent men undergoing a change from good fortune to misfortune; for this is neither terrifying nor pitiable, but shocking. Nor [should it show] (ii) wicked men [passing] from misfortune to good fortune. This is most untragic of all, as it has nothing satisfying nor pitiable nor terrifying. Nor, again, [should it show] (iii) a thoroughly villainous person falling from good fortune into misfortune: such a structure can contain moral satisfaction, but not pity or terror, for the former is [felt] for a person undeserving of his misfortune, and the latter for a person like [ourselves]. Consequently the outcome will be neither pitiable nor terrifying.

There remains, then, the person intermediate between these. Such a person is one who neither is superior [to us] in virtue and justice, nor undergoes a change to misfortune because of vice and wickedness, but because of some error, and who is one of those people with a great reputation and good fortune, e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes and distinguished men from similar families. (16)

This long quotation shows that Aristotle believed that the tragic protagonist should be someone who is in between wickedness and virtue. García Yebra reaffirmed this point by stating:

The most suitable person for being the protagonist of a tragedy is one who is in between the two extremes of virtue and wickedness. This type of person has the two conditions needed in order to excite our pity and our fear: our pity, since he is not so bad that he deserves misfortune; our fear, because he is similar to us. (283-284 my own translation)

By following these precepts, Lorca was able to provoke the pity and fear required to effect the catharsis.

It seems obvious that the catharsis takes place at both the level of the protagonist and the audience, yet this is a disputable matter; for example, Palmer believes that the Aristotelian tendency was to consider art from the audience's perspective. Thus the catharsis represents the audience's response to the action taking place on stage (Palmer 22).

There is no doubt that the audience feels relieved emotionally when Yerma kills her husband. Aristotle, in fact, believed that the poet should put himself in the spectator's place:

In constructing his plots and using diction to bring them to completion, [the poet] should put [the events] before his eyes as much as he

can. In this way, seeing them very vividly as if he were actually present at the actions [he represents], he can discover what is suitable, and is least likely to miss contradictions. (22)

Indeed, Aristotle had already expressed this belief when he underlined the importance of the plot vis-à-vis the audience: "For the plot should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, someone who hears about the incidents will shudder and feel pity at the outcome" (17). And we definitely fear and pity Yerma.

Nevertheless, I believe that the catharsis also occurs at the protagonist's level. I base my argument on the word "emotions", which García Yebra has cited as a synonym of "illness" (386). I've italicized this word because, in my opinion, Yerma suffers an illness, which is not only her infertility. Basically her illness consists of her obstinacy in not recognizing her fate. Thus her illness is a psychological one. We shall now see how the text points toward this fact.

Her illness is established within the text from the beginning of the play. The first thing that the audience observes is the external manifestation of what Yerma is dreaming:

Al levantarse el telón está Yerma dormida con un tabanque de costura a los pies. La escena tiene una extraña luz de sueño. Un pastor sale de puntillas mirando fijamente a Yerma. Lleva de la mano a un niño vestido de blanco. Suena el reloj. Cuando sale el pastor la luz se cambia por una alegre luz de mañana de primavera. Yerma se despierta. (1.1.41)  
(When the curtain rises Yerma is asleep with an embroidery frame at her feet. The stage is in the strange light of a dream. A Shepherd enters on tiptoe looking fixedly at Yerma. He leads by the hand a Child dressed in white. The clock sounds. When the Shepherd leaves, the light changes into the happy brightness of a spring morning. Yerma awakes.)

Lorca insistently emphasizes Yerma's maternal desires through the asides and verses. This desire gradually turns into desperation:

(El marido sale y Yerma se dirige a la costura, se pasa la mano por el vientre, alza los brazos en un hermoso bostezo y sienta a coser.

¿De dónde vienes, amor, mi niño?

«De la cresta del duro frío.»  
 ¿Qué necesitas, amor, mi niño?  
 «La tibia tela de tu vestido.»

...  
 ¿Cuándo, mi niño, vas a venir? (1.1.45)

(The husband leaves. Yerma walks toward her sewing. She passes her hand over her belly, lifts her arms in a beautiful sigh, and sits down to sew.

From where do you come, my love, my baby?/"From the mountains of icy cold."/What do you lack, sweet love, my baby?/

"The woven warmth in your dress."/.../When boy, when will you come to me?)

Given this desperate situation, I believe that the play consists of a process toward self-discovery. Yerma passes through various stages in order to find out the truth about herself. Lorca's protagonist wishes to find out the reason why the son she so desires cannot become a reality.

At the beginning of the play, it seems that Yerma is quite confident that she will have a son; it is only a question of patience. Yet in her first conversation with María, one immediately becomes aware of her preoccupation with time; Yerma anguishes over the fact that she's been married for exactly "two years and twenty days" and she still has no son.

Yerma tries to rationalize the reason for her sense of emptiness. And right from the start, Yerma seems to blame her husband when she tells him in a desperate tone: "A mí me gustaría que fueras al río y nadaras y que te subieras al tejado cuando la lluvia cala nuestra vivienda. Veinticuatro meses llevamos casados, y tú cada vez más triste, más enjuto, como si crecieras al revés" (1.1.42) ("I'd like to see you go to the river and swim or climb up on the roof when the rain beats down on our house. Twenty-four months we've been married and you only get sadder, thinner, as if you were growing backwards"). I find this to be ironic because, as we will discover, she is also ill, even though she does not realize it until the end of the play.

Yerma's suspicion about Juan is confirmed by the Old Woman, who refers to Juan as a "rotted seed": "Aunque debía haber Dios, aunque fuera pequeñito, para que mandara rayos

contra los hombres de simiente podrida que encharcan la alegría de los campos" (1.2.57) ("Though there should be a God, even a tiny one, to send his lightning against those men of rotted seed who make puddles out of the happiness of the fields"). Yerma accepts this accusation, and reaffirms it when she speaks with Dolores:

¡Es bueno! ¡Es bueno! ¿Y qué? Ojalá fuera malo. Pero no. El va con sus ovejas por sus caminos y cuenta el dinero por las noches. Cuando me cubre cumple con su deber, pero yo le noto la cintura fría como si tuviera el cuerpo muerto y yo, que siempre he tenido asco de las mujeres calientes, quisiera ser en aquel instante como una montaña de fuego. (3.1.92-93)

(He's good! He's good! But what of it? I wish he were bad. But, no. He goes out with his sleep over his trails, and counts his money at night. When he covers me, he's doing his duty, but I feel a waist cold as a corpse's, and I, who've always hated passionate women, would like to be at that instant a mountain of fire.)

In the last scene of the play, which takes place in a hermitage high in the mountains, the Old Woman leaves no doubt as to who is at fault for Yerma's infertility:

Lo que ya no se puede callar. Lo que está puesto encima del tejado. La culpa es de tu marido. ¿Lo oyes? Me dejaría cortar las manos. Ni su padre, ni su abuelo, ni su bisabuelo se portaron como hombres de casta. Para tener un hijo ha sido necesario que se junte el cielo con la tierra. Están hechos con saliva. En cambio, tu gente no. Tienes hermanos y primos a cien leguas a la redonda. Mira qué maldición ha venido a caer sobre tu hermosura. (3.2.106-107)

(What can no longer be hushed up. What shouts from all the rooftops. The fault is your husband's. Do you hear? He can cut off my hands if it isn't. Neither his father, nor his grandfather, nor his great-grandfather behaved like men of good blood. For them to have a son heaven and earth had to meet—because they're nothing but spit. But not your people. You have brothers and cousins for a hundred miles around. Just see what a curse has fallen on your loveliness.)

However, one must question the veracity of such a statement. I am not questioning the fact that Juan may be impotent; what I would like to question is whether Yerma is free of all fault, since

even the Old Woman states that Yerma's father was austere and stoic, that is, two traits which are contrary to the notion of sexual enjoyment:

¡Ah! Enrique el pastor. Lo conocí. Buena gente. Levantarse. Sudar, comer unos panes y morirse. Ni más juego, ni más nada. Las ferias para otros. Criaturas de silencio. Pude haberme casado con un tío tuyo. Pero ¡ca! Yo he sido una mujer de faldas en el aire, he ido flechada a la tajada de melón, a la fiesta, a la torta de azúcar. (1.2.54)

(Ah! Enrique the shepherd. I knew him. Good people. Get up, sweat, eat some bread and die. No playing, no nothing. The fairs for somebody else. Silent creatures. I could have married an uncle of yours, but then...! I've been a woman with her skirts to the wind. I've run like an arrow to melon cuttings, to parties, to sugar cakes.)

Yerma herself admits implicitly to having inherited the puritanism of her father when she states that, "Yo me entregué a mi marido por él, y me sigo entregando para ver si llega, pero nunca por divertirme" (1.2.56) ("I gave myself over to my husband for his sake, and I go on giving to see if he'll be born—but never just for pleasure"). This repulsion towards sexual enjoyment had already manifested itself during a chat she had with the Old Woman:

Vieja: ¿No tiembles cuando se acerca a ti? ¿No te da así como un sueño cuando acerca sus labios? Dime.

Yerma: No. No lo he sentido nunca. (1.2.55)

(First Old Woman: Don't you tremble when he comes near you? Don't you feel something like a dream when he brings his lips close to yours? Tell me.

Yerma: No. I've never noticed it. 1.2.186)

Therefore, all these allusions in the text make one suspect that, perhaps Juan is not the sole one at fault.

Linked to what has been called puritanism, there is the fact that Yerma exploits the concept of honour in order not to recognize the reality of her situation. In his book, *La tragedia en el teatro de Unamuno, Valle-Inclán y García Lorca*, Luis González del Valle has stated that, "Honour is an excuse which Yerma uses in order not to recognize her own personal shortcomings" (142 my own translation). I am in complete agreement with this state-



ment for I believe that her major problem is not that she is infertile, but rather that she cannot admit it to herself. Honour is not an obstacle to sexual enjoyment. The reproof of sex forms part of her character, which, as I have alluded to, was a paternal inheritance.

Even though she questions herself, she is unable to accept the fact that she cannot have a baby. In the second scene of act two, one can appreciate the main difference between Juan and Yerma. He is tired of hearing her speak about the baby, and he scolds Yerma for this reason: "Siempre lo mismo. Hace ya más de cinco años. Yo casi lo estoy olvidando" (2.2.77) ("Always the same thing. It's more than five years. I've almost forgotten it"). These words show how in fact Juan has resigned himself to not becoming a parent. But Yerma cannot resign herself to such a reality because it would be like committing suicide, as she explains to Juan:

Juan: Estando a tu lado no se siente más que inquietud, desasosiego. En último caso, debes resignarte.

Yerma: Yo he venido a estas cuatro paredes para no resignarme. Cuando tenga la culpa atada con un pañuelo para que no se abra la boca, y las manos bien amarradas dentro del ataúd, en esa hora me habré resignado. (2.2.78)

(Juan: At your side one feels nothing but uneasiness, dissatisfaction. As a last resort, you should resign yourself.

Yerma: I didn't come to these four walls to resign myself. When a cloth binds my head so my mouth won't drop open, and my hands are tied tight in my coffin—then, then I'll resign myself!)

Throughout the play Yerma holds on desperately to the idea of having a son; her desperation becomes so acute that she considers herself to be the only person that is tormented by nature:

Porque estoy harta. Porque estoy harta de tenerlas y no poderlas usar en cosa propia. Que estoy ofendida, ofendida y rebajada hasta lo último, viendo que los trigos apuntan, que las fuentes no cesan de dar agua y que paren las ovejas cientos de corderos, y las perras, y que parece que todo el campo puesto de pie me enseña sus crías tiernas, adormiladas, mientras yo siento los golpes de martillo aquí, en lugar de la boca de mi niño. (2.2.81)

(Because I'm tired. Because I'm tired of having them, and not being able to use them on something of my own. For I'm hurt, hurt and humiliated beyond endurance, seeing the wheat ripening, the fountains never ceasing to give water, the sheep bearing hundreds of lambs, the she-dogs; until it seems that the whole countryside rises to show me its tender sleeping young, while I feel two hammer-blows here, instead of the mouth of my child.)

Later on she reaffirms her hope by assuring herself that, "Lo tendré porque lo tengo que tener. O no entiendo el mundo" (3.1.91-92) ("I'll have one because I must. Or I don't understand the world"). Almost as a last resort, she pleads for divine intervention: "Señor, abre tu rosal/ sobre mi carne marchita" (3.2.101-102) ("Lord, make your rose tree bloom/ upon my barren flesh). The last line is very important because it signals the fact that Yerma has begun to realize that she is sterile.

At this point I would like to introduce another element that Aristotle considered necessary, namely "recognition" or "anagnorisis", which he defined in the following manner: "A recognition, as the word itself indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and so to either friendship or enmity, among people defined in relation to good fortune or misfortune" (14). Thus the play consists of a process toward recognition. At the same time that Yerma was holding on to her desire, there is also in play the phenomenon of the recognition that she is barren. One of the key moments leading to that recognition occurs in the second scene of act two when Yerma screams out that she is a barren field:

¡Ay, qué prado de pena!  
 ¡Ay, qué puerta cerrada a la hermosa!  
 que pido un hijo que sufrir, y el aire  
 me ofrece dalias de dormida luna.

...

¡Ay, pechos ciegos bajo mi vestido!  
 ¡Ay, palomas sin ojos ni blancura!  
 ¡Ay, qué dolor de sangre prisionera  
 me está clavando avispas en la nuca!  
 Pero tú has de venir, amor, mi niño,  
 porque el agua da sal, la tierra fruta,

y nuestro vientre guarda tiernos hijos,  
como la nube lleva dulce lluvia. (2.2.80)

(Oh, what a field of sorrow!/Oh, this is a door to beauty closed:/to beg a son to suffer, and for the wind/ to offer dahlias of a sleeping moon!/.../Oh, breasts, blind beneath my clothes!/Oh, doves with neither eyes nor whiteness!/Oh, what a pain of imprisoned blood/is nailing wasps at my brain's base!/But you must come, sweet love, my baby,/because water gives salt, the earth fruit,/and our wombs guard tender infants,/ just as a cloud is sweet with rain.)

As these last lines indicate, Yerma still clinged to her hope of becoming a mother.

In the last scene of the play, Yerma recognizes on various occasions her personal deficiencies. She tells the Old Woman that she is infertile: "Yo soy como un campo seco donde caben arando mil pares de bueyes y lo que tú me das es un pequeño vaso de agua de pozo. Lo mío es dolor que ya no está en las camas" (3.2.107-108) ("I'm like a dry field where a thousand pairs of oxen plow, and you offer me a little glass of well water. Mine is a sorrow already beyond the flesh").

The Aristotelian concept of recognition becomes a reality in the last encounter between Yerma and the Old Woman, when the latter accuses her of being infertile:

Vieja: Pues sigue así. Por tu gusto es. Como los cardos del seco, pinchosa, marchita.

Yerma: ¡Marchita, sí, ya lo sé! ¡Marchita! No es preciso que me lo refriegues por la boca. No vengas a solazarte como los niños pequeños en la agonía de un animalito. Desde que me casé estoy dándole vueltas a esta palabra, pero es la primera vez que la oigo, la primera vez que me la dicen en la cara. La primera vez que veo que es verdad. (3.2.108)

(Old Woman (strongly): Then stay that way—if you want to! Like the thistles in a dry field, pinched, barren!

Yerma (strongly): Barren, yes, I know it! Barren! You don't have to throw it in my face. Nor come to amuse yourself, as youngsters do, in the suffering of a tiny animal. Ever since I married, I've been avoiding that word, and this is the first time I've heard it, the first time it's been said to my face. The first time I see it's the truth.)

And if perchance there was still some hope, Juan puts a definitive end to all possibility or hope:

Yerma: ¿Y nunca has pensado en él cuando me has visto deseárola?

Juan: Nunca. (Están los dos en el suelo.)

Yerma: ¿Y no podré esperarlo?

Juan: No.

Yerma: ¿Ni tú?

Juan: Ni yo tampoco. ¡Resígnate!

Yerma: ¡Marchita! (3.2.110-111)

(Yerma: And you never thought about it, even when you saw I wanted one?

Juan: Never. (Both are on the ground.)

Yerma: And I'm not to hope for one?

Juan: No.

Yerma: Nor you?

Juan: Nor I. Resign yourself!

Yerma: Barren!

Thus in my opinion, the process of recognition is completed; Yerma has gone from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge.

In the last confrontation between Yerma and Juan, Lorca fulfilled another requisite of the tragedy according to Aristotle, that is, "suffering", which was defined as "a destructive or painful action, e.g. deaths in full view, agonies, woundings etc." (15). In effect, Yerma kills Juan, which thus affirms her infertility since she kills all hope of having a son and finally resigns herself to accepting her fate (illness):

Marchita. Marchita, pero segura. Ahora sí que lo sé de cierto. Y sola.

(Se levanta. Empieza a llegar gente.) Voy a descansar sin despertarme sobresaltada, para ver si la sangre me anuncia otra sangre nueva. Con

el cuerpo seco para siempre. ¿Qué queréis saber? No os acerquéis, porque he matado a mi hijo, ¡yo misma he matado a mi hijo! (3.2.111)

(Barren; barren, but sure. Now I really know it for sure. And alone.

(She rises. People begin to gather.) Now I'll sleep without startling myself awake, anxious to see if I feel in my blood another new blood.

My body dry forever! What do you want? Don't come near me, because I've killed my son. I myself have killed my son!)

We do not know how well Lorca knew the classical Greek tragedy, but the principle of suffering in *Yerma* seems to follow faithfully the precepts delineated by Aristotle:

when sufferings happen within friendly relationships, e.g. brother against brother, son against father, mother against son or son against mother, when someone kills someone else, is about to, or does something else of the same sort—these are what must be sought after. (18)

These are the situations which must be sought because, as García Yebra has noted, these are the ones that produce pity and fear to the highest degree (289).

“Hamartia”, which is also known as “error” is another Aristotelian principle of the tragedy. It acts as a complement to the element of suffering. In chapter thirteen, Aristotle stated:

a plot that is fine is single rather than (as some say) double, and involves a change not from misfortune to good fortune, but conversely, from good fortune to misfortune, not because of wickedness but because of a great error by a person like the one mentioned, or by a better person rather than a worse one. (16)

García Yebra has added that hamartia did not imply wickedness, but rather “a detrimental ignorance for the person who suffers from it” (284 my own translation). Without a doubt, hamartia is present in *Yerma*. The protagonist commits the error of discovering the truth about herself. A truth which she did not expect and which leads to the deaths of her husband, her future son and of herself in a spiritual sense.

There is an inevitable fatalism implicit in *Yerma*’s name which was a neologism created by Lorca. In his study on this play, Miguel García-Posada underlined that there exists:

a type of imminent fatalism in the character, expressed in her name, which is the author’s neologism; the name and the symbolic web which is woven by Lorca throughout the tragedy identifies *Yerma* with sterility, drought, darkness and destruction. In this sense, *Yerma* is linked to the typology of the classical tragic hero. Just as Oedipus is the son of fortune, *Yerma* is “like a dry field where a thousand pair of oxen plow.” Her name refers to the classical names (Phaedra, Medea, Electra). She is the only protagonist in Lorca’s theatre who is so profoundly marked by her name. (20 my own translation)

This keen observation proves that there is a close link with the classical Greek tragedy. By baptizing the protagonist with a name that is so specific, Lorca emphasized the fact that Yerma was born with a *fatum* that would dictate the development of her life.

Another aspect that Aristotle underlined was that of the simple and complex plots. Plot meant action (García Yebra 278); for Aristotle a simple plot was “continuous in its course and single, where the transformation comes about without reversal or recognition” (14); while a complex plot was “an action as a result of which the transformation is accompanied by a recognition, a reversal or both” (14). Furthermore, “the construction of the finest tragedy should be not simple but complex, and moreover it should represent terrifying and pitiable events” (16). Without a doubt, Yerma consists of a complex plot since as we have already shown, there is “suffering” and also “peripetia” or “reversal” which is “a change of the actions to their opposite” (14). This comes into play at the end when Yerma suddenly kills Juan.

Moving on to a different matter, Aristotle believed that tragedy consisted of six elements: plot, characters, diction, reasoning, spectacle and song (Aristotle 8). Of these six, plot was the most important:

So plot is the origin and as it were the soul of tragedy, and the characters are secondary....Tragedy is a representation of an action, and for the sake of the action above all [a representation] of the people who are acting. (9)

However, Lorca seemed to disagree in this aspect, when in an interview given in Catalan to Juan Tomás, he affirmed that, “Yerma does not have a plot. Yerma is a character who develops in the course of the six scenes...I repeat Yerma has no plot” (*Obras completas* 1671 my own translation).

Thus there seems to be a discrepancy. However, Richard H. Palmer has argued successfully that there is a close link between Aristotle’s concepts of character and plot:

For Aristotle character involved more than *dramatis personae* articulating attitudes and values. Character revealed moral purpose, “showing what kinds of things a man chooses or avoids.” Speeches that entail no action or choice express no character but only a potential for character.

The moral dimension that defines a person's essential nature develops exclusively from actions revealing that moral makeup. Character, therefore, intrinsically relates to action and plot. (23)

Thus I propose that in reality Lorca was not opposing himself to any Aristotelian principle. The dividing line between action and character is practically inexistent, for they are intimately related. Plot plays a large role in *Yerma* but it is not subordinated to the character of Yerma. In fact, her character enhances the plot. The plot and the development of Yerma's character reach their climax with the murder of Juan.

Throughout this article, I have showed how *Yerma* is definitely a play written according to the precepts of the classical Greek tragedy as Aristotle taught them to his students. As a finishing touch, I would like to focus in on one last element of the tragedy, that is, the chorus which certainly makes its presence felt in *Yerma*. As to the chorus, Aristotle believed that "[The poet] should regard the chorus as one of the actors. It should be a part of the whole, and contribute to the performance" (25). And in effect, Lorca could not conceive of a tragedy without a chorus (*Obras completas* 1709). In this play in particular, we have a chorus of laundresses who begin the second act with some lines that I quoted at the beginning of the article. However, it must be said that this is not a traditional chorus, since there is no unanimity of opinion amongst the laundresses (Minett 35).

The laundresses act as the chorus by commenting and disputing who is at fault for not having any children. Some defend Yerma, while others take Juan's side:

Lavandera 5<sup>a</sup>: Estas machorras son así: cuando podían estar haciendo encajes o confituras de manzanas, les gusta subirse al tejado y andar descalzas por esos ríos.

Lavandera 1<sup>a</sup>: ¿Quién eres tú para decir estas cosas? Ella no tiene hijos, pero no es por culpa suya.

Lavandera 4<sup>a</sup>: Tiene hijos la que quiere tenerlos. Es que las regalonas, las flojas, las endulzadas, no son a propósito para llevar el vientre arrugado. (2.1.68)

(Fifth Laundress: That's the way those mannerish creatures are. When they could be making lace, or apple cakes, they like to climb up on the roof, or go barefoot in the river.

First Laundress: Who are you to be talking like that? She hasn't any children but that's not her fault.

Fourth Laundress: The one who wants children, has them. These spoiled, lazy and soft girls aren't up to having a wrinkled belly.)

The appearance of the chorus of laundresses proves once again Lorca's desire to go back to the classical Greek tragedy.

I thus believe that when Lorca made the statement with which this article began that he was not simply making a superficial, thoughtless statement; as we have seen by examining *Yerma* in the light of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Lorca was truly faithful to the principles of the tragedy that had been taught by the Greek philosopher over two thousand years ago. I therefore conclude that Lorca's *Yerma* is a tragedy in the classical sense of the word.

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