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The Making of a Tragic Heroine: *La zapatera prodigiosa*

To Professor Morris for his guidance, and to Sandi for her immeasurable support.

A la que hubiere de hacer
la dama, le daré sumo
adorno en las perfecciones,
dulce veneno de muchos . . . .
—Calderón de la Barca,
El gran teatro del mundo

The art of theatre has fascinated humankind since antiquity—from the early Greek tragedy to the contemporary Broadway play. Perhaps this is because drama, like other arts, is an elaborately manufactured illusion, but has, at the same time, a far greater element of reality since the medium with which its creator works is uniquely human; as Martin Esslin states, "Every performance of a play from past centuries can thus be seen as an act of resurrection: the dead words and actions are reincarnated by the living presence of the actors" (86-87). And in the theatre, as in life, each actor must struggle to adequately perform the role he or she has been assigned, the fulfillment of which helps to shape the destiny of all. The observance of this parallel between life and theatre is deeply rooted in Western civilization, as Epictetus affirmed:

> Acuérdate de que, siendo un simple actor, representas una obra tal como el Autor de la comedia quiere que sea representada. . . . En cuanto al papel que tú has de representar, a otro le toca el escogerlo. (qtd. in Vigil 7)

For Western women of past generations this assumption of divine intervention in the theatre of life precluded improvisation by the cast, despite any perceived flaws in its design. Men consistently assumed the more prominent roles in their society, while women were left unsatisfied with supporting roles at best. In effect, this assumption became, in Spain and elsewhere, an invitation to the acceptance of enormous social ine-

qualities through the reduction of all situations to a common level of indifference from the perspective of Divinity, which constituted a reality more real than life itself (Vigil 8). However, the 20th-century Spanish dramatist Federico García Lorca was one author who saw to it that women had their moment in the spotlight, granting them the starring roles which their real-life counterparts were obliged to forfeit. And on his stage Lorca created another version of reality—a world burdened by the presence of a dominant patriarchal order in the midst of a political, economic and spiritual crisis; a world, conspicuously devoid of religious reference, where social and material pressures of the here and now rather than Divine Providence were responsible for what he saw as the victimization of the "second" sex. In many of his dramas, notable among them the early *farsa violenta*[1] *La zapatera prodigiosa* (1930), Lorca weaves a tapestry of fantasy and reality[2] through which emerges the truth of the female experience in the society of his day, the common thread of which is the unalterable personal integrity of a heroine who dares to author her own existence. Paradoxically, however, her empowerment could only serve to further confirm the tragedy of her situation during Lorca's era, but could facilitate social change for all women in times to come.

The predominant concept of man, woman and their respective roles in society had evolved little from the days of the Reconquest to the era in which Lorca lived. Men were still viewed as physically stronger, and with greater capacities for reasoning and self-control, while women were stereotyped as weak, vengeful and often possessed of insatiable carnal lust and a loose (and sometimes dangerous) tongue. As the 15th-century Christian moralist Fray Martín de Córdoba wrote in *El jardín de las nobles doncellas*, citing Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in support of his view: "Ser parleras les viene de flaqueza, ca veyéndose flacas para poner el negocio a manos, pónenlo a palabras; porque lo que no puede la espada, que lo haga la lengua" (qtd. in Vigil 14). This ideology flourished under the growing influence of the Catholic Church, an institution which defended man's dominance over woman on biblical grounds. As descendants of Eve women were by nature a constant threat to the social order, and were expected to remain at home, if not cloistered behind convent walls. And because arranged marriages were the societal norm, both economic and personal fulfillment were often denied them. This is the situation with which Lorca's Zapatera must contend.

The presentation of the female experience is at the core of much of Lorca's theatrical production, including *La zapatera prodigiosa*, where he demonstrates deep sensitivity and compassion for this marginalized group. But rather than to model characters after any particular individual he chose to project a generic view "unencumbered by the demands of specificity of time and place"—the universalization of an elemental hu-

man condition in an atemporal Spanish context (Greenfield 34). Thus, the characters of this drama, both male and female, are nameless figures identified only by their station in life, or an essential aspect of their appearance. But despite their status as *tipos* Lorca never loses touch with the humanity of his characters:

> whatever the abstractions behind his generic view of the human condition, the depiction is so intensely humanized that the vital experience swallows up the universal meaning and relegates it to mere background . . . . the spectacle of human action outstrips the abstraction or archetype that initially provoked its composition. (Greenfield 34)

The casting of *La zapatera prodigiosa*, begun nearly a decade before its first performance in 1930, would, in fact, become the most important aspect of its conception, as Lorca himself noted in 1923: "yo creo que una comedia se puede saber si es buena o mala con sólo leer el reparto."[3] By devising a linear, uncomplicated dramatic structure, without an extensively developed plot, Lorca "virtually eliminates the situational complexities of conventional drama; dramatic 'conflict' is based primarily on circumstantial conditions rather than on the invention and contrivance of events or coincidence" (Greenfield 32). Consequently, characterization in *La zapatera prodigiosa* is of the essence; much of the play's meaning comes from the symbolic value in the description of and interaction among the various personalities. As corresponds to a *farsa*, the characters are ridiculous, even grotesque, mechanical figures over whom the audience, through the exaggeration of their appearance and actions, is made to feel superior and react accordingly—with laughter, not tears, in the face of their misfortune.

Through characterization Lorca not only provides information about the work itself, but also foretells the direction in which he was headed in the development of his drama. At 18, the Zapatera—rebellious, strong-willed wife of the 53-year-old town shoemaker—is not only the protagonist of *La zapatera prodigiosa*, but also the prototype from which other of Lorca's heroines—such as Yerma, Adela from *La casa de Bernarda Alba* and the Novia of *Bodas de Sangre*—were to originate. This is not only because of what she experiences, but also what she stands for—an impassioned desire for freedom, fulfillment and integrity in the face of oppression and the self-righteousness of a meddling public (Greenfield 40). Her name, derived from her husband's trade, makes a strong statement about the reality of a woman's subordination to her husband, and of her dependence upon him for social identity and economic well-being—a theme that traverses the body of Lorca's dramatic works. The comical nature of the Zapatera's episodes of confrontation with neigh-

bors, or "todas las que están detrás de las ventanas" (I: 52),[4] as well as with her hopelessly mismatched husband, the Zapatero, belies her intense pain and frustration as a lesser member of society. Thus, what Lorca intended in ascribing to his *La zapatera prodigiosa* the words *farsa violenta* was, in fact, much more than a simple call of attention to the frenzied, fast-paced character of this work. More importantly, these words reveal below the surface the psychological brutality inflicted upon this *criatura poética*, the protagonist of a work which Lorca himself termed an *apólogo del alma humana* (qtd. in Hernández 27-28).

In creating a farcical character with a human spirit like the Zapatera Lorca's work extends far beyond the boundaries of "una farsa simple" (Morris 797), arousing in the audience a feeling of empathy for her not anticipated from the outset. This operates as well to distinguish her from the male counterparts whose presence serves mainly for the development of her drama: the Zapatero, the Alcalde, Don Mirlo, the Niño and the Mozos. Together these men represent various stages of manhood,[5] embodying various aspects of behavior as members of the patriarchal society from which they are cultivated, and all are perfectly suited, literally and figuratively, for their part. For example, the Zapatero, dressed in "traje de terciopelo con botones de plata, pantalón corto y corbata roja" (I:54), is the living image of an aged Pinocchio whose every move is regulated by the clutching influence of the public, like that of a puppet on a string. Submissive before the stern presence of a wife dressed in "verde rabioso" and with "el pelo tirante" (I:51), he nonetheless fantasizes about dominating her physically with "Pero, ¡ay, si tuviera cuarenta años o cuarenta y cinco siquiera!" and a furious blow on a shoe with his hammer (I:55). He fails to act, however, not through an awareness of the evils of domestic violence but because of his weakened self-image as an aging figure in a *macho* society, and of his irrational fears of damage to his reputation from neighborhood gossip. In a vain attempt to alleviate the tension of unsatisfied desires the Zapatera daydreams about younger, more desirable men, but objects to the thought of turning back the clock knowing that would leave her in a worse position: "Entonces yo sería tu criada" (I:55). She realizes that, in a society such as her own, if not dominant, she would herself be dominated; there is simply no in-between.

For all the verbal banter the two exchange, there is no real communication between them; societal obstacles have worked to discourage mutual understanding and serious consideration of individual determination over conformity to established norms. Lacking meaningful interaction with women outside the family structure, the Zapatero relies on the popular *novelas rosa* as a source of information on romantic relationships and becomes prejudiced by the negative stereotyping in what he reads: "Yo debí haber comprendido, después de leer tantas novelas, que

las mujeres les gustan a todos los hombres, pero todos los hombres no les gustan a todas las mujeres" (I:58). As a *doncella española* the Zapatera is similarly disadvantaged, having lived a sheltered life and married young without sufficient time to interact with other men before committing to a life with her husband.

Unlike the Zapatero, the Alcalde is a model of the dominant male—violent, arrogant, authoritarian. He successfully acts out the subconscious desires about which the Zapatero can only dream, through the physical abuse and ultimate murder of not one, but four, young brides. Cloaked in a blue cape and armed with a staff—symbols of male authority, violence and death—his presence in the Zapatero's household is both ominous and ridiculous, a reminder of the constant threat of senseless violence to women and a mockery of man's need to exercise control at the expense of the well-being of those around him. When, in the absence of her husband, the Zapatera is forced to turn her house into a tavern, the Alcalde doesn't hesitate to take advantage of her economic hardship by proposing marriage in exchange for material gain. He, like other members of Spanish society, believes she is weak and undisciplined because her husband has failed to "tame" her. But the Zapatera, through an act of faith in her husband and herself, shows her strength is generated from within by refusing to yield to the pressures brought on by her unfortunate circumstances.

The blue cape which the Alcalde wears is also worn by Emiliano, another significant, if imaginary, figure. He is presented as the Zapatera's improbable former lover—perhaps the character farthest from reality as seemingly the product of a fictitious character's imagination, but, ironically, the only one with a "real" name. Like *Bodas de sangre*'s Leonardo, the only male figure in that work with a proper name, he seems to represent some sort of idealized lover—passion incarnate. But real or fictitious, Emiliano certainly holds much more meaning for her than either the Mozo de la Faja or the Mozo del Sombrero. The fatal attraction of these two youths to the Zapatera leads to their deaths by duel and foreshadows the tragic ending to come for the Zapatera's soulmate, the Novia in *Bodas de sangre*. The color blue, also associated with death in *Bodas de sangre* (Morris 799), is therefore present not only in the Zapatera's reality but also in her fantasy world, which impresses early upon the audience the sense of futility, and even risk, which Lorca most likely felt in searching for easy solutions to an unbearable reality. The Novia, who would later act out the Zapatera's fantasy of escaping with a former lover, finds that her fantasy leads to death for her men, and even worse, death in life for herself.

The cape, as well as the horse and water in *La zapatera prodigiosa*, are symbols found repeatedly in Lorca's works in connection with

strength, vitality, sexuality—"masculine" characteristics which the Zapatera also possesses. In Act I the Zapatero talks to the Zapatera about his own cape, in defense of his lost manhood: "Así tuve yo una también...; ¡son unas capas preciosísimas!" (56), which she initially denies cruelly with: "¡Tú qué ibas a tener! Pero, ¿por qué te haces ilusiones? Un zapatero no se ha puesto en su vida una prenda de esa clase..." (57). A conversion can be seen in Act II when, during the Zapatera's recollection, following her husband's abandonment, of their courtship, the Zapatero's image comes to replace that of Emiliano as the idealized lover:

> Yo me miraba en sus ojos. Cuando lo veía venir montado en su jaca blanca . . . me miró y lo miré. . . . El paró su caballo, y la cola del caballo era blanca y tan larga que llegaba al agua del arroyo. . . (93)

This passage echoes those of the Suegra's nursery rhymes sung in *Bodas de sangre* as Leonardo secretly goes off to court the Novia on horseback. And just as Leonardo's wife offers him lemonade upon his return home in a feeble attempt to satisfy his thirst, or repressed desires, so does the Zapatero to his young wife without success. In addition, the Zapatera's mention of her grandfather and their common bloodline offer genealogical proof of her manly strength of character: "No me asusto de nadie, ¿lo oyes? Que yo tengo la sangre de mi abuelo, que esté en gloria, que fue desbravador de caballos y lo que se dice un hombre" (II:90).

Don Mirlo, the eldest member of the group at approximately 70 years of age, is a comical Don Juan of sorts who, as contrasted with the Alcalde, represents another aspect of Spanish patriarchal society: *el amor cortés*. Dressed in a formal black coat with tails and short pants, Don Mirlo is the personification of his namesake, the blackbird: a comical figure, yet, like the raven, a sign of impending disaster as well. Keeping alive a cultural tradition of both the upper and lower classes (Vigil 70), this lovebird pledges devotion to his lady with bookish, anachronistic *piropos* as she sits perched at her window and chirps back to him in kind:

Don Mirlo:	Chisss... Zapaterita, blanca como el corazón de las almendras, pero amargosilla también. . . .
Zapatera:	¡Cuánta cosa, don Mirlo! A mí me parecía imposible que los pajarracos hablaran. . . .
Don Mirlo:	Cuando las sombras crepusculares invadan con sus tenues velos el mundo y la vía pública se halle libre de transeúntes, volveré. (I:74-75)

But while his ritual of serenading her, like the enamored knight in praise of his ladylove, appears to raise her to a level of superiority over him, some contemporary critics, such as Mariló Vigil, in *La vida de las mujeres en los siglos XVI y XVII,* view this as another aspect of misogynistic attitudes by the dominant male order:

> La idea de la inferioridad del sexo femenino llegaba a su punto culminante, precisamente al mismo tiempo en que florecía la poesía del culto a la mujer. Keith Whinnom apunta que en las sociedades semicivilizadas las mujeres aparecen como superiores o inferiores, pero nunca como iguales. (73)

Vigil acknowledges the distancing of women from men as a common denominator in both attitudes:

> La literatura del amor cortés no es tan contradictoria con la literatura misógina como parece. Ambas constituyen formas complementarias de apartarse de las mujeres y de apartarlas a ellas del mundo. Quevedo representa un caso extremo de la mentalidad del hombre para el que todas-las-mujeres-son-unas-putas-excepto-mi-madre-que-es-una-santa . . . (75)

Through her interaction with Don Mirlo the Zapatera now also emerges bird-like. The use of birds in Spanish literature has folkloric roots dating back centuries, as Lorca must well have been aware. Fernán Caballero's *La gaviota* (1849) enjoyed much popular success through its depiction of Marisalada—a defiant, bird-like creature whose most outstanding feature was her voice. The Zapatera bears a resemblance to Marisalada not only in her penchant for expressing herself verbally but also in that she is psychologically distanced from those around her; she prefers to live isolated from others, especially from other women (Benítez 99). In both works, the protagonist is viewed by her society as a negative social force, bent on destroying all that it holds sacred.

Surprisingly perhaps, but reflective of historical realities, the most ardent defenders of the social order and incessant antagonists of the nonconformist Zapatera are the other female members of the cast: the Vecinas. Though presumably sources of aid and friendship in times of need, these neighbors, as Mario Hernández notes: "son la masa coral que, aun desprovista de palabra, observa y reprueba el comportamiento de la protagonista, ya sea con murmullos o con su sola presencia en los momentos límite" (37). Always present—by the window, near a door—they await evidence of social offense. And such was the social distrust of that era that determining a violation of the social codes did not require proof, simply the possibility of transgression (Burton 271). As Lorca himself revealed, this group is "la voz de la conciencia, de la religión, del

remordimiento . . ., algo tan profundamente teatral, que su exclusión no la concibo" (qtd. in Hernández 37). Symbolic of her sense of social entrapment, the Zapatera never gets beyond the walls that confine her, physically and spiritually, throughout the performance. She remains a caged bird on display, cruelly denied her natural right to fly free. But, as one of Juan de la Cerda's "mujeres que tienen por costumbre ser ventaneras" (qtd. in Vigil 21) she does take full advantage of the window—her symbol of rebellion and only access to the outside world—to the complete chagrin of her anxious husband.

The menacing presence of his neighbors, and their corresponding threat to his honor, are what finally unravel the Zapatero emotionally. His wife's resentment toward him, and her apparent flirtation with other men are maddening enough, but public humiliation cannot be tolerated by any means: "más lastima una onza de deshonra pública que una arroba de infamia secreta" (Cervantes qtd. in Vigil 151). Ironically, the Zapatero shares with another of Lorca's characters, Bernarda Alba, an obsession with reputation, and by leaving his wife, he aims to teach her a lesson: "Mañana quizás la tengas que buscar tú también".[6] Until this point, the audience has been persuaded to feel sympathy for the Zapatero, as the victim of his wife's torment, and a sense of camaraderie through shared knowledge of his secret plan for her demise. But the startling, ostentatious parade of the "multiplicidad de vecinas con sus trajes de color" (Hernández 37) making their entrance in a parody rescue mission give the audience a sudden jolt as if the dramatist had just turned the lens of a giant kaleidoscope through which it is viewing the show.[7] Once dressed in angry green, the Zapatera is now in passionate red. Expected by the audience to abandon her home as her husband has done, she instead chooses to stay behind. She struggles to survive, remaining faithful to the loving memory of her dearly departed: "Que día y noche lo tengo metido en lo más hondo de mi pensamiento" (II:131). And with this turn of the lens, a new perspective. Suddenly this unworthy character of farce seems more a helpless victim of circumstance, and an unexpected sense of empathy toward her begins to invade the audience's consciousness.

The moment of truth arrives as the Zapatero returns home to the sound of trumpets as a disguised puppeteer. To an enthusiastic crowd he relates the woeful tale of an anonymous saddler forced from home by an obstinate shrew, over which the Zapatera appears to express genuine grief. As the crowd disperses, he confesses this as his own personal tragedy in an attempt to awaken in her a sense of remorse and a confession of wrongdoing. His psychological manipulation is as penetrating a wound to her soul as the physical wounds the Mozos afflict on one another during the duel, for which she is also blamed. Even after obvious

blunders by the Zapatero, arousing suspicion as to his true identity, he continues his charade, more pathetic than before. It is at this time that *La zapatera prodigiosa* takes on tragic dimensions. Is she just playing along, withholding her discovery of his true identity for fear of public ridicule, or has she simply allowed herself to continue the fantasy for fear of admitting the painful truth behind her husband's display? In either case, the result is the same. The "otherness" of the Zapatera has disappeared, and we now observe her raised up from her lowly status as a farcical figure to the level of a sensitive, even noble, albeit unorthodox, human being, and we feel for the first time the pain of all that she has endured.

In the absence of any actual physical violence presented on stage, what makes *La zapatera prodigiosa* a *farsa violenta* is the force of the Zapatero's cruel trick played on his unsuspecting wife, whose only crime is a desire to be loyal to herself—"¡Ella es siempre ella!" (I:66)—rather than to follow the dictates of societal norms. It is also the trick which Lorca has played on his audience by usurping its sense of security with an element of surprise, and allowing the drama to unfold in a way it would not have expected. Throughout the work the level of intensity of emotion ebbs and flows like the element of fantasy, and along the way the referents which would normally direct us toward an appropriate emotional response, whether it be laughter, anger, or tears have been intentionally muffled or confused:

> If one is made to feel more or less deeply uncomfortable, it is because one is being confronted with facts that one hadn't known, or hadn't thought carefully enough about, or is still reluctant to feel intensely enough about. (Fraser 47)

The audience finds that this author, like God, sometimes moves in mysterious ways. Thus, Lorca's drama, with its violent dimension, touches upon ambiguities and ambivalence of feeling among his audience which are not characteristic of a simple farce, but have the purpose of tearing down, as is fundamental to all farce, a social context—in this case the dominant patriarchal order—against which the protagonist rebels.

One of the characteristics of a great dramatist is his ability for characterization; another is his recognition of the vital role the audience plays in the success of any dramatic performance. Lorca's own appearance as a character in the prologue—designed to caution the audience of the uncertainty of what it will see and hear on stage, as well as in life—makes this all quite clear. The controlling behavior he exhibits as El Autor in the drama's prologue closely mirrors the actions and attitude of the Alcalde as an element of the fiction, but also that of the domineering male of

Lorca's society. However, the audience instinctively knows that within the Niño, the Zapatera's companion, and not the author of the prologue, is where the heart and soul of the real Lorca resides. Those who knew Lorca personally have noted the autobiographical element in his excitement over the puppeteer's show since, as a child, Lorca had a love of puppet theatre as well. And like Lorca, the Niño is the one character who understands the Zapatera, and who is able to bring out her tender side. His offering to her of his grandfather's sword, a weapon associated with and reserved for men only, empowers her at the same time that others attempt to oppress her. Though young and naive, he possesses an objectivity lacking in all the rest, and can see all she has to offer to humankind. As a marginalized person in his own society, Lorca could identify and value in women attributes to which other men were blind.

In the end, the Zapatera chooses to remain with her husband despite the anger and frustration she feels. Like Lorca's other heroines she is a rebel, but always within the social fabric. Like Yerma she is never promiscuous, because it is vital to her to maintain her own sense of personal honor. And she has learned the bitter lesson that in the Spanish society of her day preserving a troubled marriage is better than attempting to live alone. She cannot rely even on other women for support because in an oppressive environment such as this the beleaguered often find their only source of relief and empowerment in the oppression of others. As Julianne Burton states in "The Greatest Punishment: Female and Male in Lorca's Tragedies":

> one of the ironies of this social system is that women, its most frequent victims, are the most uncompromising in their condemnation of one another and the most unrelenting in their demand for punishment and retribution. (271)

Thus, there are two options left for women like the Zapatera within the bounds of their social system: to "become custodians of the evidence to be used in the domination and prosecution of their own sex," or to "turn their energies inward, developing an insight and sensitivity that the male views as foreign and often threatening" (Burton 266), but which brings inner strength. The average individual most often chooses the former; the Zapatera, in deviating from the norm, has chosen the other alternative (Burton 266). She is the first generation of Lorca's tragic heroines to come.

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NOTES

1. The term *farsa violenta* is that which Lorca himself used to classify his work, the complete title of which is: *La zapatera prodigiosa, farsa violenta con bailes y canciones populares de los siglos XVIII y XIX en dos partes, con un solo intervalo.*

2. C. Brian Morris has made use of this metaphor in the description of the work: "Yet there is subtlety of a kind in the dialogue of *La zapatera prodigiosa*; to find it we first have to recognize that it is a mosaic, a tapestry, and that the many strands that are woven into it, from popular speech to popular songs, from the titles of Calderón's plays to echoes of his own poems (as when the Zapatero laments 'Y mi casa no es casa'), constitute an elaborate and self-conscious artifact as demanding of an editor's skills as the poems of Quevedo" (800).

3. Excerpt from a letter by Lorca to Melchor Fernández Almagro, July 1923, in *La Nación*, Buenos Aires, November 30, 1933.

4. All quotations from *La zapatera prodigiosa* found herein have been taken from Mario Hernández's edition (Alianza Editorial: Madrid, 1990). The location of each quotation is indicated by a Roman numeral referring to act, followed by its corresponding page number in the text.

5. In describing *La zapatera prodigiosa* Lorca stated: "Todos los personajes masculinos representan, como en ciertas litografías antiguas, la escala de la vida: el Niño, la infancia; los Mozos, la juventud; el Alcalde, la madurez; el Zapatero, la vejez; don Mirlo, la senectud" (qtd. in Hernández 11).

6. From Act 1, page 63 in reference to *la comida*.

7. Farris Anderson, in his article "*La zapatera prodigiosa*: An Early Example of García Lorca's Metatheatre" (Kentucky Romance Quarterly 28 [1981]: 279-94), has aptly referred to this work as "a kaleidoscopic theatrical function gone mad" (qtd. in Morris 797).

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