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The Dramatization of Desire: Tennessee Williams and Federico García Lorca

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Desire is the cornerstone on which Tennessee Williams's works, particularly his plays, are built. However, the word "desire" hardly appears in his correspondence and interviews and shows up only in the title of two of his works, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the short story "Desire and the Black Masseur." Yet the concept of desire in one form or another figures in much he wrote, whether for publication or in correspondence—as revealed, for example, in a September 1940 letter to Joe Hazan from Acapulco, Mexico: "Nothing new here, except one new lover, a lovely native named Carlos, who swims with me every night. Not knowing the language I have learned to be very direct...[W]e go up on the 'playa,' under the moon and the whispering mango trees, and the restless beast in the jungle under the skin, comes out for a little air" (*Selected Letters* 1:276). But if the exact word rarely surfaces, similar expressions frequently occur that demonstrate a constant tension between the flesh and the spirit.

¶2

Desire is also the foundational and recurring theme of the Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), an author whom Williams read and admired. For instance, in the postscript to a letter to Margo Jones, written from New Orleans on November 19, 1946, Williams mentions that "[t]he Lorca play was thrilling to [me]" (*Selected Letters* 2:77), referring to Lorca's last play, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Moreover, in another letter to Jones dated December 31, 1947, written while on his way to Europe, Williams lists the books he is reading on his trip—"I also have Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*...my Crane and Lorca's poems" (140). Williams not only admired but also was influenced by the Spanish author. In an article written for the *New York Times Magazine* on December 7, 1947, R. C. Lewis mentions, based on an interview with Williams, that "[a]mong his favorite writers are Chekhov and the Spanish poet and dramatist Garcia Lorca and it is probable that they, more than any others, have contributed to his own particular style" (28). For instance, it is clear that Williams's 1944 one-act play *The Purification* is closely related in style and content to Lorca's *Blood Wedding*. In Williams's plays there are assorted phrases (the "*flores para los muertos*" motif that runs through *A Streetcar Named Desire*), places (Cabeza del Lobo in *Suddenly Last Summer*), and characters (Don Quixote in *Camino Real*) that point to Hispanic culture directly and to Lorca indirectly. Finally, there is the short story "In Spain There Was Revolution" (1936), with its paragraph, "In Spain there was a revolution. Here there was only shouting and confusion. In Spain there was Guernica. Here there were disturbances of labor, sometimes pretty violent, in otherwise peaceful cities" (50). The paragraph was later incorporated as part of Tom Wingfield's opening lines in *The Glass Menagerie*. Civil war erupted in Spain in 1936, claiming Lorca as one of its first victims. If Williams's phrase seeks to awaken people's conscience to a global reality marked by violence, it may also serve to pay his respects to a fellow artist who, like him, sought solidarity with the outcasts and the marginalized.

¶3

Christopher Brian Weimer notes, however, that "the extent to which Federico García Lorca's works influenced Tennessee Williams's creative output remains a largely neglected question, one often passed over in favor of Williams's debt to Anton Chekov and D. H. Lawrence" (63). This is largely true. For example, in

Matthew C. Roudané's introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, Lorca's name is absent from the roster of authors who influenced Williams. Moreover, in Gilbert Debusscher's "Creative Rewriting: European and American Influences on the Dramas of Tennessee Williams," the Spaniard's name is once again omitted. In order to account for Lorca's undeniable influence on Williams's drama, it is useful to point out and analyze aspects of work they hold in common, all pivoting around the central theme of desire. As David Johnston has stated, "one of Lorca's major achievements was to dramatize sex as a fundamental subversion of the established order of things...[with] sexuality as a metaphor for freedom" (27). Williams's plays sought to do the same, and I contend that the American playwright's dramatization of desire finds one of its main inspirations in Lorca's canon.

¶14 Williams and Lorca intersect in five major areas. First, the output of these two dramatists is sometimes intensely religious; each found creative ways to depict the struggle between the physical and the spiritual, the flesh and the spirit, the body and the soul, the pagan and the Christian, with erotic desire pitted against social and religious norms. Second, both writers identified with the southern culture of their respective countries, Andalucía for Lorca and the American South for Williams, and set many of their works in these regions. Third, each author expressed his homosexuality in conscious and unconscious ways. Fourth, it is mainly through their female characters and the female perspective *vis-à-vis* male characters that the authors illustrated sexual and gender issues in their dramas. Finally, both artists were concerned in their plays with the relationship between reality and illusion and with the interactions between their own actual experiences and their art.

¶15 Williams's and Lorca's biographers (see Lyle Leverich for Williams and Ian Gibson for Lorca) discuss how the writers' religious upbringings influenced their sexual development. Williams was brought up in an Episcopalian household dominated by his mother, a woman for whom sex "had become a horror" (Leverich 61), while his father, often traveling, was a surreptitious lothario. Lorca's environment was also strict. His mother was a devout Catholic for whom discipline was very important. Both men therefore grew up torn between the desires they felt stirring within them and the religious upbringing they had internalized. Despite his belief, drawn from D. H. Lawrence, "that the sensual and the spiritual in man should not be at odds" (Leverich 322), Williams alternated between a cavalier attitude and puritan scruples, while Lorca would experience throughout his life a "tremendous conflict raging in his psyche between God and Dionysus, between the urges and promptings of the libido and the repressive forces deriving from the Catholic attitude to sexuality" (Gibson 71).

¶16 Guilty feelings around desires were common to both Lorca and Williams. The guilt that they felt demanded of them some kind of sacrificial atonement, and this explains the violence and death seen in many of their plays. For instance, in Lorca's *Yerma*, the protagonist kills her husband with her bare hands for not giving her a child, while the two male protagonists in *Blood Wedding* kill themselves in a duel over the woman they both want. The same dynamic can be seen in Williams. For example, in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Chance Wayne is castrated at the end of the play by Boss Finley's henchmen for having infected Finley's daughter Heavenly during sexual intercourse, while in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Sebastian Venable is cannibalized by the youths he had procured in the town of Cabeza del Lobo.

¶17 Desire, therefore, is problematic for both Williams and Lorca in the context of their own religious upbringings, which they project onto their characters. On the one hand, repressed and oppressed desire kills a person's inner being (for example, Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke* and Doña Rosita in *Doña Rosita the Spinster*). On the other hand, expressed desire can kill an individual physically, psychologically, or socially (for

example, Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Adela in *The House of Bernarda Alba*). There seems to be no escape: desire kills, regardless. However, resurrection, transformation, and salvation are possible. They usually come through a Christ-like mediator who is free of the fear of desire. Such is the case of Alvaro Mangiacavallo (for Serafina delle Rose in *The Rose Tattoo*) and of Don Perlimplin (for Belisa in *The Love of Don Perlimplin with Belisa in the Garden*).

¶8

As Robert Emmett Jones remarks, “desire and death, be the latter moral, spiritual, or physical, dominate Williams’s universe” (547). Plays like *The Night of the Iguana* and *Suddenly Last Summer* exemplify the relationship between desire and death, particularly through the characters of the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon and Sebastian Venable. The same holds true for Lorca. Ian Gibson points out that “death and frustrated love are obsessively recurrent themes” (xxi) in the Spanish writer’s work. Lorca’s famous rural trilogy composed of *Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba* highlights these themes through the characters of The Bride, Yerma, and Adela. For both Williams and Lorca, desire and death are inextricably linked, since desire inevitably leads to death. It is for this reason that they have a reputation as dramatists of sexual frustration.

¶9

Both Lorca and Williams were born in the South—Lorca in Fuentevaqueros, near the town of Granada, in southern Spain; and Williams in Columbus, Mississippi. It could be argued—based on the strong sense of place, perhaps fostered by a provincial upbringing—that the two authors had more in common with each other than with artists whose works were informed by other regional cultures within their respective countries. For example, the effects of the United States Civil War (1861–1865) on the American South and the consequences of the *Reconquista* (722–1492) on Spain as a whole (but particularly its southern region) exhibit similar historical, political, sociological, and cultural complexities. In addition, musical art forms such as jazz and the blues in the American South and *cante jondo*, or deep song, in Andalucía highlight the commonalities that Lorca discerned between African-American and gypsy cultures when he visited the United States in 1929. Moreover, both regions’ deification and subjugation of women—under a strict gender code that assigns particular roles to each of the sexes and a double standard that denies women their sexuality—is deeply embedded in the respective social structures. Finally, the presence of traditional religious mores that repress natural, instinctive human behavior (such as sexuality) creates a chasm between institutionalized religiosity and personal spirituality in the works of both authors.

¶10

Most of Lorca’s and Williams’s plays are set in their respective southern regions. For example, Lorca’s *Doña Rosita the Spinster* and *Mariana Pineda* both take place in Granada, whereas New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta serve as the setting for approximately two-thirds of Williams’s dramatic works. Many of their characters, too, are identified as thoroughly southern: Lorca’s earthy *amas* or nannies (such as La Poncia in *The House of Bernarda Alba*) and Williams’s faded aristocratic belles (such as Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois). Moreover, the South provides each author with an array of symbols of regional culture. The horse, the moon, and the spikenard are associated with the Andalusian landscape, whereas knives and embroideries are connected to its male and female inhabitants respectively. Lorca’s lyricism transforms them into symbols of universal meaning, in the process giving Andalucía a universalized metaphorical and mythic significance. The same may be said of Williams, whose images point to “a belief in the South’s metaphorical importance...” (King 628). Other critics find, in Williams’s regional symbolism, “an area where the sensitive and the fragile lived in constant dread of the gross, the mighty and the mercantile” (Kataria 1).

¶11

A sense of fatalism also characterizes Lorca's and Williams's respective southern cultures. For Williams, the American South represents "a doomed civilization, with a universal message of warning, then despair, and finally, hope" (King 628). Death is a natural presence in Lorca's Andalusian landscape, as the symbolic figures of the androgynous Moon, the Beggar Woman, and the Woodcutters exemplify in the third act of *Blood Wedding*. Authorial ambivalence about "the South" fosters a love/hate relationship that serves as a literary leitmotif. On the one hand, each author exalts his native region's appeal and unique culture. On the other hand, each deconstructs the region's oppressive social mechanisms and parochial mindsets.

¶12

Another similarity between Lorca and Williams can be found in their sexual orientation. As children, both were ridiculed by their peers (and, in Williams's case, his own father) for their sensitivity, physical frailty, and close connections with their mothers. As young adolescents, they both experienced the pain of facing sexual desires that were forbidden by the social and religious codes of their cultures. Their strict religious upbringing, reinforced by their mothers, exacerbated their sexual anxiety, causing them to internalize attitudes and prohibitions against sexuality in general and same-sex desire in particular. That they would learn how to hide their desires and act according to strict gender norms was a natural consequence, a tacit expectation in the societies in which they lived. In time, they would find others with whom they could share their pains and joys and simply be themselves. As young men, they would even fall in love with some of them (for example, Salvador Dalí in the case of Lorca and Kip Kiernan for Williams), relationships that would eventually end in heartache. As they matured, they grew somewhat more comfortable with their orientation. Lorca was killed at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War at a point in his life when he was more at ease with his sexuality; the fact that he was known as a homosexual in some circles remains a likely factor behind his killing. Williams, on the other hand, eventually came out on a television talk show in the 1970s. Nevertheless, for both authors, the struggle to accept themselves fully as men who loved men remained, to some extent, a nagging and lifelong problem.

¶13

Ultimately (and fortunately), this struggle fueled their art. For both Williams and Lorca, a strategy of concealment and revelation proved fruitful for structuring plays in which heteronormative predicaments often masked homosexual issues. Each author practiced a kind of coded writing that would result in a double reading, as David Savran has argued in regard to Williams's work. On the one hand, Lorca and Williams wrote for the commercial theater (with a few exceptions, such as Lorca's never-performed *The Audience*). Audiences understood (whether they liked it or not or agreed with it or not) what would be happening onstage—a "straight" reading of the play. On the other hand, same-sex desire is manifested in a disguised language of obscurity, opacity, and indirection. This kind of language was intended for well-trained eyes/ears and a same-sex sensitivity that could read between the lines and decipher those codes—what Savran has called a "camp" reading of the plays. This was one way in which Lorca and Williams expressed their internal turmoil and disagreed with heteronormative societal conventions regarding sexuality, gender, and sexual orientation.

¶14

Though scholarship is divided over whether Lorca and Williams were writing from a dynamic of internalized homophobia or whether they actually sought to contest the status quo,^[1] what is obvious in both their lives was the difficulty of being marginalized and even traumatized by same-sex desires. Images of sorrow, pain, and violence thread through their plays—perhaps an intentional expression of the pain of the marginalized "other," perhaps a self-punitive mechanism of guilt and atonement for homosexual feelings, or perhaps a mixture of both.

¶15 The portrayal of gender identification is yet another similarity in their work. As a result of childhood ailments, both authors spent much of their boyhoods indoors, surrounded by women. Consequently, each came to thoroughly empathize and identify with women. Their relationship with their male characters, as a result, is highly ambivalent, tending toward exaltation as well as denigration. are given negative characteristics but also portrayed as physically attractive and desirable men. This does not mean that Williams's and Lorca's female protagonists are actually homosexual men in disguise (the so-called Albertine strategy).² Rather than reverse the gender system, Williams and Lorca deconstruct it, calling into question patriarchal understandings of femininity and masculinity and challenging the "naturalness" of gender roles.

¶16 Williams's representation of the eroticized male body onstage for the pleasure of others (whether other characters or the audience or both) was revolutionary in its day. For example, according to Dean Shackelford, Blanche DuBois "projects the gaze of the gay playwright" (145) when she ogles her working-class brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski's naked, well-built torso. It is he rather than she who is made by Williams to be "the principal object of the gaze" (145) in the play. However, at the same time that he is admired, Stanley is denigrated when—despite his macho posturing—he becomes the object rather than the subject of the gaze. As Shackelford mentions, the very act of admiration becomes an act of denigration in Williams. He points out that at the same time that Williams eroticizes and displays Stanley's masculinity, betraying his own attraction for the male body (and therefore opening up the possibility for others to do so as well), the playwright is depriving the character of his patriarchal power. In *Streetcar*, as in other plays, Williams focuses on his female protagonist, simultaneously admiring and attacking the male antagonist, and thereby challenging stereotypical gender behavior.

¶17 Lorca's attraction to the masculine male body may not be as insistent or direct as Williams's, but his fascination with (and continuous denigration of) stereotypical virility is strongly evident through his characters and stage directions. For example, there are only women in the last play he wrote before he died, *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Men are entirely absent from the stage. However, despite men's invisibility onstage, the play revolves around one male character: Pepe el Romano, to whom matriarch Bernarda Alba's sex-starved daughters, especially three of them, are attracted. Throughout the course of the play, Pepe becomes the subject of fantasy, the repository of repressed desires by the confined women. It is precisely Pepe's absence from the stage that allows the power of fantasy to take over, magnifying his figure and turning him into a tabula rasa for projected desires. However, as attractive a figure as Lorca wants Pepe to be, he also attacks him by excluding him from the staged action and depriving him, in the end, of a death that would have made him heroic. (Like a coward, Pepe runs away when he and the youngest daughter Adela are discovered.) Thus, in this play, by relegating men to the invisible space outside the house, Lorca dramatizes female space and, as John Gabriele contends, "posit[s] a critical view of the socialization of arbitrary gender construction" (391). Through the interplay of visible females and invisible males, Lorca illustrates "how space can function symbolically within a dramatic text to produce political meaning with regard to traditional gender constructs and the enclosure of women" (392).

¶18 The dilemma of whether to live in a world of illusion or face obdurate reality confronts many Lorca and Williams characters, a fifth trait the authors have in common. For example, in Lorca's *Doña Rosita the Spinster*, the eponymous protagonist lives under the illusion that her fiancé will return from South America to marry her, while in *Mariana Pineda* the imprisoned Mariana hopes against time that her rebel-lover Pedro de Sotomayor

will come and rescue her from impending death. Williams's Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* lives in the world of her past, a genteel South where she is admired and courted, and Serafina delle Rose from *The Rose Tattoo* remains stubbornly devoted to her deceased husband. Most of these characters eventually confront reality, for better or worse. Doña Rosita, already an old spinster mocked by society, confesses—as she gets ready to leave her home and life—that she knew deep down that her fiancé would never return. Mariana Pineda is finally able to face death heroically, as an act of liberation, when she faces the fact that her lover will not rescue her—and that he had been using her for political purposes. Unfortunately, Amanda Wingfield will remain trapped in the illusions of a fabricated past and (in contrast to her son Tom) confined to her St. Louis apartment. Serafina delle Rose, on the other hand, confronts the fact that her beloved deceased husband Rosario was unfaithful to her and reluctantly allows Alvaro Mangiacavallo, a facsimile, to enter her world; after a reluctant courtship, she is able to go on with her life.

¶19 The ravaging effects of time, a theme that Tennessee Williams scholars such as Robert Bray and Mary Ann Corrigan have analyzed, is an important fixture in both authors' work. According to Corrigan, "Williams frequently expresses the conflict between real and ideal in temporal terms" (221), a statement that also holds true for Lorca. For instance, Lorca subtitles his surrealistic play *When Five Years Pass* a "legend about time" since it is about a Young Man's untimely realization of his sexual identity. Among the dozens of possible examples that could be cited, Alessandra del Lago in Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* seeks to run away from the debilitating effects of time on her body and beauty, while Chance Wayne looks at his thinning hair in the mirror and determines that his chances are indeed waning.

¶20 This time-controlled struggle between living in a world of illusions and facing harsh reality characterizes both Williams's and Lorca's theatre. Consequently, the dramas of Lorca and Williams are both poetic and realistic. In the case of Williams, his "willingness to open up his theatre to more than the traditional forms of realism...allowed [him] to create a lyrical drama, a poetic theatre" (Roudané 3). Theatre for Lorca "is a poetic event of stylized theatricality with its own artistic integrity and freedom from the expository word" (Greenfield 33). Thus, décor, costume, music, song, and dance become integral and vital components of Lorca's plays. These aspects are also found in Williams's productions, what Matthew C. Roudané and Richard E. Kramer (among others, including Williams himself) have called "plastic theatre." Yet, for all their lyricism, Williams's and Lorca's plots remain grounded in reality. As Lorca told Felipe Morales in an interview in 1936:

Theatre is poetry that gets up from a book and becomes flesh.... And upon becoming human talks and yells, cries and gets desperate. Theatre needs that those characters who appear on stage wear the costume of poetry but at the same time that one may be able to see their flesh, their blood...^[3] (Edwards 33)

For Williams and Lorca, theatre is primarily "about making what is invisible or repressed in society visible on stage" (Johnston 111). Their plays give "voice to the force of desire" (111), therefore questioning and deconstructing the *status quo*. D. H. Lawrence and Anton Chekhov doubtless influenced Tennessee Williams's dramatic works. However, Federico García Lorca's views on desire left a lasting thematic impression on Williams as well.

Notes

¹ John Clum, for example, criticizes Williams for the way in which he deals with homosexuals in his plays—a clear example, for him, of Williams's internalization of the homophobic discourse. However, authors like Dean Shackelford highlight the complexity

with which Williams treats the topic of homosexuality in his plays, contesting the status quo and advocating change. A third group of critics, represented by Michael Paller, argues that while Williams creatively depicts homosexuality onstage and therefore challenges heteronormativity, he is still a product of his time and has internalized its social rules regarding homosexuals and homosexuality. The same holds true in Lorca scholarship. For example, whereas Beatriz Cortez sees Lorca's avant-garde play *The Audience* as a challenge to compulsory heterosexism, Carlos Jerez-Farrán regards it as an expression of internalized homophobia.

² David Savran explains the Albertine strategy succinctly with regard to Williams in *Communists, Cowboys and Queers*. He writes: "Beginning in the late 1950's, with an increasing public suspicion (or awareness) of Williams's homosexuality, a species of criticism emerged that attempted cunningly to decipher the language of 'obscurity' and 'indirection' in Williams's plays by translating his heroines into homosexual men in drag and, as a result, turning many of his heterosexual couplings into homosexual liaisons in disguise. This particular maneuver dates back to a 1958 essay by Stanley Edgar Hyman in which he decries a 'somewhat unattractive' trend, that he alleges, enfeebles the American 'tradition' and compromises its most 'virile' achievements. The 'Albertine strategy,' as he calls it (commemorating Proust's 'Albert-made-Albertine,' whom he believes to be the 'godfather' of all such transpositions), entails metamorphosing a boy with whom the male protagonist is involved into a girl..."(115).

³ The translation is mine.

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