

Class and Gender in Early 20th Century Spain

19th century Spain (background for context for *Yerma*)

- Unlike Britain and the United States, Spain never experienced the Industrial Revolution
- Political instability and popular insurrection characterized Spain throughout the 19th century
- After a revolution, the First Spanish Republic (1873-1874) was succeeded by the restoration of the sovereign
- The last of Spain's colonial possessions lost in 1898; this was seen as a catastrophe by the ruling conservatives (and evidence of Spain's decline)

Living conditions in Spain at the turn of the 20th century (immediate context for *Yerma*)

- The population of Spain in 1900 was 18.5 millions; vast majority were dependent on agriculture (only a 1/3 as productive as Britain); the country was still predominately rural
- The vast majority of Spain owned by wealthy oligarchs allied with the Catholic Church
- Conservatives blamed decline on social disintegration from modernity; liberal opposition (anarchists and socialists) blamed decline on failure to modernize

Liberal reformers at the turn of the 20th century (García Lorca is sympathetic to these points of view)

- Liberal reformers pushed for education reforms: increase literacy rates (illiteracy rates in 1900: men = 56%; women = 71%) and secularize the culture (the Church was viewed as the biggest barrier to reform)
- Proto-feminists of the 19th century (e.g., Concepción Arenal, Emilia Pardo Bazá) had focused on education & calls for women to not be exclusively defined by gender roles (not political rights-- and many social norms had been left unquestioned)
- Theoretically, left wing groups were allies of feminist reformers; the reality was that other left wing groups were more focused on larger class issues

Social conditions for women at the turn of the 20th century (immediate context for *Yerma*)

- The Church taught a strict separation of public and private spheres, that it was sinful for women to intrude in the public sphere (a man's domain)
- Cultural ideal: *angelos del hogar* (angels of hearth) → a woman's place was in the home; a woman's purpose was to raise children and support men in their roles in society
- Education: segregated, (for women) focused on things like needlepoint, sewing, lacemaking, and embroidery, (for men) agriculture, industry, and commerce
- Percentage of women engaged in economic activity in 1900: of any kind-- ~18%; professions requiring specialized education or degrees-- less than 2%

Legal conditions for women at the turn of the 20th century (immediate context for *Yerma*)

- Until 1931, gender relations were governed by the 1889 Civil Code and 1870 Penal Code
- Civil law: fathers had custodial rights of daughters (later transferred to husbands upon marriage); wives must live wherever husband decides; wives obligated to obey husbands; husband is administrator of household goods; women must have permission to engage in

economic activity (including single women who marry); husband's had authority over a wife's salary; women had no property rights; women had no legal authority over children (widows lost this authority if they remarried)

- Criminal law: disobedience of husband or father could lead to jail time; women were jailed for adultery, men were not jailed unless the infidelity was practiced so openly that it caused scandal (i.e., keeping another woman openly-- as in the home itself); husbands had legal authority over wife's body (no such thing as rape within marriage, could beat wives, etc.)

The Second Republic (1931-1939; *Yerma* was written in 1934; García Lorca was sympathetic to the liberal reforms of the Second Republic)

- After a political revolution, the second Republic was established in 1931
- Among the other political reforms: women given the franchise; women could sign contracts and act as witnesses in court; could no longer be dismissed from a job due to marriage; civil marriage was established; decriminalization of divorce (with men and women having an equal right to divorce); homosexuality and birth control decriminalized
- In 1933, the center-left coalition was defeated, and a rightist bloc came into power; began rolling back reforms
- Reforms had all been top down anyway; there had been no popular support for many of them, even among women
- Both the right and the left shared most of the same gendered cultural assumptions and practiced the same religion
- The church opposed the reforms as sinful and destructive to the family

Context for the Spanish Civil War (outside the context for *Yerma*)

- Society was increasingly polarized between liberals and conservatives
- The Spanish Civil War begins in 1936 and ends in 1939
- The fascist victors (led by General Francisco Franco) rolled back all the reforms of the 1931 Constitution (and it remained that way until the 1970s and 1980s)

Federico García Lorca's politics and views

- Saw theater as explicitly didactic, a way to overcome old prejudices and modernize the nation; he especially wanted to reform a 19th century theater that uncritically reproduced conservative social norms
- Allied with the Left-Republican government of 1931, though he did not explicitly practice politics or make political pronouncements
- *Yerma* proved controversial, as it challenges conservative gender and religious assumptions