

Honor

(II.i.18)

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: I don't like to gossip.

THIRD WASHERWOMAN: But we all gossip here.

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: And there's no harm in it.

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: A woman who wants a good reputation has to earn it.

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN:

I planted some thyme seeds.

See how they grew!

If you want a good name,

Take care what you do!

They laugh.

(II.i.19-20)

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: These barren¹ women are like that. When they could be making lace or apple preserves, they like to go up on the roof or walk barefoot along some river!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Who are you to say such things? She has no children, but that's not her fault!

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: You have children if you want to have them! These spoiled, weak, lazy women were never meant to have wrinkles on their bellies!

They laugh.

THIRD WASHERWOMAN: They put on face powder and rouge, and they wear a sprig of oleander in pursuit of a man who is not their husband!

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: Nothing could be truer!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: But have any of you seen her with another man?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: We haven't, but other people have!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Always other people!

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: They say it happened on two occasions.

¹ The Spanish word *machorras*, as well as meaning *barren* or *sterile*, can also be used as a slur to refer to lesbians (particularly if they are mannish in their appearance or behavior).

SECOND WASHERWOMAN: And what were they doing?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: Talking.

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Talking is not a sin!

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: There's something in this world called a "look." My mother used to say that. A woman doesn't look at roses the same way she looks at a man's thighs. She "looks" at him!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: But at who?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: At someone, do you hear? *You* find out. Or do I have to say it louder?

Laughter.

And when she's not looking at him, because she's alone, because he's not right there in front of her, she has his picture in her mind's eye.

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: That's a lie!

There is an uproar.

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: What about the husband?

THIRD WASHERWOMAN: The husband acts like he's deaf. He does nothing, like a lizard in the sun.

- *To what do the washerwomen attribute Yerma's barrenness?*
- *In what ways do the washerwomen typify societal attitudes?*
- *What is their dramatic purpose in the play? The notes suggest they are like a Greek chorus, but in what sense?*

(II.ii.26-27)

JUAN: You say she went out a little while ago?

The OLDER SISTER-IN-LAW nods her assent.

She must be at the fountain. But you know I don't like her to go out alone.

Pause.

You can set the table.

The YOUNGER SISTER-IN-LAW exits.

I really earn the bread I eat! (*To his SISTER*) Yesterday I had a hard day. I was pruning the apple trees and by the end of the afternoon I began to think-- why am I working so hard if I can't even put one apple in my mouth? I'm fed up!

He passes his hand over his face. Pause.

She hasn't come. One of you should always go with her! That's why you're here, eating at my table and drinking my wine! **My work is in the fields,² but my honor is here. And my honor is yours, as well.**

(II.ii.29-30)

JUAN: **I don't like people pointing at me! That's why I want to see that door locked and everyone in her own house.**

FIRST SISTER-IN-LAW enters slowly and goes toward a cupboard.

YERMA: Talking to people is not a sin!

JUAN: But it can seem like one!

The SECOND SISTER-IN-LAW enters and goes to the pitchers, from which she fills a water jug.

(Lowering his voice) **I don't have the strength for all this. When people start a conversation, close your mouth and remember you're a married woman!**

YERMA *(Amazed)*: **Married!**

JUAN: And that **families have their honor, and honor is a burden all them must bear!**

The SECOND SISTER-IN-LAW slowly exits with the water jug.

But inside our bloodstream is dark and weak.³

The SISTER-IN-LAW exits with a tray. Her gait is almost processional. Pause.

Forgive me.

YERMA looks at her husband; he raises his head and is held by her gaze.

Though, the way you are looking at me, I shouldn't say "Forgive me." I should force you, lock you up because that's what a husband is for!

(II.ii.32)

YERMA: I'll be dead and buried before I'll ever speak to them!

MARÍA: What about your husband?

YERMA: The three of them are against me.

MARÍA: What do they think?

² *Mi vida está en el campo*: literally, "My life's in the field"

³ *Pero que está oscura y débil en los mismos caños de la sangre*: literally, "But it [honor] is dark and delicate in the very channels of the blood."

YERMA: They imagine things. Like people with a guilty conscience. They think I could want another man, and don't realize that even if I did, in my family, honor comes first! They are stones in my path! But they don't know that if I want to, I can become a torrent of water and sweep them away!

- *What is the difference in the way Yerma and Juan conceptualize honor? Who is more "correct?"*

Role of Men and Women

(II.i.19)

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: We do know her husband has brought his two sisters to live with them.

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: The old maids?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: Yes. They used to have the job of keeping an eye on the church. Now they'll be keeping an eye on their sister-in-law! I wouldn't be able to live with them!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Why?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: Because they are frightening! Like those enormous leaves that suddenly sprout up out of graves. They're smeared with wax! Plugged up inside! They probably cook their food in kerosene!

- *What is the purpose of including the two sisters-in-law? They say almost nothing and add little to the drama?*
- *Why is Yerma so resentful of the sisters that Juan brings into the house?*

(II.i.19-20)

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Can I just know what happened?

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: She spent the night before last sitting on the doorstep, in spite of the cold!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: But why?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: It's hard for her to stay in the house!

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: These barren⁴ women are like that. When they could be making lace or apple preserves, they like to go up on the roof or walk barefoot along some river!

FIRST WASHERWOMAN: Who are you to say such things? She has no children, but that's not her fault!

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: You have children if you want to have them! These spoiled, weak, lazy women were never meant to have wrinkles on their bellies!

They laugh.

THIRD WASHERWOMAN: They put on face powder and rouge, and they wear a sprig of oleander in pursuit of a man who is not their husband!

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN: Nothing could be truer!

FIFTH LAUNDRESS: Nothing could be truer!

(II.ii.31)

YERMA: A country girl who doesn't bear children is as useless as a handful of thorns-- even sinful! And so, I'm part of the refuse discarded by God's hand!

MARÍA reaches for the child.

Take him, he's happier with you! I suppose I don't have a mother's hands!

MARÍA: Why do you say that?

YERMA (*Getting up*): Because I'm sick of it! Because I'm sick of having them and not being able to use them for the right thing. Because I am hurt-- hurt and completely degraded-- watching how the wheat springs up, how the fountains never cease giving water, and how the sheep give birth to hundreds of lambs, and the dogs, and how it as if the whole countryside rises up to show me its young offspring drowsily nursing, while I feel two blows of a hammer, here, where my baby's mouth should be!

(II.ii.33-34)

YERMA: A change of scenery will do you good.

VICTOR: All scenery is the same.

YERMA: No. I would go very far away.

VICTOR: It's all the same. The same sheep have the same wool.

⁴ The Spanish word *machorras*, as well as meaning *barren* or *sterile*, can also be used as a slur to refer to lesbians (particularly if they are mannish in their appearance or behavior).

YERMA: For men, yes; but women are another matter. I never heard a man who was eating say: "How good these apples are!" You go on your way without noticing the nice things. As for me, I can say I have hated the water from these wells!

VICTOR: It could be.

(II.ii.34)

YERMA: Why are you leaving? Everybody here likes you.

VICTOR: I've behaved.

Pause.

YERMA: You've behaved. One time, when you were a strong young shepherd, you carried me in your arms, don't you remember? You never know what's going to happen.

VICTOR: Everything changes.

YERMA: Some things don't change! There are things locked up behind the walls that can never change, because nobody hears them!

VICTOR: That's how it is.

The SECOND SISTER-IN-LAW appears and goes slowly toward the door, where she stands still, illuminated by the last light of afternoon.

YERMA: But if they suddenly exploded, they would shake the world!

VICTOR: Nothing would be gained. The water in its channel, the flock in the fold, the moon in the sky, and a man with his plow!

(II.ii.35)

JUAN (*Entering*): Are you on your way now?

VICTOR: I want to get through the mountain pass before daybreak.

JUAN: Do I owe you anything?

VICTOR: No. You paid me well.

JUAN (*To YERMA*): I bought his flocks.

YERMA: Yes?

VICTOR (*To YERMA*): They're yours.

YERMA: I didn't know.

JUAN (*With satisfaction*): It's true!

VICTOR: Your husband should see his fortune made!

YERMA: He who labors gets the fruit.

The SISTER-IN-LAW who is at the door goes inside.

JUAN: We don't have enough room for so many sheep!

YERMA (*Somberly*): There's so much land!

Pause.

JUAN: We'll go together as far as the stream.

VICTOR: I wish great happiness for this house!

He shakes YERMA'S hand.

YERMA: May God hear you. Stay well!

VICTOR starts to leave, but after an imperceptible movement by YERMA, he turns back.

VICTOR: Did you say something?

YERMA (*Dramatically*): I said, "Stay well!"

VICTOR: Thank you.

- ***Why does Victor have to leave? Why does he say everything changes?***
- ***Why are Yerma and Victor's conversations never about what is important to them-- composed of small talk, misunderstandings (e.g., María's child mistaken for Yerma's, the rash, the imagined cries of a child), and awkward pauses?***
- ***Could Victor be leaving because of Yerma (consciously or unconsciously)?***
- ***Why doesn't Yerma leave Juan for Victor? Would she have left Juan if Victor had not left?***
- ***How is Victor's departure a turning point in the play?***

Water

(II.i.22)

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN (*Singing*):

In the icy stream,
I wash your sash.
Warmer than a jasmine
Is your laugh
I want to live
In the tiny snowdrift
Of that jasmine.

FIRST WASHERWOMAN:

Alas, for the wife who is dry!
Alas, for the wife with breasts of sand!

FIFTH WASHERWOMAN:

Tell me if your husband
Still has seed
To send the water singing
Through your shift.

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN:

Your shift is a boat
Of silver and wind
On the edge of the stream.

THIRD WASHERWOMAN:

I come to the river to wash
The clothes of my son,
To teach the crystal waters
To shine, to run!

(II.ii.26-27)

JUAN: You say she went out a little while ago?

The OLDER SISTER-IN-LAW nods her assent.

She must be at the fountain. But you know I don't like her to go out alone.

Pause.

You can set the table.

The YOUNGER SISTER-IN-LAW exits.

I really earn the bread I eat! (*To his SISTER*) **Yesterday I had a hard day. I was pruning the apple trees and by the end of the afternoon I began to think-- why am I working so hard if I can't even put one apple in my mouth? I'm fed up!**

He passes his hand over his face. Pause.

She hasn't come. One of you should always go with her! That's why you're here, eating at my table and drinking my wine! My work is in the fields,⁵ but my honor is here. And my honor is yours, as well.

The SISTER-IN-LAW bows her head.

Don't take me wrong.

YERMA enters carrying two pitchers. She stops in the doorway.

Have you been to the fountain?

YERMA: Yes, so we could have fresh water with our dinner.

(II.ii.28)

YERMA: But I'm not you! Men have another life-- their flocks, their, orchards, their conversations! Women only have their children and caring for their children.

JUAN: Everyone is not the same. Why don't you take in one of your brother's children? I wouldn't be against it.

YERMA: I don't want to take care of other people's children! I think my arms would freeze, just holding them!

(II.ii.29)

YERMA: I came to this house so I wouldn't have to resign myself! When I'm in my coffin with my hands tied together⁶ and a cloth wrapped around my head to keep my mouth from falling open⁷-- that's when I'll resign myself!

JUAN: Then, what do you want to do?

YERMA: I want to drink water and there's no glass and no water! I want to walk up the hill, and I have no feet! I want to embroider my petticoats, and I can't find the thread!

⁵ *Mi vida está en el campo*: literally, "My life's in the field"

⁶ a common superstitious practice of the time, to keep the body still in the coffin; cf. a popular flamenco folk song:

When I come to die,
I ask of you one thing:
That they tie my hands
With the braids of your black hair.

⁷ also a common practice, to keep the mouth of a dead person closed

(II.ii.31)

MARÍA: If you'd listen to me, you could be happy.

YERMA: A country girl who doesn't bear children is as useless as a handful of thorns-- even sinful! And so, I'm part of the refuse discarded by God's hand!

MARÍA reaches for the child.

Take him, he's happier with you! I suppose I don't have a mother's hands!

MARÍA: Why do you say that?

YERMA (*Getting up*): Because I'm sick of it! Because I'm sick of having them and not being able to use them for the right thing. Because I am hurt-- hurt and completely degraded-- watching how the wheat springs up, **how the fountains never cease giving water**, and how the sheep give birth to hundreds of lambs, and the dogs, and how it as if the whole countryside rises up to show me its young offspring drowsily nursing, while I feel two blows of a hammer, here, where my baby's mouth should be!

MARÍA: I don't like what you're saying!

YERMA: You women who have children, you can't understand those of us who don't! You stay fresh, ignorant-- like people who swim in sweet water with no idea what thirst is.

(II.ii.32)

MARÍA: What about your husband?

YERMA: The three of them are against me.

MARÍA: What do they think?

YERMA: They imagine things. Like people with a guilty conscience. They think I could want another man, and don't realize that even if I did, in my family, honor comes first! **They are stones in my path! But they don't know that if I want to, I can become a torrent of water and sweep them away!**

A SISTER enters and then exits, carrying a loaf of bread.

MARÍA: Anyway, I think your husband still loves you.

YERMA: My husband gives me bread and board.

MARÍA: What a hard time you're having, what a hard time! But remember the wounds of Our Lord.

- *What is María's dramatic purpose in the play?*

Flowing Water vs. Inhibited Water

(2.2.30)

YERMA (*As if in a dream*):

Oh, what a pasture of pain!
Oh, the gate barred against beauty!
I crave to carry a child, but the breeze
Offers dahlias made of the dreaming moon.
Deep in my flesh I have two warm springs,
Throbbing fountainheads of milk--
Two pulsing hoofbeats of a horse,
Which agitate the branches of my anguish.
O blind breasts under my clothing!
O doves without eyes, doves without whiteness!
The stinging pain of imprisoned blood
Nails hornets to the nape of my neck!
But surely you'll come, my love, my son!
As the sea gives salt, and the earth bears grain,
Our womb will swell with a tender child,
Like a cloud which brings the sweet, fresh rain.

- *It sounds as Yerma does not lack water within in that she possesses “fountainheads of milk;” however, she compares them to “imprisoned blood.” In what sense are they “imprisoned?”*

(2.2.32)

YERMA: They imagine things. Like people with a guilty conscience. They think I could want another man, and don't realize that even if I did, in my family, honor comes first! **They are stones in my path! But they don't know that if I want to, I can become a torrent of water and sweep them away!**

- *If Yerma can become a torrent of water, what does this suggest about the flow of water when she speaks these words?*
- *How does the use of the water imagery make sense here? So far, water imagery in the play has been linked to fertility, love, and production (more generally). This seems to break the pattern-- or does it...*

**flowing/falling water as potentially rejuvenating for Juan
(suggests he is need of flowing water)**

(I.i.2)

YERMA: But not you. When we got married, you were different. Now your face is pale-- as if the sun never touched it. **I wish you'd go down to the river and swim, and go up on the roof when the rain is pouring down on our house.** Twenty-four months we've been married, and you keep growing sadder, thinner-- as if you were growing backwards.

**falling water explicitly linked to fertility imagery
(necessary for growing plants)**

(I.i.3)

YERMA: Don't! Don't keep telling me what people are saying! I can see with my own eyes that's it's not true-- that **when the rain falls on the rocks, they soften and make the wild mustard grow,** and **people say it's useless. "That plant is useless."** But I can clearly see its yellow blossoms moving in the breeze.

fountains of breast milk likened to flowing waters

(I.i.4-5)

Let the trees lift their branches up to the sun!
Let the fountains leap, and the river run!

**the gush of water from the mouths of men has to be exchanged
(flow from one mouth to another)**

(I.ii.12)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN: Just the opposite of me! Perhaps that's why you haven't had a baby yet. **Men should be enjoyed,** my child! They should undo our braids and **give us water to drink from their own mouths. That's what makes the world go round!**

**the gush of water fills Victor's mouth
(it is not exchanged)**

(I.ii.15-16)

YERMA: What a strong voice! Like a gush of water filling your whole mouth.

**compare to imagery of blockage and inhibition
(associated with both Juan and infertility)**

(1.2.11)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN (*Leaving*): Though there should be a God, if only a little one, to throw thunderbolts at men whose rotten seed dams up the joys of the fields!

**ice (where the flow is inhibited) must be melted
(sexual pleasure is what loosens the flow)**

(2.1.22)

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN (*Singing*):

In the icy stream,
I wash your sash.
Warmer than a jasmine
Is your laugh
I want to live
In the tiny snowdrift
Of that jasmine.

**Yerma seeks fresh (flowing) waters from the fountain
(not the stale, stagnant water of the home)**

(II.ii.26-27)

JUAN: You say she went out a little while ago?

The OLDER SISTER-IN-LAW nods her assent.

She must be at the fountain. But you know I don't like her to go out alone.

Pause.

You can set the table. [...]

YERMA enters carrying two pitchers. She stops in the doorway.

Have you been to the fountain?

YERMA: Yes, so we could have fresh water with our dinner.

infertility associated with immobility and stasis

(2.2.28)

YERMA: I don't want to take care of other people's children! I think my arms would freeze, just holding them!

pruning is conceived in similar terms as blocking or damming

(2.2.27)

JUAN: I spent yesterday pruning trees.

**compare to imagery of blockage and inhibition
(again associated with both Juan and infertility)**

(1.2.11)

PAGAN OLD WOMAN (*Leaving*): Though there should be a God, if only a little one, to throw thunderbolts at men whose rotten seed dams up the joys of the fields!

the flow of blood through procreation (cf. gush of water as shared between individuals) is stymied or dammed up when procreation does not occur; this causes it to change its nature (from positive to negative aspect)

(1.1.8)

YERMA: That's a lie! Mothers who say that are weaklings, complainers! Why do they have them? Having a child is no bed of roses! We have to suffer for them to grow up. It must drain half our blood. But that's good, healthy, beautiful! Every woman has enough blood for four or five children, and if she doesn't have them, it turns to poison, as it will with me.

“Repression”

Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. 1915. Ed.
Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. (p. 570-571)

Psycho-analysis is able to show us other things as well which are important for understanding the effects of repression in the psychoneuroses. It shows us, for instance, that **the instinctual representative develops with less interference and more profusely if it is withdrawn by repression from conscious influence. It proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when they are translated and presented to the neurotic are not only bound to seem alien to him, but frighten him by giving him the picture of an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct. This deceptive strength of instinct is the result of an uninhibited development in phantasy and of the damming-up consequent on frustrated satisfaction.** The fact that this last result is bound up with repression points the direction in which the true significance of repression has to be looked for.

Freudian language of repression is consonant with dammed waters of *Yerma*

(2.2.32)

YERMA: They imagine things. Like people with a guilty conscience. They think I could want another man, and don't realize that even if I did, in my family, honor comes first! **They are stones in my path! But they don't know that if I want to, I can become a torrent of water and sweep them away!**

OR

(II.ii.34)

YERMA: **One time, when you were a strong young shepherd, you carried me in your arms, don't you remember? You never know what's going to happen.**

VICTOR: **Everything changes.**

YERMA: **Some things don't change! There are things locked up behind the walls that can never change, because nobody hears them!**

VICTOR: That's how it is.

The SECOND SISTER-IN-LAW appears and goes slowly toward the door, where she stands still, illuminated by the last light of afternoon.

YERMA: **But if they suddenly exploded, they would shake the world!**