

Religion

(III.i.37)

DOLORES: She got here. With her shoes and her petticoats soaked with blood-- but with her face shining!

YERMA: And nothing happened to her?

DOLORES: What could happen? God is God.

(III.i.37)

DOLORES: Now you will have a child. I can assure you.

YERMA: I will have one because I must! Or I don't understand the world. Sometimes, when I'm sure that never, never... a wave of fire sweeps up from my feet, and makes everything seem empty. And men walking along the street, and bulls and stones, seem to me like things made of cotton. And I ask myself: "What are they there for?"

(III.i.38)

YERMA: He doesn't suffer! The fact is, he doesn't want children.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Don't say that!

YERMA: I can see it in his eyes, and since he doesn't want them, he doesn't give them to me. I don't love him, I don't love him, and yet he's my only salvation! For honor and for family! My only salvation!

Water and Fire

(III.i.37)

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(III.i.38)

YERMA (*she rises*): He's good! He's good! But what of it? I wish he were bad. But, no. He goes out with his sheep 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.**

(III.ii.50-51)

YERMA: Be quiet, be quiet, it's not that! I'd never do that! I can't go out looking. Do you think that I could have another man? What about my honor? **You can't turn back the tide**, or have a full moon come out at midday! Go away! I'll continue on the road I have chosen. Did you really think that I could turn to another man? That I'm going to beg like a slave for what belongs to me? Know who I am, so that you will never speak to me again! I am not looking for anyone.

OLD WOMAN: **When you're thirsty, you're grateful for water.**

YERMA: **I'm like a parched field big enough to hold a thousand teams of oxen plowing, and what you give me is a little glass of water from the well! Mine is pain that is no longer of my flesh!**

OLD WOMAN (*Loud*): Then go on this way. It's what you want! Like thistles in the wasteland-- prickly, barren!

YERMA (*Loud*): **Barren, yes, I already know it! Barren!** It's not necessary to rub my mouth in it! Don't amuse yourself like little children do with a dying animal! **Ever since I got married, I've been turning that word over in my mind, but it's the first time I've heard it, the first time it's been said to my face! The first time I know that it's true!**

(III.ii.53)

YERMA: **Barren. Barren, but sure. Now I know it for certain. And alone.**

She stands up. People begin to gather.

I will sleep without suddenly waking up to see if my blood is proclaiming other, new blood. With my body dry forever. What do you want to know? Don't come near me, for I have killed my son! I myself have killed my son!

- What does Yerma mean when she says, "I have killed my son! I myself have killed my son?"
- Why does Yerma reject her best chance at having a child (the Pagan Woman's offer)?
- Why does Yerma kill Juan, her only remaining chance for having a child?

- How is killing your husband somehow more honorable than running off with another man?
- What will happen to Yerma after the murder?

House

(I.i.4)

JUAN: If you need anything, let me know, and I'll bring it. You know I don't like you going out.

YERMA: I never go out.

JUAN: You're better off here.

YERMA: Yes.

JUAN: The streets are for people with nothing to do.

YERMA (*Somberly*): Of course.

(I.ii.14)

YERMA: Why did you get married?

SECOND GIRL: Because they married me off. Everybody gets married! If we go on like this, no one will be left single except the children! Well, anyway-- the fact is, a girl gets married long before she goes to the church. But the old women are dead set on all this. I'm nineteen years old and I don't like to cook or clean. Well, now I have to spend the whole day doing things I don't like! And what for? Why is it necessary for my husband to be my husband? We did the same thing when we were engaged that we do now. Old people's foolishness!

YERMA: Hush! Don't say such things!

SECOND GIRL: You'll call me crazy, too! Crazy, crazy! (*She laughs*) I can tell you the one thing I've learned in life: All the people are stuck in their houses doing things they don't like. You're better off out in the middle of the street! Sometimes I go down to the river, sometimes I climb up and ring the church bells, and sometimes I drink a little anisette.

(II.i.19)

THIRD WASHERWOMAN: Are they already at the house?

FOURTH WASHERWOMAN: Since yesterday. The husband is going out to his fields again.

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 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!

(II.ii.28)

JUAN: Don't you know the way I think? The sheep in the pens, and the women in their houses. You're out too much! Haven't you always heard me say that?

YERMA: You're right! The women in their houses. If the houses are not tombs! If chairs get broken, and linen sheets wear out from being used! But not here! Every night, when I get into bed, the bed seems to be newer, shinier, as if it had just been brought from the city.

(II.ii.29)

JUAN: Being around you only makes me restless and uneasy. When there's no other choice, you should resign yourself.

YERMA: I came to this house so I wouldn't have to resign myself! When I'm in my coffin with my hands tied together² and a cloth wrapped around my head to keep my mouth from falling open³-- 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!

JUAN: The truth is you're not a real woman, and you're trying to destroy a man who has no choice!

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).

² 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.

³ also a common practice, to keep the mouth of a dead person closed

YERMA: I don't know who I am. Let go of me, let me unburden myself! I have never failed you!

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.

(II.ii.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.

(III.i.40)

JUAN: And I can't stand any more! You'd have to be made of bronze to put up with a woman at your side who wants to jab her fingers into your heart and goes out of her house at night-- looking for what? Tell me! Looking for what? The streets are full of young studs. You don't go out on the streets to pick flowers!

YERMA: I won't let you say one more word! Not one more! You and your family think you're the only people who care about honor, and you don't know that my family has never had anything to hide. Come here! Come close to me and smell my clothing; come close! Let's see where you can find a smell that's not yours, that's not from your body! Stand me naked in the middle of the plaza and spit on me! Do what you like with me, since I'm your wife, but take care you don't put another man's name on my breast!

JUAN: It's not me who puts it there-- you put it there with your behavior, and the town is beginning to talk! Beginning to talk! When I join a group of people, they all grow quiet. When I go to weigh the flour, they all grow quiet. And even at night, when I wake up in the fields, it seems as if the branches of the trees grow quiet, too!

YERMA: Those evil winds that knock the wheat down-- I don't know why they start. See for yourself if the wheat is good!

JUAN: Nor do I know what a woman is looking for, out of her house at all hours!

YERMA (*In an outburst, embracing her husband*): I'm looking for you! I'm looking for you! It's you I look for, day and night, without finding any shade where I can rest! It's your blood and your help I want!

(III.ii.52-53)

JUAN (*Coming near her*): Tell yourself it had to turn out this way. Listen to me! (*He puts his arms around her to lift her to her feet.*) Many women would be happy living the life you do. Life is sweeter without children! I'm happy not having them. We're not to blame in any way!

YERMA: Then what were you looking for in me?

JUAN: For you yourself!

YERMA (*With excitement*): That's it! You were looking for a house, peace and quiet, and a wife! But nothing more. Is it true, what I'm saying?

JUAN: It's true! Like everyone.

[...]

YERMA: You pursue me as if I were a dove you want to devour!

Four Different Ways of Reading the End

- 1) Literal: Juan is thin and sickly; he is also drunk in Act III. Yerma strength comes from the adrenaline, the channeling of the repressed desire that suddenly bursts free.

(I.i.2)

YERMA: Don't you want a glass of milk?

JUAN: What for?

YERMA: You work hard, and you aren't strong enough for so much work

JUAN: When men stay thin, they get as strong as steel.

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.**

(II.ii.34)

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!**

- 2) Symbolic: Yerma has exchanged roles with Juan, achieving complete dominance by the end of the play. By murdering him, she has succeeded in usurping his masculine role.

Men govern women, but it is Yerma who governs him. Men are active in the world, but it is Yerma who abandons her passive role of a woman at the end of Act II. Men provide a male heir, but Juan has no interest in doing so, even if he were capable (which he is not).

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(I.ii.17)

YERMA: To hell with other people!⁴

JUAN: **Don't swear! It's ugly in a woman.**

YERMA: **How I wish I were a woman!**

⁴ ¡Punalada quo le den a las gentes!: a Spanish expression that literally means, "May they stick a knife in them!"

(II.i.19)

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 barren⁵ women [*machorras* → mannish creatures] 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!

(II.ii.28-29)

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!

JUAN: Always brooding about this is driving you crazy; you never think about the things you should, and you insist on beating your head against a rock.

YERMA: A rock that is shameful-- because it *is* a rock, when it should be a basket of flowers and sweet water!

JUAN: Being around you only makes me restless and uneasy. When there's no other choice, you should resign yourself.

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?

⁵ 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).

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

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I ask of you one thing:
That they tie my hands
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⁷ also a common practice, to keep the mouth of a dead person closed

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!

JUAN: The truth is you're not a real woman, and you're trying to destroy a man who has no choice!

(II.ii.30)

JUAN: 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.31)

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.

MARÍA: I don't want to tell you what I always tell you.

YERMA: Each time I have more need, and less hope!

MARÍA: How awful!

YERMA: I'll end up believing that I'm my own son. I often go down to feed the oxen-- which I never used to do, because women don't-- and when I walk through the dark shed, my footsteps sound to me like those of a man.

(II.ii.35)

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.

(III.i.38)

YERMA: I'm not an unfaithful wife, but I know that children are conceived by a man and a woman. Oh, if only I could have them all by myself!

(III.i.40)

YERMA: I won't let you say one more word! Not one more! You and your family think you're the only people who care about honor, and you don't know that my family has never had anything to hide. Come here! Come close to me and smell my clothing; come close! Let's see where you can find a smell that's not yours, that's not from your body! Stand me naked in the middle of the plaza and spit on me! **Do what you like with me, since I'm your wife, but take care you don't put another man's name on my breast!**

- 3) Psychological: Yerma symbolically murders Juan. His role as a man is only defined by his ability to procreate, and when that hope is extinguished, Juan ceases to have function for Yerma. The murder is a literalization of this psychological truth.

In another sense, Juan has "murdered" Yerma's children, and the murder at the end is the unconscious expression of her revenge.

In another sense, the repressed sexual desire for Victor (sublimated into desire for a child) gains ascendancy as the Ego loses its hold on the Id. The violence that results is the re-channeling of this desire not into production, but into madness and a drive toward death.

(III.i.38)

YERMA: I'm not an unfaithful wife, but **I know that children are conceived by a man and a woman. Oh, if only I could have them all by myself!**

(III.i.41)

YERMA (*Screaming*): **God damn my father for giving me his blood-- the blood of the father of a hundred sons! God damn my blood that pounds on the walls looking for them!**

JUAN: Be quiet, I said!

DOLORES: People are coming! Talk softly!

YERMA: I don't care! **At least let my voice be free, now that I'm falling into the darkest part of the pit!** (*She gets up.*) **Let my body send out just one beautiful thing, and let it fill the air.**

(III.i.37)

YERMA: I don't think about tomorrow, I think about today! You're old, and now you see everything like a book you've read before. I think I am thirsty, but I have no freedom! I want to hold my child in my arms so I can sleep peacefully! And listen carefully, and don't be frightened by what I say: even if I knew that one day my son was going to torture me, and hate me, and drag me through the streets by the hair, I would still rejoice at his birth! It's much better to cry over a

man who is alive and stabs you with a knife than to cry over this phantom sitting on my heart,
year after year!

(III.ii.52)

YERMA: And I have no hope.

JUAN: No.

YERMA: Nor you?

JUAN: Nor me either. Accept it!

YERMA: Barren!

JUAN: And we shall live in peace. Both of us, quietly, with pleasure. Embrace me!

He embraces her.

YERMA: What are you after?

JUAN: *You* are what I'm after! In the moonlight, you are beautiful!

YERMA: You pursue me as if I were a dove you want to devour!

JUAN: Kiss me-- like this!

YERMA: Never! Never!

- 4) **Ritual:** The third act is a unification of Christian and pagan symbolism. The pilgrimage is more akin to a Dionysian fertility rite, however, than the ostensibly Christian justification. The murder is akin to the ecstatic murders of men by the Bacchante, their passion channeled into destructive ends beyond their control.

The ceremony of the third act is suggestive of Greek fertility rites, and Juan death echoes the death of Pentheus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, who (like Juan) attends a (Dionysian) rite with a skeptical outlook and (like Juan) is killed by the celebrants (torn apart in orgiastic violence by his mother Agave, García Lorca echoing this in the line about Yerma killing her own son). Yerma, however, does not embrace the Dionysian spirit, explicitly rejecting the Old Woman's offer. In this reading, the embrace of madness and death is simply another aspect of fertility and production (not exactly opposites, as the two are linked by ecstatic passion).

In another sense, Juan is akin to ancient kings who had to be ritually (or literally) slain in order for the land to be productive. As an incarnation of the dying and reviving deity, a solar god who has to die at the end of harvest and be re-born in the spring. Sir James Frazer's late 19th century *The Golden Bough* sees Osiris, Baldr, Jesus (among others) as part of this pattern of death and re-birth (tied to the re-vitalization of that which is sterile).

The land is the king, and the king is the land, and sterility of the land is, thus, related to the sterility of the king.

In some respects this pattern is like the biblical story of Onan who spilled his seed rather than doing his duty to his dead brother Er (impregnating Er's widow Tamar). God strikes him down as a result, and it remains for younger brother Shelah to fulfill God's law that demands the continuance of the genealogical line.

What is sterile, in this view, is literally Yerma (and someone must be held to account), but the culture that produces her is also sterile (requiring sacrifice to replenish and renew).

(I.i.7)

MARÍA: I don't know. But on our wedding night he kept saying it, over and over, with his mouth pressed to my cheek-- so many times that I feel as if my baby is **a fiery dove that he slipped into my ear.**⁸

(I.ii.13)

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!

(III.ii.44-45)

YERMA:

Heaven is full of gardens
With roses of happiness,
And there among the roses
Is one miraculous rose.
It's like the light of morning;
An archangel guards it well,
With wings like enormous storm clouds,
And eyes like agonies.
And all around its petals,
Springs of sweet, warm milk
Frolic and bathe the faces
Of the tranquil stars.
Lord, open your rose
Upon my withered flesh!

⁸ In Catholic folklore and iconography, the dove (Holy Spirit) entering through the Virgin Mary's ear is symbolic of the divine conception of Jesus.

“Elegy” (48-51)

**You pass into the mist of autumn,
virginal like Agnes⁹, sweet Clara¹⁰, and Cecilia¹¹;
bacchante who could have danced,
crowned with grape leaves and green vines.¹²**

***Federico García Lorca: A Life* by Ian Gibson (289-90)**

[The] origin reached back to the poet’s childhood, when he first became aware of the annual pilgrimage to the village of Moclín, in the hills some eight miles to the north of Vega ... Ferdinand and Isabella spent protracted periods there with their court until Granada succumbed [to Catholic Spain] ... [expressing] their affection for the place by donating to the newly erected church a standard of Christ that had been carried throughout the campaign against the infidel. During the sixteenth century miraculous powers began to be attributed to the picture... No one seems to know quite why the Christ of the Cloth concerned himself with impotence and infecundity in particular, but so it was-- and the afflicted travelled every autumn to the hermitage of Moclín in search of alleviation... Marcelle Auclair, in her biography of the poet, reported a comment by Lorca on the painting that suggested that he had indeed been at the church: ‘If you look at it well you can see, under the thin coating that covers it, the hoofs and thick hair of a faun.’”

(III.ii.47-48)

MALE (*Rising and shaking the horn*):

**Oh, how white she is,
The despondent wife!
Oh, how she moans in the branches!
Later, she will be
A poppy, a carnation--
Later, when the male
Opens up his cape.**

He comes nearer.

**If you come to the ritual,
Pray your womb will open.**

⁹ Christian virgin and martyr; commonly represented with a lamb (*Agnus* is Latin for lamb)

¹⁰ inspired by the teaching of St Francis of Assisi, this saint gave up her possessions and founded a religious order known as the Poor Clares

¹¹ one of the most venerated martyrs in the early Roman Church; patron saint of music

¹² The ceremony of the third act is suggestive of Greek fertility rites, and Juan death echoes the death of Pentheus in Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, who (like Juan) attends a (Dionysian) rite with a skeptical outlook and (like Juan) is killed by the celebrants (torn apart in orgiastic violence by his mother Agave, García Lorca echoing this in the line about Yerma killing her own son). Yerma, however, does not embrace the Dionysian spirit, explicitly rejecting the Old Woman’s offer.

Don't put on a veil of mourning,
Wear your softest, finest linen.
Go alone behind the walls
Where the fig trees have been hidden.
Lie beneath my earthen body
Till the first white sigh of dawn.
Oh, how she is glowing!
Oh, how she was glowing!
Oh, how the wife is swaying!

FEMALE:

Oh, how love endows her
With garlands and with crowns;
And darts of molten gold
Penetrate her breast!

MALE:

Seven times she moaned
And nine times she rose
And fifteen times the jasmine
Fused with the orange.¹³

THIRD MAN:

Strike her with the horn!

SECOND MAN:

Again, the rose, the dance!

FIRST MAN:

Oh, how the wife is swaying!

(III.i.38)

YERMA (*she rises*): He's good! He's good! But what of it? I wish he were bad. But, no. He goes out with his sheep 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.

¹³ the orange blossom, traditionally associated with weddings