

THE PUBLIC, A MODERN ADAPTATION OF ROMEO AND JULIET

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ABSTRACT:

THE PUBLIC, THE SURREALIST PLAY WRITTEN BY THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPANISH DRAMATIST FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA IS AN EXAMPLE FOR THE IDEA THAT "DETAILS MATTER", DUE TO THE COMPLEXITY OF THE ADAPTIVE PROCESS, WHICH EMPOWERS THE WRITER TO TRANSFORM THE ORIGINAL SHAKESPEAREAN PLAY ROMEO AND JULIET. LORCA RECREATES THE PLOT, PLACING THE ACTION IN A HIGHLY SYMBOLIC FRAME, TOUCHING ISSUES SUCH AS THE GENDER EXPECTATIONS OF THE AUDIENCE AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE CONSERVATIVE THEATRE. THE PUBLIC BREAKS THE BOUNDARIES AND THE TABOOS OF SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO AND JULIET, DEMONSTRATING A HIGH DEGREE OF TRANSFORMATION FROM THE "OLD" TO THE "NEW" TEXT.

KEY WORDS: ADAPTATION, THEATER, ORIGINALITY, DECONSTRUCTION

The history of Lorca's play is quite complicated as the author himself considered it an "impossible theatre" and therefore asked one of his friends to burn the manuscript after his death. The complicated staging, the high complexity of the characters and the hermetic communication between them made the writer take this decision. At that time the drama seemed impossible to produce, but however his friend ignored his wish keeping and even publishing the incomplete manuscript, years later after the author's assassination by Fascist anti-Republicans during the Spanish Civil War. Critics revealed that Garcia Lorca had insisted that *The Public* and other "unplayable" plays signified his real, true theatre.

The general thematic frame of the action is related to the author's flirtation with surrealism, under the influence of his friendship with Salvador Dali. Federico Garcia Lorca gives us an example of a different kind of theatre, less ideological and sterile, more passionate and controversial, defending all manifestations of love and breaking the limit of formalism. The general subject of the play develops on two major directions: a transformation of the "old", traditional, Shakespearean theatre and an apparent examination and display of repressed homosexual feelings. In fact, *The Public* is "the mirror of the audience" as Lorca himself called it: "it parades on stage the personal dramas that each one of the spectators is thinking of, often without realizing it, while they are watching the performance"². This confession of the dramatist given to the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*

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² <http://www.thepublic.org.uk/history.html>

in 1933 goes deeper, explaining that “everyone’s personal dramas are sometimes very shocking and generally nothing to be proud of, the spectators would immediately rise up in indignation and stop the performance”. Lorca synthesizes this way the essence of his drama, which goes beneath life’s pleasing surface, forcing the exposure of socially “forbidden” forms of love. The playwright reshapes Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in which young lovers prefer to die rather than living apart from each other. In the modern drama Juliet appears on stage after Romeo’s suicide, realizing that her death has no purpose and that she is doomed to eternal loneliness. Lorca proposes a new theatre to his audience, confronting it to an uncomfortable reality. He dares to bring to light the black side of human nature, the rejected feelings and emotions of each individual. Lorca selects and manipulates several aspects of the Shakespearean drama, reinserting the action in the coordination of the nineteenth century theatrical expectations. He manages to reformulate the Renaissance play in order to make it appealing to a modern public, who is more prepared for a theatrical experimentation, who wishes to rediscover Shakespeare adapted to the weaknesses of human nature.

Going back to the main topic of this analysis we should define the idea of adaptation. According to the Oxford Dictionary, an adaptation is “a film, book or play that is based on a particular piece of work but that has been changed for a new situation or the process of changing something, for example your behaviour, to suit a new situation”³. This definition offers us the first key to the understanding of Lorca’s drama. It is a play about theatrical experimentation, in which the action builds in a circle of several dramatic layers. The reader or the viewer confronts with a perpetual oscillation between reality and consciousness. This is the major alteration brought to the original play. The modern dramatist takes Shakespeare’s text beyond the borders of a theatrical cliché and shows his audience a society which captures the otherness in a frame of guilt and humiliation.

After surpassing the hermetic line of the play, the spectator or the reader discovers a rather simple plot. The Director of the Theatre of the Open Air, who had successfully produced *Romeo and Juliet* receives a challenge from three passionate, strange visitors to put on a new form of theatre. This so-called “Theatre Beneath the Sand” should communicate to the public a reality deliberately avoided by the Director before. Facing this proposal, he shows a vivid reluctance which proves to be very difficult to overcome:

“MAN 1 (slowly) I’ll have to shoot myself in order to inaugurate the true theatre, the theatre beneath the sand.

DIRECTOR Gonzalo...

MAN 1 How’s that? (He pauses.)

DIRECTOR (reacting) But I can’t. Everything would come crashing down. It would be leaving my children blind and then ... what would I do with the audience? What would I do with the audience if I removed the handrails from the bridge? The mask would come and devour me. I once saw a man devoured by a mask.” (Fischlin, Fortier 2000: 107)

Once this fear is defeated, The Theatre Beneath the Sand is staged. Then the audience is confronted to Lorca’s “poetic theatre” as it was called by the critics. This characteristic is proved by the allusive language, the fragmentary structure of the drama and the allegorical suggestions. In the third act a second level of action is infiltrated: the setting moves to the tomb of Juliet in Verona. She is disturbed in her death sleep by the visit of four white horses

³ <http://www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com/dictionary>

and the dramatic action develops with the highly metaphoric dialogue between Juliet and one of them. The flow of “plot” is interrupted by a black horse who recalls her to death. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* reappears later in the play when the “truth” of the Director’s production is revealed by the audience. The spectators find another Juliet off-stage and realize that the Juliet on-stage is actually a boy. But this is not the moment that wakes the anger of the public. Their fury is caused by the fact that the actors playing Romeo and Juliet love each other for real. In this intolerable context the protagonists are murdered by the audience. The violent display of their private universe leads to the inevitable brutal ending. The staging of this revolutionary theatre collapses into violence and finally ends in death. This dramatic denouement is the consequence of Lorca’s prediction that the audience of all times is not prepared to accept such a brutal deployment of the most intimate and anguishing emotions and thoughts.

The Spanish adaptation of the Shakespearean drama can also be considered a metatheatre, meaning a play about the making of theatre. This is one of the reasons Federico Garcia Lorca needed a source-play to build upon his controversial and complex ideas about dramaturgy and even life. *Romeo and Juliet* provided him the perfect context to express such daring ideas. The accidental nature of love and the impossibility of the characters to fulfill their most deeper and passionate desires are present in both plays, regardless of the major differences imposed by the social and the ideological context of the time.

A complete comparison between the two plays is impossible, because Lorca used *Romeo and Juliet* only as a thematic source, developing a much more complex dramatic work, in agreement to the coordinates of an urban landscape of the modern society. However, the background created by this tragic love story is the basis for the opening of taboo subjects such as the repression of homosexual feelings or the carnal value of human nature. From the beginning, the public meets anonymous characters “FIRST MAN”, “SECOND MAN”, “THIRD MAN”, which breaks any sexual stereotype. It is impossible for the spectator to sketch a clear image of any of these characters, as during the staging they rapidly change costumes, revealing themselves as homosexuals tormented by their lack of courage to express their real feelings:

“MAN 1 But I’ve got to take you to the stage, whether you want to or not. You’ve made me suffer too much. Quick! The screen! The screen!”

(MAN 3 brings out a folding screen and places it in the middle of the stage.)

DIRECTOR (weeping) The audience is going to see me. My theater will come crashing down... I’ve done the best dramas of the season, but now...!

(THE HORSES’ trumpets sound. MAN 1 goes to the back of the stage and opens the door.)

MAN 1 Come in here, with us. You’ve got a place in this drama. All of you. (To the DIRECTOR) And you pass behind the screen.

(MEN 2 and 3 push the DIRECTOR. He passes behind the folding screen and appearing on the other side is a boy dressed in white satin with a white ruff. He should be played by an actress. She is carrying a little black guitar)

MAN 1 Enrique! Enrique! (he covers his face with his hands.)

MAN 2 Don’t make me pass in back of the screen. Let me be for once, Gonzalo!”
(Fischlin, Fortier 2000: 108)

In *The Public*, Juliet is the only Shakespearean character present and active on the stage. But this time we are not dealing with the same idealized portrait as in the original text. Lorca’s Juliet is longing for love. This time we are not talking about ideological

manifestations, but about the carnal desire, about the simple human nature. This time Juliet is a man:

“JULIET More people all the time. They’ll wind up invading my tomb and occupying my very own bed. Me, I don’t care about their arguments concerning love or the theater. What I want is to love.” (Fischlin, Fortier 2000: 113)

The modernist aesthetics allows the playwright to take such a liberty with Shakespeare’s play. But this liberty is justified by the excuse of originality which is fully reached by Lorca’s adaptation. The Spanish writer builds a text in which this originality is interweaved with intertextuality, term developed by Roland Barthes. The French writer’s concept involves the idea that all literary creation has a social value, is an inevitable reproduction of all that was written before.

Reading further the modernist play, we get a deeper vision on Juliet’s despair and final resignation that we are all doomed to accept our destiny:

“It’s a trick, love’s word, a broken mirror, footsteps in the water. Then you’d leave me in tomb again, just as everyone does when trying to convince those listening to them that true love is impossible. Now I’m tired, so I’ll stand up and ask for help in throwing out of my tomb all those who theorize about my heart and all those who open my mouth with little marble tweezers.” (Fischlin, Fortier 2000: 114)

As all the other characters, Juliet vacillates between weakness and strength, emphasizing the hermetic character of the literary work. Lorca’s poetic language, sprinkled with metaphors, is an instrument which facilitates the reading and helps the spectator transpose into the universe of the play. Critics have suggested that this fragmentary characteristic of the play is deliberate in order to focus the viewer’s attention on the ideological side of the text. This artifice allowed the author to use the Shakespearean play as a source and to reveal the true identity of his anonymous characters. *The Public* is the direct result of a conscious break of all logic and rational norm.

In this context of literary deconstruction, it is difficult to identify a clear palette of themes. However, the quest of identity is present throughout all the play directly or hidden behind issues such as gender and sex. Characters are in a perpetual search of truth and in the end they discover an overlapping between the two, as death is the ultimate truth. Lorca gives an alternative to this final truth, as death is not the end. Death is just another transformation, as Juliet discovered in her tomb:

“JULIET (jumping out of the tomb) Please. I haven’t run into a girlfriend the whole time I’ve been banished, despite having passed through more than three thousand empty arches. Please. A little help. A little help and oceans of dreaminess. (She sings)

Oceans of dreaminess,
a sea of white earth
and empty arches in the sky.
My train through ships, through seaweed,
my train through time.
Oceans of time.
Seashore of woodcutter maggots
and crystal dolphin through cherry trees.
Oh, pure asbestos of termination! Oh, ruin!

Oh, archless solitude! Sea of dreams!”

There is no denouement to the theater of Federico Garcia Lorca. The play has an open ending, leaving the possibility and the need of a new beginning. The public always requires a new setting and expects a new story.

In conclusion, the Spanish writer created a modern version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* which exemplifies to what degree the process of adaptation can change the original play. *The Public* is the most obvious proof that this kind of literary recreation involves several different factors: the society, the historical and the political background. In this case we deal with Lorca’s determination to break the clichés of the traditional theater, showing his audience the true face of human nature: uncontrolled passions, falsehood, narcissism, ignorance and intolerance. All these aspects gain more value in the background created by Shakespeare’s play. Lorca becomes Shakespeare’s voice, daring to speak what could not be spoken.

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