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Federico García Lorca's *Blood Wedding* (1932): Patriarchy's Tragic Flaws¹

Federico Bonaddio

[It's wedding day somewhere in rural Andalusia, and the mother of the groom and father of the bride are sharing a private conversation.]

MOTHER: *That's what I'm hoping for: grandchildren. (They sit.)*

FATHER: *I want them to have plenty. This land needs hands that aren't hired. You're forever battling weeds, thistles, stones that appear from nowhere. And those hands should be the owners' own, able to punish and master, to make the seed grow. You need a lot of sons.*

MOTHER: *And a daughter or two! Men come and go like the wind! It's in their nature to turn to knives and guns. Girls never venture out of the house.*

FATHER

(Happily): I'm sure they'll have both.

MOTHER: *My son will cover her well. He's of good stock. His father could have had plenty of children with me.*

FATHER: *I wish it could all happen in a day. That, just like that, they could add two or three men to the family.*

MOTHER: *But it's not so. It takes time. That's why [referring to the loss of her husband and another son in a murderous feud] it's so terrible to see one's own blood spilt on the ground. A fountain that spurts for a minute but that cost us years.*

[Later, during the wedding reception, the groom's mother happens upon her son who is, strangely, unaccompanied.]

MOTHER

[To her son]: So where's your wife?

BRIDEGROOM: Resting a while. It's a bad day for brides!

MOTHER: A bad day? It's the only good day! For me it was like coming into inheritance. [...] It's like ploughing new fields, planting new trees.

[Eventually she finds a moment in the conversation to give her son some advice.]

Please, try to be affectionate with your wife. If ever you find her to be cold or vain give her a caress that hurts a little, a firm embrace, a bite and then a gentle kiss. Nothing to upset her, but enough to remind her who's the man, the master, the one in charge. That's what I learnt from your father. And now you don't have him anymore, it's me who has to teach you how to be strong.²

Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, first performed in 1933, presents a story of elopement, a jilted husband and revenge in the playwright's native Andalusia. The scene cited above takes place soon after the ill-fated nuptials have ended. The conversation between the unknowing Mother of the Bridegroom and Father of the Bride centres on the prospect of grandchildren. In this agricultural community, no one underestimates the value of having male heirs – and in numbers –, given the physical nature of the work required to extract profit from one's lands. Economic necessity rather than male pride is no doubt at the root of the preference to employ home-grown rather than hired hands. We know too, from an earlier conversation (Act I, scene ii), that the marriage joins not only two families but also their lands, affording them efficiencies as well as enhanced status in the community. If the Mother declares the benefits of having a daughter or two as well, it is not out of some loyalty to her gender but in recognition of the stability they afford the family because of their confinement to the home. 'As in the rest of the Mediterranean world', writes David D. Gilmore, 'in Andalusia the social space of the community is rigidly divided into discrete and bounded male and female spheres. Man's sphere is the space outside of the house: the public spaces. Women's realm is the inside of the house: the private spaces.'³ 'Do you know what it means to get married, child?' the Mother asks the Bride. 'A man, some children and a wall that's two feet thick for everything else' (338–9). Her view has hardened, no doubt, due to the experience

of losing both her husband and a son to a feud between clans, something which in her mind now characterizes the dangers lurking in the public sphere of men.

Of course, the Mother's view of women represents the patriarchal ideal, and in this tragedy – suffused with the inevitability characteristic of the genre – it is her earlier concerns about the suitability of her son's choice of woman (Act I, scene i) that win out over the commonplaces of her culture. That wall – some 'two feet thick' – is as much to keep women in as it is to keep the world out. But the problem is that, in their designated role as pillar of the family and upholder of its values, women can all too easily bring the home and its patriarchal head tumbling down. 'Masculine hono[u]r', explains Gilmore, 'depends upon feminine shame, or modesty, and a man therefore depends upon the good behaviour of his womenfolk as guarantee of his public esteem. In an important sense, his masculine esteem and image rest upon this weak link of female shame'.⁴ Thus we can see that, beyond the warning signs represented in the play by the Mother's early sense of foreboding or by elements of the plot such as the Bride's previous engagement to Leonardo – the man with whom she elopes and a member of the Félix clan that murdered the Bridegroom's brother and father –, patriarchy contains its own tragic flaws. Moreover, while the Mother might pride herself on the virility of her son and, before him, on that of her husband, she knows all too well that an accident of fate can snatch a man from this life in a mere instant and bring his bloodline to the swiftest of ends.

Although she may harbour misgivings about her daughter-in-law, the Mother appears to have none about the institution of marriage itself: not a bad day, but a good day for brides! Her husband's death has left her as head of the family and as custodian of its laws and values. In the social order to which she is committed, sentiment is a secondary concern when it comes to betrothal, so it is no coincidence that she should mention marriage and inheritance in the same breath. The advice she gives to her son on controlling his wife is equally telling. It reaffirms the expectation that men should rule not only outdoors but indoors too. To this end, even a degree of violence, albeit softened with a kiss, is not only permitted but advisable. Above all, the Mother's advice reveals the process by which the Law of the Father is handed down: not only in the words of a mother to her son, but in the education she has received from her husband and according to which her outlook on life is structured. Yet it is this conformity to patriarchy – with all its flaws – that ensures a tragic outcome, both for the Mother and the Bridegroom, as well as the Bride and her lover, Leonardo.

The tragic potential in patriarchy resides in a combination of factors. First, if it is to function properly, patriarchy depends on both men and women

submitting to its rules, values, rituals and beliefs; second, there is the fact that this submission cannot be guaranteed; third, there are the codes that make transgressions intolerable for families and their members; and fourth, there is the requirement in patriarchal culture that transgressions be punished. Because submission to the rules cannot be guaranteed, the relation in Andalusian culture between a man's honour and a woman's shame – between his reputation and her sexual purity, modesty and restraint – is always fraught with danger and conflict is always a possible outcome. The consequences of such conflict can even be fatal. The risks are compounded by the fact that while men are charged with protecting their women and their individual and family honour, their masculinity is also measured by their ability to seduce other women: a double standard inherent – another flaw – in the sexual culture of patriarchy.⁵ The contradictory positions of men pit them against one another in what Gilmore calls 'the game of reputation by female proxy'.⁶ Whether the catalyst is a man's reputation or his masculinity or a woman's conduct, an accident, if you like, is always waiting to happen, even more so if the notion of love is thrown into the equation, too.

In *Blood Wedding*, as it turns out, it is love and not reputation that inspires betrayal, this motive, because of its purity, acting as a counterpoint to the mixed messages of patriarchy's codes even though, as we shall see, there was cause to make the Bride's illegitimate suitor want to prove his worth by making her his conquest. Although love (or 'erotic love' as Reed Anderson puts it) looks likely to lead to adultery, it is not condemned but instead 'is represented as the liberating ideal which with energetic and rebellious force asserts its own life principles against all the alienating prohibitions of family, tradition and social class'.⁷ At the start of Act III, three young woodcutters who, like Greek Fates, survey the scene in the woods to which at night time the eloping couple has fled, predict that Leonardo and the Bride will be caught; but they also acknowledge that their affair was inevitable and just and that not to have attended to their desire would have been an act of self-deception: 'You have to follow your calling; they were right to run away.... They were deceiving one another until their blood could no more' (387). That calling is not to the conventional scenario, legitimized by marriage, in which a wife submits dutifully to her husband and is resigned to her servitude. Instead, it is to love, pure and simple. This is what is meant when the Bride tells Leonardo 'I want neither a bed nor dinner with you, and there's not a minute in the day when I'd rather not be with you' (398–9).

The love between the Bride and Leonardo, therefore, is founded on an equality that is not recognized by the structures or interests of the patriarchal order. Arranged marriages, for example, made with the economic interest of the two families in mind and bound up with matters of inheritance and lineage, do not take into account affairs of the heart and, rather unwisely, underestimate their power to move individuals. The Bride's three-year relationship with Leonardo ended, we presume, because he was not deemed, or did not deem himself, to be good enough for her. 'Two oxen and a bad hut don't amount to much' (352) is Leonardo's bitter admission to her, and one wonders to what degree his desire for her is now bound up with the need to prove himself. By contrast, the Bridegroom seems to have no such problem and is able to offer the Bride considerable land to add to her own. The Father is not ashamed to admit that his future son-in-law's family is wealthier than his own. 'You are richer than me', he gladly concedes to the Mother. 'Your vineyards are worth a fortune. Each shoot, a silver coin' (335). From his perspective, his daughter is a means to an end, and love is less of a concern than the prospect of merging estates. His only regret is that their land is not adjacent. When the Mother asks him why he would want them to be, he replies: 'What is mine is hers and what is yours is his. That's why. To be able to see it all together, how wonderful that would be!' (335).

After his separation from the Bride, Leonardo went on to marry her cousin with whom he now has a child and another on the way. Whereas we only have the Mother's word for the virility that has been passed down from father to son, in this department Leonardo has more than proved himself. But clearly, for him, children are not enough, although by the time he decides to act on the feelings which he has harboured for the Bride since they separated, the situation has become irretrievable. If in the past it was his status that was the problem, the order now dictates that the Bride is entirely out of bounds: first, because he is both married and a father; second, because the object of his desire is betrothed. Here, as he was throughout his career, Lorca is concerned with the tension between freedom and limits, something which he conceived of, more often than not, in terms of the desire for self-expression and fulfilment in the face of either artistic or social constraints. Patriarchal culture, with all its flaws, provides a fitting arena to explore this tension, which manifests itself not only in the clash between society's precepts and the impulse of love, but also in the internal conflicts suffered by those who are structured according to patriarchy's conflictive, even impossible, demands. As Anderson argues, 'the

principles that the characters hold as truths are shown through the conflicts produced by the action of the play to be flawed, even crucially deficient, both at the level of individual experience and at the level of community life.⁸ These principles also condemn the characters to intense and inescapable suffering.

The Bride knows only too well the value that maintaining her decency holds for a woman in her community. So too does the Mother who, on learning of the Bride's disappearance, makes clear to the Father that his daughter is shameless. 'It can't be her', he pleads. 'Perhaps she has thrown herself down a well.' 'Only decent women, clean women, throw themselves into water', the Mother retorts. 'Not that one!' (382). When, in Act II, Leonardo comes riding to pay the Bride a visit, she responds to his tales of regret with caution and holds firm, at least on the surface, to what she knows is socially correct and her duty: 'A man with his horse knows a lot and can do much to take advantage of a woman lost in a desert. But I have my pride. That's why I am getting married. And I will shut myself in with my husband, whom I must love above all else' (354). Leonardo speaks on behalf of love and freedom and against convention, realizing that there are some passions that cannot be kept down: 'To burn within and not say anything is the greatest punishment we can heap on ourselves. What good did pride do me and not seeing you while knowing you were awake night after night? Nothing at all!' (354). The Bride's response makes clear the conflict within, caught as she is between her family duty and the immense force of her attraction to Leonardo: 'I can't listen to you anymore. I can't listen to your voice. It's as if I'd drunk a whole bottle of anisette and had fallen asleep wrapped in a quilt of roses. And it's dragging me down, and I know I'm drowning, but still I fall' (354).

It is perhaps no accident that in *Blood Wedding* the elopement takes place after the wedding ceremony and not before. Although the Bride was duty-bound even by her engagement and Leonardo, as a married man, stands to be an adulterer no matter what, that she should be breaking her wedding vows makes the eloping couple's transgression all the more forceful and the need for punishment an absolute certainty. The Bride knows this and says as much in the woods before the Moon, who appears in the form of a young white-faced woodcutter, finally seals their destiny by lighting up the way and revealing their whereabouts to the Bridegroom. Her caring words for Leonardo reveal a selflessness that belongs to the realm of love as opposed to that of social responsibility: 'I've abandoned a good man and all his people in the middle of a wedding and with my bride's crown still on. You're the one they'll punish and I don't want that to happen. Leave me here alone! Run away! No one will defend you!' (399).

The play ends with two deaths: those of the Bridegroom and Leonardo, each dying at the hands of the other in a struggle that repeats the violent history between their respective clans. The Bride's punishment is that she has now joined the company of women who have lost their men, whether it is their husband, lover or son. She is spared physical violence other than at the hands of the Mother who, in anger and despair, beats her to the ground, lamenting her son's lost honour and name. The Bride insists that she is still pure, but naturally cannot deny the charge of elopement. Her only defence is that her passion rendered her helpless, and would always have, despite the benefits she stood to gain from her marriage:

I was a woman burning, wounded within and without, and your son was a drop of water that promised me children, land, good health; but the other man was a dark river filled with branches that brought to me the sound of its reeds and whispered me its song.... Your son was right for me and I did not cheat on him, but the other's arm pulled me away with all the force of the sea ... and would have done so forever ..., even if I had grown old and all your son's children had held onto my hair! (409–10)

Juxtaposed in her statement is the destiny she knew she should choose for herself – a husband, a family, a home – and the fate that her passions thrust upon her. In *Blood Wedding*, desire is set in opposition to the precepts of society, and tragedy is assured by patriarchy's intolerance and incoherence. The play exposes the flaws in a system marked by irreconcilable tensions: between the constraints of familial honour and the vagaries of masculine reputation; between the security and status associated with property and the personal fulfilment which love connotes; and, of course, between a woman's shame and the force of her desire. In the end, the Bride's inability to conform reveals the very folly of patriarchy's fixation with the principles of female modesty and restraint.