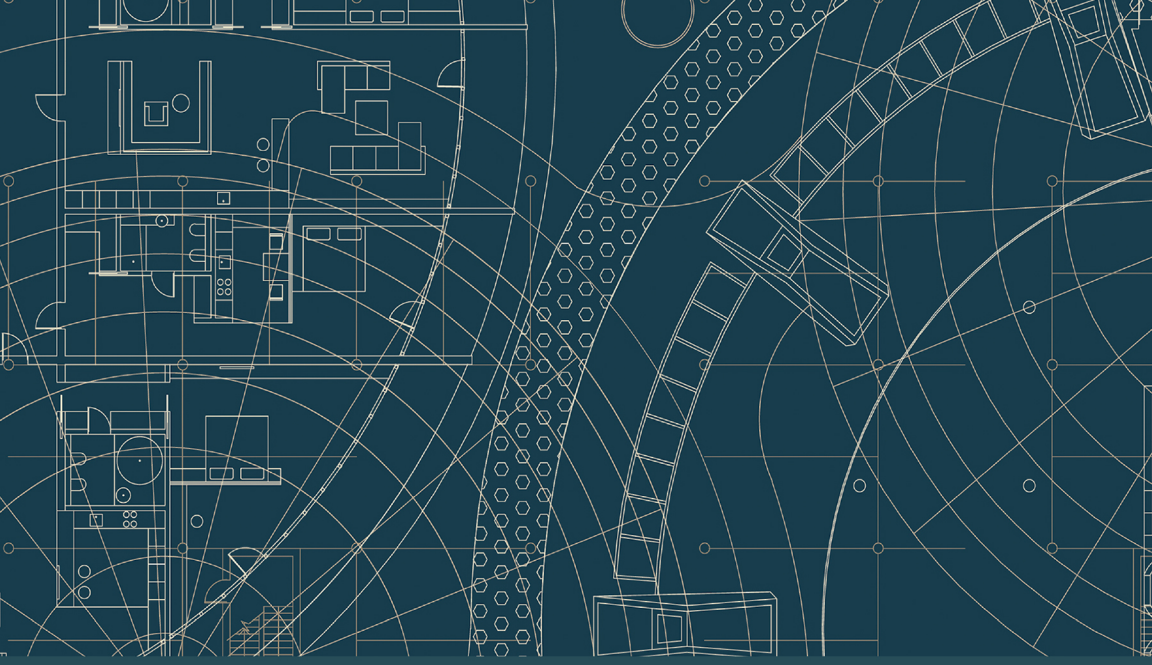

Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature

BAROQUE LORCA

AN ARCHAIST PLAYWRIGHT FOR THE NEW STAGE

Andrés Pérez-Simón

Baroque Lorca

Baroque Lorca: An Archaist Playwright for the New Stage defines Federico García Lorca's trajectory in the theater as a lifelong search for an audience. It studies a wide range of dramatic writings that Lorca created *for* the theater, in direct response to the conditions of his contemporary industry, and situates the theory and praxis of his theatrical reform in dialogue with other modernist renovators of the stage. This book makes special emphasis on how Lorca engaged with the tradition of Spanish Baroque, in particular with Cervantes and Calderón, to break away from the conventions of the illusionist stage. The five chapters of the book analyze Lorca's different attempts to change the dynamics of the Spanish stage from 1920 to his assassination in 1936: His initial incursions in the arenas of symbolist and historical drama (*The Butterfly's Evil Spell*, *Mariana Pineda*); his interest in puppetry (*The Billy-Club Puppets* and *In the Frame of Don Cristóbal*) and the two 'human' farces *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife* and *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*; the central piece in his project of 'impossible' theater (*The Public*); his most explicitly political play, one that takes the violence to the spectators' seats (*The Dream of Life*) and his three plays adopting, an altering, the contemporary formula of 'rural drama' (*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma* and *The House of Bernarda Alba*).

Andrés Pérez-Simón is an Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Cincinnati. He has published essays on world literature, drama, film and literary theory. He is the author of *Drama, literatura, filosofía: Itinerarios del realismo y el modernismo europeos* (Fundamentos, 2015) and editor and translator of the critical anthology *'Despistemes': la teoría literaria y cultural de Emil Volek* (Verbum, 2018).

Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature

63 The British Stake in Japanese Modernity
Readings in Liberal Tradition and Native Modernism
Michael Gardiner

64 Theatre-Fiction in Britain from Henry James to Doris Lessing
Writing in the Wings
Graham Wolfe

65 The Nationality of Utopia
H. G. Wells, England, and the World State
Maxim Shadurski

66 New Oceania
Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific
Edited by Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long

67 French Thought and Literary Theory in the UK
Edited by Irving Goh

68 Twentieth-Century Literary Encounters in China
Modernism, Travel, and Form
Jeffrey Mather

69 Twentieth-Century American Fiction in Circulation
Short Stories Written for Magazines and Republished in Linked Story Collections
Matthew James Vechinski

70 Baroque Lorca
An Archaist Playwright for the New Stage
Andrés Pérez-Simón

For more information about this series, please visit: https://www.routledge.com

Baroque Lorca

An Archaist Playwright for the New Stage

Andrés Pérez-Simón

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

First published 2020
by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this title has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-367-82009-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-01140-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

For Ruth

Contents

Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to the Taft Research Center at the University of Cincinnati, and the University Research Council at the same university, for their support over the years of writing this book. Special thanks go to the staff of the Federico García Lorca Foundation, in its old location in the building of the Residencia de Estudiantes in Madrid, for allowing me to access their archival material. I would also like to express my gratitude to Laura Arce, Raquel Barbero, Julia Escobar, Hunter Lang, Rodrigo Mariño and Tara Riley, who were always willing to provide great help and assistance whenever I asked for it. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the continued support of my family. Without them, this book would have never become a reality.

Note on Translations

Excerpts from Lorca's letters, public speeches and press interviews are taken from the third volume of his *Obras completas*, edited by Miguel García-Posada (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg-Círculo de Lectores, 1996). This book is cited in the text as *Obras*. The translation of excerpts from *Obras* is mine in collaboration with Hunter Lang and Tara Riley, and the same applies to all quoted sources originally in Spanish and not available in English translation.

Quotes from Lorca's plays are from published English translations with the exception of the fragments pertaining to *El maleficio de la mariposa* (*The Butterfly's Evil Spell*). In this case, I provide my translation from Piero Menarini's critical edition of the text (1999).

Introduction

In the late 1920s, Federico García Lorca found himself fighting the public perception that he was the quintessential Andalusian poet of Spanish modernism, the author of a distinctive kind of popular poetry that gave voice to the underrepresented Romani people of Southern Spain. As early as January 1927, still before the first edition of his triumphant book of poetry *Gypsy Ballads* (1928), Lorca had expressed his discomfort about what he perceived as a "gypsy myth" (*Obras* 940) that might damage his reputation in the long run. In a letter to his close friend and fellow poet Jorge Guillén, Lorca affirmed that the gypsies were for him "a literary theme, nothing else," and added, in a very avant-gardist fashion, that he "could equally be a poet of sewing needles or hydraulic landscapes" (*Obras* 940). Lorca feared that his identification with the Romani culture would render what he thought was an unfair image of him as an "illiterate, uneducated" (*Obras* 940) artist. Also in 1927, only a few weeks after writing to Guillén, Lorca ended a letter to the influential leftist author José Bergamín with a postscript that asked him to "stop considering me a gypsy, a myth that is more harmful to me that you could know" (*Obras* 955). The sensational success of his *Gypsy Ballads* in 1928 only reinforced Lorca's uneasiness about his public persona, and became a factor of importance in his decision to leave Spain in the summer of 1929 to initiate a nine-month stay in New York. This stay was followed by a three-month stay in Cuba before returning to Spain in June of 1930.

Lorca's personal journey in New York has been recreated in full detail by his biographers Ian Gibson and Leslie Stainton, but the textual reconstruction of his surrealist poetry book *Poet in New York* is still something 'in progress,' 'unfinished,' as uncertain as the material condition of most of Lorca's poetic and dramatic production. In a letter from January 1930 to his family, Lorca described *Poet in New York*, then in its final stage of completion, as "Something very intense, *so intense* that they will not *understand* it. It will provoke discussions and scandals" (*Obras* 1161, his emphasis). In New York, the author of the popular *Gypsy Ballads* adopted a typically modernist stance toward his art, one now conceived as both difficult and scandalous. Upon his return

to Spain in the summer of 1930, until 1935, Lorca made numerous—and contradictory—allusions to his New York poetry book, to which he referred first with the title of *New York* and, later, *Introduction to Death* in letters, interviews and public speeches. Lorca finally began working with a typescript of *Poet in New York* in August 1935, exactly one year before his assassination, overseeing decisions involving the selection of poems as well as their arrangement in the book. Lorca had agreed to print *Poet in New York* with Árbol, the publishing branch of Bergamín's avant-gardist magazine *Cruz y Raya*, but the Civil War brought the project to a halt and gave way to a sequence of editorial misadventures. In the summer of 1938, Bergamín intended to publish the book in Paris concurrently with a French translation by Paul Éluard. A French typist, with limited knowledge of Spanish,[1] produced two copies of the typescript and also added annotations that Bergamín had brought with him when escaping the war in Spain. Spanish poet Juan Larrea, also in Paris, amended this copy. This 'French' copy, merged with the Madrid copy that Lorca had handed to Bergamín back in 1936, became the version of *Poet in New York* that Bergamín eventually published in Mexico City in 1940. Exiled in Mexico, following the victory of the Francoist army in 1939, Bergamín traveled to the United States and found a way to convince W.W. Norton to publish an English translation of Lorca's posthumous poetry book. This translation, commissioned to Rolfe Humphries, a New York high school teacher, was based on the second, uncorrected Paris copy, and Humphries checked it against a number of New York poems that Lorca had published in literary magazines while alive.[2]

Due to the multiple inconsistencies plaguing the first edition of Lorca's *Poet in New York* and its corresponding English translation, philological disputes ensued right after the publication of both texts in Mexico City and New York back in 1940. In 2013, seventy-three years after its first publication, a reconstructed edition of *Poeta en Nueva York* came out, thanks to the decades-long work of renowned Lorca scholar Andrew A. Anderson. It is still early to determine if the dozens of translations of Lorca's book, in particular the English one, will be revised accordingly. However, even after Anderson's edition, there is still an ongoing debate on the number and nature of a series of New York photographs that Lorca collected himself in 1929, originally intending to overcome the distinction between text and image in his book of poems (Herrera 108–20). The discussion surrounding what the 'true' version of *Poet in New York* is remains open. I believe that it will stay open indefinitely because of the ephemeral condition of Lorca's writings, which consist of a wide range of artifacts notoriously affected by external elements. Lorca's writings are comprised of lost and fragmented manuscripts, containing typographical errors and conflicting testimonies on his artistic plans. The incomplete state of his writings makes them irreducible to a pure and original state of unity.

This succinct review of the editorial afterlives of Lorca's *Poet in New York* has intended to show to what extent incompleteness constitutes a main feature of Lorquian poetry, an aspect that has fueled editorial debates for decades up to this day. Incompleteness occupies an even more significant dimension when one abandons philological debates to focus instead on Lorca's involvement in the theater, first as dramatic author in the 1920s and later as both playwright and director in the 1930s. To be more precise, the concept to be considered here is not incompleteness but, rather, ephemerality. Given the performative nature of theater, any kind of archeological approach to a particular set of practices of production and reception, in this case in the theatrical industry of interwar Spain, needs to acknowledge that the ephemeral nature of the theatrical event is not ultimately reducible to the restorative logic of the archive. While this is a non-controversial statement widely accepted by theater scholars and practitioners today, the international image of Lorca is still very much the result of the amalgamation of two interpretive strategies that ignore the obvious fact that his theater was inscribed in a specific performative and historical context. The first of these strategies consists of a text-centered approach that relies on thematic and symbolic analyses to explain the 'universality' of Lorca's three agrarian tragedies (*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, and *The House of Bernarda Alba*). While Lorca's tragedies are situated in the distinctively Catholic milieu of Southern Spain, we are told, the female characters in these plays embody the universal values of freedom and passion in contrast to repression and reason, respectively. These values are supposed to be represented by figures such as the Bride in *Blood Wedding*, Yerma in the homonymous play, and Adela, the youngest of Bernarda's daughters, in *The House of Bernarda Alba*. I argue that this narrative relies on a transit from the local to the universal that simply bypasses the condition of being-for-the-theater of Lorca's works. This is at the expense of ignoring crucial factors such as the fact that Lorca had to write roles for actress-managers to gain access to the industry or that he modeled his agrarian trilogy after the contemporary genre of the *drama rural*, which provided Lorca with a formula to adopt and alter in order to conquer the contemporary stage. The second strategy I want to point out here consists in explaining Lorca's trajectory in the theater according to a teleological model that ultimately depends on the same tenets of biographic criticism that academics claim to have expelled from humanities departments decades ago. With a few exceptions, Lorca is routinely taught as a brilliant poet who, after a series of inconsequential dramatic attempts, eventually created a masterful trilogy of agrarian tragedies right before the fascists killed him in the early days of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

The two interpretive strategies I have just mentioned often operate together, feeding each other. If the agrarian trilogy attracts international attention, it is because these three plays are prone to thematic

generalizations about the frustrated desires of Lorca's female figures and, at the same time, these plays offer us a glimpse of Lorca's own violent death. In this respect, it has proven a difficult task to avoid the influence of what can be called for the lack of a better term, the "Lorca myth." As early as 1989, in the wake of the numerous publications, conferences and literary festivals organized on occasion of the fifty years of Lorca's assassination (1936–86), Paul J. Smith objected that it was "almost an article of faith that in Lorca literature and life are one" (*Body* 107). Almost three decades after Smith's assertion, the theater of Lorca has been approached from multiple critical angles, yet his biography seems very much alive even in those scholarly pieces that invoke the anti-humanistic foundations of postmodernism. Sarah Wright has observed how critics still rely on Lorca's life or, "more specifically, his death" ("Theatre" 40), to perpetuate two mutually reinforcing ideas about his theater, namely that its core expresses "the struggle between freedom and repressed desires," and that "the backdrop of a Spain threatened by Fascism can be seen as the *mise-en-scène* (in varying degrees of disguise) for his plays" ("Theatre" 40). This biographical bias, in conjunction with what I have described as a predominantly textual analysis of Lorca's theater, has legitimized superficial theories about the importance of Lorca's sexuality in his own creation. As Maria M. Delgado notes, theories that posit that Lorca's "crafting of strong female roles . . . [was] a veiled portrait of displaced homosexual desire . . . simply fail to consider the material conditions in which Lorca crafted his works, dominated by powerful actress-managers like Margarita Xirgu and Lola Membrives" (35). The present study proposes an alternative to this traditional paradigm previously denounced by Smith, Wright and Delgado, while still acknowledging the unavoidable existence of "a trajectory of past scholarship that has played a decisive role in shaping how his theatre has been read and produced and the ways in which this has been bound with the Lorca myth" (Delgado 33). My contention here is that this vicious circle can be broken by first expanding the Lorquian dramatic canon and, later, considering it a collection of dramatic writings created *for* the theater, in direct response to the conditions of Lorca's contemporary industry. Throughout this book, I also argue in favor of inserting the theory and praxis of Lorca's theatrical reform in the wider context of theatrical modernism precisely to contest biographical interpretations of this theater.

The goals of this book are threefold. The first one is to bring the reader's attention to a diverse corpus of Lorquian plays beyond the limits of his popular agrarian trilogy, conceptualizing Lorca's trajectory in the theater as distinctively modernist since 1920, when *The Butterfly's Evil Spell*, his first play, premiered in Madrid. Throughout his life, Lorca opposed commercialism, yet he accepted his role as producer of commodities as part of a long-term plan to create a theater for a new audience in

interwar Spain, a reformist project that Lorca intertwined with revolutionary politics in the 1930s. Second, I study different aspects of Lorca's engagement with his contemporary theatrical industry, with an emphasis on his role as theoretician of a new stage (as early as 1923 he praised the use of puppets, for example, as will be discussed in the second chapter) and his experience as director of the state-subsidized itinerant theater company La Barraca (1932–35). I will also devote attention to Margarita Xirgu, a leading actress-impresario, and Cipriano Rivas Cherif, the Spanish theater director best acquainted with the theories of European modernism. Xirgu staged Lorca's *Mariana Pineda* in 1927, and from 1930 to 1935 the duo Xirgu-Rivas Cherif staged four of Lorca's dramas. In 1935, Rivas Cherif also directed Lorca's adaptation of Lope de Vega's *The Foolish Lady*. Third and last, I propose a reading of Lorca as archaist playwright and director, for he saw the tradition of Spanish Baroque as the source for the new dynamics of spectatorship he intended to establish. While Lorca's engagement with the historical avant-garde has been scrutinized in detail for decades, and there is no need to deny the obvious importance of surrealism, cubism and expressionism in his poetry and drawings, it is necessary to acknowledge that the theory and practice of these artistic movements cannot account for Lorca's activity in the theater. For such aspects of his theater as the device of theater within theater, the symbolic and allegorical construction of characters, and the intersection of ritual and theater refer back to the Spanish tradition of the *auto sacramental*, epitomized by Pedro Calderón de la Barca. Moreover, Lorca's tragicomic farces, written for actors and puppets, have their starting point in Miguel de Cervantes' interludes. Lorca himself verbalized his archaist gesture in an early speech as director of La Barraca before an audience of university students and members of the progressive government of the Spanish Second Republic, in October of 1932. To the surprise of politicians who were expecting a transparent leftist discourse from the director of the newly created state-subsidized theater company, Lorca claimed the legacy of Calderón and Cervantes, arguing that "the pendulum of Spanish theater oscillates violently between the antagonistic worlds" (*Obras* 218) of these two authors.

The Playwright as Producer

Lorca's trajectory in the theater was a lifelong search for an audience. After his negative experience in the commercial arena in 1920—his first play, *The Butterfly's Evil Spell*, only lasted four nights in the Teatro Eslava of Madrid—Lorca spent the following years working concurrently on different projects (puppet plays, *Mariana Pineda*, *The Shoemaker's Prodigious Wife*, *The Love of Don Perlimplín and Belisa in the Garden*) while at the same time trying to establish contact with the leading figures in the contemporary theatrical industry. Lorca's letters of