

**“Bernarda Alba and Frogs with No Tongues”**

*By Thomas Blake*

Completed in 1936, just months before his abduction by Franco’s secret police, Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* depicts a domestic world in which swift and violent punishment greets any and all insubordination. As an aggressive and overbearing woman, Bernarda rigidly outlines the parameters of acceptable behavior for her children. The drama can be read allegorically; Bernarda Alba, like Francisco Franco, seeks total control of her “subjects.” By presenting the devastating effects of Bernarda’s inflexibility, the playwright exposes the dangers of a totalitarian state. The play, however, assumes a richer complexity when read as a different type of cautionary tale. By exploring the extent to which Bernarda Alba embodies the maternal role as outlined by phallogocentric psychoanalytic theory, the dangers of a patriarchal economy become evident. By reducing the maternal to that which merely defers to paternal law, Lacanian psychical architecture denies the feminine ontological viability and threatens to construct a world in which difference is neither respected nor acknowledged. Similar to the thematizing dynamic of a fascist, one-party state, a patriarchal culture perpetuates the notion that male subjectivity is not simply a mode of signification but *the* standard for all psychical formation. As a mother “dutiful” to this premise, Alba acquiesces to prevailing ideology despite its impact on feminine agency. Furthermore, she aggressively endorses this asymmetrical Symbolic order and endeavors to engender in her daughters the willingness to subscribe to oppressive cultural norms. Unable to *speak herself*, opting instead to transmit prevailing ideology, Alba functions as a gear in an androcentric machine. In so doing, she renders herself and her children mute.

Widowed at the onset of the play, Bernarda Alba ascends to power as an aristocratic matriarch in the patriarchal culture of Andalusian Spain. One might imagine that, no longer straitjacketed by inherited notions of “appropriate” feminine conduct, Bernarda would transform her home into an oasis far removed from the injustices of the outside world. Sadly, Bernarda actively reinscribes an overtly misogynistic social structure. Graver still, Lacanian conceptions of subject formation imply that any possibility for her to do otherwise is illusory.

For Lacan, functional subjectivation occurs only through disavowal of the mother. Prior to the mirror phase, that is to say before the child possesses a sense of its own autonomy, the mother, by meeting all of the child’s demands, represents the fullness (the absence of Lack) that all human beings desire. Once the child becomes aware that s/he exists independently of all other beings, the phallus replaces the mother as emblem of fullness. Devoid of a phallus, the feminine-maternal mutates into the emblem of Lack, represents the threat of castration, and becomes the absolute other, the unintelligible. As a result, subjectivity, as simply the illusion of wholeness, an illusion, to be sure, that must remain intact for the human psyche to remain unfractured, occurs only through rejection of the mother. Lacan’s metaphor in *Seminar XVII* depicts the urgency of matricide.

The mother is a big crocodile and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother's desire...There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap, and that holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller that protects you, should the jaws suddenly close. (qtd. in Fink 84)

Though briefly the emblem of fullness, the maternal ultimately functions as a monstrous threat to life and autonomy. The manifestation of maternal desire equates here to utter destruction of the subject. Only by severing ties to her can healthy subjectivation occur.<sup>1</sup> Since Lacan argues that the pursuit of wholeness dominates the entire human psychological trajectory, rejection of the Lack becomes the rejection of the feminine-maternal. The subject cleaves itself from the maternal and pursues the phallus by aligning itself with the law of the father. Lacan concludes, therefore, that culture forms "along fundamentally androcentric and patriarchal lines" (*Seminar II* 204).

Returning to the play, Bernarda Alba depicts this Lacanian dynamic. Imposing her command on the household, she confines her daughters to the domestic sphere as a gesture of respect for the patriarch. "During our eight years of mourning, no wind from the street will enter this house! Pretend we have sealed up the doors and windows with bricks. That was how it was in my father's house, and in my grandfather's house" (205). In deference to paternal law, Bernarda perceives the continuity of traditional values as justification for imprisoning her daughters. Moreover, Bernarda embraces these cultural practices without question. This exemplifies the extent to which prevailing ideology subsumes the feminine-maternal, or, as Lacan puts it, how "the Symbolic order literally submerges her, transcends her" (*Seminar II* 204). By wholeheartedly conforming to social expectations, Bernarda Alba exhibits a total disregard for her children's desire, and although they resist her rigid authority, she asserts her power relentlessly. "In here," she pronounces, "you do what I tell you to do" (206). Ironically, however, these "orders" are not her own; she simply recycles dominant ideology.

It is here that we begin to see how *The House of Bernardo Alba* becomes Lorca's disturbing portrait of the maternal function. Insidiously, since Bernarda occupies a position of authority, she appears to be far from a passive figure. In actuality, however, she takes the mantle of power and simply re-broadcasts the same cultural messages that prevent her and her daughters from experiencing a sense of self-actualization. With the exception of Angustias, courted by the young philanderer in the village, Pepe el Romano, Bernarda confines her family to the home, extracts her children from society, and renders her daughters ineligible for marital union. The youngest of these women, Adela, most firmly resists her mother's authority. In open rebellion, Adela cries, "I can't be locked up...I don't want my skin's whiteness lost in these rooms. Tomorrow I'm going to put on my green dress and go walking through the streets. I want to go out!" (1026).

Refusing to be confined, renouncing her mother's orders to wear black, and unwilling to sublimate her desire, Adela eventually consummates her relationship with Pepe in an act of revolt against what she deems unjust cultural codes. By the end of the drama, however, once abandoned by Pepe and defeated by her mother's unbending power, Adela kills herself to avoid a life of confinement.

*The House of Bernarda Alba*, as a theatrical production, functions via confinement. Since observers of the play sit with their backs to the fourth wall, Nina Scott argues, "the viewer becomes as much a prisoner of the house as the five daughters" (298). Since the entirety of the play's action takes place within the Alba home, the audience is as confined to the setting as the characters are. C.B. Morris echoes this sentiment by claiming that the house is "the space that encloses the reader or spectators together with the characters on stage" ("The Austere Abode: Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*" 129). Through this closure, the play enacts a dynamic of subjection.

This confinement, however, emerges in the play's structure, as well. The ideological closure represented by the *dutiful mother's* passive reception of patriarchal authority also becomes apparent in the relative closure of Lorca's dramatic form. We may observe that closed form by recognizing the remarkable extent to which the play conforms to Aristotle's analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*. The Benavides-Albas are members of a landowning, aristocratic class. The drama transpires "within one revolution of the sun" (Aristotle 94). Adela experiences a moment of *recognition* during which she understands the gravity of her situation: her forbidden love for Pepe will never materialize into the relationship she desires. After Bernarda fires a gun at Pepe, he "ran off on his horse," presumably never to be heard from again (287). Furthermore, Adela's *recognition*, in classical fashion, is accompanied by her *reversal* of fortune: the young woman kills herself immediately after discovering that she will never be united with her lover. Finally, the tragic climax of the play, the catastrophic suicide, stems from *hamartia*: Bernarda's decision to forcibly control her daughters and Adela's refusal to conform to maternal (cultural) authority contribute equally to Adela's destruction.

To be sure, however, a "tragedy" functions insofar as it conforms to a particular worldview. There must be dominant and clear-cut notions of concepts like justice and appropriate conduct to which the audience can relate, so the audience can understand that which is "tragic" about the tragedy...so "that which is terrifying and pitiable can arise from spectacle" (Aristotle 101). According to Lorca, therefore, the more accurately a theatrical production depicts "realistic" socio-material conditions, the more effectively the performance will impact the audience. Autor, from Lorca's *Play Without a Title*, articulates this aesthetic: "reality begins because the author does not want you to feel that you are in the theater, but rather in the middle of the street" (qtd. in Soufas 14). In stark opposition to Brechtian alienation, Lorca seeks dramatic representation "so real" that it renders Symbolic structures as accurately as does "a photographic

document” (Stainton 430). Instead of jolting the audience from the complacency of observation, as Brecht does, Lorca asserts that the more closely a work of art simulates the Symbolic, the more capable it is of eliciting empathy and the more capable it is, therefore, of initiating change.

While conforming to a “classic” Aristotelian definition of tragedy and reproducing Scribe’s formula for the “well-made play,”<sup>2</sup> Lorca produces a text that conforms structurally to a tradition it seeks to subvert. For some feminist critics, realism constitutes a flawed mode of representation. Sue-Ellen Case suggests that realism merely replicates existing social structure and therefore validates it through reinscription. When situated in a “patriarchal systems of signs, women do not have the cultural mechanisms of meaning to construct themselves as the subject rather than the object of performance,” so feminine subjectivity, within a phallogocentric context, can only be alienated by and from “the system of theatrical representation” (*Feminism and Theatre* 120). Along similar lines, Cixous claims, “it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin” (“*Aller à la Mer*” 546). In short, like Case, Cixous suggests that since social systems have been historically shaped by phallogocentric conceptions of subjectivity, the male universal subsumes the feminine in any “realistic” representation of culture.

These critiques of realism stem from the notion that aesthetic reproductions of the Symbolic order implicitly validate the cultural practices of which that order is comprised. According to this logic, therefore, the structural composition of a text like *The House of Bernarda Alba* undermines its subversive content by mimetically reconstituting the oppressive material conditions the work seemingly rejects. For the “anti-realist,” realism, in Lacanian terminology, yields to the law and to its regulation or legitimates cultural structures by re-presenting them. I patently reject this claim. Realism does not seek to recreate “reality” in an effort to (re)convey a fixed Symbolic order. One need only read works by Miller, Hansberry, Friel, Soyinka, or Wilson (and countless others) to discover this. Though experimentation in form and deviations from “traditional” modes of representation effectively disturb conceptions of “reality” by constructing alternate worlds onstage, any drama that implements intelligible dialogue ultimately anchors itself in the Symbolic order from which it seeks refuge.

From a different tack, as theorists like Irigaray and Bhabha urge subjects to incorporate dominant socio-linguistic practices through mimicry in order to reshape ideological terrain, Lorca appropriates traditional modes of representation in an effort to undermine oppressive and hegemonic Symbolic structures. By depicting the subjugation of women, a dynamic familiar to occupants of a patriarchal society, Lorca explores how societal practices, when deeply embedded within the cultural psyche, impinge upon the subject’s capacity for agency. This is yet another way that the play, as an artistic response to and performed expression of Symbolic structures, can be positioned within a feminist-psychoanalytic framework.

And it is from within this framework that we can see Bernarda Alba as a paradoxical figure. On one hand, she articulates a fierce independence. When her loyal servant, Poncia, suggests that the mistress's five daughters are too old to be unwed, the matriarch replies, "None of them has had a suitor – nor needs one! They can get by very well" (211). To be sure, the Alba house is devoid of men. Even the servants are women. With the patriarch no more, the scene is set for the women to exist in harmonious autonomy from oppressive paternal law. After all, there appears to be no specific, identifiable male authority figure to which Bernarda must defer. Perhaps for this reason critic John Gabriele proposes that Lorca

portrays three generations of women who—except for reasons of procreation—have survived with no apparent dependency on men and only minimal contact with the outside world. Moreover, there is here every indication that the cloistered lives of the Benavides-Alba women will continue unaltered in the coming years. (188)

This reading endows these women with far more agency than they actually possess. First, the daughters have not actively elected to remain confined in the home. Secondly, and more importantly, Bernarda's locks her children up in deference to the traditions of an overtly patriarchal system. In this regard, what Gabriele deems survival *with no apparent dependency on men* is illusory. Cultural law informs every decision Bernarda makes.

More troubling still, instead of explaining the legitimacy of the cultural practices she perpetuates, Bernarda only articulates a powerful urge to fit neatly into the social fabric of her community. Like the tortured heroine in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Bernarda Alba is terrified of scandal. When her own mother, Maria Josefa, wanders away from the house, Bernarda instructs a servant not to let the old widow near the well. The servant informs her mistress that Maria Josefa's safety is not at risk, and Bernarda exposes her real concern. "It's not that. Out there, the neighbors can see her from their window" (207). From this perspective, one conforms to the Symbolic order, one is interpellated, not because the Symbolic order offers refuge from the ontological void, but because one fears that deviation yields derision. From Bernarda's vantage point, Maria Josefa is a liability. As Bernarda transmits inherited ideology, her mother voices dissent: "I don't like to see these old maids, itching to get married, their hearts turning to dust. I want to go back to my own village! Bernarda, I want a man so I can get married and be happy!" (224). . Maria Josefa, therefore, opposes the two primary sanctions that her daughter has imposed. Bernarda has forbidden her children from seeking male companionship and confined them to the home. Maria Josefa yearns for both physical freedom and intimacy.

Bernarda cannot identify with her mother's desire. Maria Josefa, after all, wants to liberate herself from the confines of tradition. She wants to remarry and pursue her own interests. In this regard, Maria Josefa functions in stark opposition to the Lacanian conception of maternity. She exclaims, "I want to get away from here! Bernarda! To get married at the edge of the sea, at the edge of the sea!" (225).

There is an obvious disconnection here between mother and daughter, a gulf that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, has profound implications. Psychologist Lisa Baraitser states that the child has a persuasive “need to recognize the mother’s subjectivity as a locus of self-experiencing beyond that of the child. If the child does not have a mother whose subjectivity is recognizable, then the child cannot hope for recognition herself” (223). Although Maria Josefa clearly possesses subjectivity, her worldview does not correspond to prevailing ideology. She wants to act in accordance with her own desire instead of buckling beneath the weight of social expectation. Morris argues that Maria Josefa’s “dreams of marriage on the seashore and of children imply an escape not only from the house in which she is a prisoner, but from the village in which that house stands as a fortress of stern values and stiff traditions” (139). Bernarda, however, cannot understand this impulse. Maria Josefa, departing from the notion that the feminine-maternal should capitulate to dominant modes of thought, becomes the literal madwoman in the attic. As a deviant from normalized modes of being, Maria Josefa must be kept under lock and key. Instead of internalizing her mother’s revolutionary attitude, Bernarda deems her mother insane. Precisely who is “crazy” here is ambiguous. Although Bernarda subscribes to the mandates of communal will, her unwavering resolve to perpetuate phallogocentric ideology at her own expense teeters on the brink of insanity. Since Bernarda cannot recognize her mother’s unconventional attitude, she defaults to prevailing ideology. This proves disastrous. Bernarda does not tolerate her mother’s dissent and orders the servants to “Lock her up!” (224). Once again, Bernarda relies on confinement to impose her power. If her subjects challenge her authority, their movements, their agency, must be restricted.

To be sure, however, Bernarda’s subjects are all females, and in this Andalusian Vega, women, behind barred windows of the guarded home, embroider bolts of linen while the men wander in the openness of olive groves. Out in the fields, there exists for men a freedom to pursue desire, a freedom clearly denied the women of the village. Functioning as a bridge to the outside world, Poncia relays to Adela and her sisters sordid tales from the groves. As if to torture young women unable to express their sexual desires, Poncia tells of how a prostitute, “dressed in sequins” came from far away to please the men of the village, and “fifteen of them paid to take her into the olive grove” (240). Furthermore, Poncia admits, “years ago, another of these women came, and I myself gave money to my oldest son so he could go. Men need these things” (241). In keeping with a patriarchal power structure, however, Poncia speaks harshly of any woman who pursues sexual desire. For example, as Poncia explains that Librada’s unmarried daughter has become pregnant and “to hide her shame, she killed it and put it under some rocks. But some dogs, with more feeling than many creatures, pulled it out, and as if led by the hand of God, they put it on her doorstep. Now they want to kill her. They’re dragging her down the street, and them men are running down the paths and out of the olive groves, shouting so loud the fields are trembling” (260). *They*, of course, are the men of the village. Though one of *them* impregnated this woman, Librada’s daughter protects the identity of the father.

Horrifyingly, Poncia nods with approval as Bernarda, eager to punish indecency, shouts, "Finish her off before the Civil Guard gets here! Burning coals in the place where she sinned!" (261). . In a frenzy of perverse aggression, Alba calls for a swift and brutal response to unsanctioned desire.

The matriarch reacts so violently because frivolous indulgence of sexual appetite is a luxury that only men can enjoy. Nowhere does this double-standard emerge more clearly than when the family stallion beats against the walls of its stable. Bucking against its confinement, Bernarda suspects that the animal is "too hot" from the sexual repression that has been imposed upon it. Her response to the horse is a crystallization of her views on sexual practices. "Let him out so he roll around in the piles of straw...shut the mares in the stable, but turn him loose before he kicks down the walls!" (264). . The parallel between the stallion and the Alba daughters is obvious. The young Alba women are as imprisoned as the horse, but the daughters, as *daughters*, are in a double bind. They are relegated to the stable of cultural law, but they have even less freedom of movement. As women, they need to be locked up like mares; they cannot enjoy any reprieve from the harshness of their subjection. Men, however, out of the stable and galloping through the olive groves, appear exempt from rigid behavioral codes.

As a microcosm of society at large, the Alba home mirrors the tensions of an androcentric culture. Though patriarchal practices are imbedded in ideological, religious, and community systems, and though "appropriate" feminine conduct, as Bernarda so clearly articulates, is to conform to these systems, there is inevitable resistance to oppressive traditional values. There are obvious instances of overt revolt; Librada's daughter and Adela both refute the law and pursue their sexual impulses. These women, however, are destroyed by their open refusal to sublimate desire. Yet Librada's daughter and Adela are outliers; they "stand out" insofar as they patently and publicly denounce cultural authority. In this oppressive environment, rueful conformity is the more common trajectory. Adela's sisters verbalize the psychological impacts of assimilation. Magdalena declares, "Today people are more refined. Brides wear white veils, just as in the cities, and we drink bottled wine, but we rot inside about what people will say" (215). Although she is the daughter of a wealthy, aristocratic, landowning family, material privilege provides her little salvation. Obliging cultural norms has a far greater impact on her than do the luxuries of an aristocratic existence. Obviously, Bernarda, too, has been subjected to patriarchal codes throughout life. Though she has elected to wholeheartedly conform to the mandates of paternal law, the matriarch is clearly motivated by fear—Bernarda is motivated by the compulsion to "fit in," *rotting inside because of what people might say*. Amelia goes so far as to claim, "To be born a woman is the worst possible punishment" (241). Woman must be subordinate to male authority; she must sublimate her desire. Although all people are subjected to the parameters of the order, these women (and all women occupying a patriarchal social structure) are far more confined. Not only must they answer to cultural codes that demand their deferral to paternal law,

they must endure the tyrannical reign of a mother that respects these codes to the letter.

For Angustias, the injustice of the system produces jealousy and rage. Fully aware that her sisters' resent her engagement to Pepe, she states, "envy is eating" her sisters alive, and this envy causes familial relationships to deteriorate (233). In a fit of resentment, Martirio steals Angustias' picture of Pepe. Furthermore, Martirio, having seen Adela's "petticoats covered with straw," tells Bernarda about Adela's affair with Pepe (285). Even still, Martirio describes Adela as "fortunate a thousand times over" because "she had him" (288). Trapped by a fiercely controlling mother, the daughters seek escape through marriage. In her critique of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray explains how patriarchal social structure breeds rivalries among women. "If we are to be desired and loved by men, we must abandon our mothers... which destroys mothers... which destroy the possibility of love between mother and daughter. The two become at once accomplices and rivals in order to move into the single possible position in the desire of man. This competition equally paralyzes love among sister-women" (102). In the Alba home, the acquisition of a man guarantees emancipation from Bernarda's harsh rule; for Freud and Lacan, a woman births a child to fill her phallic lack. In both cases, (the illusion of) female subjectivity can only be actualized by the male subject. These notions coalesce when, vying for Pepe's attention by condemning Adela's relations with him, Martirio shouts to Adela, "My blood is no longer your blood! I try to think of you as a sister, but I see you only as a woman!" (283).

Fully aware of his effects on family harmony, Maria Josefa declares, "Pepe el Romano is a giant. All of you want him. But he is going to devour you because you are grains of wheat. Not grains of wheat. Frogs with no tongues!" (281). Without tongues, these frogs are powerless to feed their sexual appetites. Moreover, these women, without tongues, can neither adequately articulate their frustration nor can they participate in the public dialogue that serves to construct the very laws to which they are subordinated. In addition, Maria Josefa describes Pepe as a *giant* because he is the emblem of freedom from their mother's unrelenting domination. For Maria Josefa, however, Pepe only personifies an oppressive order. Alba, however, is unbending in her fidelity this order. At the same time, she articulates dissatisfaction similar to her daughters'. In a fit of frustration, Bernarda declares, "Things are never the way we would like them to be!" (255). In this tragic moment, displays overt hostility towards the system she goes to such great pains to perpetuate. Though dutifully endorsing the law of the land, she clearly recognizes, if only briefly, that the cultural practices she transmits limit agency, suppress desire, and engender bitterness. Moreover, the "we" to whom she refers is ambiguous. Though she could be speaking to the experiences of the Benavides-Alba family unit, Bernarda, knowingly or not, delves into the trauma of subject formation. The "we" designates the audience and actors alike, and refers, therefore, to all subjects confined to the limits imposed by a Symbolic order. The very act of "participation" in culture constitutes

conformity, to some extent, to clearly delineated codes of conduct, an obligation that fundamentally suppresses agency and personal freedom. Further still, the “we” denotes women in particular, subjects who occupy a patriarchal Symbolic to which they must answer but which they have not constructed.

Like Librada’s daughter, Adela seems to combat this passivity when she speaks out against Bernarda’s fascistic rule. “The shouting in this prison is over! (*She seizes the mother’s cane and breaks it in two.*) This is what I do with the tyrant’s rod!” (285). In an act of defiance, Adela rejects the law of the home. Clearly, the youngest daughter expresses adamant revolt against maternal authority. She pursues her desire in spite of Bernarda’s maniacal fidelity to tradition and cultural practices. For Robert Lima, Adela’s revolt signals revolutionary self-assertion. “Adela is transformed into a heroine fighting boldly, if hopelessly, for her cause” (285). The young woman’s resistance against the Symbolic order, although a futile endeavor, is an admirable and epiphanic moment. Gwynne Edwards suggests that Adela’s behavior is autobiographical, indicative “in many ways of his resistance to the conservative value of Spain in which he lived, and to that extent the play was highly prophetic, Adela being a projection of Lorca himself” (181). If one reads *The House of Bernarda Alba* as the author’s expression of socio-political concerns, Adela’s revolt and subsequent suicide mimic the playwright’s refusal to pander to an unjust regime.

Upon further analysis, however, Adela’s revolt against maternal authority is *not* quite the exertion of power it may appear; despite her efforts or intent, she *does not* transcend cultural law. After all, in her cane-breaking rant, Adela shouts, “No one gives me orders but Pepe!” (285). Adela has, in fact, internalized her mother’s worldview; women are at the mercy of a patriarchal order. Adela clearly rejects her mother’s “law,” but maternal authority, in this play, controls insofar as it transmits male subjectivity. Accordingly, when Adela revolts against Bernarda’s fascism, Adela is rejecting the messenger but not the message. Even in her act of insubordination and total disregard of her mother’s authority, Adela embraces the role of that which enables male subjectivity. What on the surface may appear to be utter disregard for traditional values is, *tragically*, simply an unconventional endorsement of these values. Again, this inability to break out of ideological closure evidences itself in the very closure of “conventional” dramatic form Lorca employs.

Though Adela ignores Angustias’s “right” to Pepe, and bypasses the necessity for marriage in pursuit of her sexual satisfaction, she embraces the underlying structures of a phallogentric social economy. That is to say, she reduces herself to the status of object and is thus in collusion with her own oppression. “I will put on a crown of thorns... like any mistress of a married man” (284). This moment is even more powerful in Ian Gibson’s translation of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, taken from the 20th edition of Lorca’s *Obras Completas*, published in 1978, in which Adela states: “After tasting his mouth I can’t stand the horror of these ceilings any longer. I’ll be whatever he wants. With the whole village against me,

pointing at me with their burning fingers, persecuted by people who claim to be decent—in full view of all of them I'll put on the crown of thorns worn by the mistresses of married men" (925-6). Her reference to the Messiah here is foreboding; as Christ's resolve results in his martyrdom, Adela's resoluteness will be equally fatal. *The burning fingers of people who claim to be decent* eradicate or ostracize that which deviates. At the same time, however, what appears to be Adela's will to power is actually an illusion. Claiming that she will be *whatever he wants*, she will mold her subjectivity around his projection of desire. Unwilling to be the daughter Bernarda demands, she elects to be the woman for whom Pepe el Romano yearns. Each "identity," however, is prescribed. She merely changes the setting of her confinement. "I will go to a little house, alone, where he will see me whenever he wants, whenever he feels the need" (284). Adela has occupied a home in which her movement has been restricted. Her relocation situates her in the same position. Only this time, her movements are restricted, not by her mother, but by Pepe el Romano. Essentially, she, as did her mother, dutifully conforms to the absolute power of male authority.

Though Lacanian theory implicitly deems this submission inevitable, Julia Kristeva, offering a feminist "corrective" to the Lacanian paradigm, re-imagines how the feminine-maternal relates to the law. By occupying a conceptual space from within which cultural laws can be validated, transmitted, thus codified, the maternal function operates as the mediator of the law. In this capacity, therefore, the mother possesses the potential energy to put the law "on trial," only yielding to Symbolic structures that meet to her socio-ethico-political conceptions of justice. Undoubtedly, Bernarda Alba does not put culture on trial. From a Kristevan perspective, dutiful acquiescence to cultural norms *because* they are the norm is dangerously problematic.

Feminine perversion (*pere-version*) is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity, it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabilizer (against its deviations); by assuring the mother that she may thus enter into an order that is above humans' will it give her her reward of pleasure. Such coded perversion, such close combat between maternal masochism and the law have been utilized by totalitarian powers of all times to bring women to their side, of course, they have succeeded easily. ("Stabat Mater" 328)

Kristeva argues that feminine conformity to patriarchal social structure is perverse. More aptly, the mother who legitimates phallogocentric ideology becomes the *pere-version*, the maternal version of the father.<sup>3</sup> Feminine perversion, reflecting that which ensures *reproduction and continuity*, sanctions the reproduction of continuity. Kristeva suggests here that a mother's willingness to step into that conceptual space points to the perverse. Furthermore, Kristeva alludes to the extent to which totalitarian regimes espouse this conception of the feminine-maternal. Indeed, *The House of Bernarda Alba* warns of these perversions.

The fact that no men ever emerge in the drama only accentuates Bernarda's perversion. The patriarch has died but lingers as an absent master. Pepe el Romano shapes the action of the play, but he never materializes *onstage*. *The House of Bernarda Alba* presents an exclusively feminine space, yet depicts a world of women shaped by unseen men, men invisible because a) in a literal sense, they never appear in the production, and b) shapers and purveyors of the law (like Kierkegaard's *crowd* and Heidegger's *they*) exist only as a nebulous, unintelligible mass. Bernarda Alba portrays the effects of this omnipresent-invisible patriarchal force, and she characterizes its *version* of the maternal function as a *dutiful mother* upon which the androcentric social structure (or a fascist state) depends. Repression of the feminine follows when the mother uses her position to transmit and perpetuate the priorities and practices of patriarchal conditions. For Lacan, this *version* of the mother is not a version at all; passive deferral to paternal law *is* the maternal function. Since Lacan claims that women are devoid of "their own" subjectivity, the feminine-maternal is that which enables the Law of the Father, enables male subjectivity. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan posits that "there's no such thing as Woman because, in her essence...she is not-whole" (72-3). Since woman has no subjectivity that is *her own*, the Lacanian notion of the maternal function eerily coincides with Bernarda's conception of her parental role.<sup>4</sup> Kristeva's concept of *pere-version* responds to this disturbing aspect of Freudian-Lacanian psychodynamics, dynamics informed by inherited phallogocentric presuppositions. Bernarda's daughters have, from their mother, internalized this message, and this becomes most clear, perhaps, when Martirio laments, "I do things I have no faith in, but I do them like clockwork" (212). Just as Bernarda thinks that societal norms should not be questioned, Martirio has no faith in the legitimacy of her material reality, but, as do her sisters, she robotically conforms to cultural expectations.

Federico García Lorca zeroes in on this sense of powerlessness. A fascist regime presents itself as the apex of political evolution, and, in so doing, broadcasts ideological maxims as inherent truths. Similarly, Lacan relegates the maternal function to a position of passivity, and, in so doing, wields biology as justification for this relegation. It is in this context that we read *The House of Bernarda Alba* as a call to arms. Human agency, the locus of power and freedom, must be preserved at all costs. Ironically, however, Lorca provides no alternative to fascism. Instead, he depicts the horrors of a world in which no such alternative exists. Simultaneously, this play proffers no replacement for the dutiful mother; on the contrary, the work conveys a narrative in which only she rears our young. Though the universe Lorca presents to us is fictional, the tragedy is very real.

But what is most "real" about *The House of Bernarda Alba* are the psychological consequences that subjects endure when confined to a Symbolic order in which oppression is normalized. Furthermore, when the horrors of material conditions are amplified, examined, and laid bare, we—the subjects—often uniformly recoil from the representation or reject them altogether. In a Lacanian sense, we are

overwhelmed by exposure to the Real. We are traumatized by the phantasm of unmediated, unpolished, unadulterated access to this...this...thing.<sup>5</sup> These glimpses into reality result in denial and terror. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, "How China Got Religion," Slavoj Žižek identifies this bizarre phenomenon.

"Culture" has commonly become the name for all those things we practice without really taking seriously. And this is why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as "barbarians" with a "medieval mindset": they dare to take their beliefs seriously. Today, we seem to see the ultimate threat to culture as coming from those who live immediately in their culture, who lack the proper distance. (10/11/07)

Accordingly, we can deem Bernarda Alba a *freakish* expression of conformity to traditional values because she exhibits a *medieval* (uncompromising, unflinching, unconditional) adherence to the Law. In Bernarda's case, as in our own, the Law is real. Traditional values exist. The repression of feminine agency, certainly in Andalusia during the mid-twentieth century, was not an invented set of circumstances employed merely for literary technique. Bernarda, however, follows the *letter* of the Law. In so doing, she exposes its rawness, its weirdness, and its injustice. But she does more than that...she *dutifully* inculcates the Law in her children. This process functions as a perverse revelation for the audience/reader. For this matriarch, men and women exist on different planes; society views and treats them differently. Women should propagate existing ideology regardless of its impact on them. Adela cannot bear this existence, so she embraces suicide as the only answer. With Pepe gone, she is unable to pursue her desire, and with her secret revealed, Adela's confinement to the home looms as an inevitable certainty. She hangs herself in her ultimate act of defiance. Sadly, however, Bernarda undermines the revolt when she barks, "cut her down. My daughter has died a virgin. Carry to her room and dress her in white. No one is to say a thing. She died a virgin" (288). Under these oppressive circumstances, Adela perceives suicide as an empowering expression of freedom. Metaphorically, this may be so, but one cannot deny the material reality of the situation. First, there exist profound problems when self-destruction constitutes the only method through which one can attain "freedom." Second, Adela's suicide *could have* served as a revolt against the injustices of an asymmetrical social structure in which men are active and women are passive, but Bernarda silences Adela's rebellion by dressing the "virgin-corpse" in white. In this play, then, there exists no escape from the totality. As reader, as audience member, as critical thinker, one seemingly cannot help but ask *why* these circumstances could be tolerated. One either asks this question, or one dismisses the entire situation as absurd, unrealistic, unbelievable...as fiction. Culture, Žižek tells us, signifies that which we exercise without taking seriously. If we take it seriously, if we behave like the atavistic Bernarda, we risk uncovering its strange contents and complying with them without question. Characters like Bernarda Alba do not disturb us because they are implausible or unrecognizable; they are disturbing because they are "so outrageous" and "because they spill the secret of what we have done for so long: respectfully tolerating what we don't

take quite seriously, and trying to contain its political consequences through the law” (Žižek *New York Times* 10/11/07). Bernarda shatters our capacity to enjoy a comfortable lie...the illusion that law and order and justice are synonymous, interchangeable.

To the extent that she reveals to us that which is concealed determines the extent to which we recoil in horror from Bernarda Alba. She may well be emblematic of a terrible mother, a horrific oppressor, or an intolerant tyrant, but this woman is a powerful manifestation of cultural conditions. If women are denied subjectivity, if culture, via philosophy, psychoanalysis, law, politics, or tradition, sends women a message that they are passive bodies that are to perpetuate existing norms, the maternal function is reduced to an instrument of the state. If one is tempted to read thinkers like Lacan or Kristeva as purveyors of theoretical abstractions with little relevance for the person waiting at the bus stop, consider Bernarda Alba. If phallogocentric ideology is transmitted indiscriminately from society to its subjects, from parent to child, from mother to daughter, the machine rumbles forward.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Grosz explains that fetishism results when a subject refuses to reject the mother. She elucidates also why fetishism is more common in males. “The fetishist demands that the mother have a genital organ the same as his own. His disavowal functions to ward off threats of his own organ, threats which force him to acknowledge the possibility of its loss. In place of the missing maternal phallus, he will position the fetish (shoe, raincoat, underwear, etc.)” (*Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 118).

<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth century French playwright, Eugène Scribe, produced over 250 plays between 1815 and 1855. His legacy, however, is his structural approach to drama. His concept of “the well-made play” relies on a formulaic structure. Lee A. Jacobus defines this structure as the following:

1. A careful exposition telling the audience what the situation is, usually including one or more secrets to be revealed later.
2. Surprises, such as letters to be opened at a critical moment and identities to be revealed later.
3. Suspense that builds steadily throughout the plays, usually sustained by cliff-hanging situations and characters who miss each other by way of carefully timed entrances and exits. At critical moments, characters lose important papers or misplace identifying jewelry, for instance.
4. A climax late in the play when the secrets are revealed and the hero confronts the antagonist and succeeds.
5. A denouement, the resolution of the drama when all the loose ends are drawn together and explanations are made that render all the action plausible. (647)

In plays like Molière's *Tartuffe*, Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this structure dominates the action onstage.

<sup>3</sup> Considering French etymology, French *perverse* in English means "perverse" or "contrary to." The prefix, "per," derives from the Latin and, according to the OED, signifies "away entirely, to destruction, to the bad" (Latin meaning retained in both English and French). The French pronoun, "vers," means "toward," a meaning retained in the word, "version." The Latin, "*pervertere*" is "to turn away evilly." The French, "*verser*," is "to shed" or "to remove." Similarly, "*renverser*" is "to reverse." When Lacan utilizes the term *perverse*, the Latin-French origins of the term suggest a *turning back of*, a *turning away from*, a *reversal of*, or a *shedding of* castration anxiety and the normative functions of the Oedipus complex. Dylan Evans describes the Lacanian perverse as any psychical structure operating as "an infringement of the normative requirements" for subject formation (138). Kristeva's term, *pere-version*, is phonetically identical to the Lacanian term, *per-version*. In this context, not only does Kristeva summon the perverse and the father (*pere*), she retains the notion of the turning away. In the Kristevan sense, feminine perversion does not shed or turn away from paternal law (when such a reversal is "appropriate").

<sup>4</sup> Lacan positions *all* subjects, male and female, as a fissure, the split between an illusory ego produced in the mirror stage and the "knowable" subject of enunciation articulated in the Symbolic and through language. Lacan speaks to this divide when he defines the subject "as that which is represented by a signifier for another signifier," ultimately rendering the subject "an effect of language" (Evans 196). In one sense, therefore, subjectivity for every human being is an illusion, a fantasy. At the same time, however, the Symbolic order is the mechanism through which "subjectivity" is fashioned. If patriarchal law fabricates and maintains this order, the fantasy through which subjectivity can be achieved is shaped exclusively by patriarchal *versions* of this fantasy.

<sup>5</sup> In Beckett's *Endgame*, Hamm, a blind and crippled occupant of a nightmarishly apocalyptic world, a world devoid of nature, kinship, and meaning, a world in which the ontological protection provided by the Symbolic has been stripped away, revealing the true nature of the abyss, asks Clov, "have you not had enough? Of this...this...thing" (2461).

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Frogs with no tongues! Act III, p. 206. Though it's easy to write off Maria Josefa's final speeches as the ranting of a senile old woman, there are grains of prophetic wisdom in them. The Question and Answer section for The House of Bernarda Alba is a great resource to ask questions, find answers, and discuss the novel. How does La casa de Bernarda Alba end? In the final act of The House of Bernarda Alba, Bernarda finds Adela hanging in her room.. she has taken her own life. 6. What does Bernarda Alba think of the mourners and other inhabitants of the village? 7. Why is Pepe el Romano approaching Bernarda's house? 8. According to Magdalena, what are Pepe de Romano's motives? 9. Why is Bernarda upset with Angustias? 10. What does Maria Josefa desire as the curtain falls? Answers 1. The play occurs in the summer. It is very hot and the women are often using fans. 2. Poncia and the maid dislike Bernarda. Poncia considers her a tyrant. 6. Bernarda considers the mourners and neighbors vicious gossips who are beneath her in social standing. She compares them to goats as they are exiting. 7. Pepe el Romano wishes to court Angustias, Bernarda's oldest daughter.