Episode 5: Oxford Spanish Literature Podcast

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Christy Callaway-Gale 00:02
Ever wondered what it would be like studying Spanish at the University of Oxford? Sit in on my conversations with Spanish tutors to find out what's so fascinating about the literature they teach, why they love teaching it, and why they think you might love it too.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:15
Hi Laura, how are you doing? How's your day been so far?

Laura Lonsdale 00:19
Oh, not too bad. Yeah, yeah. How about you?

[CONVERSATION FADES OUT]

Laura Lonsdale 00:22
So my name is Laura Lonsdale. And I teach Modern Spanish literature from the late 19th century to the early 21st century.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:29
So what's the name of the text that we'll be speaking about today and who wrote it?

Laura Lonsdale 00:34
So it's called *Bodas de sangre* and it was written by Federico García Lorca.

Christy Callaway-Gale 00:39
Tell me a bit about the form of the text. Is it a play, a novel, a short story or a poem, for example?

Laura Lonsdale 00:45
So it's a play, and it's set in Andalucía, in the south of Spain, near Granada, which was Lorca's hometown, in what we assume is the early 20th century. And the story is based on events reported in the Spanish press in 1928, concerning a bride who eloped with her cousin who was then later found dead.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:05
Do you want to give us a summary of the basic plot?

Laura Lonsdale 01:09
Sure. So in Lorca's play—his, kind of, version of this story that he read about in the papers—a bride elopes, not with her cousin, but with a former lover, Leonardo, whose family has a long standing feud with the bridegroom's family. The bridegroom's mother is tormented by the loss of her husband and eldest son as a result of this feud, and very afraid for her younger son. When he is killed along with Leonardo, his death fulfills all the mother's worst fears, and completes the cycle of violence presented as inevitable.

Christy Callaway-Gale 01:39
It's such a striking plot, I'm really excited to get into the detail about this text. But, first, if you could tell us why you wanted to speak about this text in particular?

Laura Lonsdale 01:49
Yeah, so I chose this text because it is, for me, the most powerful and possibly the most beautiful of Lorca's plays. I actually studied this text for A-level myself. And I studied it, both in Spanish and in Theatre Studies, which gave me two different ways into the text: one focused on culture and language and the other more focused on performance. So, you know, the text has sort of been in my life, if you like, for a long time.

Christy Callaway-Gale 02:16
Fantastic. So let's move to speak about the historical and literary context surrounding the text itself. What was happening in Spain at the time that this text was written?

Laura Lonsdale 02:29
Well, the play was written in 1932, and premiered in Madrid in 1933. And these were the years of the socialist Second Republic, which lasted from the end of Primo de Rivera's military dictatorship in 1931, to the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. They were heady, turbulent years in which Lorca became involved in a variety of artistic projects, not least his touring theatre company, La Barraca, which took classics of the Golden Age theatre to tiny rural communities across Spain. This venture was sponsored by the Republican government, in the context of its *misiones pedagógicas*, which brought libraries and even a touring museum to the remotest of Spain's towns and villages, in an attempt to make culture and education more widely accessible, at a time when illiteracy in rural Spain was as high as 40%, especially among women.

Christy Callaway-Gale 03:20
What sort of literature, then, and maybe specifically plays, were being written in Spain at the time, and how does this particular play that we're going to be speaking about today, compare to those?

Laura Lonsdale 03:32
Well as in other parts of Europe, the 1920s were a time of feverish and playful experimentation in the arts in Spain...to the extent that it's come to be known as Spain's Silver Age. With the Wall Street Crash and the coming of the Second Republic, the early 1930s brought a more sober and politicized approach to artistic creation. The theatre throughout this period was largely a commercial enterprise and theatres were really more entertainment venues than they were arts venues. But there was a flourishing, if rather financially impoverished, kind of art theatre scene in both Madrid and Barcelona...led by important figures, like the director Cipriano Rivas Cherif and the actress and producer Margarita Xirgu, both of whom worked very closely with Lorca. So what Lorca did with *Bodas de sangre* and the rest of the rural trilogy to which it belongs, was fairly remarkable for his day, because he managed to bridge what was really a kind of yawning divide at the time, between commercial success and artistic seriousness, something which had eluded most of his contemporaries. *Bodas* was also unusual because where other dramatists were turning away from tragedy towards something, sort of, more farcical or grotesque, Lorca was reinventing it for his day. And where other dramatists were becoming very overtly politicized in the context of the Second Republic, particularly as the Civil War approached, Lorca managed to write works that resonated very powerfully with their historical moment, but which nonetheless kind of avoided propaganda.

Christy Callaway-Gale 05:00
You just mentioned the rural trilogy there, could you tell us a bit about the other two plays that form part of this trilogy, and maybe speak a little bit about why these plays are often grouped together?

Laura Lonsdale 05:12
Yeah. So the other two plays are *Yerma* and *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. *Yerma*, which means 'barren', is the story of a woman who's desperate to have a child, but imprisoned in an unhappy marriage with a man who really doesn't want children. And *La casa de Bernarda Alba* is the story of a tyrannical mother obsessed with the honor and propriety of her daughters. And it was the last play Lorca wrote before his assassination at the start of the Civil War. Together, the three plays make up what is known as his rural trilogy and, as that name suggests, they're all set in Spain's rural south. They all have female protagonists...and they explore women's lives and desires in the context of the severe social restrictions that were placed on their bodies, minds and activities. And in different ways, they all explore the conflict between desire (the needs of the body) and social convention, or expectation.

Christy Callaway-Gale 06:06
And you also said that this play's slightly unusual for its time because it's a tragedy. Is there a typical definition of tragedy and maybe a typical structure to a tragedy that's useful for us to have in mind when we're reading or watching this play?

Laura Lonsdale 06:21
Yeah, I mean, I think I'm going to go back right to the origins and, and mention the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who in his *Poetics* define tragedy very specifically, as 'mimesis', by which he meant, kind of, 'representation'. So 'mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplished in the catharsis', in other words, the release of such emotion. So this definition was written in the 3rd century BCE, but it's remained the touchstone of the genre ever since. And while many of the philosophers prescriptions have been disregarded by even such great tragedians as Shakespeare and Calderón, the sense of it being 'elevated, complete and of magnitude', written in a high poetic register, usually in verse, and provoking strong and cathartic emotions in the audience, has remained fairly constant to the genre. Though each era has reinvented...tragedy for its own purposes, perhaps the single most defining feature of tragedy—so, in other words, the thing that makes a tragedy a tragedy, in spite of its...all of its permutations—is the nature of the hero's battle against the forces ranged against them. So in a tragedy, this battle must be lost, and the audience has to know it must be lost from the beginning...and that's usually achieved through the use of prolepsis, or, kind of, techniques of anticipation. The narrative arc of tragedy therefore always involves a desperate effort to overcome an obstacle and the ultimate failure to do so.

Christy Callaway-Gale 07:56
So I think now we'll move to speak in a bit more detail about the text itself, *Bodas de sangre*. So the play's made up of three acts and I think let's start with Act One, because that seems to make sense. How does Lorca set up the themes of the play in the opening scene and set this tragedy in motion?

Laura Lonsdale 08:15
Well, we have a sort of sequence of revelations in this opening scene. We hear first of all of the mother's fear and hatred of the knife which is initially unexplained. Then we have the mention of the death of her husband and her son and her own very visceral grief. She says 'la desesperación me pica en los ojos y está en las puntas del pelo'. Then we have the mention of the Félix family and the feud between...the two families. And then later in the scene, the revelation that the bride was previously engaged to a member of that family. So we have this kind of slow, sort of, building...of...of information that...kind of, sets in train the sequence of events.

Christy Callaway-Gale 08:57
And then the second scene of Act One interestingly opens with a lullaby which is being sung to the child of Leonardo, who's the bride's former lover. What's the significance of this lullaby? And what role, if any, does it have in the play's tragic structure?

Laura Lonsdale 09:14
Well Lorca loved collecting songs and lullabies from different parts of Spain, and in a lecture on 'las nanas infantiles', he commented on how often they expressed an 'aguda tristeza' or, or a sense of drama

seemingly at odds with their function, which is obviously to get a child to sleep. This particular lullaby about a ‘caballo grande que no quiso el agua’ is based on one that Lorca had heard in a number of different versions in Granada. And the first time we hear it in the play, there is a contrast between the warmth and gentleness of the scene, and the sadness coldness and violence of the song. So ‘[l]as patas heridas / las crines heladas / dentro de los ojos / un puñal de plata’. Of course, by the time it's sung a second time, after Leonardo hears of the bride’s intended marriage and leaves the scene in a fury, the mood has changed and the images begin to take on a more direct significance. It’s also worth pointing out that in Ancient tragedy sections of verse would have been sung, and a chorus would have provided commentary on the action. In a rather oblique and symbolic manner, the lullaby comments on the action by offering a series of proleptic, or anticipatory, images of death and grief.

Christy Callaway-Gale 10:26
So I think let's move towards Act Two and think about the first scene of Act Two. So this is when Leonardo rides ahead of his wife to speak to the bride, who’s his former lover, on her wedding day when she’s about to marry somebody else. And throughout this scene, we have the singing of the wedding guests who are approaching where the bride and Leonardo are, so the singing gets louder and louder during the scene. So this is, once again, another example of the singing that we encounter in Act One. I just wondered what the significance of this singing here was during this former lovers' exchange, and how Lorca manipulates it for dramatic effect in this scene?

Laura Lonsdale 11:10
The song works as a kind of ironic counterpoint to the bride’s misgivings and to the angry recriminations between the bride and Leonardo. And this generates a dramatic contrast between the supposed innocence, joy and excitement of the occasion, and the dark undercurrents of passion that will eventually sweep it all away—a little bit like the sort of contrast that we were seeing in the lullaby too. Only the Criada, who of course knows what is going on, introduces a note of melancholy and foreboding into the song through her mention of the rising moon and the bride’s sleeplessness, contrasting with the repeated image of her awakening. At the end of the scene, we hear the final verse of the bridal song as the curtain falls slowly on an empty stage. And the last word that we hear is ‘estrella’ (‘star’), an image that will later be picked up again in relation to the bridegroom, who sets out to search for the eloped couple, like an ‘estrella furiosa’. So this is another cosmic element like the moon, and, sort of, suggesting the inevitability of fate.

Christy Callaway-Gale 12:15
Great, so from there we move on to the second and final scene of Act Two. And this is when we have the wedding celebrations that go ahead, and we are faced with also their immediate aftermath. So I think for me when I was reading this scene, it does feel quite chaotic, I think, because you have, on the one hand, you have the celebrations and wedding rituals happening. And then on the other hand, you have the bride’s, sort of, angst. And the scene does end very abruptly with the wedding guests actually splitting up to go and hunt for Leonardo and the bride who have seemingly run off together. What effect

does Lorca create by interweaving society's rituals, like the wedding rituals, with the characters' personal struggles?

Laura Lonsdale 13:01
Yeah, it's a really interesting question and I suppose, kind of, behind it is the idea that Lorca pits the individual against society in the play...and that that would explain then this sort of tension between social ritual...and individual struggle. And, and as I've said, you know, in some ways, he certainly does, you know, as personal desire seems to be thwarted by social convention. But the conflict is perhaps in some ways more the theme of *Bernarda Alba* than it is of *Bodas*, where things are not quite so simple. So in *Bodas*, the bride chose not to marry Leonardo because he was too poor, and she chose to marry the Novio, even though in the end she was helpless in the face of her passion for Leonardo. So the bride attempts to assert herself, not in the face of tyrannical social convention, as Adela does in *Bernarda Alba*, but in the face of her passion, and it is her desire that thwarts her ultimately, not social convention. So of course, we may still see the Novia as a victim of the social conventions that put her on a collision course with her own desire, but the point is that, as a tragedy, *Bodas* introduces much more powerful forces than just social ones.

Christy Callaway-Gale 14:16
So let's move on to Act Three, then. Starting with the first scene of Act Three, so this opens in the forest where the lovers are being hunted down by the wedding guests. And this scene ends with the implied death of Leonardo and the groom. And I'm interested in the fact that this scene does feel a lot more abstract and symbolic than other scenes in the play. Why do you think Lorca chooses to create this shift at this point in the play?

Laura Lonsdale 14:46
Yeah, so it's...this is the scene I've chosen to look at it in a lot more detail later on. So we'll talk about this in a little while. But for now, let's just say that the play enters a completely new phase at this point, leaving all realism behind and entering into a world of poetic symbolism. The scene gathers together all the play's main themes and images, including, and perhaps especially, the 'sangre' of the...of the play's title.

Christy Callaway-Gale 15:13
Yes, and we'll definitely, as you say, we'll speak in a lot more detail about this scene in the second part of this podcast episode. So now we can move on to the final scene of the play, where the bride finds the groom's mother and her neighbour, and she actually begs them to kill her, which, to me, sort of implies that she believes she's done wrong. But at the same time, she also pleads her honor and her innocence to them. What's your interpretation of the bride's words here because they seem to me to be contradictory?

Laura Lonsdale 15:47
Yeah, I mean, effectively, the bride is saying that she had no control over her actions and that she acted against her own will. She says, '[y]o no quería, ¡óyelo bien!; yo no quería, ¡óyelo bien!, yo no quería. ¡Tu hijo era mi fin y yo no lo he engañado, pero el brazo del otro me arrastró como un golpe de mar'. Very powerful words. In a different context, we might doubt her intentions or her sincerity here, but in the context of the tragedy, it's important that we take this lack of agency seriously. She is the victim of a passion in which fate, family inheritance, physical and unconscious drives all have a part to play. But she also stresses that she is '[h]onrada, honrada como una niña recién nacida', she says. In other words, she hasn't lost her virginity to Leonardo. So when she, when she challenges the mother to put her hands in the fire, 'tú, por tu hijo; yo, por mi cuerpo' she is submitting to a trial by fire that will prove her innocence in this sense.

Christy Callaway-Gale 16:47
And thinking about Lorca's sensitivity when he's writing about women in the...in his plays and in his other work, do you think we're supposed to feel sympathetic for the bride at the end of the play?

Laura Lonsdale 16:59
Yeah, that's a very interesting question…I think in some ways, we are…because, of course she is pulled along by the force of her passion and the force of her desire. And, and she has a very emotive and, and poetic exchange with Leonardo, which sort of places them among, you know, the best star-crossed lovers if you like, you know, in theatrical tradition. But at the end of the day, you know, she (like all the other characters apart from Leonardo) she plays out a role, you know, she is the Novia, she's not an individual as such. And so I think our sympathies are probably also limited by the fact that she isn't a fully, sort of, individualized character.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 17:53
A big part of studying Spanish at Oxford is looking at literary texts in a lot of detail. So I'm asking Laura to pick out an extract from the play, so we can analyze it a bit more closely.

[MUSIC ENDS]

Laura Lonsdale 18:05
So I've chosen the very beginning of Act Three, Scene One. So we're in a damp forest at night, contrasting completely with the hot, dry Andalucía that we've heard about before now. And over the sound of two violins playing, three woodcutters emerge on stage and comment on the elopement of the bride with Leonardo.

Christy Callaway-Gale 18:27
How should this scene look and feel at this point in the play according to the stage directions?

Laura Lonsdale 18:33
Well, this is clearly not...not a real place, but a symbolist setting that has something of the unconscious and something of fairy tale about it. Let's have a look at the opening *acotación*, or stage direction. So it says, very simply, 'Bosque' ('forest'). 'Es de noche. Grandes troncos húmedos. Ambiente oscuro. Se oyen dos violines'. So immediately, that marks out the, kind of, the shift from the sort of quite frenetic activity, I think you used the word 'chaotic' for that last scene of Act Two, and suddenly we're somewhere very still, very dark…, very damp. And I think we can assume that these '[g]randes troncos', you know, they're not meant to be realistic trees, you know, they're meant to evoke the, kind of, the atmosphere of.., kind of, nocturnal, sort of, seclusion, if you like, more than...more than anything else.

Christy Callaway-Gale 19:38
So the conversation in this extract, as you said, takes place between these three woodcutters, and they don't appear anywhere else in the play as far as I'm aware. So why does Lorca use these three characters at the beginning of this final act?

Laura Lonsdale 19:54
Well, I think the woodcutters are essentially a kind of tragic chorus. So I mentioned... mentioned the tragic chorus before and...the role that it plays in commenting on the action. So that seems to be very clearly their...their function here. But the fact that they're wood cutters not only makes them agents of the supernatural forest, it also brings to life the play's imagery of trees and branches in connection with both family and life. So as the Leñador Segundo says, referring to Leonardo, 'Un árbol de cuarenta ramas. Lo cortaremos pronto'.

Christy Callaway-Gale 20:33
So if we see the woodcutters as a type of tragic chorus, as you've just said, how does Lorca structure their conversation, or choose the language that they use in their conversation, to suggest this.

Laura Lonsdale 20:46
So by commenting on what is happening they're at once, sort of, countering and reinforcing the narrative of inevitability. 'Debían dejarlos', says one; '[e]l mundo es grande. Todos pueden vivir en él', says another; '[p]ero los matarán', says another. So this creates tension and heightens tragic emotion by giving a sense of both the alternative and its frustration. As a tragic chorus, their role is to comment on what has happened and what is yet to happen, but there's also something, as I mentioned, sort of quite choral, in the musical sense, about their dialogue. In other words, they pick up motifs and rhythms from each other, structuring their exchange with echoes and counterpoints. When the moonlight appears, they shift up a gear, poetically speaking, from prose into verse as they attempt, hopelessly of course, to

persuade the moon to leave the lovers be. So the moon...emerges just after the end of this extract that I've chosen and...and sort of, in, in connection with the Mendiga ('the beggar woman'), who is a kind of personification of death, is responsible ultimately for...for the…the death of the…of the two men. So at this point, the chorus is, sort of, trying to persuade the moon to leave them be and they say: '¡Ay luna mala! / Deja para el amor la oscura rama. / ¡Ay triste luna! / ¡Deja para el amor la rama oscura!'. So later in the scene, they emerge again to beg death, personified as the Mendiga, for clemency.

Christy Callaway-Gale 22:19
Could you speak more about the significance of the moon here and what sort of language Lorca uses to describe the moon?

Laura Lonsdale 22:27
Yeah. This is Lorca's only theatrical version of the moon but it's, it's a very prominent image in his poetry, for example, in the *Romancero gitano*, and in the *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*. In Lorca's work the influence of the moon is usually malign, well always malign, and associated with death. And in line with traditional symbolism, it's usually figured as feminine. Here, the moon is actually a young man, though his youth and his whiteness, as well as his use of the feminine form of the adjective 'helada', make him somewhat ambiguous.

Christy Callaway-Gale 23:03
And then the woodcutters also talk about blood. What different views do they put forward about blood?

Laura Lonsdale 23:10
Yeah, so...well, the conversation about blood...goes like this. So the Leñador Primero says: 'Se estaban engañando uno a otro y al final la sangre pudo más'. Tercero replies: '¡La sangre!'. Primero: 'Hay que seguir el camino de la sangre'. Segundo: 'Pero sangre que ve la luz se la bebe la tierra.' Primero: '¿Y qué? Vale más ser muerto desangrado que vivo con ella podrida'. So we have this repetition 'sangre', 'sangre', 'sangre' in each of these lines. And 'sangre' seems to be synonymous here with passion, instinct or desire. Picking up on Leonardo's words in Act Two Scene One where he says, 'no quiero hablar porque soy hombre de sangre'. So 'sangre' seems to be equated with authenticity; it's the opposite of 'engaño' or 'falsehood'. But it's also associated with the darker regions of the mind and the body. So 'sangre que ve la luz se la bebe la tierra'. So, literally, blood resides inside the body and when it's spilled, this means death. So, by extension, when passion comes to light, it's similarly self-destructive. The Leñador Primero observes, however, that it's better for blood to flow than to stagnate, even if this does mean death. So passion is therefore associated with blood, because it's both the individual's lifeblood (the thing that allows the person to live) and death (the destruction wrought by passion). However, when the same Leñador observes that 'al final la sangre pudo más', he seems to be associating blood not only with passion, but also with family, and by extension with the blood feud between the Novio and Leonardo's families. This is picked up again in the Leñador Primero's later use of 'sangre' to suggest the sexual union of the Novia and Leonardo. So he says, 'Pero ya habrán

mezclado sus sangres'. And the word 'blood' here stands in for other kinds of bodily fluid, but also suggests the mixing of their lineages.

Christy Callaway-Gale 25:13
Yeah, so there's so many rich connotations to this conversation about blood. Does this conversation then shed any light on the title of the play, considering it also has the word '*Blood*' or '*sangre*' in it?

Laura Lonsdale 25:27
Yeah, absolutely. So, of course, a wedding is a moment of union...union of two people, but also a union of two families. So...So all of those...and of course, it's also meant to be a celebration of the love and, and the physical...attraction between two people as well. So all of those different connotations are brought together, under the title of the or under...the...in the context of the *Boda*. But it's only as we start to understand how '*sangre*' is linked in all of these different ways to passion, to authenticity, to desire, to life, to death, to family, but also then to...to conflict as well in the form of the blood feud, that we start to really understand what that title *Bodas de sangre* is pointing us to.

[MUSIC STARTS]

Christy Callaway-Gale 26:26

Thinking about applying for Modern Languages at uni? Well keep up to date with the latest episodes of the podcast and find out about our upcoming outreach events by following us on Twitter @OxMML_Schools.

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Christy Callaway-Gale 26:40

You might also like to take a look at our Modern Languages blog, 'Adventures on the Bookshelf'.

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Christy Callaway-Gale 26:47

This podcast was created by Professor Ben Bollig, produced by me Christy Callaway-Gale, and brought to you by the Sub-faculty of Spanish at the University of Oxford. Special thanks goes to the tutors that participated and the Taylor Institution Library.

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