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Enrique Álvarez
Florida State University, ealvarez@fsu.edu

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Abstract

Review of Emilio Peral Vega. *Pierrot/Lorca. White Carnival of Black Desire*. London: Tamesis, 2015.

Keywords

Spanish Literature, Queer, Lorca

Emilio Peral Vega. *Pierrot/Lorca: White Carnival of Black Desire*. London: Tamesis, 2015. 167 pp.

Emilio Peral Vega's new monograph *Pierrot/Lorca: White Carnival of Black Desire*, a welcome new title on Lorcan queer studies, restores authorial intention to both creative and critical endeavors, while addressing complex relationships between the personal and the aesthetic, artistic and lived experiences, and visual and literary cultural domains. The objective of the book is "to bring a new perspective to the poetic, prose, theatrical and even pictorial works of Federico García Lorca, focusing on Pierrot as a mechanism for representing intimacy" and "as the most evident encoding of the poet's homosexuality" (1).

In chapter 1 Peral Vega provides a well-researched, exhaustive taxonomy of the different manifestations of Pierrot across modern times and cultural geographies, going back to the early nineteenth century French mime Jean-Gaspard Debureau. According to Peral Vega, Debureau performed the role of "a poet able to communicate a mass of sensations and meanings from total silence" (12). By way of the symbolist performance of emotion in Debureau's mime, Peral Vega lays the critical coordinates between visual and literary imagery, as well as performance and identity, each of which informs his approach to García Lorca's poetics of the male homosexual closet. Throughout his thoroughly illustrated account of intertexts and designs of the white mask, Peral Vega describes a lonely and pathetic Pierrot, emotionally torn between comedy and tragedy, tender friendliness and silent melancholy, while paradoxically feeling both liberated from and fearful of castration.

Following this pattern, chapter 2 presents a thematic continuity between Verlaine and Lorca in an apotheosis of the queer Pierrots that featured in *fin-de-siècle* European Decadentism. Through a willing identification of queer desire with a gender transitive model of male homosexuality, the author assertively reads the content of these decadent images of Pierrot as "explicitly homosexual" (34). However, given the heuristic complexity of queer desire as an analytical tool, the automatic connection of male homosexuality and effeminacy that Peral Vega ostensibly assumes without question may present some problems for the theoretically minded reader.

Within this playful game of binary structures, chapters 3 and 4 shift the focus from Pierrot to Lorca and then from Lorca to Pierrot, that is, from the psychic splitting of the mask as an emotional paradigm of the poet's early writing to García Lorca's own pictorial output of Pierrot's performance of sexuality. In the first case, the author addresses García Lorca's initial treatment of a sexually undecided poetic self. Peral Vega establishes a working relationship between ambiguous references to brotherhood and friendship in García Lorca's juvenilia, before moving to a more profound treatment of male homoeroticism through the image of the comrade in

“Oda a Walt Whitman.” The problem here is that Whitman’s comrade in Lorca’s famous ode is not only “a synonym for lover” as Peral Vega rightfully points out (46), but also fulfills a social function that unambiguously relates class, gender, and sexuality. The *camarada* ‘comrade,’ both in Whitman and García Lorca, constitutes a political plea for democracy, masculinity, and queer desire that determines a crucial meaning that is overlooked in Peral Vega’s otherwise perceptive discussion. His reading of García Lorca’s strikingly beautiful early prose “Pierrot. Poema íntimo,” results in a far more convincing analysis, featuring classical and Shakespearian homoerotic references that the poet would go on to explore later in *El público*.

According to Peral Vega, García Lorca’s pictorial output of the white mask demonstrates “the effeminate characterization of the buffoon . . . and an insistent and recurrent desire that tries to hide itself to the point of castrating the repressive gaze of the viewer” (64). In order to demonstrate this argument, Peral Vega groups García Lorca’s numerous drawings of Pierrot into three categories: “the melancholic clowns” (66), “Pierrots with divided faces” (68), and paintings “of a more erotic nature” (72). In all three cases, this critic offers thought provoking interpretations of the images’ homoerotic/homosexual content, although some readers may consider his assumptions rather far-reaching.

Chapter 5 explores an already overused narrative of the tormented relationship between Salvador Dalí and García Lorca, glossing over biographical accounts of their friendship and focusing instead on the imagery drawn from *commedia dell’arte*. Peral Vega describes the Dalí/Lorca exchange of San Sebastian iconographic motifs as a sort of secret gay code, which concludes with Dalí’s withdrawal from “the erotic game Lorca so longed for” preferring instead “an aesthetic collaboration entirely separate from carnality” (92). Here, the informed reader will miss productive dialogues that could have resulted from Christopher Maurer’s *Sebastian’s Arrows* (2004), an edited collection of letters and mementos between García Lorca and Dalí on the topic of San Sebastian martyrdom, or from Cecelia J. Cavanaugh’s chapter on the same subject in *New Lenses for Lorca* (2012). Both of these texts are conspicuously absent from Peral Vega’s otherwise impressive bibliography.

Chapter 6 addresses frustrated sexual desire through a close reading of García Lorca’s 1926 tale of cuckoldry *Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*. For Peral Vega, this “is a play of deep silences which, rather than silencing, instead intensify its homoerotic bias” (98). To prove this claim, he moves back and forth between drama and poetry in a somewhat cluttered display of intratextual competence. In chapter 7, the author concludes by addressing the centrality of the mask in García Lorca’s surrealist plays. The analysis of *El público* focuses on the tormented relationship between Man 1/Gonzalo and the Pierrot-inspired Director/Enrique in dialogue with the *maricas* ‘faggots’ of the “Oda a Walt

Whitman.” The more elaborated discussion of the mask in *Así que pasen cinco años* introduces the reader to an intricate web of citations that can be difficult to follow. Nevertheless, once the reader captures these perceptive readings of *Así que pasen cinco años*, they will surely find them to be of great interest for both future research and pedagogical activities in the classroom.

Finally, in the epilogue Peral Vega summarizes the importance of the masks of *commedia dell'arte* as an aesthetic and personal encoding for García Lorca’s work and life. He deduces that García Lorca does not completely destroy the power of these masks and ultimately remains unable to tell “the black truth of his lonely heart” (141). At times Peral Vega seems almost unconvinced as to the legitimacy of his own interpretations by resorting a bit too often to argumentative disclaimers. The attentive reader will also notice some editorial oversights that, unfortunately, negatively impact the reading experience. But these minor errors are perhaps unavoidable in such a rich account of the inter and intratextual relationships within García Lorca’s writing, as the one Peral Vega undoubtedly offers in this book.

Enrique Álvarez
Florida State University