

# Undecidability in Lorca's *Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*

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## Abstract

At many junctures in Lorca's *Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, the spectator or reader encounters unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, ambiguities, discontinuities, and unknowns; these arise locally, at numerous specific points in the text, and also affect the broad, overall understanding and interpretation of the dialogue and action. This article offers an analysis of all these instances, both large and small, and argues that, taken together, they constitute an important and pervasive feature of the play that, ultimately, becomes thematized as undecidability. In this regard, *Amor de don Perlimplín* therefore aligns more closely with Lorca's experimental theatre of the 1930s, such as *El público*, rather than with the plays with which it is more commonly compared, such as *La zapatera prodigiosa* or the puppet pieces.

BELISA: ¡Nunca creí que fuese tan complicado!

The origins of Lorca's play *Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, subtitled *Aleluya erótica en cuatro cuadros*, are to be found in a fragmentary manuscript from 1922-23. But he only worked in earnest on it during 1925-26, which means that the essential composition of the work comes after that of *El maleficio de la mariposa*, *Tragicomedia de don Cristóbal y la señá Rosita*, *Mariana Pineda*, and *La zapatera prodigiosa*. The premiere of *Amor de don Perlimplín* in Madrid, planned for early February 1929, was cancelled at the last moment by government authorities. Lorca had a manuscript with him in New York, where he read it to friends and gave it to Mildred Adams to translate, with a view to a possible American staging. Eventually, the play only received a single performance during his lifetime, presented by the amateur group Club Anfistora in April 1933. The work sits rather uneasily in a space somewhere between, on the one hand, the canonical "rural tragedies" and other allied works (*Mariana Pineda*, *Doña Rosita la soltera*), and on the other the clearly experimental corpus of *El público*, *Así que pasen cinco años*, and *El sueño de la vida*. Consequently, it is often ranged alongside *La zapatera prodigiosa* and the two puppet plays, *Tragicomedia de don Cristóbal y la señá Rosita* and *Retablillo de don Cristóbal*, partly on the grounds of its elements of farce and partly for its treatment of the topos of *el viejo y la niña*.

Many essays about *Amor de don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* used to open with the trope of unjustified neglect, arguing that, because of its short length, difficult generic categorization, and lack of popularity among theater companies, the play had frequently been overlooked or marginalized. However, such an assertion can no longer be sustained today, given the body of critical material that has gradually but steadily accumulated.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, various aspects

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<sup>1</sup> I have identified and read through sixty-four journal articles and chapters in collective volumes, in addition to at least forty single-authored books that dedicate a chapter or a section to the play; these date from 1941 through to 2015. For obvious reasons of space, I have cited and included in my bibliography only those that I consider the most germane to the topic of this article.

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of the work have received attention: the complex textual and performance histories, and the play's initial reception;<sup>2</sup> what *aleluyas* are, their evolution, and the relationship of the play to that tradition;<sup>3</sup> Lorca's modulation of the stock situation of an old man married to a young woman;<sup>4</sup> connections with other literary texts and issues of influence;<sup>5</sup> and questions of genre (farce, tragedy, tragicomedy, etc.). But above all, and as is only to be expected, most efforts have been directed towards understanding the motives of the characters and construing the unusual course of events that unfolds.

Indeed, the majority of commentators hasten to provide their version of a plot summary after which they then put forward their particular interpretation. What is rarely, if ever, done is to dwell on the dialogue and the on-stage action of the play, moment by moment. It will be my contention here that there are many junctures in *Amor de don Perlimplín*, both small and large, where the spectator or reader encounters unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, ambiguities, discontinuities, and unknowns and, furthermore, that taken together these constitute an important and pervasive feature of the play that, ultimately, becomes thematized as undecidability.

The uncertainties start to present themselves early on in Scene I. Given Perlimplín's bookish, bachelor lifestyle, we do not know but may conjecture that perhaps, at age fifty, he is still a virgin (254). Marcolfa is too embarrassed to spell out what the hidden, "grandes encantos" of marriage are, but her blushing suggests that they may be sexual in nature (254), a suspicion immediately reinforced by Belisa's erotically charged song issuing from off stage (255). In the Madre's brief lecture to her daughter on the economic advantages of marriage to a rich man, she states, with rather cryptic logic, that "los dineros dan la hermosura.... Y la hermosura es codiciada por los demás hombres" (257), perhaps pointing out that Belisa can expect a life of leisure that will preserve her good looks or possibly hinting at the likelihood that she will soon be widowed, inherit, and subsequently be pursued by other, younger suitors.

Having sent her indoors, the Madre stresses her daughter's fair complexion and purity, "es una azucena" (257), picking up Marcolfa's adjective, "la blanca Belisa" (255), and then continues on in a more confidential tone, "Pues si la viese por dentro.... ¡Como de azúcar!" (257). Sugar is also white, but on the face of it the comment seems addressed more to Belisa's sweet disposition. But why the need for a hushed voice? Could the Madre be referring, indirectly but still indelicately, to her daughter's intimate physical attributes—"por dentro"—rather than her character, an alternative seemingly bolstered by lines from Belisa's song: "Entre mis muslos cerrados / nada como un pez el sol. / Agua tibia entre los juncos, / amor" (255)? Additionally, could this repeated motif of whiteness ("¡Como de azúcar!... blanca por dentro" [259]) also gesture, despite her exuberantly sensual nature, to Belisa's virginity? It is hard to say, but given the notional eighteenth-century setting, such an implication is not beyond the bounds of possibility.

As the first stirrings of a new feeling arise in Perlimplín, "siento una sed.... ¿Por qué no me traes agua?" (258), Marcolfa whispers something—we have absolutely no idea what—into his ear: "(Marcolfa se le acerca y le da un recado al oído.)" but it is sufficiently startling to elicit a reaction of considerable surprise, if not disbelief: "¿Quién lo puede creer?" (258). The recapitulation of Belisa's song again insinuates—but hardly proves—that the message contains some sexual revelation. And as the song ends, Perlimplín asks semi-rhetorically, "¿Y qué es esto que me

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2 Ucelay's introduction and edition (1990) are fundamental, and all references will be to this text. For performances see Aguilera Sastre & Lizarraga Vizcarra and for reception see Fernández-Cifuentes 1986.

3 See Grant, Ucelay 12-26, García Castañeda, and Pedrosa.

4 Fernández-Cifuentes 1992.

5 Beyond the long list of works connected with the tradition of *el viejo y la niña*, Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* and Fernand Crommelynck's *Le Cocu magnifique* are frequently mentioned.

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pasa?... ¿Qué es esto?” (259). While a good number of critics relate his perplexity to a mixture of anticipation and anxiety hitherto unknown to this newly betrothed fifty-year-old, others have posited that he is actually experiencing an erection—perhaps his first, but of course, whether it is one of these two, or something else again, we will never know.

From mild doubts to deeper imponderables, in Scene 2 the questions mount. There is no indication of how much time has elapsed between the proposal and the wedding. From within Perlimplín's bedroom, five whistles are heard (262), evidently corresponding to the five men with whom Belisa will, reportedly, have intercourse during the night (274); when the signals are heard again (264), Belisa explains them away as the clock “striking” five. If we posit for the moment a more or less “realistic” sequence of events, this would imply that the multiple illicit *rendez-vous* must have been arranged in advance, a conclusion that perhaps fits with Belisa's statement that “el que me busque con ardor me encontrará” (261) and her apparent lack of surprise that “son cinco” (262). When Belisa asks Perlimplín about his past loves, he first responds “¿Qué mujeres?” and then “Pero ¿hay otras mujeres?” (263). While it is possible to read this as a simple, romantic gallantry—there is “no one else but you”—Belisa's astonished reaction (“¡Me estás asombrando!” [263]) may support, though it does not prove, a previous conjecture that at age fifty Perlimplín is still a virgin.

Up to this point the dialogue, stage design, costumes, musical effects, etc. have combined to create an effect of heavily stylized realism, but now the lights dim and two Duendes enter and perch on the hood of the prompter's box. The presence of these supernatural creatures in this liminal space on stage now propels the action into an unreal dimension. Is the audience meant to think that they are somehow “real”—after all, they claim to have known Perlimplín and Belisa for many years (266)—and later Perlimplín mentions “mi madre cuando la visitaron las hadas de los contornos” (281)? Or do they fulfil a purely symbolic function, as extraneous and mischievous entities endowed with a superior knowledge of events, as an indirect mouthpiece of the author or a kind of chorus, as well as serving as an expedient way of compressing the hours of the wedding night into a few theatrical moments? Their status is, ultimately, indeterminate and never resolved.

When the curtain is drawn back and dawn starts to break, Perlimplín is found to be wearing a pair of large, gilded antlers (269), a heavy and awkward headdress of which both he and Belisa make no mention throughout the remainder of the scene, suggesting that it, too, is to be taken symbolically and intended primarily for the benefit of the audience. When Perlimplín first came on stage in Scene 2, he was described as “*vestido magníficamente*” (261), and later he asked his wife for permission to remove his “casaca,” presumably the same green dress coat of Scene 1 (253). However, no stage direction indicates that such an action occurred, and now, on getting out of bed, “*va vestido con casaca*” (269), seeming to suggest that he has spent the night fully clothed. For her part, Belisa is found in an “*espléndida toilette [sic]*” (270), which must reprise the attire in which she appeared the evening before: a “*gran traje de dormir lleno de encajes*” and “*cofia inmensa [con] una cascada de puntillas y entredoses*” (261).

The five open balconies, the ladders, and the hats are explained away implausibly by Belisa, and the explicit statement of the supposed events only comes at the beginning of Scene 3, when Marcolfa reminds her employer of what she says he already knows, namely that “la noche de boda entraron cinco personas por los balcones” (274). It is, of course, impossible to imagine realistically how Perlimplín and Belisa could have occupied the same bed and yet, at the same time, Belisa could have cuckolded him five times over the course of a single night inside the house, and with five sex partners who were “representantes de las cinco razas de la tierra” (274). Evidently,

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there is some hyperbolic compression and symbolic representation occurring here (González Guzmán 52; Jiménez-Vera 113); once conveniently married, it is implied, Belisa will soon go on to have adulterous liaisons with a wide range of younger suitors. Another unanswered question has to do with how much, at this precise moment, Perlimplín really knows, or suspects, or has an inkling of, or is in denial about. When Marcolfa later recounts the incident, she adds: “Y usted sin enterarse” (274). At all events, after Perlimplín’s queries concerning the five balconies, her being kissed, and whether anyone else has kissed her, all of which Belisa cajolingly deflects, he finally seems to decide, mainly on the basis of her first explicit declaration of love for him, that everything else is unimportant (271). However, the adoption of such a positive or optimistic attitude is immediately undercut by the violence and sadness of the imagery of Perlimplín’s poem/song (272) that closes the scene.

Many critics have asserted that Perlimplín is impotent, but while this is a possibility it is far from being convincingly substantiated. If he never undresses, as appears to be the case, it seems plausible to conclude that, whatever Belisa may or may not have done, the marriage was not consummated between husband and wife. Nonetheless, in the second of the three, brief rounds of questioning that take place, Belisa replies: “¡Tú me has besado!,” to which Perlimplín concurs: “¡Sí! Yo te he besado” (270). The reasons as to why things may not have progressed beyond kissing—if indeed that occurred—are open to speculation. Impotence is certainly one factor to be considered (“Tú eres joven y yo soy viejo... ¡Qué le vamos a hacer!” [277]), fear of his wife is another (“pareces una ola y me das el mismo miedo que de niño tuve al mar” [261]), but we should not overlook the precise nature of the evolving emotions that he has for Belisa, where sexual attraction may rapidly be giving way to something else. Such would appear to be the implication of Duende 2’s assertion that “el alma de Perlimplín, chica y asustada como un patito recién nacido, se enriquece y sublima en estos instantes” (266). Is Perlimplín an ugly duckling spiritually turning into a swan? The *DRAE* defines “sublimar” as “engrandecer, exaltar, ensalzar, elevar a un grado superior,” implying not only a gain in complexity, but also one of moral quality. The Duende’s phrase “en estos instantes,” though, is surely premature, in the sense that what is happening at that moment will be the stimulus for a psychological process that spans the rest of the play.

Scene 3 presents a Perlimplín unperturbed by the clear evidence of Belisa’s multiple adulteries and positively intrigued by her latest dalliance (274), disconcerting attitudes to which we will return below. After relinquishing to Belisa the letter from her latest admirer (only later do we realize that the stone to which it was attached was thrown by Marcolfa), Perlimplín avers: “Yo sé que tú me eres fiel y lo sigues siendo” (276), a statement which, in the moment, must leave the audience completely baffled and which is still difficult to construe even in the light of the denouement. And a similar reaction surely awaits his next declaration that, since he now knows “everything,” “quiero ayudarte como debe hacer todo buen marido cuando su esposa es un dechado de virtud” (276-277). How can Belisa be conceived of as a model, a veritable paragon, of virtue? There is no irony detectable here. Furthermore, it is almost equally remarkable that she adjusts nearly instantaneously, and with minimal hesitation, not only to the revelation that her husband is fully aware of what is going on, but also to his professed inclination to be her close *confidant* and indeed to his fulsome praise of her latest mystery lover.

Scene 4 brings the denouement that constitutes one of the biggest conundrums posed by the play, and is a topic to which we shall likewise return below. More locally, Belisa sings her erotically charged song off stage and then emerges in the moonlit garden, expectant for the ten o’clock *rendez-vous*. As she waits, she says: “He sentido tu calor y tu peso, delicioso joven de mi

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alma” (284), but of course this cannot literally be the case, as they have never even met face to face, save gone further than that, so we are forced to conclude that this is purely in her imagination. Likewise, a little later, in conversation with Perlimplín, she asserts of her mystery lover that “el olor de su carne le pasa a través de su ropa” (285), yet again they have never been in sufficiently close proximity for Belisa actually to perceive this phenomenon. After Perlimplín shows Belisa his dagger and announces his intention of plunging it into her suitor’s heart (285), she tries to restrain him, but he breaks free; she then calls out “desperately” for Marcolfa to bring her the sword from the dining room, as she now intends to “atravesar la garganta de mi marido” (286). Even allowing for the extremity of her emotions at this juncture, such a plan of action seems suspect. But what really casts doubt on all this is her next speech:

(*A voces.*)

Don Perlimplín  
marido ruin  
como le mates  
te mato a ti. (286)

Her imprecations, shouted out, are couched in five-syllable lines of verse with an insistent assonance in “i,” making them sound more like a children’s jingle than a desperate threat. To what extent can the real violence that is unfolding—the soon-to-be-discovered suicide—be taken seriously? Immediately thereafter, when Belisa encounters the “mystery man” wrapped in the long red cloak, she asks him repeatedly and insistently who has stabbed him, despite her exchange with Perlimplín moments earlier. As the “mystery man” collapses on the garden bench, it seems that only now does Belisa start to take him seriously, as if in her previous dialogue she had really been under the impression that this was all part of some elaborate sham or pretense, as if from a melodramatic romance: “¿Pero qué es esto?... ¡Y estás herido de verdad!” (287). It is far from clear, though, why she should ever have thought that this was make-believe.

Although these many individual moments of uncertainty, ambiguity, discontinuity, and disjunction are spread throughout the text, there are several bigger questions arising from a consideration of the play as a whole that are just as hard to pin down and, perhaps, irresolvable. These have to do with: the evolution of Perlimplín’s feelings for Belisa and the vocabulary he uses to designate them; how cuckoldry and happiness can be reconciled, and the acquisition of new capabilities that Perlimplín claims the experience has afforded him; his motives and goals for the elaborate plan that he sets in motion during the latter half of the play, his feelings about it, and the inconsistencies within it; the meaning of the denouement and, particularly, how Belisa is affected by what Perlimplín does; to what extent the Christological framework should be understood as having a serious or an ironic import; the unique, jarring mix of genres, from farce through to tragedy; and the representational instability occasioned by various different cases of metatheatrical effects.

As we saw, by the end of Scene 1 Perlimplín starts to feel unsettled by Belisa, though he cannot put a name on it (258, 259), and at the beginning of Scene 2 he wonders where his “old self” has gone (¡Ay!... Perlimplín... ¿dónde estás, Perlimplín?” [261]). A little later he makes the momentous announcement: “He tardado en decidirme... Pero... [...] Belisa... ¡yo te amo!” (262), and in the dialogue that ensues he expands on this abrupt declaration:

PERLIMPLÍN: [...] Antes de casarme contigo yo no te quería.

[...]

PERLIMPLÍN: Me casé... ¡por lo que fuera!, pero no te quería. Yo no había podido imaginarme tu cuerpo hasta que lo vi por el ojo de

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la cerradura cuando te vestían de novia. Y entonces fue cuando sentí el amor, ¡entonces!, como un hondo corte de lanceta en mi garganta. (263)

But the inexperienced Perlimplín seems to be confused. Is love really something that one ponders and then makes one's mind up about? And if the first crucial event for him was spying voyeuristically on Belisa and seeing her as she was putting on her bridal attire, then surely what he feels is physical attraction and desire, rather than love.<sup>6</sup> Several lines later, as they get into bed and he puts out the light, he ups the ante still further: "¡Te adoro!" (264) are his last words before the Duendes come on stage.

Later, in the midst of all his suspicions about the open balconies/ladders/hats, Perlimplín nonetheless also tells Belisa that "yo cada minuto te quiero más" (270), and in a stage direction he is described as "embobado" (270). But all is not well. He earlier described the *coup de foudre* he experienced as "un hondo corte de lanceta en mi garganta" (263), and the poem/song that closes Scene 2 picks up precisely that imagery.

Amor, amor  
que estoy herido.  
Herido de amor huido,  
herido,  
muerto de amor.  
Decid a todos que ha sido  
el ruiseñor.  
Bisturí de cuatro filos  
garganta rota y olvido. (272)

Beyond the age-old figure of falling in love as receiving a wound, there is also the suggestion of "amor huido," a notion that undercuts his apparent satisfaction at Belisa's answers and the sense of expansive well-being that dominated his mood moments before.

Marcolfa, too, perceives his words and actions as betokening love: "Mi señor la quiere demasiado," to which he cryptically replies: "No tanto como ella merece" (275). Perlimplín convinces Belisa to confide in him, and a key part of his argument is that "ahora te quiero como si fuera tu padre... ya estoy lejos de las tonterías" (277). These "tonterías" must refer to his previous stirrings of physical desire and also to what he (mis)identified as true marital love. But as Perlimplín bifurcates his personality into the "mystery lover," things become distinctly complicated. Based on the letters she receives, Belisa concludes that "lo que no cabe duda es que me ama como yo deseo" (278), and she gives us a sample of the kind of thing that he writes to her: "Belisa ¡No es tu alma lo que yo deseo!, ¡sino tu blanco y mórbido cuerpo estremecido!" (278). Here is Perlimplín in the *persona* of the unidentified young man channeling his powerful lust, at a distant remove from the paternal affection professed by the "real" Perlimplín.

This dichotomy reappears in a modified form at the close of the action: "¡Ah, Don Perlimplín! Viejo verde, monigote sin fuerzas, tú no podías gozar el cuerpo de Belisa... El cuerpo de Belisa era para músculos jóvenes y labios de ascuas... Yo en cambio amaba tu cuerpo nada más"

6 Many critics assume that Perlimplín sees her naked, but notice the phrase "cuando te vestían de novia." It is much more likely that he sees her in her undergarments. In consonance with one of the general propositions made by the play—that concealment generates interest and curiosity (Lyon 238, 239)—Perlimplín is at most mildly interested in Belisa on her balcony where she sits "*medio desnuda*" (255) and later "*casi desnuda*" (258) (Borel 34). For the wedding night she wears a heavy and elaborate nightgown, though her hair is down and she has "*los brazos desnudos*" (261). In Scene 4 she is "*espléndidamente vestida*" (284) though admittedly by the end of the scene she has become considerably disheveled ("*medio desnuda*" [288]).

(287). Perlimplín now characterizes himself as a feeble “dirty old man,” only able to “love” but not physically enjoy her body, quite unlike the “father figure” role that he claimed to have adopted. At all events, by killing the “mystery lover” (and hence, also himself), Perlimplín achieves at one stroke two very different goals: “Él te querrá con el amor infinito de los difuntos y yo quedaré libre de esta oscura pesadilla de tu cuerpo grandioso. (*Abrazándola.*) Tu cuerpo... que nunca podría descifrar” (286). For Belisa he eternalizes the love felt for her by the young man (Lyon 239), and for himself he breaks free of the terrible oppression caused by her splendid body and his inability to make sense of it or possess it. Accordingly, the invention of an *alter ego* corresponds to an attempt to compartmentalize the uncomfortable mixture of lust and affection that he repeatedly refers to as love. This hardly constitutes the transcendence which we are at moments led to believe that he has achieved, as for instance by the Duendes.

Despite Perlimplín’s initial apprehension about marriage in general and Belisa in particular, after the wedding night a remarkable change has come over him. In the midst of his concerns about all the suspicious details, he is still able to announce that “¡Por primera vez en mi vida estoy contento!” (270), and a little later he relishes the sunrise that, apparently, he has never seen before: “Es un espectáculo que... parece mentira... ¡me conmueve!” (271). On the face of it, it would seem that this transformation has been brought about by the “love” that he has just declared for Belisa. But in Scene 3 we are obliged to revise our previous conjecture. Now Perlimplín knows for certain that he has been cuckolded, and yet he tells Marcolfa: “yo soy feliz [...] Feliz como no tienes idea” (275). And his explanation of how these two inimical states can coexist within him is that, thanks to this experience, “he aprendido muchas cosas y, sobre todo, puedo imaginarlas” (275). Love, or lust, or physical attraction for a highly sexual young woman may have been the catalyst, but it appears that the resulting consequence of being cuckolded is a small price to pay—or perhaps simply becomes irrelevant—compared to these new capabilities that he has acquired. Perlimplín makes repeated reference to them in the rest of the play: “comprendo tu estado de ánimo [...] Yo me doy cuenta de las cosas. Y aunque me hieren profundamente comprendo que vives un drama” (276); “¡Yo lo sé todo!... Me di cuenta enseguida. [...] lo comprendo perfectamente” (277); and he strikes the attitude of the worldly wise: “¡Qué inocente eres!” (277). As made explicit in the prior quotation (275), *learning* (and hence knowing, understanding) and *imagination* are intimately linked; imagination is a mode of insight, of knowledge (Lyon 238). Perlimplín tells us that “yo no había podido imaginarme tu cuerpo hasta que lo vi por el ojo de la cerradura” (263), and later he contrasts “then” and “now”: “Antes no podía pensar en las cosas extraordinarias que tiene el mundo... Me quedaba en las puertas... En cambio ahora... El amor de Belisa me ha dado un tesoro precioso que yo ignoraba... ¿Ves? Ahora cierro los ojos y... veo lo que quiero” (280-281). At the end, he will call the elaborate ruse and its impact on Belisa “el triunfo de mi imaginación” (285). While all this would seem to establish a simple linear trajectory, such a “triumph” might at the very least be considered Pyrrhic, the acquisition of understanding and imagination involving betrayal, suffering, and ultimately self-immolation (as we will explore below), and may possibly be undermined by one of Perlimplín’s last utterances: although it is the *sight* of her (partially clothed) body that—he claims—endows him with imagination, he nonetheless admits that his new faculties are not powerful enough to achieve ultimate *understanding* of it: “Tu cuerpo... que nunca podría descifrar” (286).

In the wake of Perlimplín’s marriage, whatever he experiences—or does not experience—on the wedding night, the upsurge of emotions, both happy and painful, his suspicions and then confirmation of Belisa’s adultery, and finally some kind of curiosity concerning his wife’s extra-marital affairs (the stage directions describe him twice as “*intrigado*” [274, 278] and once as

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“*inquisitivo*” [278]), he conceives of a plan to induce Belisa to fall in love with a mysterious suitor whom he creates and then brings to life (Perlimplín is the figure only glimpsed in the street, the writer of the letters, etc.). Through the course of Scenes 3 and 4 numerous sequences of dialogue appear to throw light on his motives and goals.

Perlimplín is cognizant of the large difference in age and its implications (277, 279, 287; Lyon 238), and so the fictional young man allows him to play out a role *vis-à-vis* Belisa that he could never do in “real life.” At the same time, it seems that he also intends for the experience of this unusual courtship to have a very particular impact on his wife. Perlimplín calculates correctly that elusiveness and a hint of disdain will pique Belisa’s interest and cause her to speculate obsessively about the mysterious figure (275). He stokes her fascination with eloquent descriptions of the young man (277), but it is the letters which he writes anonymously that are the most effective component in his ruse. In stark contrast to the romantic clichés sent by her other admirers, his letters scorn soulful platitudes and concentrate instead on her body, which—as he bluntly states—he desires (278). At the end of Scene 3 Perlimplín for the first time refers explicitly to what he is in the process of doing: “Como soy un viejo quiero sacrificarme por ti. Esto que yo hago no lo hizo nadie jamás. Pero ya estoy fuera del mundo y de la moral ridícula de las gentes” (279). The key concepts here are self-sacrifice, the uniqueness of his scheme, being “fuera del mundo”—whatever that means, and being beyond conventional social morality. He elaborates on this in conversation with Marcolfa:

MARCOLFA: Su amor debe rayar en la locura.

PERLIMPLÍN: (*Vibrante.*) ¡Eso es! Yo necesito que ella ame a ese joven más que a su propio cuerpo y ¡No hay duda que lo ama!

MARCOLFA: (*Llorando.*) [...] ¿cómo es posible? ¡Que usted mismo fomenta en su mujer el peor de los pecados!

PERLIMPLÍN: ¡Porque Don Perlimplín no tiene honor y quiere divertirse! [...] ¿Qué he de hacer sino cantar?

(*Cantando.*)

¡Don Perlimplín no tiene honor!

¡No tiene honor! (281-82)

now adding the further ingredients of needing Belisa to be madly in love, his lost honor, and, most troublingly, his desire to amuse himself, to have some fun.

When he surprises Belisa in the garden, Perlimplín is now described as “*concupiscente*” (285), hinting at the salacious, though vicarious, pleasure he takes in this. He is eager for details, and they have the following exchange:

BELISA: [...] Le quiero, Perlimplín, ¡le quiero! ¡Me parece que soy otra mujer!

PERLIMPLÍN: Ése es mi triunfo.

BELISA: ¿Qué triunfo?

PERLIMPLÍN: El triunfo de mi imaginación. (285)

Her “transformation” is a marker of success, achieved by the unique plan that he conceived, but this is only step one, as we soon discover: “para que sea tuyo completamente se me ha ocurrido que lo mejor es clavarle este puñal en su corazón galante. ¿Te gusta?” (285). Beyond the extremity of his proposed course of action, the final question that he poses to her is, evidently, more than a little disturbing.

In the last part of the scene, Perlimplín appears in character as the young man who has just

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been stabbed. He lowers his long cloak and Belisa immediately recognizes her husband, but he continues on firmly in character, claiming that Perlimplín “salió corriendo por el campo y no le verás más nunca. Me mató porque sabía que te amaba como nadie. Mientras me hería... gritó: ¡Belisa ya tiene un alma!” (287). While Belisa struggles to work out what is going on, he attempts to clarify his intent: “¿Entiendes?... Yo soy mi alma y tú eres tu cuerpo” (287). The mention of her body refocuses his attention in the final moments:

PERLIMPLÍN: (*Moribundo.*) [...] tu cuerpo. Déjame en este último instante, puesto que tanto me has querido, morir abrazado a él.

BELISA: (*Se acerca medio desnuda y lo abraza.*) Sí... ¿pero y el joven?... ¿Por qué me has engañado?

PERLIMPLÍN: ¿El joven?... (*Cierra los ojos.*) (287-88)

There are several unresolved questions here. Is Perlimplín still talking in character? Does the “me” of “Déjame” refer to Perlimplín or the *alter ego*? If “¡Belisa ya tiene un alma!,” why are the verbs still in the present tense in the subsequent assertion that “Yo soy mi alma y tú eres tu cuerpo”? How does this fit with his request for a final, physical embrace, which Belisa grants? Does such a request, at this very point in time, undercut his previous contentions? Furthermore, Belisa does not appear to understand the situation completely. When Perlimplín repeats her penultimate question as his final words—“¿El joven?,” what tone of voice should inflect them? Is he incredulous that she is still so confused, or disappointed that she continues to obsess about him, or something else again? Could they be an indication that, just as he expires, he half-grasps that he may actually have failed?

Marcolfa is left to “pick up the pieces.” Realization seems to be dawning on Belisa as she claims: “(*Extrañada y en otro mundo.*) Perlimplín, ¿qué cosa has hecho, Perlimplín?” (288). Having fallen in love with the mystery man, Belisa already considered herself “otra mujer” (285), but now following this latest experience Marcolfa asserts that she is changed again: “Belisa, ya eres otra mujer” (288). More ambiguity arises when, after Marcolfa refers to “mi señor,” Belisa asks: “¿Pero quién era este hombre? ¿Quién era?” (288). It is possible that she is still unsure regarding the basics of what has just happened, but more likely that she is asking who was the *real* Perlimplín, the person whom she never got to know? Marcolfa’s answer, “El hermoso adolescente al que nunca verás el rostro” (288), does nothing to resolve things, and it is unclear why she (re)-introduces this idea at this stage—is she suggesting that Perlimplín was both “mi señor” and the “hermoso adolescente”? This leads through to Belisa’s final statement and question: “Sí, sí, Marcolfa, le quiero, le quiero con toda la fuerza de mi carne y de mi alma. Pero ¿dónde está el joven de la capa roja?... Dios mío. ¿Dónde está?” (289). If “le” refers to Perlimplín, and she loves him “body and soul,” he would seem to have been successful, but in the next breath Belisa is still desperately asking after the “joven.” Is this part of Perlimplín’s scheme, that she should remain fixated on the mirage of the young man, or has Belisa truly failed to understand the situation? Marcolfa implies the former: “Don Perlimplín, duerme tranquilo... ¡La estás oyendo!... Don Perlimplín... ¡la estás oyendo? [*sic*]” (289).

Expressed succinctly, Perlimplín has created a *persona* designed for Belisa to fall hopelessly in love with, in order that she can become a “whole” person (with an integrated body and soul). This involves her experiencing a powerful love that she has never felt before, which is both a means to an end (i.e. integration) and an end in itself, as Perlimplín wants her to feel for him (his *alter ego*) the same kind of love that he believes he has for her. However, such a love is inevitably and fundamentally problematic: for Perlimplín its physical fulfilment and reciprocation are unattainable and he can only experience it, vicariously, through the *alter ego*; for her part, Belisa

unknowingly falls in love with a fiction, and it is questionable whether the nature of the love that she feels (physical desire that turns into something obsessive) is really appropriate to the task of bringing out her spiritual dimension. If Perlimplín can be counted as having “succeeded”—and that is far from certain—it is a very mixed success, and of course it involves his own death; as for the now widowed Belisa, doubts remain as to whether she has genuinely become that second type of “otra mujer.”

Lyon usefully lists several of Perlimplín’s possible—and often contradictory—motives, to which I have added some additional ones of my own (241; see also Bacarisse 74-75). (1) Perlimplín is grateful to Belisa for having afforded him the new experience of love but, above all, for having unlocked the unsuspected power of his imagination; his actions therefore involve self-sacrifice driven by altruism and selfless love, and their goal is to “repay” Belisa by endowing her with a soul. (2) He is driven by a desire for revenge, conceived in a symmetrical fashion as having Belisa experience deeply exactly the same frustration and non-fulfilment caused by unattainable love, in her case, for the non-existent young suitor who is subsequently done away with, after which she will live on with an unrequited memory of him. Perlimplín’s cruel query “¿te gusta?” (285) would seem to support this.<sup>7</sup> (3) His suicide is more self-centered, in that it will liberate him from the frustration of not having the kind of physical relationship with Belisa that he longs for but knows he will never achieve. (4) Less altruistic than (1), less vengeful than (2), and closer to (3) because of the selfishness involved, one might also argue that his chief aim is to know that he will be loved after death, to live on in Belisa’s heart (Borel 38; González Guzmán 53, 56; Jiménez-Vera 109-110). (5) Another possibility not considered by Lyon is that Perlimplín is mentally unhinged; his comment that “ya estoy fuera del mundo y de la moral ridícula de las gentes” (279) can be read in two ways, and his apparent glee at his loss of honor and how this “frees him up” is striking: “¡Porque don Perlimplín no tiene honor y quiere divertirse! [...] ¿Qué he de hacer sino cantar?” (282). (6) The denouement can be read as kind of modified *liebestod*: in that last embrace with the semi-naked Belisa Perlimplín achieves a momentary union with her and the conjunction of bodies and souls; this is only attainable through death. It should be clear that it is impossible to opt for just one of these alternative readings over the others, as is demonstrated by the complete lack of critical consensus in interpretations of the play.

Another factor that affects our attempts to determine whether any change really occurred in Belisa and, if so, the precise nature of that change is the Christological framework present in the text. Marcolfa addresses Perlimplín repeatedly as “señor mío” (253), “mi señor” (255, 255, 275, 280), or “el señor” (275), but the full significance of this only becomes apparent towards the end. The decor for Scene 3 includes “*La mesa con todos los objetos pintados como en una ‘Cena’ primitiva*” (274), while Scene 4 is set in a “*Jardín de cipreses y naranjos*” (280). The two emblematic trees foreshadow the intermingling of death and love that will predominate here, and while neither are olive trees, the garden acquires distinct overtones of Gethsemane as well as the *hortus conclusus*. The key juncture comes when Perlimplín announces to Belisa the arrival of her lover (whom he intends to stab) with the line “Míralo por dónde viene” (286), the opening verse of one of the best-known *saetas* sung during Easter processions to announce a float with a sculpture of the Passion of Christ. Minutes later Marcolfa talks of wrapping Perlimplín in a shroud and then announces to Belisa: “ya eres otra mujer.... Estás vestida por la sangre gloriosísima de mi señor” (288).

7 That some kind of unconventional retaliation is involved would appear to be suggested by Lorca’s statements in 1933: “El héroe, o antihéroe, a quien hacen cornudo, es español y calderoniano; pero [Perlimplín] no quiere reaccionar calderonianamente, y de ahí su lucha, la tragedia grotesca de su caso” (“O.”); “Su imaginación dormida se despierta con el tremendo engaño de su mujer; pero él luego hace cornudas a todas las mujeres que existen” (Anon.).

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There are at least two ways of taking this, as an example of serious symbolism or as highly ironic or even parodic. Perlimplín becomes a Christ-like figure: out of his love for Belisa, he chooses willingly to lay down his own life in order to “redeem” hers. Perlimplín’s spilt blood is shed for Belisa and “clothes” her, a notion from Catholic devotion reinforced by the Last Supper-like dining-room table. But this only holds if we accept one line of interpretation of the play and reject all the others. Furthermore, are Perlimplín’s lustful urges (as well as paternalistic affection) for Belisa comparable to Christ’s pure love for mankind? Is Belisa “redeemed”? The “lo” from the line of the *saeta* supposedly refers to the mystery lover and not Perlimplín. Does this correspond, therefore, just to Marcolfa’s particular way of understanding the unfolding of events (Bacarisse 74, 77, 87), or by introducing these strange, out-of-place, and occasionally jarring elements, does Lorca make a parody of the possible parallels?

In the light of all the above, it is no surprise that the generic category of the play also remains indeterminate. Lorca of course avoided the issue by calling it an “aleluya erótica.” Critics who stress the elements of comedy or farce connect it with popular medieval farce, *commedia dell’arte*, puppet traditions, Cervantes, Italian comedy (Goldoni), and so on. Others find more of the grotesque, while it is hard not to agree that, as the action progresses, it tips increasingly towards tragedy, though in a rather unconventional fashion (Bacarisse 74-75, 79; Ucelay, 184). Lorca himself acknowledged that “empieza en burla y acaba en trágico,” of Perlimplín he referred to “la tragedia grotesca de su caso” (“O,” 1933), and stated that “lo que me ha interesado en don Perlimplín es subrayar el contraste entre lo grotesco y lo lírico y aún mezclarlos en todo momento” (Anon., 1933).

Finally, the various different examples of metatheatricality should be mentioned, as this phenomenon immediately calls into doubt how the spectator should respond to what is more or less self-consciously being presented on stage, that is, to what extent the theatrical illusion is foregrounded and itself thematized (Hershberger). In Scene 1, beyond the stylized pattern of dialogue, from behind a curtain (256) Marcolfa acts exactly as a prompter, feeding Perlimplín his lines which he then humorously mangles. In Scene 2, the episode with the Duendes introduces a very overt metatheatrical element as they draw a curtain, perch on the prompter’s box, and refer in their dialogue to the audience (Feldman; Fernández-Cifuentes 1986, 122-124). As superior and possibly supernatural beings, they know things about the characters in the play and about the plot, and at moments assume an almost chorus-like status vaguely reminiscent of the three Leñadores in *Bodas de sangre*. Further, the audience whom they address comes to play the role of society at large (Lyon, 239-240). In Scenes 3 and 4 Perlimplín invents a character, fosters a belief in his existence, writes (the script of) his letters, and finally performs the role in the garden.

I debated for some time whether to use the term ambiguity or undecidability in the title of this article, but eventually opted for the latter. Bennett and Royle write that:

The difference between new critical ambiguity and poststructuralist undecidability, though apparently minimal, is fundamental. For the new critics, ambiguity produces a complex but organic whole, a unity wherein ambiguity brings together disparate elements. For poststructuralist critics, by contrast, undecidability opens up a gap, a rift in the text which can never be fully sealed. Undecidability opens the text to multiple readings, it destabilizes the reader’s sense of the certainty of any particular reading, and ultimately threatens to undermine the very stability of any reading position, the very identity of any reader [...]. Suspensions of mean-

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ing bypass the reductive and constricting determination of what is now recognized to be the illusion of a single, final, determined 'meaning.' To think in terms of undecidability, however, is not to advocate the equal legitimacy of any and every interpretation: to acknowledge and explore aporias or suspensions of meaning involves the responsibilities of the most thoughtful and scrupulous kinds of reading. (276)

It seems to me that *Amor de don Perlimplín* is poised somewhere between the two extremes adumbrated here. Perlimplín's motives and goals and the effect that his scheme ultimately has on Belisa remain open to speculation; the status of the Duendes remains unresolved; and so on and so forth. Lorca's intent seems to be to throw into question a variety of commonly held assumptions: whether an individual's psychology and motivations are understandable by others; societal conventions of morality, standards of conduct, and prescribed codes; the relationship of the theatrical illusion to reality; spectator expectations based on theatrical genre; and, at the same time, his purpose also appears to be to explore and champion other human capabilities, chief among these the power of the imagination.<sup>8</sup>

The entirety of Lorca's dramatic corpus is bound together in sharing an essentially poetic discourse and rich veins of symbolism. However, if we focus on the issue of undecidability, *Amor de don Perlimplín* clearly aligns more closely with Lorca's plays from the 1930s which are normally thought of as his most innovative, difficult, and challenging pieces: *El público*, *Así que pasen cinco años*, and *El sueño de la vida*. *Amor de don Perlimplín*, like those three plays, and also like *El maleficio de la mariposa*, has a male protagonist, whereas what might be thought of as Lorca's more "approachable" plays, from *Mariana Pineda* through *La zapatera prodigiosa* to the tragedies and *Doña Rosita la soltera*, all feature female protagonists. I would argue that *Amor de don Perlimplín* actually embodies more undecidability than *Así que pasen cinco años* and just as much as *El público*, although its presence in the earlier play is more "stealthy" and less immediately noticeable, a characteristic that marks it out as unique in Lorca's dramatic writings.

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8 Wright comes close to my overall view of the play: "the difficulty of locating an ultimate meaning is a function of a text in which univocal referential meaning is constantly undermined by a play of plurivocal signifiers" (40). However, for her this phenomenon is a consequence of the play's basic theme of "epistemology and its relation to the visual medium" (42), a theme that manifests itself through difficult and shifting layers of meaning involving veils, illusions, dreams, fantasies, and psychological projections.

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