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*Perlimplín*: Lorca's Drama About Theatre

Sharon G. Feldman

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## Perlimplín: Lorca's Drama About Theatre

Sharon G. Feldman  
University of Texas at Austin

The contemplation of a theatrical work as a type of semiotizing machine which generates a network of signification systems, implies, *a priori*, the task of specifying the boundaries which define the object of analysis. Hence the dichotomy of *text* and *performance* has long been recognized as uniquely inherent in the theatre genre and, therefore, a logical preoccupation of the theatre semiotician. As indicated by contemporary theoretical work (such as that of Patrice Pavis and Anne Ubersfeld), it would appear that the role of the spectator in the reception of a performance is finally coming into view as an essential aspect in the definition of the *mise en scène*. According to Pavis: "This notion of *mise en scène* operates a radical transformation, moving from the finalized exterior object to the structuring effort of the perceiving subject. It has become a structural principle of organization which generates and creates the performance from project/ propositions of the stage and responses/ choices of the audience" (138). Essentially, without the presence of the spectator, the theatrical performance *per se* ceases to exist. The theatre is therefore, by nature, an extremely self-conscious art form: the actor, for example, knows that he is being spied upon by the audience; he maintains a constant awareness (either consciously or unconsciously) of the possibility that his every gesture, word and article of dress may be interpreted as an intentional sign. Veltrusky's declaration that "all that is on the stage is a sign" (84) is indicative of this notion.

Modern playwrights, such as Brecht and Pirandello, frequently inspired by the unique signifying structure of the theatre genre, have explored this interest by way of a self-reflexive, metatheatrical mode which appears as an underlying feature in their work.<sup>1</sup> Una Chaudhuri proposes the possibility of considering the work of certain playwrights (for example, that of Jean Genet) as "both semiotic object and semiotic analysis; an artistic-theoretical structure which explores its own codes." "Indeed," Chaudhuri continues, "insofar as modern drama is metatheatrical it is also semiotic; and insofar as he shares the semiotician's concern with signification the modern playwright is also a semiotician: his plays are, at one and the same time, messages in a theatrical code, and explorations of that code" (34).

Federico Garcia Lorca's "erotic lace-paper valentine" *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín* (1931) is a tragi-comedy in which various levels of metatheatrical interaction. In this essay, I will employ semiotics as a tool in order to write my own metatext, thereby deciphering the basic features of Lorca's metatheatrical. Throughout *Perlimplín*, it is

possible to detect elements of a semiotic commentary—direct and allegorical—with respect to the circumstances which define the theatre event. Not only do Lorca and his dramatic personages exhibit a deep consciousness of the signifying structure of the theatre, but also, they act to jar the spectator into a state of self-consciousness with respect to his own role in this communicative system.

In explaining the relationship of the spectator to the performance, one finds an analogous situation in Roland Barthes' differentiation of *readerly* and *writerly* texts. In the case of the *writerly* text, the reader takes on a role of co-authorship whereby he or she is converted into an accomplice in the creation of the literary work. "Why is the *writerly* our value?" asks Barthes. His response: "Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (4). The theatre work can thus be viewed as being *writerly*, and therefore, polysemic and subject to a sort of *rewriting* or decoding process—as the passage from signifier to signified is open to interpretation by the director, actors and technical staff, and then by the spectator. The playwright's original written text is thus *rewritten* at various levels.

Pavis illustrates this idea in his concept of the "metatext of the *mise en scène*" (131-61). Here, the term *mise en scène* is not employed in its traditional sense (to designate the ensemble of staging elements), but rather it denotes a type of dynamic intersection between *Text* and *Performance* known as *T/P*. In this passage from text to performance (that is, *mise en scène*), various interpretative metatexts are produced: the director *reads* the author's text and *writes*—internally—a metatext or commentary which manifests itself—externally—as the *mise en scène*: the spectator, in turn, *reads* (receives) the performance and constructs another internalized metatext. The metatext always exists—not in the form of a definitive written text, but rather as a semiotic system of interpretation. It is the commentary which supplies the key to decoding the performance.

In Lorca's *Amor de Don Perlimplín con Belisa en su jardín*, the dramatization of these signifying structures is interwoven with the basic *fabula* or *story*. The structure of the drama is simple and linear: a "prologue" is followed by a single act. This act is divided into three *cuadros* which proceed in chronological order. In brief, the following *story* is disclosed to the spectator as the dramatic action progresses: Don Perlimplín is a fifty-year-old virgin (and an offshoot of the archetypal *viejo celoso*). Throughout his life—in a manner reminiscent of Don Quixote and Emma

Bovary—he has sought diversion and refuge from quotidian life in the reading of books. Marcolfa, his loyal servant, nevertheless manages to persuade him that it is time for him to marry, since she is growing old and may not be around to care for him much longer. Through her intervention, he marries Belisa, a young, lovely and highly sensual woman. The morning after their wedding night, he awakens, unaware that two enormous golden horns, symbolic of his cuckoldry, protrude from his head as five other men have entered his sleeping chamber through five balconies on that same night. Later, Perlimplín finds himself heartbroken and “dying of love” (204) when he realizes that his wife has been “kissed” by others. He laments that he is unable to “decipher” Belisa’s body.<sup>2</sup> And so, having already lost his honor, he devises a plan in which he *plays* the role of a young gallant who sends erotic notes to Belisa in order to incite her desire: “¿Para qué quiero tu alma?” he writes in one of his letters. “Belisa, no es tu alma lo que yo deseo, ¡sino tu blanco y mórbido cuerpo estremecido!” (211). Marcolfa helps him to arrange a meeting between the young lover and Belisa in the garden (the primordial point of *rendezvous* for an erotic encounter). Perlimplín appears twice: as his original-spiritual self (Perlimplín<sub>1</sub>), and as an erotic double (Perlimplín<sub>2</sub>) disguised by a large, red cape. As Belisa looks on, he creates the illusion that he, the jealous husband, has killed the lover. In reality, he has committed suicide with his dagger. Perlimplín’s *performance* is a success in that he has managed to locate his sensual self and project it as the embodiment of Belisa’s ideal vision of erotic love. He has caused her to love not only the spiritual Perlimplín, but also the sensual Perlimplín. Belisa has also undergone a form of doubling: she has learned to love not only erotically, but also platonically. Paradoxically, in order for this triumph to be achieved, and for this drama to be played out, Perlimplín must die.

In discussing the notion of theatrical space, Ubersfeld underlines the importance of the role of the spectator, especially in representations of contemporary drama. She defines theatrical space as comprising “scenic space” (that is, the space occupied by the performers), plus the audience’s space, plus the relation and communication which take place between the two. The spectator is therefore physically integrated into this theatrical space, but not merely as a passive receptor; rather, he or she is obliged to decipher, unravel and reconstruct. Ubersfeld notes that the contemporary theatrical space generally forces the spectator to question the customary codes of perception. It permits the spectator to view the world in a different way (123). In *Perlimplín*, not only language, but also all other elements of the *mise en scène*—such as decor, music and costume—are indicative of a fictive, incongruous and strangely colored theatrical space. The spectator is suddenly plunged into this surreal universe. In the “prologue,” the decor is composed of green walls and black furniture; in the second *cuadro*, we see Perlimplín’s dining room, where the perspectives are “equivocadas deliciosamente”

and all of the objects on the table are painted “como en una cena primitiva” (205). The background music (Scarlatti sonatas) and costume (extremely theatrical) are evocative of a distant era—that of eighteenth-century neoclassic drama. Perlimplín is dressed in a green cassock, a white wig, and a dramatic red cape. Belisa’s mother wears a “great eighteenth-century wig full of birds, ribbons and glass beads,” and Belisa, in the first *cuadro*, wears a lacy sleeping gown and an enormous headdress, from which cascades of needlework and lace flow to her feet.

Toward the end of the first *cuadro* (more or less the half-way point in the drama) the spectator is introduced to still another code of fiction within the theatrical space—that of the *Duende*. On the eve of their wedding, Perlimplín and Belisa are about to go to bed:

Dos *Duendes*, saliendo por los lados opuestos del escenario corren una cortina de tonos grises. Queda el teatro en penumbra. Con dulce tono de sueño, sueñan flautas. Deben ser dos niños. Se sientan en la concha del apuntador, cara al público (196).

This brief intervention by the *Duendes* does not merely serve as a dramatic interlude, but rather, it is central to the metatheatrical structuring of the play. Firstly, they serve to inject a fantastic element into the work. Abel, in his definition of metatheatricality, underlines the presence of the fantastic as an essential feature of this mode. For him, fantasy lies at the heart of reality: “so in the metaplay life *must* be a dream and the *world* must be a stage” (79).

The positioning of the *Duendes*,—on a prompt box, facing the audience—and their somewhat cryptic conversation,—which makes reference to the presence of an audience or *públic*—breaks with the hereunto established performance structure of exclusively implicit dialogue between dramatic personage and spectator:

DUENDE PRIMERO. Ya estamos.  
DUENDE SEGUNDO. ¿Y qué te parece? Siempre es bonito tapar las faltas ajenas.  
DUENDE PRIMERO. Y que luego el público se encargue de destaparlas.  
DUENDE SEGUNDO. Porque si las cosas no se cubren con toda clase de precauciones...  
DUENDE PRIMERO. No se descubren nunca.  
DUENDE SEGUNDO. Y sin este tapar y destapar...  
DUENDE PRIMERO. ¿Qué sería de las pobres gentes? (197)

The *Duendes* are the epitome of self-conscious dramatic personages. They call attention to themselves as theatrical signs by directly referring to the presence of the spectator. In this manner, their discourse represents a type of speech act which can be literally translated as, “We are acting on a stage.”<sup>3</sup> Hence they create the illusion that, although they may be fantastic inventions of the author, they indeed seem to have access to our “real world”—and to

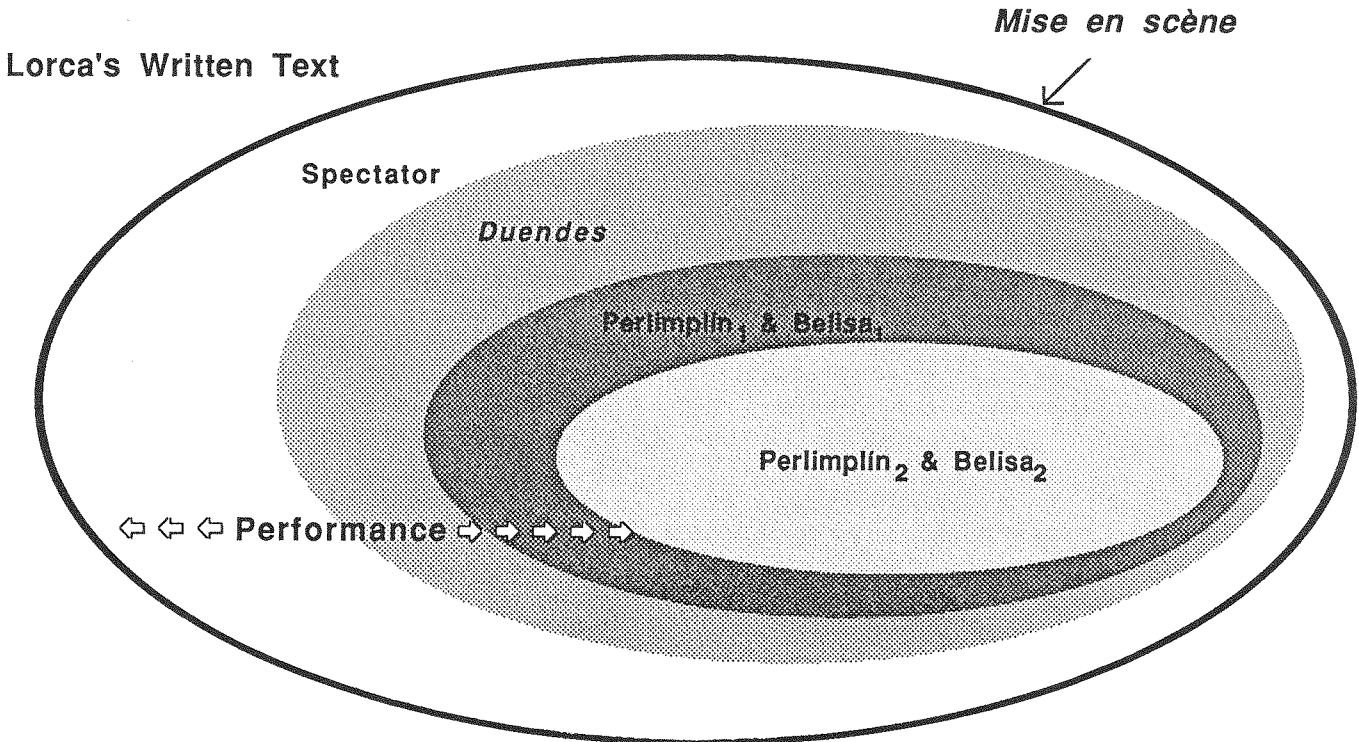
Perlimplín's world as well. They tell us that when things are easily seen and understood, the spectator rests passively in a sort of *readerly* mode. It is therefore necessary to draw an "efficient and most sociable screen" (*Perlimplín* 199) in order to conceal the dramatic action and jar the spectator into a more active and *writerly* mode of perception. In directly inviting the audience to discover/ uncover (that is, interpret/ decode), the spectator becomes incorporated within the boundaries of the *mise en scène*. As a result, a sort of Jakobsonian communication model (source of emission «—» message «—» receptor) is created as the backdrop for the *Duendes'* metatheatrical commentary.

DUENDE SEGUNDO. Cuando las cosas están tan claras...  
 DUENDE PRIMERO. El hombre se figura que no tiene necesidad de descubrirlas...  
 DUENDE SEGUNDO. Y se va a las cosas turbias para descubrir en ellas secretos que ya sabía.  
 DUENDE PRIMERO. Pero para eso estamos nosotros aquí. ¡Los duendes! (197-8)

The presence of the *Duendes* can also be viewed as a semiotic commentary on the concept of theatrical foregrounding devices; namely, *framing*. Keir Elam describes the "crucial axiom" of the theatrical frame as a constraint whereby there exists a differentiation between the roles of the actors and spectators in terms of the modes or planes of reality in which they navigate (88). The dimmed lights and

the curtain which is drawn at the onset of the *Duendes'* intervention are signs which constitute the boundary markings designating this framing. On the one hand, the *Duendes* function as an ostensive device which confirms the presence of the frame by directly pointing to the dramatic action (that is, the erotic scene of Perlimplín's and Belisa's wedding night) which is occurring on the other side of the curtain. On the other hand, they appear to be breaking with the frame of dramatic action by stepping out of it with their explicit references to the audience. They consequently indicate with their presence, their dialogue and their defamiliarization of the conventional performance structure, a configuration of theatrical communication whereby the spectator is able to perceive a dynamic system composed of a plurality of frames. These frames define the various planes of metatheatre or *play-within-a-play* in *Perlimplín*. The diagram of theatrical space illustrates the organization of this system.

As shown, the line representing the *mise en scène* falls at the intersection of Lorca's *Text and the Performance*. The spectator is placed within the realm of the *mise en scène*, and in direct contact with the *Duendes*. The boundaries of the frames are continually broken as a result of transactional devices—bridgings of communication across the different planes of metatheatre—and they are therefore depicted as having nebulous borders. The signifying structure of the theatre is thus drawn as an open system of communication in which it is possible for all planes of metatheatre to communicate with one another either explicitly or implicit-



Frames of Metatheatre in *Perlimplín*

ly. For example, the channel of communication established between the *Duendes* and the audience connects their respective modes of reality and also serves as a passageway in mediating communication between the audience and Perlimplín and Belisa.

As offspring of Lorca's dramatic imagination, the *Duendes* seem to possess a form of dramatic omniscience which enables them to create the illusion that it is they who are orchestrating the entire theatrical performance. In 1933, Lorca presented a lecture entitled *Juego y teoría del duende*. While the word *duende* possesses the literal connotation of "sprite" or "pixie," its etymological history also includes an association with the folklore and tradition of Andalucía in signifying the sensation associated with artistic inspiration and creation. The expression *tener duende*—or to be *enduendado*—connotes a sensation of enchantment or bewitchery; possession by an artistic spirit or muse.

In his talk, the playwright muses about the dark sounds of music which have *duende*:

Estos sonidos negros son el misterio, las raíces que se clavan en el limo que todos conocemos, que todos ignoramos, pero de donde nos llega lo que es substancial en el arte. Sonidos negros, dijo el hombre popular de España, y coincidió con Goethe que hace la definición del duende al hablar de Paganini, diciendo: "Poder misterioso que todos sienten y ningún filósofo explica." (91)

Lorca is quick to distinguish *duende* from the image of a muse or angel: the latter two are exterior manifestations whereas the *duende* emerges from deep within the interior regions of the artist. It most naturally reveals itself in music, dance and spoken poetry, since these are arts which require the presence of a living body (98). Thus, it only seems natural that the *duende* be present in Lorca's theatre, where all of these living art forms coexist. The *duende* is the driving force which is inherently behind all true artistic creation.

In *Perlimplín*, a drama about the creation of theatre and the performance of theatrical roles, it is likewise fitting that one find this force personified in the figures of the two *Duendes*. Lorca tells us that every artist must fight with his *duende*. The *duendes* personified in Perlimplín belong to and serve as an inspiration to the artists/creators of the plurality of metatexts within the system of *mises en scène*. They are a reminder that the play is as much a creation of the audience—and of the actors and the director—as it is a creation of the author.

Perlimplín and Belisa have *duende*: they are creators of theatrical roles (doubles) which they act out within the deepest level of play-within-the-play. Their transformation and doubling is indicated throughout the performance by a network of signs which appears to indicate a juxtaposition between two different kinds of love: erotic love, carnal and sensual; and the platonic spirit, a pure and chaste love which stems from the soul. While together, these two

aspects would normally complement each other as the two sides of a well-rounded ego, here, in the surreal Lorcan drama, they are displaced or abstracted from the personages and projected forth in the form of a split which produces a doubling, comparable to that of a mirror image.

An example of this splitting occurs at the end of the "prologue," where Belisa's mother praises Perlimplín for being so very "modest and competent" (187). (That is to say, he will make a good husband for her promiscuous daughter.) Perlimplín replies, "No sé cómo expresar nuestro agradecimiento." Belisa's mother then interprets his use of the first person plural—*nuestro*—which he has employed in referring to himself. She replies: "¡Oh, nuestro agradecimiento!... ¡qué delicadeza tan extraordinaria! El agradecimiento de su corazón y el de usted mismo... Lo he entendido" (187). Here, the employment of *nuestro* suggests a sort of *double entendre*: firstly, Perlimplín is, perhaps, referring to himself and to Marcolfa, who has been off to the side, prompting him; secondly, the Mother's interpretation represents a recognition of the presence of the double image of Perlimplín, in which two different phases of his self are projected: body and soul.

Perlimplín then senses that he is about to undergo a transformation as he passes from the world of adolescent to that of adult in the discovery or *decoding* of his sexuality. He exclaims, "¡Ay, Marcolfa, Marcolfa! ¿En qué mundo me vas a meter?" (111). Piano music is heard as a band of black paper birds then flies past Perlimplín's balcony. These are signs which suggest a pending transformation, an ominous future, and the presence of an artificial reality.

In the first *cuadro* (the wedding night), Perlimplín confesses his love to Belisa. He tells her that before the wedding, he did not love her, but when he saw her body while peering through the keyhole of her dressing room, he felt love for the first time, "Como un hondo corte de lanceta en mi garganta" (195). Here, Perlimplín<sub>1</sub> confuses carnal attraction with spiritual love. It is, again, an indication of his pending transformation into a sensual being, whose role he will later play as Perlimplín<sub>2</sub>.

In a sense Belisa also plays a type of theatrical role in her *soirées* with various lovers who whistle to her from below the balconies. Her love for Perlimplín at this point is nothing more than platonic, but with the others, it is erotic. In the second *cuadro*, an erotic love letter comes flying in through an open balcony. Belisa grabs it, knowing that it is intended for her, and her husband declares, "Yo me doy cuenta de las cosas. Y aunque me hiere profundamente, comprendo que vives en un drama" (208). This drama is the theatre (or metatheatre) which Perlimplín himself has devised for his wife. The author of the love letter is, in fact, an invention of Perlimplín himself—his erotic *Other*. Thus, at this point in the action, he is already playing the role of the young gallant, Perlimplín<sub>2</sub>.

The final performance takes place in the garden which contains cypresses—typically a sign of imminent death. Marcolfa, in her usual role, acts as a go-between and helps her master to arrange a meeting between Belisa and the

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The final performance takes place in the garden which contains cypresses—typically a sign of imminent death. Marcolfa, in her usual role, acts as a go-between and helps her master to arrange a meeting between Belisa and the

anonymous author of the erotic love letters. The elusive Perlimplín<sub>2</sub> makes his first appearance in a flash, running through the garden. He is wrapped in an enormous red cape, and his face is covered. Next, Perlimplín<sub>1</sub> appears and announces that he is going to kill Perlimplín<sub>2</sub>: "Pues en vista de que le amas tanto, yo no quiero que te abandone. Y para que sea tuyo completamente, se me ha ocurrido que lo mejor es clavarle este puñal en su corazón. ¿Te gusta?" (220). As soon as he vanishes, Perlimplín<sub>2</sub> reappears. He uncovers himself and tells Belisa that her husband has just killed him with an emerald dagger: "Él salió corriendo por el campo y no le verás ya nunca. Me mató porque sabía que te amaba como nadie... Mientras me hería gritó: ¡Belisa ya tiene un alma! Acércate" (221).

In uncovering himself, the images of Perlimplín<sub>1</sub> and Perlimplín<sub>2</sub> are revealed simultaneously; the latter manifested as a projection of the former. Marcolfa, in the role of a spectator observing the scene declares: "¡Lo sabía! Ahora le amortajaremos con el rojo traje juvenil con que paseaba bajo sus mismos balcones" (222). As a spectator in this drama, she has deciphered the signification of Perlimplín's metaplay and also perceives a transformation in the personage of Belisa. She tells her, "Belisa, ya eres otra mujer. Estás vestida por la sangre gloriosísima de mi señor" (223). Belisa has discovered the existence of her spiritual *Other* and recognizes the duality of her love. Unfortunately, as the play concludes, she has still not clearly understood the existence of the two different Perlimplíns: "Sí, sí, Marcolfa, lo quiero, lo 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?" (130).

In *Perlimplín* Lorca posits conditions of performance structure and interior duplication in which his characters not only act out their multiple roles in the spectacle, but are also transformed into spectators who perceive, indicate and interpret the various levels of metatheatre. Their performances reflect Lorca's concern with the systems of signification that are posed by the configuration of a *mise en scène* which encompasses the presence of the spectator. *Perlimplín* is, therefore, both semiotic object and semiotic analysis. It is, indeed, a modern drama about theatre.

## NOTES

1. The demonstration of this concept is by no means exclusively limited to the modern (or postmodern era). Calderón, Shakespeare, and Moliere are but a few examples.
2. Most critics interpret this declaration of ineptness as a sign of Perlimplín's sexual impotence. The *Duendes* (see below) also refer to Perlimplín's "misfortune" (200). It is my opinion that this "misfortune" refers, rather, to Perlimplín's cuckoldry. Perlimplín is not presented as impotent but merely sexually adolescent and inexperienced—as exemplified by a declaration made by one of the all-knowing *Duendes*: "El alma de Perlimplín chica y asustada como un patito recién nacido se enriquece y sublima en estos instantes."
3. Eco lists the two basic speech acts which comprise every dramatic performance: "The first one is performed by the actor who is making a performative statement—'I am acting.'... The second one is represented by a pseudo-statement where the subject of the statement is already the character, not the actor" (115).

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