



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

Produced by Prof. Molly E. Seremet

Episode Guide

Season 1, Episode 2

FuenteOvejuna: Of Pigs, Acorns, and Adaptations

Hosts: Cole Metz and Keith Taylor

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Episode Transcript

Cole: Hi, I'm Cole Metz,

Keith: And I'm Keith Taylor

Cole: And today on *Writ in the Margins*, we're going to talk about the story of a rural community full of angry peasants, an evil commander, and acorns.

First Banjo

Cole: How're you doing today, Keith?

Keith: Good! Can't wait to get to those acorns.

Cole: Oh that tracks. For me, I can't wait to get to the peasants.

Keith: Let's get into this whole Fuente Ovejuna thing first.

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Cole: Sounds good. Whatcha' got?

Keith: Well, to start, these days, *Fuenteovejuna* is a name familiar to anyone studying theatre. Though written in Spanish more than 400 years ago, *Fuente Ovejuna* is considered a gem of the Spanish Golden age and a mainstay in world theatre history. Though the play is now famous on its own terms, the name Fuente Ovejuna was famous in renaissance Spain for an entirely different reason: in 1476, the small farming town of Fuente Ovejuna played host to a popular uprising, ending in a gruesome murder committed by discontented peasants— though the play makes the case for its righteousness, and popular opinion tends to agree.

Playwright Lope de Vega makes the play a story of two worlds: the first, rural Fuente Ovejuna itself, where citizens become revolutionaries throwing off the tyrannical rule of Commander Fernan Gomez de Guzman; the second world is the powerful court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, full of its own authority but distant from the realities of the town's exploitation.

Lope de Vega makes his townspeople relatable by focusing a great deal of literary attention on the agricultural life and culture of Fuente Ovejuna; though their tale of oppression and mistreatment is universal in scope, we come to know characters like Laurencia and Frondoso intimately, and on terms other than their trauma. The community's rural nature is at the heart of the play, dominating the daily lives of Fuenteovejuna's inhabitants, as it did the lives of most people for thousands of years. Throughout the play, the agricultural craft and sensibility shows up in their speech and, eventually, in their action: the flock learns to band together to ward off a predatory interloper.

Cole: By tapping into such a deep, rich cultural tradition in his play, de Vega also created a platform for peoples of any culture to connect with the themes and characters of the story. Every culture has its food, its drinks, its husbandry, its music. And the story itself has served as an inspiration for dreamers and revolutionaries ever since. Fuenteovejuna proposes a daring overthrow of tyranny, and a revival of cultural continuity that has been taken to heart by artists as diverse as contemporary diasporic Cubans and Soviet ballerinas of the 1940s. We're gonna dive more into that later, and that's enough on the history and context for right now.

Let's take a look at some content. We should note here that, for our text work, we are working primarily from Anthony Racz's 2010 translation. The brief scene you are about to hear comes from the first act, at the Commander's arrival in town, a pivotal moment wherein he takes control of its administration. He's greeted by Esteban, town alderman and father of the play's protagonist, Laurencia. Esteban's welcome party includes lavish gifts and heaps of praise for the Commander. Esteban's is the voice you hear first.

Esteban: Fuenteovejuna deems
 Your presence here an honor, and our own
 Town council begs you to accept what seems
 No doubt a paltry offering conveyed
 By cart to one the village so esteems
 And tendered in goodwill mid poles arrayed
 With ribbons, though the gifts themselves be small.
 To start, glazed earthenware our potters made.

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Next, an entire stock of geese—see all
 Their heads protruding through the mesh to voice
 Praise for your valor with their cackling call!
 Ten salted hogs, each specimen more choice,
 Jerked beef, rich delicacies, and pork hides
 Which, more than perfumed gloves, make men rejoice.
 A hundred capons and plump hens, the brides
 Of future widowed roosters of the same
 Sort dotting these lush fields, are yours besides.
 You'll not fetch arms or horses for your fame,
 Nor trappings here embroidered with pure gold
 Unless you take for gold the love you claim.
 And having said “pure,” may I be so bold
 As to suggest these wineskins hold such wine
 That winter soldiers scarce would mind the cold
 As they patrolled outdoors if they could line
 Their stomachs with this, steelier than steel,
 For wine can cause the dullest blades to shine.
 I'll skip the savories and the cheese you'll feel
 Most tempted by, except to say it's right
 That we should pay you tribute for our weal
 And wish your household hearty appetite.

Commander: For this, much thanks, good councilmen.
 You may retire with all my best...
 Kind folk, I doubt not what you say.
 May God be with you.

Esteban: Singers, play
 Our song of triumph once more, please.

Banjo music

Keith: Keeping with the standard for speeches from the Spanish Golden Age, Esteban's greeting is about as lengthy and decadent as you might expect for the welcome of a new leader as powerful as the Commander. At times, the list feels like it has no end. He downplays it to start, of course, calling it a “paltry offering,” but the sheer numbers he goes on to say tell the opposite story. Lope de Vega's images are vibrant. Feel the rich textures of “glazed earthenware” from the village potters and the weight of the wineskins in our hands while we see a full gaggle of geese whose heads, Esteban says, poke through the holes of the net containing them to honk and squawk at us. This welcome gift is extravagant. But none of these are the most exciting offering of all. What I am most

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interested in are the hogs.

What Esteban describes is a lot of hogs. Not quite 30-50 feral hogs in your backyard 3-5 minutes after your kids go out to play, but more than you are ready for nonetheless. Once you understand the centrality of pig-farming in the culture of small Spanish towns like FuenteOvejuna, it begins to make a lot of sense. But before I tell you about these massive pigs, you need to learn about something much smaller. The acorns that they eat.

Fuente Ovejuna is situated in a region of Southwestern Spain that has historically been lauded for its Oak forests. The Spanish Oak forests that surround Fuente Ovejuna find their place in the play, as well. Laurencia and Frondoso are absconding in one such forest when the Commander approaches Laurencia. To save his hide, Frondoso hides behind a tree, probably one of these massive oaks, stepping carefully to avoid the loud crunch of acorns under his feet. Probably. These acorns are a key component in the lives of farmers like the characters we see in the play. The moors, during their conquest and occupation of Spain not long before the events of this play, called the area of *Los Pedroches* “the plain of acorns.” al-Himyari, an Arab chronicler familiar with the region, wrote about the care inhabitants of this plain of acorns took to tend to the Oak trees that produced this bounty of nuts. Around the world, people do not generally eat acorns, but these acorns of the Spanish woodlands are sweet enough to consume. Still, in times of desperation, locals eat a kind of porridge of acorns from their land. The most important consumers of these acorns, however, are those pigs.

Iberian Blackfoot Pigs that are from the western region of Spain south of Salamanca and raised to 80 kilograms on a diet of feed and grass, then further fattened to a minimum of 160 kilograms on montanera acorns and grass are designated Class-1 Acorn-fed Iberico Ham. If you’ve eaten at enough fancy restaurants (or at least read their menus, like me) your mouth is watering at the mention of it. Jamon Iberico is among the world’s most famous culinary delicacies, and Esteban has just offered the Commander a great number of them.

The hogs are more than just a perfectly fattened and salted meal. They represent the region's entire economy. This is a small town and the people of FuenteOvejuna are not rich by any means. In fact, they appear to struggle, or at least toil, even before the Commander arrives. And when he does, they offer him geese, pots, wine, and the greatest of delicacies. Profits from these hams might make the difference between warm meals and acorn soup in the winter. At the very least, the pigs represent years of care for the animals and trees and months of careful attention to their feeding and fattening. To give them up as a gift is no small thing.

Gift-giving is an ancient and sacred tradition, universal to human interaction. It acts as a show of reverence, we only bestow gifts on others we deem worthy or hope to flatter, and signals selflessness, since it requires giving something up that we might have used ourselves. In the case of the townspeople, the balance here is misguided or misjudged. A gift too great for a man too small.

Of course, the Commander is surely flattered but far from appropriately grateful for the bounty being offered to him here. Esteban wishes him a great appetite to match the great feast they are presenting, but it is all for nought. While the Commander has an appetite far exceeds his reach, it isn’t for Iberico Ham. Instead, here, just as he casts aside the amazing gift being handed to him, his eyes wander and he begins to lust after Laurencia. The significance of the train bestowed upon him might be lost to the Commander, but readers and producers of *FuenteOvejuna* would do well to take time to consider the gravity of Esteban’s offering.

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Cole: Wow Keith that makes a lot of sense, I never thought about some of that stuff. You mention the scene in the forest, where the Commander corners Laurencia but Frondoso saves her with the Commander's crossbow-- how do you think this information about the acorns and rural life might find its place in a production?

Keith: Well to start, I think the picture of the forest itself— Oak trees, massive oaks and acorns covering the ground. It makes sense and I sort of have this image of Frondoso skipping between clear spots on the ground to try to avoid crunching acorns as he tries to hide, just to create a fuller picture of the world. At the same time, I think it's important to keep the rural community in mind especially for scenes like that, because once you do, the whole thing starts to feel more like a fairytale. The Commander is this wolf that creeps into the safety of the farmland, and the sheep have to stick together to figure out how to survive. I think the rural community informs a lot of these things, and can find their way at least into the actor and director's minds in a production.

Cole: Oh definitely, I agree. Have you ever had Iberico ham before?

Keith: Um, no? But I really am not sure it was something that was on my bucket list like this before doing all this research, but now it's like how could I do so much reading and listening and talking about it without trying? So if anyone has the ham hookup, let me know. I'm looking forward to hearing what you've got for us coming up next, Cole.

Cole: Well I don't have any ham, if that's what you're asking about. I want to talk about a couple adaptations. *Fuenteovejuna* thrives in adaptation. Like many of the early modern plays with which we are more familiar, it is malleable. The story is straightforward; the characters are bold, with understandable motivations; and there are no licensing fees for its production— an underappreciated facet of its ability to be produced, and therefore experimented upon. But really the attraction to *Fuenteovejuna* starts with its politics. The central themes of Lope de Vega's masterpiece resonate powerfully, and unhappily with audiences today. Gender, class, militarism, imperialism, and resource exploitation collide in ways that feel prescient to the contemporary reader. De Vega's treatment of these themes is also strikingly realistic. These features and qualities make *Fuenteovejuna* attractive to theatre artists with something to say: indeed, production of the play, even in its "original" form requires immersion in the town's social ills and problems— problems still faced by nearly every society in the world.

In her 2009 collaboration with Mephisto Theatre, Cuban playwright Liuba Cid effectively rewrote the text of *Fuenteovejuna*, expanding and transforming it into an investigation of Cuban history and the political meaning of Cuba, itself. Cid used de Vega's text as a base— almost a canvas— upon which she painted elements from across the Afro-Caribbean and Cuban diasporas. Her text is a "palimpsest", wherein many of de Vega's words are changed, the space between the lines expanded, to make room for the historical countertext of an entire island. All of this manifested vibrantly in the look, sound, and feeling of Cid's production. The Commander and his lieutenants Flores and Ortuno are dressed in the olive green military uniforms of Fidel Castro's early years, and they distribute the town's own produce back to them as rations; Cid replaced these common Spanish agricultural foodstuffs with ones more familiar to Cubans, turning wine, cherries, and beer into rum, sugar cane, and tobacco, while the words of Cuban liberator Jose Marti are voiced by the townspeople in their rebuke of imperialism. Lucumi Yoruba instruments are played for the town's many ceremonies; the complex syncretic beliefs of Santeria appear in the person of the Priestess character, added by Cid, who performs collective rituals like the *letra del año* for the town. Scholar Michelle Tennyson says this production engaged in "transculturation"; a term coined by Cuban

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anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, transculturation is the sort of simultaneous loss *and* creation of culture resulting from the interaction of different human groups. The transcultural event is a way of excavating the new from the destruction or transformation of the old—a process that, for Liuba Cid, is the central theme of Cuban history.

In the early 20th century, Soviet audiences couldn't get enough "choreodrama" — that is dance adaptations of popular literature. Vakhtang Chabukiani and Alexander Crain collaborated on *Laurencia*, a bravura new version of de Vega's play. It first premiered in 1939 at the Kirov Theater. It was praised for its combination of folk dance with traditional ballet forms. Chabukiani, a Georgian dancer and choreographer, wanted to elevate this vital element of his culture. In Georgia—the country not the state— dance is a *very* important tradition: every region has a local form of dance, in which the performers wear unique historical costume to portray local stories and myths. For example, *kebvsuruli* is a famous mountain dance wherein two men compete for the love of one woman. She breaks apart the fighting by throwing her veil in between her suitors. While *Laurencia* did not originally include specifically Georgian dancing, Chabukiani's heritage is clearly at play via the inclusion of Russian folk dance elements, and the notion of "folkifying" ballet itself— Georgian dance is frequently described in balletic terms, and performers oftentimes work in a physical mode that resembles *pointe* in ballet. *Laurencia* was a massive success, revived in 1956 by the Bolshoi. The marriage of Russian artistic pride and heritage was adored by the Soviets. Allusions and references to the past are a hallmark of Soviet art of the period, which sought to encapsulate the ways in which a people could be global leaders in technology and enterprise without abandoning all that made them unique in the process.

In 2011, playwright Cusi Cram was commissioned to adapt *Fuenteovejuna* by the University of Southern California's School of Dramatic Arts. Subtitled "a disloyal adaptation", this version of the text is a play-within-a-play set in 1930s Spain. A troupe of actors take their ardently anti-fascist production of de Vega's story on tour, litigating and grappling with their own political motivations along the way. The characters of the play's first level, the acting troupe, were each draped in colors representing different political parties and affiliations: the actress playing Laurencia is pragmatic but progressive, and wore overalls, whilst the woman playing her mother was in a teal dress that indicated her monarchist sympathies. Even in telling a story about a unified town, there are differences and frictions among those doing the telling; even in Fuente Ovejuna, there are differences of opinion upon which entire lives depend. The act of storytelling, according to Cram, is both unifying and radical event that challenges the boundaries of individuality, as actors become those they represent, making real that which wasn't.

Interestingly, more than the other adaptations I've discussed, Cram's text exists on a second level of adaptation, mediated as it is by translation. The rabbit hole on that one goes deep, but it's worth contemplating the ways in which a translation can both alienate and align.

Each of these adaptations is very different, but the shared current of de Vega's text— even when it's not directly used— unifies them, and creates a political dialogue that, much like the storytellers in Cusi Cram's text, transcends the individual culture or artist from which they sprang, transforming the specificity of their circumstances into common ground for shared understanding.

Keith: Wow, Cole, that is a lot of really interesting stuff. I'm amazed by how all these different cultures— and you're right, they adopt the play to fit their circumstances that— the play is such a political basis from which you build what ever scaffold you need.

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Cole: Yeah, it's really amazing how you can just sort of puzzle piece these amazing words that Lope de Vega wrote into something really meaningful to your circumstances.

Keith: Something I'm really interested in: could you say some more about that idea of transculturation you mentioned?

Cole: Yeah! So transculturation as a concept exists to bridge the gap between the loss of culture or deculturation with the acquisition of new cultural elements, or acculturation. The man who came up with the idea, Fernando Ortiz, expressed these ideas specifically in the context of colonialism, but it definitionally exists in any cultural collision. I think there is a really interesting reading of de Vega's play through a postcolonial lens— as you've talked a lot about today, resource allocation is a major facet of the play. De Guzman the Commander comes in and, yes, is given these gifts, but then proceeds to drain the town dry in terms of both agricultural and human capital.

Keith: Wow, um, thanks Cole. This— really great work here.

Cole: Well thank you.

Keith: Really great work. Talk to you later.

Cole: See ya.

Banjo music

Keith: Extending gratitude to professor Molly Seremet, all of our classmates and collaborators on this podcast project, and the entire Shakespeare and Performance program at Mary Baldwin University. Jordan Willis aided in the writing and research of this project, and provided the banjo music you heard throughout. See our show notes for sources and further reading on the topics covered in this episode, and listen to our friends' episodes on *Fuenteovejuna*, and more. For Cole Metz, this has been Keith Taylor, presenting *Writ in the Margins*.

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