

Lady of the Dawn

**A Play in Four Acts
by Alejandro Casona**

**translated by
Donald B. Gibbs**

**Spanish Literature Publications Company
York, South Carolina
1998**

Prologue

In the more than fifty years since Alejandro Casona's *La dama del alba* (*Lady of the Dawn*) had its premiere in Buenos Aires in November of 1944, it has been widely studied in the United States in university courses in contemporary Spanish theater and in advanced-level high school Spanish classes. The play's enduring popularity stems from the fact that it succeeds on various levels. On one, it is an exciting and suspenseful thriller, keeping its audiences and readers enthralled as the mystery surrounding the disappearance of a young woman in a village of Asturias in northern Spain unfolds. On another, it combines fantasy and reality as it explores questions pertaining to life, death and love, and on a third, it offers numerous insights into Asturian folklore, especially that involving St. John's Eve, a time when miracles are thought to occur. When Death, in the guise of a beautiful pilgrim, comes to the village in search of someone whose time has come to join her on her journey, the mystery at hand starts to unravel and head towards a resolution acceptable to all, while, at the same time, Death begins to experience a mystery she herself cannot explain, the miracle of life.

Though the stage directions indicate *sin tiempo* (no specified time), it is likely that the play takes place in the early part of the twentieth century. The setting is a rural mountain village where people travel by foot, horse or cart, and visitors from outside are viewed with suspicion. An atmosphere of death pervades the first two acts, which take place at the start of winter when nothing is growing in the fields, and crops lie dormant, awaiting spring, when they can come to life again. The days are short, the weather gloomy and cold, and very little is happening. Inside one of the houses in the village, this same spirit of gloom is reflected in the lives of an Asturian family: Mother still

mourning the loss of her daughter, Angélica, who disappeared four years ago in the river that passes through the village; the younger children kept home from school, because to attend they would have to cross the river where Angélica presumably drowned, and never allowed to make any noise out of respect for the memory of their older sister; Martín, Angélica's husband for only three days, brooding and resentful of a love unfulfilled and the constant reminders of his wife and the aura of reverence accorded her. The oldest members of the family, Grandfather and the faithful servant Telva, do their best to convince Mother that life goes on, but their pleas go unheard. A visit from a wandering pilgrim and Grandfather's discovery of who she really is unleash a compelling story in which images of life gradually replace those of death, though the specter of death still looms overhead. A young woman named Adela, found nearly unconscious in the very same river where Angélica was lost, soon takes her place in the family, and life begins anew. Angélica's room, which had been locked and kept as a shrine to her memory, is opened, and the spirit of death removed, when a chest containing Angélica's possessions is unlocked, and sheets from her bed are set out to be warmed, giving them a new life.

The second half of the play takes place on the eve and morning of the feast of St. John, June 23-24, not exactly the longest day and the shortest night of the year, as the Pilgrim states, but close enough to it. Everything is bursting with life. The dormant fields of winter are now lush with crops. The children run, laugh and play, joyfully anticipating the evening's celebration, when music, dancing and bonfires welcome the coming of summer. Adela has replaced Angélica in the lives of the family that rescued her, symbolized by her work on an embroidery begun by Angélica but left unfinished until now. Telva remarks that the family house, previously dark and lifeless, now seems like a clock that has started running again after having been stopped for so long. Mother, who hadn't shown any interest in anything since losing her daughter, suddenly starts living again, indicated by her first forays outside her home in four years, her observance of the rapid growth during this time of both the children of the village and the trees and flowers of the countryside, her renewed interest in how her own property is being maintained, and her decision to attend tonight's festivities. Meanwhile, the Pilgrim, who failed to take someone with her on her visit to the village some six to seven

months earlier, keeps her promise to return, leading Grandfather to think she has come for Adela, who is happy in every aspect of her new life but one, the fact that Martín seems to be unaware of her feelings for him. Whether life and love will prevail for her or whether the Pilgrim will take her or another on the journey to death are questions that lead the play to its dramatic conclusion on St. John's Eve, when anything is possible, for as legend has it, on this night every river in the world contains a drop of the miraculous waters of the River Jordan, the river in which Jesus was baptized.

Of all the characters in *Lady of the Dawn*, the Pilgrim is the most complex. Her arrival in Act I initiates the main action of the plot, and her return in Act III brings about its resolution. While there are several images of life and death pertaining to other characters and to the setting and time frame of the play, many are associated with the Pilgrim herself. When we first see her, her face is covered by a hood, and she carries a staff, giving her the appearance of Death as the Grim Reaper. As she pulls back her hood, she reveals a beautiful but pale complexion. Later, in Act II, she stands by a scythe that leans against a back wall throughout the play, associating her with an instrument that cuts down living things. References are made to the coldness of her hands and to her icy touch, which can cause flowers and even people to wither and die. She is caught, however, between her mission as one who accompanies people in death and the fact that she is a woman who yearns to express her love but can't for fear of what the consequences will be, as in Act II, when she tells Grandfather that she once kissed a beautiful child on the eyes, causing his blindness. She is flattered that one of the children, Andrés, finds her beautiful, and in Act IV, when Andrés' brother, Falín, makes her a crown of roses to wear to the St. John's Eve festivities, she puts it on, looking at herself in the mirror out of curiosity, only to come to the realization that it is not part of her destiny to delight in the simple things commonly enjoyed by other women. When the children entice her into playing a game in Act I, she becomes so caught up in the spirit of it that she experiences for the first time feelings totally unknown to her, the sensation of laughter, the warming of her hands, and finally the beating of her heart, all of which cause her to grow weary, fall asleep and miss an important appointment with death. While she has briefly been touched by the miracle of life, she realizes it is only a temporary experience for her. Her one

consolation in her mission seems to be that through death she frequently leads those who have led troubled lives into a new world of peace and contentment.

In translating *La dama del alba* into English, I have tried to stay as close to Alejandro Casona's original text as possible. On the occasions where very colloquial speech is used, such as in the scenes involving Telva and the St. John's Revelers in Act IV, it has at times been necessary to give a freer translation, conveying the sense of what is being said. In the children's game and in the songs of St. John's Eve, because of the rhyme requirements, wording in some verses has been reworked, so as to keep the intended rhyme pattern. An example would be "*Ésta es la botella de vino / que guarda en su casa el vecino.*" (literally, "This is the bottle of wine / which the neighbor keeps in his house."), which I've translated as "This is the bottle of wine / Made from the grapes of our neighbor's vine." I've left some untranslatable words, such as the names of dances, in Spanish, but have given others a translation close to the intent of the word. In Act II, Grandfather and Telva talk about the wedding of *la Mayorazga*. The word *mayorazgo* refers to a first-born child's right of inheritance to an entailed estate, so it seemed logical to translate *la Mayorazga* as *the Baron's first daughter*. In general, however, there have been few difficulties in expressing the beauty of Casona's prose in English, because of the clarity of his words in Spanish. This is a play closely tied to the culture of a region of Spain not as well known to outsiders as Castilla, Andalucía or Cataluña, but the story it tells has a universal appeal. My most sincere wish in translating *La dama del alba* is to introduce an important Spanish dramatist, whose works span a thirty-year period from 1934 to 1964, to an audience not previously familiar with his work.

This translation is based on the edition of BIBLIOTECA EDAF DE BOLSILLO, Madrid, Spain, 1985, number 135. I would also like to acknowledge a student edition of the play published by Charles Scribner's Sons (1947), edited by Juan Rodríguez-Castellano, for its Spanish-English vocabulary, which was most helpful, especially with regard to botanical words. Many thanks, too, to Thomas F. Coffey, Ron Caniglia, Bonnie Faimon, and Fran Minear for their help in the preparation and proofreading of this manuscript.

Donald B. Gibbs
Creighton University

CAST

The Pilgrim

Telva

The Mother

Adela

The Daughter

Dorina (a child)

St. John's Eve Reveler, #1

St. John's Eve Reveler, #2

St. John's Eve Reveler, #3

St. John's Eve Reveler, #4

The Grandfather

Martín de Narcés

Quico, the Millworker

Andrés (a child)

Falín (a child)

Young Man, #1

Young Man, #2

Young Man, #3

This work was first performed at the Teatro Avenida in Buenos Aires, November 3, 1944, by the Margarita Xirgu Company.

ACT I

Somewhere in Asturias, Spain. Time unspecified. Main floor of a comfortable, clean farmhouse. A solidly built home of white-washed stone and fine woods. In the background, a wide door and window that look out to the countryside. On the right, the first steps of a staircase that leads to the upper rooms, and in the foreground of the same side, an exit to the corral. On the left, an entryway to the kitchen, and in the foreground a large wood-burning fireplace decorated with racks and shelves filled with rustic pottery and shiny red and ocher-colored pots and pans made of copper. Leaning on the back wall, a scythe. Rustic walnut furniture and an old wall clock. On the floor, thick hemp mats. It's evening. An oil lamp is burning.

Mother, Grandfather, and the three grandchildren (Andrés, Dorina and Falín) finish eating dinner. Telva, the housekeeper for many years, attends to the table.

GRANDFATHER: *(Slicing the bread.)* The loaf is still hot. It smells of flowering scotch-broom.

TELVA: Scotch-broom and dry vine; there's no better firewood for heating the oven. And what can you say about this gold color? It's the last wheat from the sunniest part of the hill.

GRANDFATHER: The flour is good, but you help it along. You have hands God intended for baking bread.

TELVA: And what about the sugared pancakes? And the French toast? In winter you like it soaked in hot wine. *(She looks at Mother, who has her elbows on the table and stares absently.)* Aren't you going to have anything for dinner, Mistress?

MOTHER: I don't want anything.

*(Telva sighs, resigned to this.
She puts milk in the children's bowls).*

- FALÍN: Can I crumble bread in the milk?
- ANDRÉS: And can I bring the cat to the table to eat with me?
- DORINA: The cat's place is in the kitchen. His paws are always dirty from ashes.
- ANDRÉS: And who asked you to butt in? The cat's mine.
- DORINA: But I'm the one who washes the tablecloth.
- GRANDFATHER: Pay attention to your sister.
- ANDRÉS: Why? I'm older than she is.
- GRANDFATHER: But she's a woman.
- ANDRÉS: Always the same old story! The cat likes to eat at the table and isn't allowed to; I like to eat on the floor, and I'm not allowed to either.
- TELVA: When you're older, you can make the rules in your own house, young man.
- ANDRÉS: Yes, yes; every year you say the same old thing.
- FALÍN: When do we get older, grandfather?
- GRANDFATHER: Very quickly. When you know how to read and write.
- ANDRÉS: But if you don't send us to school, we'll never learn how.
- GRANDFATHER: *(To Mother.)* The children are right. They're old enough. They should be going to school.