

CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD. COLLECTIVE GUILT DISGUISED AS FATALITY

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Abstract

When a crime breaches the code of honor that a community has agreed to honor and abide by, it is the community as a whole, and not just the immediate parties, who has an interest in seeing the guilty punished so that its social order can be restored. From this perspective, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* does not portraiture the drama of fate or fatality, but the drama of collective responsibility: the murder of a man follows a community consent that overcomes the reluctance of the actual perpetrators.

Key Words :

Code of honor, murder, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gabriel García Márquez.

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1. Introduction

When Ángela Vicario was offered for marriage to Bayardo San Román, almost no one in the town knew that she was not a virgin. On their wedding night, however, after the bride had been returned to her parents' house because of this 'stain of honor', the whole community seemed to have accepted that the fate of Santiago Nasar – the man responsible for Ángela's 'deflowerment' – had been decided. One morning arrives, Santiago is murdered against the door of his house.

If everyone knew that the crime was going to happen, why did no one intervene to prevent it? Years after Santiago had been murdered for the benefit of the community's code of honor, the town still cannot talk of anything else. Why is the equilibrium not recovered? The present article attempts to explore the fit between law and honor in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (Gabriel García Márquez, 1981)¹ and, in particular, whether the code of honor trumps the law by hiding the drama of collective responsibility behind the appearance of fatality.

2. The Stain of Honor Requires Reparation

Small communities typically enjoy a delicate equilibrium. Once Bayardo arrived to the town where *Chronicle* takes place, he arguably blew up that balance. It is not surprising though, for 'not only was [he] capable of doing everything (...) but also had access to endless resources' (27). His father was a 'hero of the civil wars' (33), his mother had been

¹ García Márquez, Gabriel, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, New York, Vintage International (2003). Page numbers in parenthesis correspond to this edition.

proclaimed 'the most beautiful of the two hundred most beautiful women in the Antilles' and Bayardo himself was able to close the purchase of the most opulent house in town by taking 'ten bundles of thousand-peso notes' from his silver-trimmed saddlebags (37).

Bayardo travelled 'from town to town looking for someone to marry' (26), so when he decided to marry Ángela and settle down in the town, the community could not help but to feel both flattered and grateful for having such an illustrious new resident. Against this background, when Bayardo returned Ángela to her parents' house because she was not a virgin, it is reasonable to assume that the townspeople took it as if the stain of honor had been inflicted upon the whole community.

García Márquez reminds us in the epigraph that 'the pursuit of love / is like falconry'; yet the town seemed to care little about Bayardo's arrogant manners in marrying Ángela. Indeed, to the extent that the loss of virginity was understood as the 'theft' of a marriageable woman,² it most concerned the girl's family. However, to the extent that the 'crime' breached the code that the community had agreed to honor and abide by, it was the town as a whole, and not just the immediate parties, who had an interest in seeing the guilty punished so that its social order could be restored.³ The townspeople as a community, therefore, required sacrifice as reparation.

When Ángela was inquired about the identity of the person responsible for her 'deflowerment', she whispered 'Santiago Nasar,' words that nailed him 'to the wall with her well-aimed dart, like a butterfly with no will whose sentence has always been written' (47). Ángela's words took the form of a verdict from the viewpoint of the town.⁴ Márquez's butterfly simile is effective: Santiago's fate had been decided in a trial celebrated according to the code of honor, and the community was ready to enforce the holding.

It is crucial to note that the murder did not happen despite of the numerous people that could have saved Santiago's life; it happened precisely because of them. From this perspective, the novel does not portrait the drama of fatality or fate, but the drama of collective responsibility. That is, the murder of a man follows a community consent that overcomes the reluctance of the actual perpetrators.

Santiago was the scapegoat that the town needed in order to recuperate the temporarily disturbed order. Only from this standpoint is the reader capable of understanding how a murder, while at first had little chances of being committed, was actually perpetrated.

² See Szilágyi, István H., "Chronicle Of A Death Foretold: A Retrospection", in M. Paola Mittica (ed.), Dossier "Law and Literature. A Discussion on Purposes and Method". Proceedings of the Special WS on Law and Literature held at 24th IVR World Conference in Beijing, *ISLL Papers* (lawandliterature.org), Vol. 3, 2010, pp. 105-127.

³ See Aristodemou, Maria, *Law & Literature, Journeys From Her To Eternity*, Oxford University Press (2000), pp. 190 and 193.

⁴ See Mateo Gambarte, Eduardo, *Las Trampas del Relato o la Fatalidad como Coartada en Crónica De Una Muerte Anunciada*, <http://www.qinnova.es/redir/uned/publicaciones/humanidades/revista4-articulo9.pdf>

There are numerous instances that evidence the prima facie remoteness of the crime. We are told that Ángela 'had chosen Santiago Nasar's name because she thought her brothers would never dare go up against him' (90); his money 'made him untouchable' (101) declares one character; 'those two aren't about to kill anybody, much less someone rich' (55) believes another. In this vein, the narrator hints in numerous occasions that the Vicario brothers were unwilling to commit the murder. Clotilda Armenta, one of the few characters that escapes from the sacrifice-driven logic of the town, believes that the mayor should arrest the twins 'to spare those poor boys from the horrible duty that's fallen on them' (57). 'She'd sensed it' continues the narrator, that 'the Vicario brothers were not as eager to carry out the sentence as to find someone who would do them the favor of stopping them' (57).

Yet, the obstacles to act according to the town's code of honor had to be ignored and, if necessary, resisted.⁵ In particular, the community's indifference towards the twins' intention of killing Santiago seems to function as a deliberate provocation. Under the Spanish primitive understanding of honor, only noble families afforded the privilege of holding 'honor'.⁶ It follows that by disregarding the twins' warnings, the townspeople were actually providing them incentives to commit the crime, for otherwise the Vicario brothers would be implicitly denying the honorability of their family.

Furthermore, the appointment of Santiago as scapegoat for the town's broken order might have actually resulted conveniently. Although his wealth appeared to shield him from the sacrifice, his profile contained features that made him a suitable candidate. To start with, he belonged to an ethnic minority, the so-called Arabs, who were probably Christian Lebanese.⁷ Moreover, to the extent that Santiago came from a family of immigrants, he was a foreigner, and therefore a convenient target to expiate the community's sins. Finally, in addition to being attractive and 'openhearted' (8), we are told that 'he was a sparrow hawk. He went about alone, just like his father, nipping the bud of any wayward virgin who began showing up in those woods' (90).

3. *The Wound is Still Open and the Law Fails to Give Closure*

The cold-blooded murder of Santiago forced the town to confront two problems: the ex post review of the crime by law enforcement, and collective guilt. While the first concern should have eliminated the second, that is, had the law been properly enforced, the town would have been able to move on. In reality, the second concern trumped the first; in other words, the code of honor trumped the law.

⁵ See Aristodemou, Maria, *Law & Literature - Journeys From Her To Eternity*, cit., p. 193.

⁶ See Aquino Pérez, Alexis, *Tragedia y Ficción Legal en Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada*, San Juan, PR, Fundación Puertorriqueña de las Humanidades (2002), p. 83.

⁷ See Sanguinetti de Serrano, Nancy and Serrano Forero, Eustorgio, *El Honor Disfrazado De Destino – Análisis de Crónica de una Muerte Anunciada – Crítica a una Sociedad Violenta*, Perú, Editorial San Marcos (2008), p. 13.

The intervention of the law in the murder of Santiago is embodied by a magistrate that arrived to the town twelve days after the murder had been perpetrated. The author explains that troop reinforcements were required to help the judge, for a 'crowd (...) was pouring in to testify without having been summoned, everyone eager to show off his own important role in the drama' (98). This crowd of locals, eager to persuade the judge with its view of the crime, manages to intelligently disguise the facts by portraying the murder as a chain of unfortunate events that made Santiago's death inevitable. As a result, the magistrate blames fate. 'Fatality makes us invisible' (66) he writes in red ink, although in reality it is the result of a collective action.

The author makes use of intertextuality to present the metonymic figure of the judge as an easy target for the masquerade: '[i]t was obvious that he was a man burning with the fever of literature. He had doubtless read the Spanish classics and a few Latin ones, and he was quite familiar with Nietzsche' (99). It has been argued that *Chronicle* mirrors, probably not without mockery, the Spanish Golden Age (*Siglo de Oro*) literature,⁸ which had the unconditional defense of honor as a main theme.⁹ From this perspective, when the author notes that the judge is familiar with the Spanish classics, the reader can anticipate that the law would be receptive to the fatality claim of the town.¹⁰ In similar fashion, the reference to Nietzsche can be understood as an allusion to fatality, inherent in the notion of 'eternal recurrence', according to which it makes no difference what one decides to do because one has already decided, or will so decide.¹¹ Put another way, fatality is inevitable.

However, the inability of the town to recover its equilibrium after the murder appears to function as the tell-tale heart of this novel. For years, says the narrator, the townspeople 'could not talk about anything else' (96); their conduct 'begun to spin around a single common anxiety, (...) none ... could go on living without an exact knowledge of the place and the mission assigned ... by fate" (97). At the sight of this town 'that was an open wound' (98), the question that follows is how the law should have addressed this problem.

The enforcement of the law aspires to bring certitude and therefore dislikes precipitation. Before acquitting, and especially condemning, the law is tirelessly preoccupied with verification. From this perspective, the judge should have considered whether the Vicario brothers, or by and large the townspeople, counted with reasonable evidence to believe, notwithstanding the confession of Ángela, that Santiago was 'guilty'. The judge himself recognizes that 'what had alarmed him most at the conclusion of his excessive diligence was not having found a single clue, not even the most improbable, that Santiago

⁸ See, in particular, by Calderón de la Barca, *Life is a Dream*; and by Lope de Vega, *Fuente Ovejuna*.

⁹ See, in this regard, Méndez Ramírez, Hugo, *La reinterpretación paródica del código de honor en Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, Hispania Volume 73, Number 4, December 1990, <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/hispania--3/html/p0000005.htm>. See also Rabell, Carmen, *Periodismo y Ficción en Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, Santiago de Chile, Monografías del Maitén (1985), p. 55.

¹⁰ 'He was so perplexed by the enigma that fate had touched him with, that he kept falling into lyrical distractions that ran contrary to the rigour of his profession' (99).

¹¹ See Rowe, David, *The Eternal Return Of The Same: Nietzsche's 'Value-Free' Revaluation Of All Values*, Parrhesia, Number 15•2012•71-86, http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia15/parrhesia15_rowe.pdf

Nasar had been the cause of the wrong' (99). Absent this reasonable certainty, the law should not have endorsed the crime nor the thesis of homicide in legitimate defense of honor.

4. *What the Town Did Not Want to See and Where to Find the Responses*

It has been suggested above that Santiago's sacrifice helps the town to turn a blind eye to the person responsible for Ángela's loss of virginity. It appears thus sensible to address the question of whom is hidden behind the town's unwillingness to face the truth. Put differently, try to resolve the ultimate enigma of *Chronicle*: who 'deflowered' Ángela?

The story leaves us only one explanation for this question. There is a single character that enjoys the superior position of both holding the mystery and knowing the identity of the enigma. The answers lie with Ángela; we will consider three questions in connection to her.

First, why does the Vicario family not marry her with the person who took her virginity? At the time when *Chronicle* takes place, the Colombian Criminal Code did not provide for a legitimate defense of honor in the context of homicide; however, it did discharge the perpetrator of any wrongdoing related to sexual violence if the offender married the 'injured' woman.¹² Therefore, the reason for murdering Santiago and hiding Ángela for the rest of her life might seem irrational if we consider that the family lost an opportunity to marry her with Santiago, the second wealthiest man of the town. Yet, we have already observed that nothing in *Chronicle* seems to be left to irrationality.

Second, why is Ángela not in love with her secret lover? When pointing at Santiago, the novel suggests that Ángela is protecting someone 'who really loved her' (90).¹³ It is interesting to note that the narrator avoids suggesting that Ángela ever loved him, as one might presume in light of the fact that she fatally risked someone else's life with the only aim of protecting her lover. Further, Ángela falls in love with Bayardo, which appears inconsistent with the literary universe of García Márquez, dominated by a vision of perpetual love.¹⁴

Third, why does Ángela end up hating her mother? Ángela herself tells the narrator that she 'discovered that hate and love are reciprocal passions (...). Just seeing her [mother] would turn [her] stomach (...) but ... couldn't see her without remembering him [Bayardo]' (93). If we approached Pura Vicario with the eyes of *Chronicle's* universe, her conduct

¹² Criminal Code of Colombia from 1936, Article 322: "The person responsible for the crimes covered by the two previous chapters (Chapter I: sexual violence, Chapter II: rape) would be exempted from punishment if he married the injured woman" (translated by the author).

¹³ 'The most current version, perhaps because it was the most perverse, was that Angela Vicario was protecting someone who really loved her and she had chosen Santiago Nasar's name because she thought her brothers would never dare go up against him.' (90)

¹⁴ See, for instance, García Márquez, Gabriel, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, where Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza entertain their love during their entire lives even if they do not see nor talk to each other.

toward Ángela would not seem particularly perverse unless there were something unknown to the reader. Moreover, it does not seem clear why Ángela began to hate her mother at the precise moment that she fell in love with Bayardo. Indeed, it is her mother, the reader might argue, who had offered her for marriage to Bayardo, and if not for Ángela's premature romance, their marriage would have lasted. What is, then, her mother responsible for?

A persuasive argument can be made that the answers to these questions lead to the character of Ángela's father, Poncio Vicario, as the real perpetrator of the deflowerment of his daughter. This explains why the family never contemplated the possibility of marrying Ángela with her first lover, nor was Ángela in love with him (although he 'really loved her'). Also, this hypothesis explains why Ángela's hate for her mother was informed by her love for Bayardo: she blamed her mother for either covering the incest or not being able to see it. Pura Vicario's fault *in vigilando* made her, from Ángela's standpoint, responsible for the disgraceful marriage with Bayardo.

The novel hints in various occasions of Poncio Vicario's involvement in the ultimate enigma. Even his name - Pontius - suggests that he allowed the execution of an innocent, of whom comparisons to Jesus can be drawn.¹⁵ His silence during the different acts of the tragedy also acts as a powerful scream. Although Poncio Vicario had lost 'his sight from doing so much fine work in gold in order to maintain the honor of the house' (30), he did not have a say when Ángela was offered for marriage, nor when she was returned to her parent's house and the twins resolved to recover the family's lost honor by killing Santiago.

Poncio Vicario died a short time after Santiago's death, 'his moral pain carried him off', says Ángela to the narrator. Ángela herself also seems to subtly point at him when inquired by the judge about Santiago. 'He was my perpetrator', responded Ángela, or 'he was my *author*', as the original version in Spanish more clearly suggests.¹⁶ Finally, to the extent that *Chronicle* has been understood to mirror the drama of *Oedipus the King*, Poncio Vicario's blindness marks him as responsible for the crime.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

A few months after publishing *Chronicle*, García Márquez wrote an article in a newspaper explaining that he had waited thirty years to write this novel, until his friend told him the ending that the story needed: Bayardo had forgiven Ángela, and now they lived

¹⁵ Santiago *Nasar's* name evokes the figure of Christ the *Nazarene*. Also, the stab on his right hand, according to the report, 'looked like a stigma of the crucified Christ' (75). See, in this regard, Aristodemou, Maria, *Law & Literature - Journeys From Her To Eternity*, p. 184.

¹⁶ "Fue mi autor" in Spanish, see García Márquez, Gabriel, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, New York, Vintage Español (2003), p. 98.

¹⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*; see, for a comparison in this regard, Aristodemou, Maria, *Law & Literature - Journeys From Her To Eternity*, p. 194.

merry together.¹⁸ This account of the facts is, nonetheless, completely untrue. Bayardo (Miguel Reyes in real life) never forgave Ángela; he married a different woman and turned into a successful businessman with twelve children.¹⁹

This anecdote may illustrate the extent to which, in *Chronicle*, the boundaries between facts, literature, journalism and law are purposely blurred. García Márquez continues to fool the reader even after having finished reading the book, and it becomes evident that the mysteries of the story are impossible to resolve.

Yet, the biggest accomplishment of the novel probably lies in between its ambiguities: each reader can get from the book what she is ready to learn. One could believe, with the judge, that the murder was inevitable, and thus only fatality can be blamed. Alternatively, one could spot an issue of collective responsibility, and hold the whole community responsible; a town on trial, she would think. Even further, if the reader is prepared to break the ultimate taboo and identify an incestuous relation, she might observe the town's unwillingness to confront the truth as a by-product of its unanimous violent reaction. For, as the adage goes, telling the truth has always been a revolutionary act.

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¹⁸ See García Márquez, Gabriel, *El Cuento Después del Cuento*, El País, August 26, 1981, http://elpais.com/diario/1981/08/26/opinion/367624809_850215.html

¹⁹ See Roca, Julio, "Sí. La devolví la noche de bodas" ('Yes. I returned her the night of the wedding'), *Magazín al día*, nº3, May 12, 191. As seen in Rama, Ángel, *Sobre Crónica De Una Muerte Anunciada*, Blog 'Palabras Maldichas', May 25, 2008, <http://palabramaldichas.blogspot.com/2008/05/la-caza-literaria-es-una-altanera.html>

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