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"Lady Assassins in Spain? A Psychological and Cultural Profile of Pérez-Reverte's Doña Adela de Otero," Thomas C. Turner, University of Minnesota, Morris

In 1988, twenty years ago, Arturo Pérez-Reverte wrote a marvelously complex novel entitled *El maestro de esgrima (The Fencing Master)*. The project of that novel was to show how certain traditional Spanish values and attitudes were threatened by contemporary realities. The protagonist, the talented and socially withdrawn Don Jaime de Astarloa, is a gentleman of the ideal "caballero-hidalgo" type, a fencing master, who is nearly killed defending his values, single-handedly, against a major transnational conspiracy being played out during the political turmoil of the late 19th century. Pérez-Reverte shows that by then it had become extremely difficult to be an honorable man in the traditional sense, to lead a provite life devoted to an art, like fencing, and especially to deal as an individual with the complexities of modern intrigue.

Now this sounds so far like a fairly common plot, the individual triumphing over conspiracy, but, most interestingly, the threat against don Jaime develops in the form of a woman character, doña Adela de Otero, who is a beautiful, young, athletic fencer, ... a lady assassin. So..., in 1988 an important author proposes a lady assassin for Spain and envisions her existence a century earlier.

The portrayal of killers and assassins has been common recently, especially in popular literature and film, but Pérez-Reverte's villain should be taken seriously, because the constellation of experiences and attitudes that Adela represents does indeed constitute a threat to society in general, and the fact that this threat is formulated in the person of a woman makes the threat particularly poignant. In Adela de Otero there is evidence of serious cracks in the foundation of society.

In Minnesota, in August of 2007 there was a

major bridge collapse of Interstate 35W in Minneapolis, the entire bridge fell into the Mississippi River, killing thirteen and wounding hundreds. The vocabulary of bridge evaluation is now common: "fatigue tracks," "stress fractures," "support damage," "torsion on girders," "twisted trusses," "bearing corrosion," "non-redundant design," "scouring," "gusset plate erosion," "total structural failure," etc. In hindsight it appears that there were indications of problems long before the actual event. Could this collapse have been predicted and avoided? If the behavior of doña Adela de Otero were examined for predictive elements or contexts, could the kind of societal collapse that her character, attitudes and circumstances portend be anticipated? Could

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there be lady assassins in Spain or might there have been in the past century? How and where might they have appeared? What kind of society presents conditions for the development of serial killers and assassins?

While a good case could be made for portraying doña Adela as a "femme fatale," especially from don Jaime's point of view (see works consulted), while it is tempting to look at her as a picaresque figure within the tradition of Spanish literature, while it would be historically valuable to document Adela's victimization in the context of the contemporary class power hierarchy, and while a straightforward psychological analysis may be possible, it is the intent of this paper to examine her ethical motives, to assess her personal vulnerabilities, in order to analyze

danger that she might represent in Spain as well as society's culpability in her development.

This paper will, therefore, "profile" Doña Adela, in the criminal sense, as a serial killer or, more specifically, as an assassin. The profiling sources used are *The Anatomy of Motive*, by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker (N.Y: Simon and Schuster Pocket Books, 1999) and *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer*, by Michael D and C. L. Kelleher (N.Y: Random House Dell Publishing, 1998). This paper is the result of an application of the characteristics of serial killers and assassins to the circumstances and actions of doña Adela de Otero.

Plot

The plot essentials of *El maestro de esgrima* are the following:

- Adela de Otero must recover some incriminating letters from a young don Juan type Marqués, Luis de Ayala, who is blackmailing her benefactor, the person who saved her from a life of poverty and destitution.
- She enlists the help of Don Jaime, a fencing master, with whom she tries to form an intimate relationship, which falter because of age disparity.
- Don Jaime is searching unsuccessfully for a perfect fencing thrust. He teaches Adela, however, his previously discovered "200 escudo" thrust.
- Adela attempts to secure the letters from Don Luis, who is also a fencer, first by seduction and then by negotiation. When all else fails she uses don Jaime's thrust to run a foil into the throat of don Luis, but she does not secure the letters because don Luis has entrusted them to don Jaime (both Adela and Luis have don Jaime in common as a fencing master).
- Later the reader learns that Adela's maid has been killed and mutilated to allow for Adela's escape; don Jaime's friend, who makes sense of the letters, steals them (except for one critical letter), attempts to blackmail the benefactor, and is killed as well.
- Adela assumes that Don Jaime has the letter and intends to blackmail her benefactor.
- In the final intense scene of the novel, she arrives late at night, ready to obtain the most critical letter at any cost (actually it has fallen by accident under a piece of furniture).
- Adela reveals the historical background of her situation, don Jaime finds the letter in question; Adela uses persuasion, seduction, and, finally, violence to take the letter from don Jaime.

•She attempts to stab don Jaime with a hat/hair pin and then with a foil. Don Jaime picks up a buttoned practice foil by mistake. She wounds him several times viciously in the ribs and fingers. Adela forces him into a corner for the kill, but in doing so she reveals a defensive weakness. At the last moment don Jaime is able to kill her with what turns out to be his long-sought perfect thrust.

In summary, Adela de Otero is involved in a premeditated conspiracy where she has directly murdered the Marqués and, indirectly, her own maid. Unplanned consequences lead to the death of a third person and to her attempted murder of don Jaime.

Definitions

In their definition of serial killing, the Kellehers state the following: "the murder of at least three individuals in which each lethal act was separated from the next by a discrete cooling-off period" (Kellehers, 7-8). In serial killing the "cooling-off period" is often characterized by "fantasies," which many times lead to the stalking of the next victim" (Kellehers, 7). Adela does not exhibit these fantasies, however she fits within the Kellehers' definition of "team killer," motivated by partners (Kellehers, 14). Adela has independent motives as well; she chooses to do what she does as much for her own financial gain as for loyalty. She is not a fevered killer, out of control, but rather cold and matter of fact. Pérez-Reverte states about her story of the killing of the Marqués, "There was something so natural, so calm about her voice, that don Jaime felt terrified" (Pérez-Reverte, 223). She is a lady assassin.

Common Characteristics of Serial Killers and Assassins

Backgrounds of serial killers and assassins can almost always be characterized in the following way: they have been abused and consequently there is a strong tendency to react to a situation which is perceived to be out of control by employing manipulative, dominating, controlling behavior (Douglas and Olshaker, 28) This behavior exhibits an element of cruelty (Douglas and Oldhaker, 28) and little overall sense of moral dimension (Douglas and Olshaker, 27). Killers can be "organized" or "disorganized" in their crimes (Douglas and Olshaker, 78), and

they sometimes work alone, but can be, like Adela, team killers (Kellehers, 151). Trauma, especially paranoia, and sometimes psychopathy are factors.

Abuse

At the age of 17 Adela falls passionately in love, "living a beautiful love story, a tale of eternal love" (Pérez-Reverte, 217). She moves to a foreign land and six months later she is abandoned. She continues with a life of anguish, poverty, and complete solitude, estranged from her own culture. It is mid-winter, her life is out of control, she contemplates suicide, and nearly throws herself into a river. She is saved from suicide by a benefactor who takes her in and supplies her needs.

The intensity of her feelings about these circumstances is subtly revealed in her casual reference to a Lord Byron poetic drama, *The Deformed Transformed: A Drama*, in a conversation with don Jaime. The reader must search out the full context of her reference in Byron's work (Byron, 526). Adela compares her situation to Olimpia in the Byron poem, whose Roman home has been ransacked by the English. Olimpia flees to St. Peters, followed by soldiers who intend to rape her. She climbs up on a high altar and pushes a heavy crucifix down on one of her attackers. It is in this desperate context that Adela sees her past and current situation. She sees herself as a victim, she has been destitute, like Olimpia, with the possibility of losing her home, and now she feels impelled to kill to defend her life.

Manipulation, Control, Domination

Adela is extremely adept at manipulation. Much of the entertainment value of the novel derives from the romantic tension between Adela and Don Jaime and many of her seductive attempts are familiar, but none the less, charming. The reader may favor her at first; she is a young woman trying to break into a man's world, fencing, and being very clever about it. Later in the novel she becomes dangerously manipulative, both psychologically and physically.

Adela is an extremely beautiful young woman of 27, who is "tall, slimmer than most, and she has an elegant waist. Her voice has a pleasant, hoarse quality and a touch of foreign accent. She

has slender hands, agreeably cool, dark skin, thick black hair, and large eyes, violet in color" (Pérez Reverte, 38-39, all translated quotes from Margaret Jull Costa's edition). In her fencing shoes don Jaime notices that she has a "grace normally found in ballerinas," her shoes give her gait a "lithe animal beauty," and she moves "like a cat" (Pérez-Reverte, 62). It is easy for don Jaime to fall in love with her and again, she is particularly skilled at using psychological manipulation to get her way.

One important point about power and control in this novel is that fencing itself is a fascinating metaphor for both characters' actions, which are often very subtle, where skill is as important as power, where the feint is as dangerous as the thrust. Fencing instructions occur at the beginning of chapters. As a talented psychological fencer, as well, Adela keeps don Jaime off balance.

A Propensity for Cruelty /Preference for Danger.

Adela has charm, mocksy, and panache. What also distinguishes her is the intensity of her cold anger, her thirst for danger, her lack of concern for her own welfare, her possibly pathological lack of empathy, and her propensity for cruelty.

What also distinguishes Adela is the intensity of her cold anger, her thirst for danger, her lack of concern for her own welfare, her possibly pathological lack of empathy, and her propensity for cruelty.

Pérez-Reverte gives the reader indications of her cruelty, almost from the start. Early on don Jaime senses "danger" (Pérez-Reverte, 65), something "dark and wild" (Pérez-Reverte, 66), and he feels her anger through her fencing. She takes pleasure in the killing potential of Don Jaime's thrust, and coldly relates her killing of the Marqués. In addition to physical cruelty at the end of the novel, Adela berates don Jaime psychologically, calling him at one point a "complete fool," among other things (Pérez-Reverte, 238).

Lack of Moral Dimension

Factors which characterize Adela's actions in the realm of moral dimension are materialism; fear of loss of personal security; social withdrawal; lack of meaning, love, general empathy; false generalization, and selective memory.

When Adela de Otero first appears in the novel, it is in a well-appointed apartment that has been rented for her in Madrid. Adela dresses elegantly in clothes which match her eyes. It is evident that Adela values her comfort and the financial security which her benefactor has supplied over seven years, including the gift of a house and an education deemed appropriate for the times. The benefactor had given her not only things, but also, she says, "everything that she was" (Pérez-Reverte, 219). Her values are oriented toward the solid and visible, the material realities of existence. Consequently, the possibility of the loss of financial security, for her or for her benefactor, has become an obsessive fear for her.

Adela de Otero, in spite of being an attractive, articulate woman, has led a solitary existence complicated by her relationship to her benefactor. She insists that he "became for her the father she had never known, the brother she had never had, the husband she would never have" (Pérez-Reverte, 217). She has a kind of obsessive loyalty to her benefactor. Don Jaime describes it as a "blind loyalty to an idea, to a man" (Pérez-Reverte, 224). Additionally, Adela states that she has no real friends (Pérez-Reverte, 74). She lives alone, without real intimacy, and she is isolated from alternative lifestyles or models, other than that of her benefactor.

At one point she states that she does not exist, that is, in comparison with don Jaime, who has keepsakes throughout his quarters which account for his history. She has no positive memories that she wishes to retain as a basis for meaning or as a guide for thoughtful ethical behavior. Her life is empty. In don Jaime she sees a man

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who has some admirable qualities and real substance, who finally understands her: her deep-seated anger, her need for intimate connection, but he must reject her. His circumstances will not permit the relationship under the intimate terms that she encourages. Don Jaime is very cognizant of the 30 years difference in their ages.

Adela sees matters in terms of loyalty, not right and wrong. She berates don Jaime at the end of the novel saying, "Do you still believe in good people and bad people, in just and unjust causes?" and she continues, "I came here tonight to tell you about the man to whom I owe everything that I am" (Pérez-Reverte, 220). Don Jaime tries to reason with her by saying that her benefactor betrayed his friendship with General Prim by spying on Prim for Prime Minister Narváez, indicating that Adela has misplaced her trust in such a man. Don Jaime says, "Are you telling me that you have done all this for a man capable of betraying his own friends" (Pérez-Reverte, 220)? Don Jaime is challenging the logic of her loyalty. Adela trusts a man who is not capable of being a loyal friend, he has sold his friends out and is in fact using her to the point of putting her in high danger, but she responds, "he was always good and loyal to me, wasn't he" (Pérez-Reverte, 220)? Emotion trumps reason.

Don Jaime challenges the logic of Adela's loyalty. Adela trusts a man who is not capable of being a loyal friend, he has sold his friends out and is in fact using her to the point of putting her in high danger... Emotion trumps reason.

Adela does not recognize the larger logical merit of extending the principle of "respect for others" to all people. She ignores or does not recognize the concept of the "common good," and she does not attach emotion to that concept. She may recognize rules about "respect for all people" but she decides that her "special obligations" to those close to her simply outweigh the more general concerns. Adela does not feel any overarching empathy for society, there is only loyalty to a group, and groups fight groups. Loyalty establishes ethics, pain of those outside the group does not count.

In insisting that there is only loyalty, Adela may be acting on her experiential belief about "men behaving badly." From the beginning, she

has only met men who act in their own self interests. Finally in the last interview she has with don Jaime she believes that he wishes to extort money as well. Here she is wrong because don Jaime is a man of honor and honesty, the kind of man who previously did not exist for her. She has over-generalized about men, a fact which the figure of don Jaime proves right in front of her.

Don Jaime is a man of honor and honesty, the kind of man who previously did not exist for Adela; he disproves her stereotype of men behaving badly right in front of her.

Adela suffers from what philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb describes as a "narrative fallacy" (Taleb, 63). She relates the story of her own history mechanically, as if it were memorized, and she tells it in the third person. It is the telling of a rehearsed story. Taleb states, "We like stories, we like to summarize, and we like to simplify, i.e. to reduce the dimension of matters" (Taleb, 63). In short, says Taleb, there is a "predilection for compact stories over raw truths" (Taleb, 63). Adela does not remember accurately. She believes that her benefactor was totally devoted to her, but that is because she was devoting time daily, hourly, to becoming what he suggested. While she was training in this way, he was off at the bank, no doubt working similar kinds of criminal deals which had made him rich. So while he was a big part of her thinking, she may actually have been a very small part of his thinking. This rings true because of his willingness to put her into serious danger.

Blaming Fate, Blaming Others

Adela, like other male and female picaresque characters, believes that her actions have been determined by fate. Taleb maintains that people should actually be more aware of the role of the unexpected in existence. In fact he states, "life is the cumulative effect of a handful of significant shocks" (Taleb, xix). He gives the example of the turkey which could be absolutely convinced that life is good, that there is food every day, because there have been a thousand good days, but several weeks before Thanksgiving, on the one thousand first day,... (Taleb, 40-41). Adela

is well aware of the turbulence of existence. Her life has been full of unexpected events. As she once states directly to don Jaime, "In this whole story, all I have done is play the role assigned to me by fate" (Pérez-Reverte, 238). Adela reminds the reader of a quote from the movie *The Secret Life Words*, directed by Isabel Coixet, "all things happen, deep down, by accident."

While her perceptions regarding fate are understandable, Adela reacts to the fact of the inevitable ups and downs in life by choosing an aggressive control over existence, come what may, by making "preemptive strikes," which often exist within a realm of dubious morality and often have unintended consequences, "collateral damage." There are, of course, other kinds of reactions and especially other kinds of attitudes that can be adopted in the face of adversity, and, rightly or wrongly, society as a whole simply can not tolerate individuals who do not take responsibility for their actions.

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Culpability and Projection

It is true that figures like Adela de Otero are basically troubled individuals, troubled often by psychological trauma, paranoid tendencies and sometimes pathological traits. Pérez-Reverte displays a remarkable understanding of this psychology, however his work also suggests areas where society is at least partially culpable for the damage done by such individuals. Society determines the stage on which trouble individuals both develop and eventually act out their dangerous tendencies. What are the stress factors which might encourage a moral collapse, such as is seen in the figure of Adela de Otero? In what societal circumstances will Adelas occur and when in Spain have these circumstances be prevalent? Adelas may occur:

- where troubled individuals are threatened with abuse, neglect, abandonment (war, financial collapse such as during and after the Spanish civil war),

- where tendencies of mental illness or dysfunction are ignored, such as an innate weakness of empathy or lack of role-taking ability, both of which are tendencies which are presented by psychopathic individuals,
- where troubled women have no recourse but to depend on men or are faced alone with impossible circumstances of either a temporary or permanent basis with no road to financial or psycho-logical independence,
- where society permits wealth and material goods to become the principal concerns of its citizens, where striving for wealth becomes obsessive for both men and women, and, especially for women, where there are few creative outlets in the working world for any kind of work providing sufficient income, self-fulfillment or self-realization,
- where young women are allowed to mature without any positive feedback, without experiences which could provide positive narratives for them, to be used for building meaning in their lives and as models for good behavior, ,
- where isolation is prohibitive of social growth or groups insist on exclusivity, where there are in-groups which emphasize "special obligations" over "general obligations," such as respect for all people,
- where life is viewed as a vicious game and winning is all, where life is devalued, where "collateral damage" from actions is seen as acceptable, where preemptive strikes become legitimate,
- where education for women is channeled into superficial concerns, where education does not provide for critical thinking, where personal observations, narrations, and rationalizations are not examined for accuracy and logical consistency, where people can not step out of the box of their own experience to recognize alternative viewpoints concerning reality and available options, where societies promote only one way of thinking about issues.

Conclusion

Pérez-Reverte paints a very convincing portrait here of a lady assassin and he proposes a pattern of compelling social circumstances which might produce additional lady assassins in Spain. In this novel the motivations of the assassin are not psychologically depraved, but rather common, loyalty and greed, and therein lies the particular danger for modern society. That loyalty and

greed should motivate the actions of this otherwise talented, beautiful and troubled young woman is, to say the least, disconcerting and extremely sad.

Again, in the reference to the Byron poem, where Olympia lies dying before the Englishman, Arthur, Arthur utters words which might be those of don Jaime as well, words which indicate the personal tragedy of Adela's fading life:

"Alas! That the first beat of the only heart
I ever wished to beat with mine should vibrate
To an assassins' pulse." (Byron, 526)

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