**FUENTE OVEJUNA**

**Title information**

Fuente Ovejuna is the name of a small town in the south of Spain (near Córdoba). In the historical account on which this play is based, when the investigation was carried out to determine who should be punished for the Commander’s death, even under torture no individual person from the town would admit guilt, and they all supposedly gave the excuse, *Fuenteovejuna lo hizo*(Fuenteovejuna did it). As a result, no one was ever tried for the crime of killing the Commander. And this refrain, *Fuenteovejuna lo hizo* became a sort of tag line that appears over and over both in Spanish literature and speech, meaning ‘it’s nobody’s fault’, or more precisely, ‘you’ll have to punish all or none of us, this was a collective decision’. The title can be literally translated as The Sheep’s Well or the Sheep Fountain, but it is normally left in Spanish, as Fuenteovejuna or Fuente Ovejuna.

**Pitch**

A small town rises up against the oppression of a cruel overlord, putting him to death in an act of collective justice. A drama about popular and institutional power, and its uses and abuses, this play has been staged regularly since it was written to express political upheaval and what can happen when a town takes the law into its own hands.

**Synopsis**

At the start of Lope’s play, the town of Fuenteovejuna welcomes the Commander to the town, offering him gifts and singing in his honor. Once the welcoming ceremony is finished, and the townsfolk begin to leave, the Commander asks two of the young women in the town, Laurencia and Pascuala, to stay behind. Their response to their noble lord is polite, but they are not amenable to his sexual advances. The Commander becomes upset that the girls have disdained him, demanding that because of his position they should bend to his every whim. The girls stand up for themselves; even if he is their noble lord, they insist, politely, that he does not have the right to abuse his power over them and threaten their honor. This enrages the Commander, but Laurencia, the daughter of the mayor of the town, Esteban, gets away, insisting the Commander does not have the right to take advantage of her. Later, when Laurencia is walking with her suitor, Frondoso, in the wood, they are set upon by the Commander, who attempts to rape Laurencia. Frondoso steals his crossbow and threatens him with it, while Laurencia escapes. In revenge, in the second act, the Commander storms into the wedding of Laurencia and Frondoso, having come to arrest Frondoso for drawing a crossbow on him. Pascuala reminds him of the sacred event taking place, but the Commander has no regard for the sanctity of the marriage ceremony. At the end of the interrupted wedding scene, Frondoso is arrested and Laurencia taken prisoner by the Commander’s men. (It is ambiguous here whether Laurencia has been raped, but at the end of the play it is hinted that she fought off any physical dishonor other than rough treatment.)  The Commander eventually lets her go, and when she returns to the village, Laurencia appeals to her father and the men of the town for justice. She asks, are you not men of honor? Are you not fathers and owners of land? She answers her own question, calling the men sheep, and saying that Fuenteovejuna is rightly named (as a watering place for sheep). She says that it will be the women who will take the revenge, as the men aren’t up to much in the town. She insults them, rousing them to action. The result of this monologue is that the town rallies together and murders the Commander. Her words encourage the women to form a separate regiment themselves.

The townsfolk kill the Commander, collectively, in vengeance for Laurencia’s dishonour and all the other offences he has committed against them. In the fighting, Frondoso is freed, and the two lovers are finally married. The King and Queen, hearing that the Commander has been killed, send a judge to discern who should be punished for the crime. Frondoso, as the prime suspect, is encouraged to hide, yet he bravely stays to protect Laurencia and his town. When no one admits to the murder, the judge orders torture but every townsperson he tortures says the same thing, that ‘Fuente Ovejuna did it’. The town asserts their desire to be ruled directly by Ferdinand and Isabella, and not to have another feudal overlord to replace the brutal Commander. King Ferdinand’s decision is that because there has not been an official confession, no one will be charged with the crime, and at least for the time being the town will be ruled directly by the King. The end of the play reveals a conflict between royal power- representing God, the written law and ‘truth’- and popular, collective power - linked to the peasants’ belief in their dignity, honor and the vengeance they enact in protection of their way of life. In the end, no one is punished, and *Fuenteovejuna lo hizo*, everyone did it, and everyone is free to go.

**Sources**

The play is based on a historical chronicle by Fray Francisco de Rades (1572), which details how the small town of Fuente Ovejuna struck out against its harsh and brutal feudal lord, Fernán Gómez, in 1476. His reputation for cruelty against the men and women of the town, in unlawfully demanding money and possessions from them and abusing his power over the women, led them to take justice into their own hands and collectively murder him. The story of Rodrigo Téllez Girón, the young Master of Calatrava, is also taken from the chronicle, from events that took place two years before the uprising of Fuente Ovejuna. The ongoing war of succession to the Spanish crown during that time meant that allegiance was split between either Ferdinand and Isabella (who later would become the ‘Catholic Kings’) or their rivals, Alfonso of Portugal and Princess Juana of Castile. The historical Master of Calatrava changed his loyalty from Ferdinand and Isabella to Alfonso and Juana, and Lope incorporates this unrelated storyline into his dramatic backdrop for the story of Fuente Ovejuna.

**Critical response**

This play has been used for political purposes in times of instability as well as to show how loyalty to a monarchy can re-establish order. It has been staged in the former Soviet Union, during the Spanish Civil War to show the power of the people, and in Spanish America in the middle of the twentieth century in times of unrest and government change. Critics have seen the play as both supporting the monarchy and as a potential threat to it; either way, this play has been at the forefront of the Lopean canon and is one of his most often staged and studied works.