



A COMPANION TO

Carmen Amaro in Gaité

CATHERINE O'LEARY | ALISON RIBEIRO DE MENEZES

A COMPANION TO CARMEN MARTÍN GAITÉ

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A COMPANION TO
CARMEN MARTÍN GAITE

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This book is dedicated
to the memory of
Doreen Kennedy

FOREWORD

I first met Carmen Martín Gaité thanks to some common friends who introduced me to her many, many years ago, when I was studying at the Complutense University, Madrid, and she had begun to write short pieces following the award of her degree from the University of Salamanca. Later, as a lecturer at the National University of Ireland, in Dublin, I taught a course on the contemporary Spanish novel and included *Entre visillos* on the syllabus. I well remember the enthusiasm which that novel sparked off in my students who, overcoming inevitable linguistic hurdles, could identify with those provincial Spanish girls living in a closed-off world and facing the inherent difficulties that it presented for them. For those Irish students that world was typically Spanish, yet, even if the dilemmas were not as acute, they could see similarities with the Ireland in which they were growing up. At least, that's how they saw it, and their reactions provoked considerable interest and debate in class.

In 1983, thanks to University funding to bring contemporary writers from Spain and Italy to Dublin, I invited Carmen Martín Gaité to Ireland, thinking she would be the perfect speaker to fire the students' imagination – not only because of her excellence as a novelist, but also because of her extrovert personality, which I had glimpsed all those years before in Madrid, and my hunch was confirmed as soon as she set foot in Ireland. The official funds available were limited, so I asked her to stay in my home, an invitation which she accepted at once with delight...

I'll never forget that week which Carmiña – as her closest friends call her, as she is from Galicia – spent in our house. Her first reaction, on being shown her room, was to rearrange the furniture. The armchair, where she could relax and read, was too far from the window and the free-standing mirror was too close, since she wasn't a woman who needed a lot of light to see her by now completely grey hair, which she brushed almost without looking. Those, at any rate, were the justifications which she gave for the rearrangements.

Her visits to our department and contact with the students were also unforgettable. I was afraid that, in the face of a visitor from Spain, the students might retreat into the timidity which was habitual on such occasions. I need not have worried. She and the students got on famously, and neither hesitated to raise their voices if they disagreed. I'd go so far as to say that the students

learnt a lot not just about literature but also about the Spanish temperament.

Happily, my youngest daughter got on well with her too. She was then about 18 or 19 and of an age with Carmen's own daughter, and they went shopping, not for things of Carmen's age (by then she was 57), but for the girls' generation – they went to fashion boutiques and the odd second-hand shop, with Carmen all dressed in frills and lace. Practically everything they bought was for her daughter, her only daughter, whom she adored and who died tragically only a few years later. Carmen would reflect with me, sitting in her room at night, about her life, revealing confidences about the break-up of her marriage to Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio; at other times, she would forget such sad matters and, at her instigation, we would sing together songs from our youth, famous romantic *boleros*, with their unforgettable erotic touches.

Inevitably, being in Ireland and given Carmen's love of partying, we took her to a pub, in Tallaght I believe. She took a certain care with her appearance, and particularly her hair. Her appearance in the chosen establishment caused an undeniable sensation. It was obvious not just that she was foreign, but also that she belonged to a certain type of bohemian middle class (which was quite true): someone who had rebelled, just like so many of her characters, against the *status quo* of the professional middle classes. But not in an aggressive way, more an inner rebellion... As was usual, the band asked if anyone wanted to sing. And Carmiña jumped up at once and took the stage. But if the Irish were expecting 'Cielito lindo' or 'La paloma', they were surprised to hear an old Castilian song, 'Salamanca, la blanca'. The applause was thunderous, even if no one had understood the words.

Carmen also went to Galway for a few days. I put the furniture back in its place, and we all reminisced on her visit with fondness. After that, each time I went to Madrid I would meet up with her, hear of her literary successes and her personal tragedies – which changed her, left her more distant. Writing was her only consolation. She died in 2000 but her memory lives on in many of us.

María Isabel Foley de Butler

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INTRODUCTION

What we, or at any rate what I, refer to confidently as memory – meaning a moment, a scene, a fact that has been subjected to a fixative and thereby rescued from oblivion – is really a form of storytelling that goes on continually in the mind and often changes with the telling. Too many conflicting emotional interests are involved for life ever to be wholly acceptable, and possibly it is the work of the storyteller to rearrange things so that they conform to this end. In any case, in talking about the past we lie with every breath we draw.

William Maxwell, *So Long, See you Tomorrow*

Carmen Martín Gaité was born in Salamanca on 8 December 1925, ‘a las doce de la mañana de un día frío y soleado’ (at midday on a cold, sunny day).¹ She spent many of her summers in Galicia, in the village of San Lorenzo de Piñor where her mother was from, and her writing references both Salamanca and Galicia, the former most obviously in *Entre visillos* (*Behind the Curtains*), while the latter is the setting for *Las ataduras* (*Binding Ties*), *Retahílas* (*Yarns*) and *El pastel del diablo* (*The Devil’s Cake*). Galicia is also present elsewhere, Martín Gaité claimed, in the acceptance of the mysterious in her work and her ‘forma de entender y navegar la vida’ (way of understanding and navigating life), which she credits to her Galician roots.² The daughter of parents ‘de una calidad humana excepcional’ (‘Bosquejo’, 11) (of exceptional human qualities), she was brought up in a liberal, well-to-do

¹ ‘Bosquejo autobiográfico’, in *Agua pasada (Artículos, prólogos y discursos)* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1993), 11–25 (11). It is not our intention to offer here a literary biography of Martín Gaité, in the Anglo-American sense of the term. Such a study is severely lacking in Martín Gaité studies, but in the absence of access to her personal papers, it remains an almost impossible project to carry out, despite the author’s many seemingly autobiographical observations in her writing and in spite of such evocations as Josefina R. Aldecoa’s brief biographical sketch in *Los niños de la guerra* (Madrid: Anaya, 1983). Evaluating these against primary sources and documents must await the archiving of her papers; a full and accurate treatment of her relationship with her husband Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, and indeed its subsequent disintegration, would likewise require proper documentation and we have refrained here from speculative comments on this aspect of her life.

² Carmen Martín Gaité, ‘Galicia en mi literatura’, in *Pido la palabra*, prologue by José Luis Borau (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2002), 122–37 (123).

family context; well-known writer Miguel de Unamuno was a family friend. The civil war and later Francoist regime had an impact on Martín Gaité's life, and much of her early writing is an engagement with, and a criticism of, the injustices that she saw in post-war society.

As young girls, Carmen Martín Gaité and her sister Ana were educated at home, with a series of private tutors, but the author credits her father with influencing her towards art, history and literature. Rather than a convent school, Carmen Martín Gaité attended the Instituto Femenino de Salamanca, the model for the 'caserón destartelado y frío' ('Bosquejo', 15) (large, run-down, cold building) that Natalia attends in *Entre visillos*. In 1943, she began studying for a degree in Filología Románica at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Salamanca. It was here that she first met Ignacio Aldecoa and published her earliest poems and prose writings, in the university magazine *Trabajos y Días*. In 1946, she received a summer grant to study Portuguese at the University of Coimbra, thus embarking alone on her first foreign visit, during which she would acquire an interest in thirteenth-century Galaico-Portuguese poetry, the subject of her first, unfinished, doctoral dissertation. Travelling in 1948 to Cannes, for another summer study course, Martín Gaité remarked that in addition to discovering the work of Sartre, Camus, Gide and Proust, she experienced freedom for the first time ('Bosquejo', 17). Following this, Martín Gaité moved to Madrid to begin research for that doctorate on medieval poetry, but, meeting up with Aldecoa again, she became part of a literary circle with much promise; in addition to Aldecoa, Medardo Fraile, Alfonso Sastre, Jesús Fernández Santos, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio and Josefina Rodríguez (later Aldecoa) were close companions. 'Todos', she has said of the group, 'llevaban el virus de la literatura' ('Bosquejo', 18) (They were all infected with the virus of literature). They would, in due course, come to constitute what has been called in literary criticism the *Generación de medio siglo* (Mid-Century Generation). It would not be long before Martín Gaité abandoned her academic research in favour of creative writing. On 14 October 1953 she married Sánchez Ferlosio, and in due course had two children. Miguel was born in 1954, but tragically died the following year; Marta was born in 1956, and sadly also pre-deceased her mother. The marriage did not last.

Martín Gaité's main historical and cultural point of reference is Spain of the Franco regime, although in some of her work she does recall children's writers from the period of the Second Republic. She wrote extensively on the ways in which popular culture under Franco was infused with propagandistic messages, counteracting this with a poetics derived loosely from existentialism (her visit to Cannes was surely influential) and centring firmly on the individual in contact with those around her. Her later work would address the social upheavals of the Transition era and convey a sense of the altered familial and societal structures of democratic Spain. Despite the great

changes that she witnessed and the prolific nature of her *obra*, her work is surprisingly homogenous, concentrating on a small number of themes which she constantly revisited during the course of her long writing career. Many critics have remarked on this, Kathleen Glenn, for instance, stressing 'the coherence of her fictive universe and the recurrence of certain themes and techniques'.³ Much of her work corresponds to Ciplijauskaitė's notion of the 'novela de concienciación' (novel of coming to awareness), which links past ties and memory to interpersonal exchange.⁴ Her themes might be summarized as a fascination with time and memory; a concern for communication; an interest in women's lives, position in society, and the role models which influence them; and a preoccupation with the ethical value of literature in opening up reader horizons and posing intellectual challenges. Broadly, her techniques range from social realism in *Entre visillos* and her short stories, though with more human touches and textual play than the classic of the type, Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama*; through an increased literariness and metafictional experimentation in *Retahílas* and *El cuarto de atrás* (*The Back Room*), although these novels again avoid extremes in literary experimentation; to a return to narrative-driven, psychologically focused works that concentrate on the intimate world of the individual, in what Gonzalo Navajas has termed a 'neomodernist' poetics, at the end of her career.⁵ Nonetheless, her works do not fit exactly with the standard interpretative categories of post-war Spanish fiction. While some are undoubtedly examples of the social novel, there are strong existential undercurrents to others; this failure to fit critical categories may help to explain the lack of attention paid to *Ritmo lento* (*Slow Rhythm*), for instance. And while her work is certainly not structuralist nor yet post-structuralist, there are, as Joan Lipman Brown argues, traces of *nouveau roman* experimentalism in works such as *Retahílas* and *El cuarto de atrás*.⁶

Despite these formal shifts, a focus on colloquial language and the rhythms of speech and a concern for the well-turned phrase have made her perhaps the best prose stylist of her generation. Maria Vittoria Calvi describes Martín Gaité's writing as containing an 'elegante estilo literario y registro coloquial' (elegant literary style and colloquial register), and comments that her stress on dialogue in her writing, 'lejos de ser un simple recurso narrativo, representaba la medulla de su propuesta creadora y de su teoría de la narración' (far from being a simple narrative device, represents the core of her creative

³ Kathleen M. Glenn, 'Review of *Nubosidad variable*', *Hispania* 76 (1993), 296–7 (296).

⁴ Biruté Ciplijauskaitė, *La novela femenina contemporánea (1970–1985): hacia una tipología de la narración en primera persona*, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1994).

⁵ Gonzalo Navajas, *Más allá de la posmodernidad: Estética de la nueva novela y cine españoles* (Barcelona: EUB, 1996).

⁶ Joan Lipman Brown, *Secrets from the Back Room: The Fiction of Carmen Martín Gaité* (Valencia: University of Mississippi, 1987), p. 18.

proposal and her theory of narration).⁷ For Calvi, much of the originality in Martín Gaité's work lies in her 'creación de un lenguaje propio, en el que se integran el símbolo, la memoria y el flujo de la oralidad, y palabras tan corrientes como "hilo" o "ventana" se revitalizan, dilatando la gama de sus significados' (creation of a personal language, in which symbol, memory, and the flux of orality become integrated, and words as common as 'thread' or 'window' are revitalized, giving up the range of their meanings).⁸

The symbols which Calvi mentions – the 'hilo', or thread of discourse, and the window – are two of the most pervasive in Martín Gaité's work, representing respectively human communication, and so the narrative weave of words, and the status of women in post-war Spanish society as confined to the domestic sphere, unfree, and unable to realize their true possibilities individually and within society. The theme not simply of freedom, but of social constraints allied to an individual's fear of seeking or embracing freedom, becomes one of the dominant concerns of Martín Gaité's early works, and this dialectic between social determinism and individual autonomy unites *Entre visillos*, the short stories of *El balneario* (The Spa) and *Las ataduras*, *Ritmo lento*, and *Fragmentos de interior* (Inner Fragments). The search for freedom via expression, which is primarily conceived of as oral expression, emerges as a central concern in *Retahílas*, as does the pervasive power of the past as a force shaping the individual's sense of identity in the present, a notion already evident in the short stories but which becomes fully worked into Martín Gaité's poetics in the 1970s. The ominous presence of, yet silence about, the Spanish civil war and its legacy in early works manifests itself as an interrogation of personal and collective history in Martín Gaité's most famous work, *El cuarto de atrás*, the novel that propelled the author to international recognition and has become her best-known book. The issues which it raises, most notably the intersection of identity and socio-political environment, many seem to fall from view in later novels; yet *Cuarto*'s metafictional form and *Retahílas*'s concern with communication reappear in *Nubosidad variable* (*Variable Cloud*) coupled with the psychological and existentialist focus of *Ritmo lento*. In this sense, despite very real formal changes, Martín Gaité's work is unusually consistent and coherent. A preoccupation with theatrical *leitmotifs*, the wearing of masks, and the search, beyond role-playing, for an authentic self characterizes her protagonists from as early on as *Las ataduras*, and as late as *Lo raro es vivir* (*Living's the Strange Thing*). It is also reflected in the theatrical intimacy of the settings for verbal exchanges in *Retahílas*

⁷ Maria Vittoria Calvi, 'Carmen Martín Gaité, en busca de interlocutor italiano', in Emma Martinell Gifre (ed), *Al encuentro de Carmen Martín Gaité: Homenajes y bibliografía* (Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona, 1997), 52–6 (52).

⁸ Calvi, 'Carmen Martín Gaité, en busca de interlocutor italiano', p. 55.

and *Cuarto*, it features, as might be expected, in Martín Gaité's theatre, and it is discussed in her many literary essays.

One of the features of Martín Gaité's work is its unpolemical, understated tone. While many of her literary generation were venting their spleen against Franco and debunking History (with a capital 'H') – Juan Goytisolo's *Don Julián* (*Count Julian*), with its energetic and aggressive diatribe against the myths and shibboleths of the regime, or Juan Marsé's subversive and demythificatory *Si te dicen que caí* (*The Fallen*), are excellent examples – Martín Gaité turned precisely to the writing of history, in books on, first, eighteenth-century and, later, twentieth-century Spain. This gesture on her part was not intended as one of rebellion against her compatriots, however; it arose out of her particular fictional poetics, and her stress on the ordering of a narrative out of the raw material of life, past, present and future. The themes that have been so celebrated in *Cuento*, then, are also the underpinnings of lesser-known books such as *El proceso de Macanaz* (*The Trial of Macanaz*) or *Usos amorosos del dieciocho español* (*Courtship Customs in Eighteenth-Century Spain*). Martín Gaité's non-belligerent tone may also explain why her works encountered relatively little resistance from Francoist censorship while it was in operation. Indeed, the censoring of her work has been so uncontentious as to have raised little critical interest, and the matter is outlined here in a consistent fashion for the first time.

As Carolyn P. Boyd has argued, the Franco dictatorship 'aimed to re-establish traditionally "Spanish" values, social hierarchies, gender roles, and cultural norms by rigorously controlling all forms of individual or collective expression.'⁹ Censorship was but one of the tools used to impose this new mythology of Spanishness and its employment was defended and justified in the name of the common good. In general terms, the regime's censorship legislation reflected its determination to eliminate the views of its opponents and to protect both itself and its influential supporter, the Roman Catholic Church. This is strikingly demonstrated in the list of points that the censors were required to answer in their reports:

(Does the text attack any of the following:

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. ¿Ataca al dogma? | Dogma? |
| 2. ¿A la moral? | Morals? |
| 3. ¿A la Iglesia o a sus ministros? | The Church and Her Ministers? |
| 4. ¿Al Régimen y a sus instituciones? | The Regime and its institutions? |
| 5. ¿A las personas que colaboran o han colaborado con el Régimen? | People who collaborate, or have collaborated, with the Regime? |

⁹ Carolyn P. Boyd, 'History, politics and culture: 1936–1975', in David T. Gies (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Spanish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 86–103, (96).

- | | |
|---|---|
| 6. Los pasajes censurables, ¿califican el contenido total de la obra? | Do the censurable passages constitute the total content of this work? |
| 7. Informe y otras observaciones. ¹⁰ | Report and other observations?) |

In almost none of the reports on Carmen Martín Gaité's work are these standard questions addressed; instead, as was often the case, the rules were arbitrarily applied and the censors tended to limit their reports to a brief description or evaluation of the work and an indication of whether it should be authorized, authorized with cuts, or prohibited.

The case of Martín Gaité is an interesting one. The censorship of her novels, or rather the lack thereof, reveals much about the censorship process itself, its ambiguities and its inefficiencies; it also exposes the regime's attitudes towards female writers. The fact that the first works that she submitted to the censors were from the supposedly 'lesser' genre of the short story is significant. So too is the fact that her early works – the short stories and *Entre visillos* – while they make some social criticism, also contain elements of non-political genres such as fantasy, autobiography, romantic fiction and *Bildungsroman*. On the basis of this she was not considered to be a provocative writer, something which would help in her future dealings with the censors. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that she comments on Spanish society and finds it wanting, particularly in its treatment of women. Ironically, the regime's paternalistic attitude towards women may have benefited Martín Gaité and aided her work to pass unscathed through the offices of the censors. As Patricia O'Byrne argues, 'during most of the Franco period there appears to have been a shared perception among critics and censors alike regarding appropriate themes and style for women writers', and clearly this was based on a 'correct' view of femininity, strongly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on morals.¹¹ Though Jo Labanyi argues that 'female writers were subjected to particularly strict moral scrutiny',¹² it seems clear that women's writing was considered less important than writing by men and was often dismissed as romantic fiction. Martín Gaité played with this to some extent, incorporating and parodying elements of romantic fiction in her novels. This may have encouraged the censors, who often read only superficially novels by writers not considered notorious or suspect, to interpret her writing as modern romantic fiction. The reports on *Ritmo lento* and

¹⁰ España. Ministerio de Cultura. Archivo General de la Administración (AGA) (3)50 Sig. 21/11901 Expte 183.

¹¹ Patricia O'Byrne, 'Spanish women novelists and the censor (1945–1965)', *Letras Femeninas* 25 (1999), 199–212 (200, 211).

¹² Jo Labanyi, 'Censorship or the fear of mass culture', in Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (eds), *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 207–14 (211).

Retáhilas, both of which contain errors in the basic plot descriptions, suggest that Martín Gaité's work received only very cursory readings by the censors, and this is an indication of the lack of importance granted to it.¹³

O'Byrne offers further reasons why writers, like Carmen Martín Gaité, of what she terms the *novela neorrealista femenina* were not harshly censored. These authors, she claims, adopted certain measures aimed at evading censorship: 'these measures included stressing the unrepresentativeness of the female protagonist/perpetrator, allowing non-Spanish characters to expose double standards and injustice, and the use of indirect narrative and elusive stylistic features.'¹⁴ Carbayo, too, notes Martín Gaité's skilled evasion of censorship by seemingly conforming to what was expected of a female writer while simultaneously subverting the approved models of female behaviour.¹⁵ Some evidence of these measures can be seen in Martín Gaité's use of multiple perspectives, her concept of the *chica rara* (strange girl) and, most obviously in *Entre visillos*, the voice of the foreigner. The success of *Entre visillos* in particular meant that Carmen Martín Gaité had an established reputation, a factor that the censors may have taken into consideration during later deliberations. It should also be remembered that discussion of Martín Gaité's literary output never focused exclusively on its revelations about or criticisms of Franco's Spain, and the censors, wisely, chose not to draw attention to it. In short, it was sometimes considered to be more politically shrewd to allow a work to be authorized than to create a furore over its bowdlerization or prohibition.

If the Francoist censors found it easier at times to ignore the thrust of Martín Gaité's social and gender criticisms, academic commentators have had to face the issue head on.¹⁶ Martín Gaité herself consistently rejected the label 'feminist' for her work, yet, as the ensuing chapters will reveal, she is frequently and quite rightly linked to other women writers of her era, such as Carmen Laforet and Ana María Matute, not to mention younger, openly feminist authors such as Esther Tusquets.¹⁷ Indeed, Martín Gaité's extensive

¹³ Of course, another factor pointed out by Labanyi is that 'élite culture is not a political threat'. Labanyi, 'Censorship or the fear of mass culture', 214.

¹⁴ O'Byrne, 'Spanish women novelists and the censor', 200, 211.

¹⁵ Mercedes Carbayo-Abengózar, *Buscando un lugar entre mujeres: Buceo en la España de Carmen Martín Gaité* (Málaga: Universidad de Málaga, 1998), 56, 58–9.

¹⁶ Mercedes Carbayo-Abengózar offers a coherent feminist reading of Martín Gaité's work in *Buscando un lugar entre mujeres*.

¹⁷ In *Literatura y mujeres* (Barcelona: Destino, 2000), 72, Laura Freixas dissects the contemporary Spanish publishing world, demonstrating convincingly how the description of a work as 'de, sobre o para mujeres, o femenina' carries a pejorative connotation which rules the author of any such work *a priori* out of the 'respectable' contemporary canon. It is no surprise that key woman writers in Spain should thus reject the even more politically and ideologically charged label 'feminist'.