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Edited by
Lou Charnon-Deutsch and Jo Labanyi

Culture and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Spain



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LOU CHARNON-DEUTSCH
and
JO LABANYI

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*Cover illustration: Portrait of Rafaela Flores
Calderon, by Antonia Maria Esquivel. Courtesy of
the Museo del Prado, Madrid. The comparison of
women to caged bird was frequent in
contemporary literature and painting.*

**Culture and Gender
in Nineteenth-Century Spain**

Oxford Hispanic Studies

General Editor: Paul Julian Smith

The last twenty years have seen a revolution in the humanities. On the one hand, there has been a massive influence on literary studies of other disciplines: philosophy, psychoanalysis, and anthropology. On the other, there has been a displacement of the boundaries of literary studies, an opening out on to other forms of expression: cinema, popular culture, and historical documentation.

The *Oxford Hispanic Studies* series reflects the fact that Hispanic studies are particularly well placed to take advantage of this revolution. Unlike those working in French or English studies, Hispanists have little reason to genuflect to a canon of European culture which has tended to exclude them. Historically, moreover, Hispanic societies tend to exhibit plurality and difference: thus Medieval Spain was the product of the three cultures of Jew, Moslem, and Christian; modern Spain is a federation of discrete autonomous regions; and Spanish America is a continent in which cultural identity must always be brought into question, can never be taken for granted.

The incursion of new models or critical theory into Spanish-speaking countries has been uneven. And while cultural studies in other language areas have moved through post-structuralism (Lacan, Derrida, Foucault) to create new disciplines focusing on gender, ethnicity, and homosexuality, it is only recently that Hispanists have contributed to the latest fields of enquiry. Now, however, there is an upsurge of exciting new work in both Europe and the Americas. *Oxford Hispanic Studies* is intended to provide a medium for writing engaged in and taking account of these developments. It serves both as a vehicle and a stimulus for innovative and challenging work in an important and rapidly changing field. The series aims to facilitate both the development

of new approaches in Hispanic studies and the awareness of Hispanic studies in other subject areas. It embraces discussions of literary and non-literary cultural forms, and focuses on the publication of illuminating original research and theory.

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Contributors

MARYELLEN BIEDER is Professor of Spanish at Indiana University. She has published a book on Francisco Ayala and numerous articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, particularly on the work of Pardo Bazán.

ALDA BLANCO is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has co-edited Galdós, *La de Bringas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1983), edited two works by María Martínez Sierra, and published widely on nineteenth-century women writers. She is currently completing a book on women's fiction in mid-nineteenth-century Spain.

LOU CHARNON-DEUTSCH is Associate Professor of Spanish at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and President of Feministas Unidas. Her books include *Gender and Representation: Women in Nineteenth-Century Spanish Realist Fiction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990) and *Narratives of Desire: Nineteenth-Century Spanish Fiction by Women* (Penn State Press, 1994). She has published various articles on gender and nineteenth-century Spanish fiction, and is currently completing a book on illustrations of women in nineteenth-century Spanish periodicals.

STEPHEN M. HART is Associate Professor of Spanish at the University of Kentucky, and a former Lecturer in Spanish at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. In addition to his wide-ranging articles on modern Spanish and Latin American literature, he is the editor of two books, including *Feminist Readings on Spanish and Latin-American Literature* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1991), and author of five others, including *White Ink: Essays on Modern Feminine Fiction in Spain and Latin America* (London: Tamesis, 1993).

CATHERINE JAGOE is Associate Professor of Spanish at Northern Illinois University. She has published various articles on gender

in nineteenth-century Spanish narrative, and a book *Ambiguous Angels: Gender in the Novels of Galdós* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1994). She is currently co-editing *Sexualidad y género en España: una antología (1850-1900)* for publication by Siglo XXI.

SUSAN KIRKPATRICK is Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego. In addition to a book on Larra and many articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish fiction, she has published *Las Románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835-1850* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1989; Spanish translation Madrid: Cátedra, 1991) and *Antología poética de escritoras del siglo XIX* (Madrid: Castalia, 1992). She is currently preparing a book on literary configurations of the seduction fantasy in late nineteenth-century Spain.

JO LABANYI is Reader in Modern Spanish and Latin American Literature at Birkbeck College, University of London. In addition to articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish and Latin American fiction, she has published two books on contemporary Spanish fiction, edited a collective volume on Galdós, and translated Galdós's *Nazarín*. She is currently co-editing an introduction to Spanish cultural studies and completing *The Politics of the Family in the Spanish Realist Novel*, both for Oxford University Press.

ABIGAIL LEE SIX is Lecturer in Spanish at Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London. She has published a book and several articles on Juan Goytisolo, and is preparing a book on non-verbal communication in the modern Spanish novel.

JAMES MANDRELL is Associate Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature at Brandeis University. In addition to a wide range of articles on Spanish and Latin American literature, he is author of *Don Juan and the Point of Honour: Seduction, Patriarchal Society, and Literary Tradition* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

GERALDINE M. SCANLON, formerly Lecturer in Spanish at King's College, University of London, is now an Honorary Research

Fellow based in Spain. Her main research areas are nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish social history and literature. Her publications include articles on educational and women's history, as well as fiction. Her book *La polémica feminista en la España contemporánea (1868-1974)* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1976) is now in its second edition (Madrid: Akal, 1986).

ALISON SINCLAIR is Lecturer in Spanish at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Clare College. Her books include *The Deceived Husband: A Kleinian Approach to the Literature of Infidelity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). She has also published numerous articles on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish fiction, poetry, and drama, and is currently preparing a collection of essays on *La Regenta*.

DIANE FAYE UREY is Professor of Spanish at Illinois State University. She has published numerous articles on nineteenth-century Spanish fiction, Galdós in particular; and is author of *Galdós and the Irony of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), *The Novel Histories of Galdós* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), and a forthcoming book on Galdós's early *Episodios nacionales* and the formation of the Spanish reading public.

NOËL VALIS is Professor of Spanish at the Johns Hopkins University. She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish literature, including *The Decadent Vision in Leopoldo Alas* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) and *Leopoldo Alas (Clarín): An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Grant & Cutler, 1986). Her numerous editions include *In the Feminine Mode: Essays on Hispanic Women Writers* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), Carolina Coronado, *Poesías* (Madrid: Castalia, 1991), and 'Malevolent Insemination' and Other Essays on *Clarín* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1990).

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Introduction: Ain't I a Fluctuating Identity?

IN posing this question, a play on Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a woman?', Denise Riley issues a by now common plea 'for both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of "women"' (Riley 1).¹ Questioning the category of 'women', its fictive, erratic status, has become one of the principal projects of recent feminist theory and criticism. Just as the vexing 'Woman' and the equally essentializing 'woman' have been challenged, feminists must now take care to define what we mean by 'women' and, equally important, what is meant by the 'we' that writes about categories of women. In the heady days of 1960s and 1970s liberal feminism 'we' was an unproblematic category supposedly designating all women everywhere. The determination of biological gender seemed straightforward (in the days before Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, or Thomas Laqueur's *Making Sex*). 'Feminism' was used in the singular: whatever their differences, it was thought, oppression joined all women together into one great sorority, it was a 'pan-cultural fact' (Ortner 67). Even while femininity and masculinity were being explored and renegotiated in some academic as well as non-academic areas, studies on the images, activities, and victimization of women in various world cultures seemed to reinforce such essentializing notions as nurturing womanhood, aggressive masculinity, or innate feminine pacifism. The very fact of being a woman seemed to grant authority to speak about women in this global sense. Feminists, those feminists who had 'a room of their own', determined from that privileged space that women should 'write the body', not just be the body to somebody else. It was understood that the view from this room was framed by personal experiences, but many feminists misrecognized the contours of the frame from which such dicta could be issued, failing to understand the connection between writing the body and the body politics that had preceded this grand gesture.

Gradually it became evident (the evidence often coming from groups of women who did not choose necessarily to identify themselves in the first instance as feminists or even women) that vast categories of women were left beyond consideration in feminist discussions taking place within the academy. By not carefully historicizing the relation between the social, the political, and the sexual, by generally ignoring the connections between gender, class, and race and the equally complicated construction of male sexuality, many feminist projects had resorted to consoling goddess-worship, utopian, radical exclusionism, or its opposite, a celebration of androgyny. Others, attempting to deconstruct difference, retreated into psychoanalytic investigation that too often resulted in ahistorical, globalizing assumptions about sexual development and practice. As these retreats and consolations fail on the level of the social to theorize gender, many feminists are turning again to the local politics of gender production where there is still much work to be done on the politics of difference. There is a growing recognition, reflected in several of the following essays, that gender has to be viewed against the public spheres where political and national identities are inextricably bound together with gender ideology. Even though our categories and strategies are fraught with contradiction and difficult exclusions, there is still much to be gained by focusing not only on gender production and gender subversion as a *force majeure* in the formation of subjectivities, but on the relation between gender, race, and class.

Denise Riley (5) recommends that, to avoid deconstructive moves to transcend sex that have no political allegiances, we study the historical foundation of the instability of sexual categories, and the discursive formations that either establish or question the naturalism of sexuality. Collectively, these essays point in that direction, looking at a period in Spanish cultural history when the boundaries of gender were shifting and redefining themselves. It is of course customary to speak of gender trouble in the context of postmodern cultures and to think of nineteenth-century Spain as a vast, patriarchal landscape where configurations of gender were radically polarized and predictable. Some of the essays here examine the discursive formation of the female subject from within this patriarchal landscape. Others demonstrate that important boundaries between men and women, public and private, strong and weak, etc. were being

challenged over the period covered in these essays. Just as Foucault argued that Victorian prohibitions against the subject of sex were accompanied by myriad incitements to speak everywhere and always about it, so we can see that the conspicuous gender polarizations of the nineteenth century were the effect of an increasing sexual categorization whose progress was neither smooth nor exempt from contradiction.

In *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, Thomas Laqueur studies how, in the eighteenth century, a single-sex model evident in medical texts beginning with Aristotle and Galen of Pergamum (second century)—according to which women were homologous to men, only with the male reproductive organs turned outside in—started to evolve into a two-sex model that we too often equate with a *natural* division of the sexes. By the nineteenth century, notions of sexual difference had become firmly established: not only were women's reproductive systems different from those of men; women were 'different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect' (5). Sex became an ontological, not just a social category (8). Gender roles evolved in keeping with ever more generalized biological notions of women's physical and mental unsuitability for public roles. But Laqueur is quick to concede that the increasing legitimization of the two-sex model, with its resultant heightened gender polarity, did not mean that other, counter models simply faded away or were never produced, for 'at any given point of scientific knowledge a wide variety of contradictory cultural claims about sexual difference are possible' (175). The same is true for gender: even in nineteenth-century Spain, where gender polarization seems to be most glaring and unremitting, there are undercurrents that undermine its categorizations in many subtle ways. This is a key notion for understanding several of the essays in this collection which argue that Spain's sexual and gender polarizations were constantly problematized at the level of character development in both Romantic and realist texts. The sexual ambiguity of Julián (*Los pazos de Ulloa*) or Bonifacio (*Su único hijo*), for example, provides a platform from which to question ideal notions of gender in nineteenth-century culture. Ranging from the identity of women writers, as perceived by themselves and by male critics, to the textual construction of gender by writers of both sexes, these essays argue that there were different ways of being a woman or

man, 'different densities of sexed being in operation' (Riley 6) that did not always conform to convention. Despite the debasement of the feminine seen on the manifest level of many of the texts studied here, there was a need on the part of some writers to tamper with the categories, to recognize the desirability of 'fluctuating identities' by questioning what it was and was not to be a woman or a man.

The essays that follow were written for this volume, with the exception of that by Noël Valis, an earlier version of which appeared in article form in *Dispositio* (1990) 15/40, 1-25. The 'we' that writes in this instance consists of female and male specialists in the study of Spanish culture, of American and British origin, teaching and writing in the United States, Britain, and Spain. Despite the range of approaches taken, the contributions build on a tradition of Anglo-American feminist criticism that is wary of essentialist definitions of the feminine and of women's writing. Our concern is, rather, to unsettle oppositional forms of thinking by showing how notions of sexual difference, in addition to containing a high degree of latent ambivalence, are always strategic constructions subject to contestation and renegotiation. The essays in this volume that make use of psychoanalytic theory elucidate particular historical moments in the production or interrogation of sexual difference, or show how qualities labelled as feminine and masculine pass to and fro between female and male characters in what at times comes close to a kind of competition for ownership.

The essays are arranged in chronological order of authors discussed, tracing a movement from the 1830s to the 1890s: a movement that is not one-directional but marked by hesitations, regressions, and contrary impulses. The first essay by Jo Labanyi charts the precarious construction in Romantic drama of an ideology of sexual difference that makes possible the acclimatization in Spain of liberal individualism. The next two essays discuss the problematic relation of the Romantic autobiographical genre to the gendering of subjectivity: Noël Valis shows how two provincial women poets writing in the 1840s, Carolina Coronado and Vicenta García Miranda, use autobiography to challenge contemporary male expectations of the female writer, and to break down the restricting opposition between public and private; while James Mandrell exposes the gender bias in autobiographical readings of Bécquer's work by male critics. Susan