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Rewriting Womanhood

LaGreca, Nancy

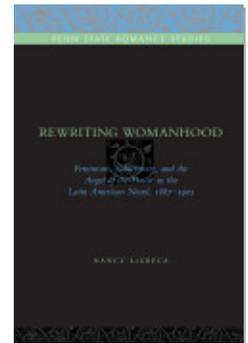
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LaGreca, Nancy.

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COMING OF AGE(NCY):
REFUGIO BARRAGÁN DE TOSCANO'S *LA HIJA DEL BANDIDO*

LA HIJA DEL BANDIDO (The Bandit's Daughter [1887]) by the Mexican writer Refugio Barragán de Toscano is an adventure novel, set in the transitional period between the twilight of Spanish colonial Mexico and the dawn of the struggle for independence.¹ The story is the fictionalized retelling of a rural legend about a cave-dwelling gang of bandits who operated in the mountainous regions of the province of Jalisco. At the time of this writing, Barragán is the earliest known woman novelist of nineteenth-century Mexico; *La hija* was her most successful work. The novel has gone through fifteen printings in Mexico, although it is virtually unknown to many scholars both within and outside Mexico today. It is part adventure novel, part document of local customs, and part historical novel. In terms of female subject formation, it is multilayered and lends itself to readings from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and women's history and culture. The protagonist, as the title suggests, is the head outlaw's daughter, whose *quinceañera* (a Mexican girl's fifteenth birthday and coming-of-age celebration) commences and frames the narrative.

In *La hija* this rite of passage to womanhood, the *quinceañera*, is a medium for psychoanalytic identity formation because of the transitional nature of coming-of-age as a social fissure and the subsequent social "lawlessness" or transgression allowed by this gap. The role of transitional and marginal spaces will be of particular importance in this analysis, because Barragán situates the heroine's agency *between* life stages, genres, historical settings, societies, geographies—and even genders—to introduce in the preadolescent girl's bond with her father a rupture that drives the plot. It is this conflict that allows the protagonist to break many of the tenets of the Angel of the House; when María, the bandit's daughter, discovers her father's deceptions, she rebels against him and becomes the heroine of the novel.

1. The narrator cites the current Spanish governor, Don Miguel de la Grúa Talamanca, marquis of Branciforte, who was the unpopular viceroy of New Spain from 1794 to 1798.

Barragán and Her Novel: Disruptions of Power and Marginal Perspective

Barragán's preference for balancing her narrative in the precarious political position between colonial Mexico and the early republic likely reflects her conception of the symbolic order in transition, since she witnessed the mutability of political regimes from her early childhood in the 1850s to the late 1880s, when she wrote *La hija*.² During these years Mexico endured the rule of Santa Ana and the French monarchy of Maximilian and enjoyed the respite of Juárez's reform.³ In Barragán's Mexico, focusing on the moment that a regime crumbles and shifts must have been like looking through a doorway to opportunity, because it is at this moment that one may view the political structure (which, to a significant degree, dictates the social) in its most vulnerable and tentative phase.

In Barragán's Jalisco (a province just northwest of Mexico City), provincial life responded to the ebb and flow of political changes in the capital and to international concerns, such as conflicts with France and the United States. For example, in nineteenth-century Jalisco the "social structure was in constant flux as the expansion of the railroad (under Lerdo de Tejada, González, and Díaz) in Mexico closely linked the national market with that of the United States" (Zalduondo 2001, 46). French occupation meant that more than thirty thousand troops "overran central Mexico" and were stationed in provincial towns during Maximilian's rule (Meyer and Sherman 1991, 390–97). Provincial life, then, did not isolate Barragán from the instability that was more keenly experienced in the capital.

On a personal level, much like the unpredictable changes in politics, Barragán's destiny transitioned by chance—instead of leading her to the

2. The information in this chapter comes from the literary scholar María Zalduondo's (2001) useful research on Barragán's biography, in which she pieces together the scant sources available on the author's life.

3. The shifts in power in Mexico were extreme until Díaz's relative constancy starting in 1876. The 1850s saw postcolonial instability and the near-dozen stints of leadership under the slippery and corrupt, but talented, military leader Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794–1876) from the 1830s to the 1850s. During this time, Mexico endured the loss of Texas in 1836, and the subsequent Mexican-American War, or Guerra de Estados Unidos a México, and an extensive loss of territory to the United States (1846–48). Later, the 1860s brought the respite, for the most part, of enlightened secular liberal reform under Benito Juárez. Juárez's rule was interrupted by a French invasion, facilitated through the efforts of Mexican conservatives. Napoleon III installed the emperor Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph (1832–67, archduke of Austria) in a monarchy from 1864 to 1867. Although Juárez's republican forces defeated the French and Juárez had Maximilian executed in 1867, his presidency was cut short by his death in 1872.

common domestic life of a uneducated Mexican woman, her circumstances provided her with enough education to become a schoolteacher and, later, a noted author. She was born into a family of modest means in the town of Tonila, Jalisco, in 1846.⁴ Her father was a schoolteacher and was saving a portion of the family's already small income for the education of Barragán's older brother. It was through the misfortune of both of her two siblings' deaths that she had access to education; the money intended for the eldest was used to send her to normal school in Colima, and she then moved with her family to Ciudad Guzmán and worked as a teacher there. A fissure had opened up that freed Barragán from the prescribed domestic existence.

In 1869 she married Estéban Toscano Arreola, a professor, and moved to Guadalajara. Barragán continued teaching and writing even while raising her two children—an uncommon practice for nineteenth-century Mexican wives and mothers, who were generally forced to quit once they had a man to support them. After her husband's death in 1879, Barragán remained employed as an educator and added to her significant oeuvre, which included poetry, drama, and narrative. As a widow, she faced the financial burden of being the sole provider and supported her family by publishing and teaching. However, her widowed status granted her the highest degree of legal freedom possible for a woman in the 1880s (Macías 1982, 13). Although in a much less adventurous form than her fictional female heroine, Barragán was sure to have recognized, in comparison with married women around her, the greater agency and freedom she could enjoy as a widow. She put her potential to good use: she is credited with having opened an elementary school and with collaborating with her son, who played a large role in the advent of the film industry in Mexico, to open and manage an early cinema in Puebla (Zalduondo 2001, 73, 87).

Both on a personal level and at the national one, the particular lessons of mid-nineteenth-century Mexico may well have taught the author of *La hija* that political power (with its inevitable effects on social norms) was a precarious and ephemeral force. Her numerous opportunities to experience the losses and gains of power during various moments of historical and experiential shift may explain why she chose to peer into the interstices of power to rewrite the feminine ideal.

4. For biographical information on Barragán, see Zalduondo 2001, 70–76. For an overview of Barragán's literary production and summaries of her works, including her novelette *Premio del bien y castigo del mal* (1884), see 76–87. Barragán also wrote poetry (*Celajes*, 1880), a drama (*Diadema de perlas*, 1873), and several children's books.

Paralleling the slippery evasions of category and stability in Barragán's political context and personal life, *La hija* is a novel that does not fit into a single genre. While some of the more poetic moments in its narrative may show some minor influence of *modernismo*, it is mainly a novel of adventure and intrigue written in the Romantic and realist styles, without any hint of decadence or the more voluptuous landscapes and personages common in *modernista* prose.⁵ The author of the foreword calls *La hija del bandido* “un libro ‘costumbrista’” (Ruiz Cabañas 1934, i) [a book depicting local customs, dress, and social types]; however, this categorization is problematic, because of the prominence of the action-packed plot, which overshadows the few passages describing local customs, landscapes, and festivals.⁶

The story is based on a local legend that was told to the author as a child by her aunt (Barragán 1934, 2–3). The structure of the novel is complex, with the main plot interrupted by tangential intrigues and the nonlinear storytelling including flashbacks to keep the reader up to speed with simultaneous action that takes place in different geographical locations involving various secondary characters. For the purpose of this analysis we will recount the main action concerning the heroine and relevant subplots.

The protagonist, María Colombo, is the daughter of Vicente Colombo, the notorious chief of a gang of bandits. She has grown up in the thieves' hideout in the caves of the Nevado de Colima, a mountain in the state of Jalisco, believing that her father is hiding there for political reasons. On her fifteenth birthday, she is given a letter from her deceased mother that reveals the truth about her father's criminal activity. At that moment, her filial devotion largely vanishes and she embarks on a quest to find her maternal grandfather in the city of Zapotlán (today called Ciudad Guzmán), about sixty kilometers from the caves.

5. The literary movement *modernismo* differs from Anglo literary modernism. Both movements are reactions against Enlightenment and bourgeois ideals. However, first-generation Spanish American *modernismo* came about in the late 1880s and has a closer tie to Romanticism and influence from Parnassianism and the French fin de siècle decadent writers; *modernismo* innovates these tendencies with American characters and themes.

6. Localism (*costumbrismo*) was a valued characteristic of cultural production in Colima in the 1800s (Zalduondo 2001, 66–67). Barragán's descriptions of provincial Mexico inspired national pride, as evidenced by Ruiz Cabañas's foreword to the 1934 edition. His first words are “La aparición de un libro ‘costumbrista,’ que pinte con justeza nuestro medio—rico en el color y singular en la emoción—debe ser saludada con simpatía por lectores y bibliófilos” (i) [The publication of a book depicting local color, that paints precisely our surroundings—richly colorful and uniquely exciting—should be welcomed warmly by readers and bibliophiles]. For more on the importance of local journals and novelists, see the section titled “Rural Ties” in Zalduondo 2001.

Gaining her father's permission and the means to travel requires ability on the part of the young lady to lie, cajole, persuade, and even employ powers of seduction. Although her primary goal is originally to reunite with her maternal grandfather, in a gesture of loyalty to her dead mother, her adventures multiply when she discovers several kidnappings of her father's doing. She thus becomes the heroine who travels to Guadalajara; returns to Nevado; drugs the band of criminals, including her own father; and rescues the victims. Zapotlán is about 125 kilometers south of Guadalajara in the state of Jalisco, and the Nevado de Colima is about 60 kilometers southwest of Zapotlán. I have estimated from the travels listed in the novel that the protagonist journeys about 400 kilometers independently.

In this process of tricking evildoers and saving the day, María falls in love with a handsome young suitor, Rafael. She must, however, reject him on the basis that he would someday discover and resent her shady origins. Rafael has given evidence that this is true when he seems to recognize María as the beautiful damsel who rescues him from the bandits' cave—and questions her involvement there. Proudful and unyielding to her grandfather's and Rafael's pleas for her to wed, María instead decides to enter a convent. Her choice allows her to avoid becoming an Angel of the House and also positions her in a tradition of Hispanic women of letters who joined religious orders.

Denying the Name of the Father: María Granados's New Self

In Barragán's novel, Vicente Colombo is the symbolic father, because he is the leader of the group of bandits and has complete power over that domain, as well as being María's genetic father. Further, his name is reminiscent of Cristóbol Colón (Christopher Columbus), the first conquistador, exploiter, and symbolic father of the *mestizo* (mixed race) and *criollo* (of Spanish lineage) populations of Latin America. Colombo thus performs the "socially regulatory function of the name-of-the-father" (Grosz 1990, 51), to use Lacan's phrase, on abstract levels.⁷ Recognizing that Colombo is both father and law makes María's power over him especially significant from a

7. Lacan's idea of the Name-of-the-Father originates in Freud. In Freud's onset of "normal" adult sexuality (which justifies phallic/social power) the liminal is the transitional space in which this resolution of the conflict with the father occurs. In *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), Freud links the change of state from the infantile autoerotic to the discovery of a sexual object (the mother), and later resolution of the incestuous desire, to symbolism and ritual in tribal societies. Freud bases his theory of the Oedipal complex on the Darwinian imagining of a "primal horde" (a group of jealous sons

feminist perspective. The vicious criminal himself says, “Delante de María soy un cordero, un niño, un manequí a su voluntad y sin fuerza propia” (41) [Before María I am a lamb, a child, a puppet to her will, without strength of my own]. Thus, embedded in an action-packed adventure novel, in which the reader’s attention is drawn into the multiple story lines, there is always the underlying transgression of María’s rebellion against her father and the patriarchal law that his name represents.

The symbolic nature of the Name-of-the-Father is relevant to a feminist reading of the novel because it is Colombo’s *name* that is his handicap in his ability to monitor his daughter’s actions; the same name that means *law* in the hideout marks him as a wanted man in society. Thus he cannot circulate in public unless he disguises himself. María, then, must deny the name of the father and assume a legitimate one in order to stay in Zapotlán. Here, she coaches her servant Juana in the art of assimilating the newfound false identity—the identity that will be her ticket to liberty and public agency:

Juana murmuró con cariño, dando a sus ideas otro sesgo:
 —Yo temo no saber desempeñar bien mi papel en esta comedia. Y si no, ¿Qué diremos ahora?
 [—] Simplemente que venimos desde México a cambiar temperatura, buscando aires más puros, porque me hallo enferma del

who kill and eat their father in order to gain access to the women of the tribe [Freud 1995, 883]). Freud adds to this myth the idea of the sons’ *remorse*, which is the basis for social taboos (thus law): “[Tribal societies] created two fundamental taboos of totemism out of the *sense of guilt of the son*, and for this very reason these had to correspond with the two repressed wishes of the Oedipal complex [desiring the mother, killing the father]” (885; emphasis in the original). The rite of passage is resolved, then, with the sons’ love for and identification with the dead father, and their pact not to desire the mother. In Freud’s European application of the primal horde, the Oedipal complex, the son’s guilt (and subsequent renunciation of the desire for the mother) marks the transition from boy to man and an implicit pact/alignment with the father that determines social structure: “Society is now based on complicity in the common crime, religion on the sense of guilt and the consequent remorse, while morality is based partly on the necessities of society and partly on the expiation which this sense of guilt demands” (887). This pact between father and son, which has not gone unnoticed among feminist scholars such as Irigaray and Kristeva, “founds patriarchy anew for each generation, guaranteeing the son a position as heir to the father’s position” (Grosz 1989, 68).

Although in Freud the correlations between father, law, and society are clearly present, Lacan presents them in terms of abstract law. Citing the fact that a father figure need not be genetically related, and drawing on the God the Father metaphor in religion, Lacan comes to the conclusion that “the attribution of procreation to the father can only be the effect of a pure signifier, of a recognition, not of a real father, but of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father” (1977). In this sense he takes Freud’s theory of the primal horde and the dead father from *Totem and Taboo* and posits it as a master signifier of the symbolic order.

corazón. Además, por lo que pueda ofrecerse, no olvides que mi padre se llama Laurencio Granados; mi madre Gabriela Alvarado, y que soy huérfana. (46)

[Juana murmured affectionately, giving her ideas another slant:

“I fear I will not know how to play my role well in this comedy. And if not, what will we say then?”

(María replies) “Simply that we come from Mexico City to change climates, searching for cleaner air, because I have a heart condition. Moreover, in case anything comes up, do not forget that my father is named Laurencio Granados, my mother Gabriela Alvarado, and that I am an orphan.]

So, in the context of nineteenth-century Mexican society, where women were almost exclusively defined in relation to their male relatives, María’s assumption of her own, original identity—intentionally detached from that of Vicente’s—is a heavily loaded symbolic act. It inserts into the symbolic order an example of a woman who finds her developing sense of self and worth through her own words and deeds.

Apart from the focus on María’s relationship with her father, there is a phenomenon of the elimination of paternal figures in the novel in a more general sense.⁸ Two of the female characters are stolen from their fathers and must fare for themselves: Colombo had abducted María’s mother, Paula, and, by Colombo’s orders, the bandits capture Cecilia, María’s friend and surrogate sister, as well. Women are not the only fatherless young people in the novel. María’s suitor, Rafael, is an orphan, and this term is applied to the gang of bandits. While in nineteenth-century novels in the Hispanic world, Europe, and the United States orphans and orphan-bandits are plot staples that lend themselves to adventures and intrigues (as in novels by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano and Manuel Payno of Mexico, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda of Cuba, Charles Dickens of Britain, and Victor Hugo of France), these writers do not simultaneously draw attention to the triangular relationship of mother–father–child, as Barragán does in *La hija*, to then

8. Paula, María’s mother, writes of her life prior to her capture by Colombo in her letter to María: “No tenía madre ni hermanos; pero tenía a mi padre que me amaba por todos ellos” (23) [I didn’t have a mother nor siblings, but I had my father, whose love for me made up for all of them]. In the case of Rafael, the narrator informs us that “Carecía de padres y hermanos” (62) [He lacked parents and siblings].

rupture it. The symbolic father's role of "instilling in the child the sense of lawfulness and willing submission to the social customs," then, gives way to agency (Grosz 1990, 68). This is one way that the author breaks down the stability or perceived invincibility of her imagined symbolic social structure: by creating a fatherless society in which individuals act independently of this particular restriction.

At the same time that the protagonist rebels against the patriarchal figure, she valorizes the maternal impulses of her mother, who had died soon after María's birth. María's postmortem discovery of the mother's voice via a written document is her impetus for leaving the bandits' cave. By valorizing the mother as the voice of "truth," Barragán's discursive gesture is similar to those of Kristeva, Irigaray, Lacan, and others who have given importance to the mother's role in identity formation.

Barragán's Strategic Liminality

La hija del bandido is a tale set on the threshold of hegemonic society—it is close enough so that the reader is mindful of the dominant social structure's proximity and influence, yet the novel's historical, social, and geographical settings, as well as its protagonist, are slippery enough to fall into an imaginary space just out of mainstream nineteenth-century Mexico's delineations between civilization and barbarism, law and order, and urban and rural. In particular, it breaks the dichotomy of the association of *criollo* men with public participation and agency on the one hand, and the linking of women to private domestic space and passivity on the other. While ruling-class power in historical Mexico grants agency to men almost exclusively and is concentrated in the urban centers, the novel focuses on rural and provincial spaces and marginal bandit society. The author chooses these marginal spaces to present the counterhegemonic notion of feminine agency. The action of the novel takes place about five years before the Wars of Independence, when antiroyalist sentiment was circulating. The positioning of an unorthodox female character at a time when the undercurrents of rebellion were in place is a way of putting a chisel into a crack that is already present in order to open up a space for change.

María's transitional stage between girlhood and womanhood is the most important liminal experiment in the novel. In Hispanic culture the *quinceañera* is generally acknowledged to be a religious and social event that marks a young woman's transition to adulthood. It is "a performance of budding

womanhood on at least two levels . . . religious and social,” complete with “symbols of sexual awakening,” such as the donning of adult formalwear and high-heeled shoes (Cantú 2000, 27–29). This coming-of-age celebration is thought to have stemmed from Aztec and Mayan rites of passage that were assimilated into Catholic religious and social culture in colonial Mexico. Early ecclesiastic documents support this hypothesis, as does the absence of celebrations of its kind in Spain, although there is no conclusive evidence to its origins (3–8).⁹ Important for the focus at hand is the fact that a girl’s fifteenth birthday meant that she was a woman rather than a child and thus marriageable.¹⁰ The date of the fifteenth birthday roughly coincides with menarche and childbearing. It is a date repeatedly mentioned in *La hija*, it marks the pivotal point in the narrative that begins the main action of the story, and it is also the threshold between girlhood and the commencement of a woman’s role as an Angel of the House within marriage.

Because the *quinceañera* is such a poignant moment in a woman’s formation and is profoundly embedded in the fabric of Spanish American society and its gender power hierarchies, I will draw on Victor Turner’s theory of the liminal and liminoid to interpret this rite of passage as a key aspect of the story of *La hija*. Turner uses derivations of *limen* (Latin for “threshold”) to refer to the conditions and persons who “slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (1969, 94). The *limen*, then, can be thought of as marginal space where the laws and rules of a dominant culture are temporarily frozen or neutralized, allowing alternative modes of being to happen, as the liminal transitions from one social role to his or her next.

While in Turner’s earlier work liminality refers to a specific ritual stage in tribal cultures, his later development of the idea of the *liminoid* (liminal-like phenomena) in industrial or post-tribal societies amplifies significantly the applicability of liminality. In brief, liminal personae are participants in a rite of passage who are cut off from their hierarchical societies and lose all social markers, such as class and rank. Normally, in this status-less condition, the members form a “generalized social bond,” which Turner refers to as *communitas*; in the liminoid, however, the marginal state can be achieved

9. The *quinceañera* is still widely celebrated today in many Spanish American countries (most notably in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean) and by Latinos in the United States.

10. In Mexico in the 1930s a girl could get married at the age of fourteen (Cantú 2000, 5). In recent times the *quinceañera* does not mean a young woman is marriageable, but, according to one scholar’s surveys of girls and their families, it often means that she is given more privileges, is allowed to date, and is allowed to wear heels and makeup (28).

by an individual, rather than within a social group, as is the case of María in *La hija*. Turner's definition of the liminoid is worth noting because he describes how it relates to art and literature: "We have seen how tribesmen *play* with the factors of liminality, with masks and monsters, symbolic inversions, parodies of the profane reality, and so forth. So also do the genres of industrial leisure: . . . the novel, poetry, . . . and so on, pulling the elements of culture apart, putting them together again in often random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, sometimes deliberately experimental combinations" (1977, 43). In liminality "the underling comes uppermost" (1969, 102). That is, there is a carnivalesque reversal of authority in which the leader loses all power and the weak exert authority over him or her. Turner identifies the court jester who is allowed to criticize the king as liminal in this sense, a reversal of power that brings to mind María's influence over Colombo.

Several aspects of the liminal (in tribal rituals) and liminoid (in post-tribal societies) can be applied as a way of thinking about how the author positions the protagonist María into a fictional space ripe for symbolic social change. Liminal personae are "necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 1969, 95). Like María, they are often "neophytes in initiation or puberty rites" (95).¹¹ Liminal entities, Turner explains, "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (95). The quality of existing between positions applies to María, as she embarks on adventures upon her fifteenth birthday that bear little resemblance to preparing her for marriage and children, yet she is no longer a child: she is, in fact "betwixt and between" social categories.

11. The main criterion is that the liminar is in fact in transition. Turner, drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's 1960 study, recognizes the rite-of-passage transition stages as separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject . . . is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (1969, 94-95)

Although she is pursued by suitors, the protagonist's mind is on doing everything in her power to free her father's kidnapping victims and making her world a better place.

The liminal is important in terms of social power structures (for example, that of patriarchal oppression) because “[we] are presented, in such rites, with a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties” (Turner 1969, 96). This threshold space of social structure is a place outside the usual social law and the hegemonic symbolic order, where individuals may experiment with the rules of conduct and acceptability: in liminality “new ways of acting, new combinations of symbols, are tried out, to be discarded or accepted” (Turner 1977, 40). It is indeed a space of “creative potentials,” “great flexibility,” and “radical novelty” (40).

So, the liminoid in *La hija* is this ritualistic space between girlhood and womanhood, between civilization (Ciudad Guzmán) and barbarism (the bandits' caves), and between vicereignty and independence, where it is perfectly acceptable that the protagonist does not abide by laws of seclusion and angelic obedience to father or husband—bearing little resemblance to the social and legal restrictions placed on women in nineteenth-century Mexico, as we saw them in Chapter 1 of this study. To give one brief example of María's unrealistic independence (living alone in Zapotlán and doing as she pleases), her suitor, Rafael, questions her: “¿No vives aquí sola, no eres la dueña de tus acciones?” (60) [Do you not live here alone, are you not the master of your actions?]. As noted in Chapter 1, enclosure, chaperoning, and teaching women to internalize appropriate norms of conduct were the three primary safety guards that men used to protect women's honor and ensure their sexual and social conduct (Carner 1987, 97)—measures that are discounted in María's symbolic world.

The Liminoid and the Reconnection with the Mother

In the pre-liminal state, the novel's protagonist is a guileless child and the bandit's hideout cave is the only home she knows. The pre-liminal setting is one of false appearances and lies; María believes that her father is a Mexican freedom fighter hiding out from the Spanish authorities. Because she believes that he is a defender of justice, she shows him due respect and

follows his orders with “alegría infantil” (Barragán 1934, 20) [infantile joy]. When Colombo tells her to enjoy her birthday, for example, she responds in a way that is almost exaggeratedly subservient: “Haré todo lo que me ordenes, y voy a divertirme leyendo este libro” (21) [I will do everything that you say, and I am going to entertain myself reading this book]. The book to which she refers is a prayer book and she has just finished making an altar to the Virgin Mary (her namesake). The semiotics of willing obedience and religious devotion reflect the prescribed comportment for a young woman from a respectable middle-class family.

Before her fifteenth birthday, María believes that she and her father must hide in the cave because he is part of the independence forces and therefore wanted by the Spanish government: “Hija mía, yo estoy aquí porque así conviene a la cooperación de esa grande obra con que los mexicanos soñamos tanto tiempo hace; la obra de la Independencia” (32) [My daughter, I am here because this is what is most convenient to my participation in this great feat about which we Mexicans have dreamt for so long: achieving Independence]. As long as María believes this lie, she remains childlike and obedient to her father. The irony of Colombo’s story is rich: María believes that he represents freedom, yet he is one who imprisons others. In fact, María will be the heroic representative of freedom in the chapters to come, as it is she who both frees herself from Colombo’s clutches and liberates his victims.

Through a revelation upon her fifteenth birthday, she discovers that the safe “home” to which she is confined is based on deceit. María is soon to be undeceived about her father’s artificially constructed home life—and this marks the moment that she enters the quasi-magical liminoid, and the liberty from social bonds it implies. The pivotal moment of transformation in María’s life is when her servant and maternal replacement, Juana, gives the girl a letter from her deceased mother, Paula. The letter, which is among the most poetically written passages in the novel, makes reference to a girl’s fifteenth birthday three times, a common number used in rituals: “Mi juventud se encontraba en la fuerza de su vida . . . [como el espíritu] de los 15 años . . .” / “Quince soles han brillado sobre tu tierna frente . . .” / “Cuando hayas leído este manuscrito, tendrás quince años; ésta es mi voluntad” (28) [My youth was in full force . . . [like the spirit] of the fifteenth year of life / Fifteen suns have shone upon your tender brow / When you have read this manuscript you will be fifteen years old; this is my will]. The magical three-time repetition, which recalls the chanting of a spell, marks the daughter’s passage into the liminal.

The reconnection with the mother presents Paula as the source of truth and liberation (in effect, she takes the place that María's father previously occupied). In a gesture that presents the mother as savior, Paula's voice emerges from the grave and comes to María to release her from her metaphorical prison: the bandits' cave—María's domestic sphere, repeatedly referred to as a "tomb":

[El] alma [de María] entera estaba suspendida entre dos tumbas. La tumba silenciosa, desde cuyo fondo se levantaba la voz de su madre suplicante y llorosa; y la tumba agitada y llena de peligros, en que su padre aguardaría su vuelta; la tumba en que vivían, pues no podría darles otro nombre a aquella extraña morada, sepultada entre las rocas. (35)

[(María's) entire soul was suspended between two tombs. The silent tomb from whose depths rose the voice of her crying and imploring mother; and the rough one full of danger, in which her father would await her return—the tomb in which they lived, as she could not give another name to that strange dwelling, interred among the rocks.]

Within the confining, suffocating enclosure, María feels her mother's *chora* (Kristeva's term for pre-linguistic drives and rhythms that originate in the womb) through the letter, the maternal kiss and emotions: "Sentía [los] besos [de su madre], le parecía escuchar sus palabras ahogadas por el llanto; y luego de aquellos besos y aquellas palabras, no quedaba ante sus ojos más que la soledad espantosa de una tumba" (33) [She felt her [mother's] kisses and she thought she heard her words drowned out by the sobs; and after those kisses and those words, nothing was left before her eyes except the frightening loneliness of a tomb].¹² These maternal impulses, which seem to radiate through the rocks, set off María's agency and propel her into the public sphere to vindicate her mother by reuniting with her maternal grandfather and deserting Vicente.

The idea of the discovery of truth within the shadows of the cave resonates with Plato's cave as a metaphor for the awakening of human

12. Kristeva's *chora* is part of the semiotic realm, a complement to the realm of the symbolic. These pre-linguistic impulses are similar to the rhythm one may sense in music and poetry (1947b, 93–97).

consciousness. Although the cave is a literary commonplace that goes back further than Cervantes' seventeenth-century cave of Montesinos in *Don Quijote* and is prevalent in nineteenth-century Romanticism, here its links to ignorance and discovery suggest a Platonic reading. In *The Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Luce Irigaray posits that Plato's cave is the black hole of ignorance and is analogous to the female *hystera*, or womb, while the light that shines from within the cave from the location of the forms represents masculine enlightenment. (We see another clear example of the cave metaphor as the site of ignorance and the light as enlightenment in Zeno Gandía's novel, which I discuss in Chapter 5.) In Barragán's novel the gender associations with primitiveness and enlightenment in relation to the cave are reversed. Here the dark cave, the site of ignorance and shadows, is the *paternal* space, while the resurrected mother is the source of light and of knowledge.¹³ Paula's maternal words awaken María's consciousness as a subject, activate her agency, and launch her into the public sphere. To do so María must reject the name of the father, a symbol of patriarchal law, as his name carries with it the stain of his crimes. As we have seen, she rechristens herself María Granados.

Following the dramatic scene of the maternal epiphany, the reader is given some light comic relief. The narrator parodies the coming-of-age spectacle of a girl's first grown-up toilette, which here characterizes María's transformation from adolescent ignorance to liminal consciousness:

¡Pobre María! Enjugó sus ojos; arregló sus cabellos, y procuró serenar su semblante, otros días tan festivo. Después fue a mirarse a un espejo; ensayó una sonrisa, y aguardó con cierta coquetería a que entrase su padre a saludarla. Como se ve, la niña comenzaba a ser mujer, y se ataviaba para desempeñar la primera escena. Pronto sería cómica. Había tomado una resolución, ya sabremos cuál era. Para llevarla a cabo, necesitaba fingir, engañar a su padre con una alegría aparente; con una tranquilidad que estaba muy lejos de sentir. . . . Más claro aún, si ella engaña, si ella finge, es porque

13. This Platonic "darkness," the black cave, for Irigaray, is the maternal womb (*hystera*), so that the black space is a metaphor for feminine ignorance and bodily primitiveness, while light is analogous to masculine enlightenment (1985, 243–46). In Plato's metaphor, a line of prisoners faces the interior wall of a cave with a light source behind them. They are able to see only the shadows cast upon the wall of objects that are projected from behind them; they cannot see the actual objects (what Plato calls the *forms*).

aquél nunca le habló verdad. María engañada por su padre, . . . se preparaba también a engañarle. (33)

[Poor María! She dried her eyes, arranged her hair, and tried to calm her countenance, which on other days held such a festive expression. Afterward she went to look at herself in a mirror; she practiced a smile and waited with a certain coquetry for her father to enter and greet her. As we can see, the girl was becoming a woman and she was dressing herself to play the first scene. Soon it would become comic. She had made a resolution and now we will find out what it was. In order to see it through, she needed to feign and deceive her father with artificial happiness, with a serenity that she was very far from feeling. . . . And clearly, if she deceived, if she feigned, it was because that man never spoke the truth to her. María, deceived by her father, . . . prepared herself to deceive him in return.]¹⁴

In this passage there is an ironic twist in the boudoir scene of the *quinceañera*; normally the young damsel would don womanly and seductive attire for the first time in a performance of subservient femininity in preparation for marriage. Here, however, María is beautifying herself to more easily trick or “seduce” her father into allowing her to go to Zapotlán—venture out on her own in the world and, later, to shun her hegemonically prescribed betrothal. The narration is unambiguous about María’s conscious decision to resist paternal authority and forge her own path in life. The Freudian rebellion against the father for the love of the mother is the impetus for the story from here on. However, María does not come to identify fully with the mother, as this stage would mean crossing the line from girlhood to womanhood (that is, leaving the liminal and entering the stage of marriage and motherhood).

María perpetuates her liminality by running away from the symbolic domestic space of the cave and moving constantly between social modes and geographical spaces. During her adventures, she neither takes full part in the society of Zapotlán nor completely loses her connection to the bandits in the caves. For example, when the villain of the story, a bandit named Andrés Patiño, reveals the outlaws’ hideout, placing them in danger in exchange

14. I have altered the short-paragraph formatting of the original text to save space.

for a valid passport, María shows solidarity with her former “family” by exclaiming, “¡Desgraciado . . . !” (199) [The wretch . . . !]. She also insists on wearing mourning for her father after he dies, putting herself in jeopardy by implicating herself with the bandits (199). She is between girlhood and womanhood, in between the purely marginal bandit culture of the caves and the mainstream cultures of Guadalajara and Zapotlán, just as she is, to some extent, loyal to the mother yet still bound to her father in a sentimental, if not an obedient, way. Within this fictional transitional mode in which social structure is softened and claims to power are more easily laid, Barragán takes full advantage of liminal spaces to allow her fictional protagonist to fulfill her desires as an individual, rather than within the marriageable ideal.

Feminine Agency for an Era of Progress: The Carriage and the Opium Vial

In terms of her transition from girlhood through the onset of her *quinceañera*, the pre-liminoid in the narrative is associated with the seclusion within the cave-home, while the liminoid is characterized by ambulatory freedom to roam. Before María’s *quinceañera*, her father recognizes that “la pobre niña vive siempre guardada, si no por espesas rejas de hierro; si, por rocas impenetrables, donde solo el águila anida, y donde habrán de estrellarse siempre, todas las pesquisas de la policía” (7) [the poor girl lives constantly enclosed, if not by thick steel bars, by impenetrable rock where only the eagles nest, and where all the police investigations might some day be launched]. Descriptions of the cave, a metaphor for the home and domestic life, are filled with language denoting darkness, graves, death, crime, and seclusion (11–13). This space is associated with María as the obedient daughter; her “burial” deep in the bowels of the cave is analogous to the *recogimiento*, the domestic seclusion of the home, that I discuss in Chapter one.

While María is in the liminoid mode (post-*quinceañera*), feminine agency challenges patriarchal power, engaging her in active, extradomestic activity that lays claim to public power. In an ironic twist of roles, Vicente’s movement is restricted to the domestic cave—he can only go to Zapotlán in disguise and at great risk of being caught by the authorities (103).

María navigates power in the city surprisingly well for a girl who has never ventured out from a subterranean bandits’ lair. She uses her charms to win over the loyalty of the count of Tunerada (a man of power and her “protector” in Zapotlán), to then arrange with him to help her free her

father's kidnapping victims. Her energy and decisiveness are reflected in the narrator's remarks on Tunerada's admiration of María: "Jamás se había imaginado que aquella joven, arrullada por las brisas de la montaña, fuese capaz de tanta energía como la que acababa de revelar sus últimas palabras" (113) [Never had he imagined that that young girl, lulled to sleep by the mountain breeze, was capable of as much energy as her words had just revealed].

After directing the count on what to tell her father in order to free the prisoners (113), she shows that she is aware of how power works and how to put it to her own use: "Mi padre es algo supersticioso tratándose de mí, y creo que accederá; de lo contrario apelaremos a la franqueza, y . . . quizá al ruego para conseguirlo; pero de todos modos lo haré; apoyada en el prestigio de Ud." (114) [My father is somewhat superstitious when it comes to me and I believe he will give in; if not, we will call upon frankness, and . . . perhaps begging to achieve our goal; but no matter what, I will do it, supported by your prestige]. We see this same determination repeated throughout the plot: when she gets her father to establish her in Zapotlán, when she throws an opium-laced dinner party for the bandits to carry out her plan (which later leads to their demise), and when she frees the prisoners—including her own suitor—in the caves. This is, perhaps, one of the most noteworthy single acts in the story: the damsel navigating the subterranean hideout to release her distraught, imprisoned suitor, the young, handsome law student Rafael.

In addition to being street smart and unabashedly moving in political circles to reach her goals (like Cabello's Blanca Sol, as we shall see), María displays another important element of agency, in her penchant for travel. Travel, except in the case of relocating with one's husband or family, was not acceptable for a Mexican woman who considered herself honorable (chaste and marriageable). Not even in the rare cases of their working as physicians in Mexico City did women venture out to attend an emergency call for a patient; "a respectable woman could not go out alone or at all hours" (Macías 1982, 12). Foreign women's travel accounts of real women in Mexican society are in line with this image of Mexican women as sheltered and immobile. In 1884, Helen Sanborn (a U.S. citizen living in Mexico) writes: "It is contrary to custom and all rules of etiquette for a lady to go on the street alone, even in the daytime . . . it is improper for ladies, even in groups of two or three, to be out after dark unattended by a servant. . . . An American girl does not half appreciate her freedom and independence until she goes to one of these countries" (quoted in Agosín 1999, 210). Thus the narrative inscribes a vehement desire for freedom to travel (expressed by the narrator, as we will discover) that was strictly forbidden in actual society.

The reader catches a glimpse of real-life Mexico's disapproval of women's travel in Barragán's symbolic experiment: María's nanny, Juana, unsuccessfully tries to stop her charge's solo travel. The young heroine shrugs off Juana's fears, issuing her the following mandate before embarking on her quest: "You will remain here until I order your departure or come back for you" (95). María's words are emblematic of her decisiveness in acting on her will and driving the action throughout the plot. Reminding the reader of the real-life Argentine writer and traveler Juana Manuela Gorriti and the fearless French Peruvian Flora Tristán, the novel's dynamic heroine moves freely between the private and public spheres; receives male visitors at her home unchaperoned; and, without anyone getting in her way, travels independently on "dangerous" roads (95). Thus, Barragán's heroine differs from characters in nation-building texts such as those described by the twenty-first-century Hispanist and critical theorist Mary Louise Pratt, in which women are models of republican motherhood: "[Women] are imagined as dependent rather than sovereign; they are practically forbidden to be limited and finite, being obsessively defined by their reproductive capacity" (1992, 30). This is clearly not the case in *La hija del bandido*, as María is an individual who acts according to the dictates of her mind and heart.

Yet counteracting policies of enclosure is only the tip of the iceberg in this feminist altering of the symbolic order of Porfirian Mexico; travel is a metaphor for discursive freedom and the voyage of the intellect. To give an idea of the narrator's conception of travel, freedom, and its link to imagining and writing fiction, let us examine a passage in which the narrator defends her right to make a temporal leap in the plot by comparing her pen to a magic wand:

Cuando yo era niña, solían referirme algunos cuentos de encantadoras, en los que varitas mágicas encendían en mí deseos irrealizables . . .

Hoy, gracias a Dios, he llegado a alcanzar una varita de aquellas, por la que puedo a mi antojo, cruzar en un segundo los mares, visitar el Viejo Continente y el Nuevo y el Austral: en una palabra, entrar y salir a donde quiero, sin pedir licencia: andar tan de prisa que dejo atrás a los que iban delante; y oigo y observo, sin que nadie me observe a su vez. (197)

[When I was a little girl, they used to tell me tales of enchantresses, from which the idea of the magic wand ignited in me impossible desires. . . .

Today, thanks to God, I have come to obtain one of those wands, by which I can, at my whim, cross the seas in a second to visit the old world, the new, and the south pole: in a word, to come and go wherever I want, without asking permission: to walk so fast I leave behind those who were ahead of me; and I hear and I observe, without anyone observing me in turn.]

The magic wand is the writer's pen and the landscape is only limited by the writer's imagination. The idea of freedom is closely linked to the imaginary journey and writing. Here the narrator (who, by her own references to herself as the author, is conflated with the female writer) expresses autonomy in terms of physical movement of one's body through space and the uncensored liberty to observe. Both these themes are reflected in the novel: the fictional María travels and the narrator comments, giving voice to what the heroine sees. Here, again, the narrator's lack of (and desire for) agency and freedom are overt:

¡No hay momentos . . . en que se piense más; en que la imaginación remonte, con más ahinco, su vuelo por los espacios intelectuales y morales . . . que cuando se camina a caballo . . . nos damos cuenta de todas las bellezas agrestes de la soledad. . . .

Pero dejémonos de viajes; pocos o ninguno de mis lectores leerán mi libro viajando; y yo, al escribirlo, no emprendo más viaje que el de la imaginación que inventa, el corazón que siente, y la mano que escribe. (79)

[There are no moments . . . when one thinks more; when the imagination elevates its flight through the intellectual and moral realms with more zeal. . . . Only by riding on horseback . . . do we become aware of the rustic beauty in solitude. . . .

But let us leave the theme of voyages; few or none of my readers will read my book while traveling; and I, upon writing it, do not set forth on any journey, other than that of the imagination that invents, the heart that feels, and the hand that writes.]

The narrator's tone of yearning is apparent in this passage and it is one of the moments of slippage, in which (similar to the novel's riding the edge of fantasy and history in terms of its roots in local legend) nonfictional desires momentarily creep into social commentary by pointing to the almost nonexistent opportunities for women to explore public space without repercussions.

Barragán's expression of early feminism in the topics of freedom, space, and gender politics is a literary gesture not unlike those of later feminist theorists. For both nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminist thinkers, women's space and writing are intimately linked. Latin American women writers during Barragán's era, such as Gorriti, Matto de Turner, and Wright de Kleinhans, were opening up symbolic and real-world spaces by founding their own periodicals and literary organizations.¹⁵ On a concrete level, Virginia Woolf is perhaps the first feminist to write at length, in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), of the important material link between writing and the need for women writers to lay claim to their own private space—signaling the fact that even in the domestic sphere, women did not have control over their environment. The twentieth-century Mexican feminist thinker, writer, and diplomat Rosario Castellanos explores with satire and humor the intricate and, at times, sinister implications of the myths of femininity perpetuated in and by typically feminine spaces, such as the home, the beauty salon, and the secretary's desk, in her 1975 dark comedy *El eterno femenino* (The Eternal Feminine).

Other twentieth-century theorists associate feminine space and writing in more abstract ways. Cixous, for example, believes that women's transgressive writing is the way to break free from the masculine creation of "harem" space (1981, 251), thus creating an abstract space of their own, but also a concrete one, because they could move within their physical space with a feeling of ownership. Irigaray theorizes all space, even the domestic, as masculine, and thus women never truly own it. For Irigaray, the mother is the "space by and in which man can find a position and locate himself" (Irigaray quoted in Grosz 1989, 174) In this view, woman cannot occupy a space of her own because she *is* space, and she later exchanges her possibility for space for his: his home (174). For Claudine Herrmann, *space* refers to both the physical areas around us (the home as well as nations and territories) and the mental arena; each is vulnerable to masculine domination (cited in

15. For a discussion of women's periodicals and literary salons in the late 1880s, see the Introduction in this study.

Grosz 1989, 168). Herrmann draws a parallel between men's control over physical spaces and their domination of a language that is awkward and foreign (literally as well as figuratively) in the mouth of a woman (169). If for Herrmann the way that men oppress women is by aggressively taking possession of mental and physical space, it seems that the gesture in women's writing of revalorizing women's space is one vehicle for repossessing it for themselves by being agents within it. The theories outlined above that offer an abstract concept of space should be taken into consideration for the analysis at hand to remind us that women writers repossess not only imagined "physical" space in writing, but abstract and mental space as well. These views offer interesting alternatives to viewing women's space in terms of the dichotomies private-space-for-women and public-space-for-men. In her novel *Barragán* appears to change the symbolic ownership of space by envisioning a woman who dominates various social orbs and an author/narrator who is an agent within her own creative and imaginative space—and who occupies, temporarily, the imagination of her reader as well.

By writing the theme of travel into her novel as I have described it here, *Barragán* is pointing to the independence and self-realization that one scholar has found in women's travel writing of the nineteenth century: "Traveling embodies a journey of the imagination and the possibility of creating a world of experiences, allowing women to tell of their own adventures instead of being mere receptacles for their male counterparts' stories. Traveling also allows women to witness life first-hand, to become accountable for their own histories, their own destinies" (Agosin 1999, 13). The self-invented *María Granados* dominates the spaces of the criminal's lair, the city, and the open road in her quest to correct wrongdoing. Her aggressive attitude toward the spaces she inhabits makes her one of the most dynamic heroines of the nineteenth century.

The Other Side of Agency: Equalizing Standards

By focusing on *María's* agency, I do not mean to imply that she escapes a superficial classification as an *ángel* on numerous occasions in the narrative. Despite the many heroic acts that *María* performs (her travel, dexterity at handling both known and unknown dangers, and so on), she is still described, at times, with images that conjure up the angelic ideal—although her actions contradict such characterizations, and at times, on the contrary, she is referred to as a "fallen angel" for her ties to the lugubrious

bandits' cave (Barragán 1934, 170). At other times, the narrator makes generalizations about women and motherhood that seem to advocate the Angel of the House, for example: "La que cría y nutre con el alimento de su cariño y la abnegación de su ternura es madre" (63) [A mother is she who raises and feeds [her young] with the nutrients of her affection and her tender abnegation]. Nonetheless, we see the main female protagonist engaging in none of these maternal activities. It is true that she saves the kidnapping victims (which denotes a self-abnegating altruism); however, this is a feat that the (male) authorities would have performed, and one that wins the hero (or heroine, in this case) praise and recognition, unlike the day-to-day nurturing required of a wife and mother that goes largely unnoticed and unrewarded.

The narrative, however, seems to impose angelic standards on the male characters; Rafael (María's suitor) and his confidant, Adolfo, are held to ideals normally reserved for women. While storming the bandits' cave to look for one of the kidnapping victims (whom they do not find), they witness, but ignore, a scene of a woman being taken away on a horse, causing the narrator to comment on their "egoísmo" [selfishness] and lack of "abnegación," "compasión," and "buenos sentimientos" (83) [abnegation, compassion, and good sentiments]. In another section, the narrator exclaims, "¡Oh! Si el hombre tuviera dominio sobre sus pasiones, ese clavo de la virtud" (209) [Oh! If men could only dominate their passions, this urge that impales virtue]. The message is that it is just as important for men to be self-abnegating and restrained in their passions as it is for women.

Barragán also includes an equalizing gesture about morality and gender when she comments upon the wife of one of her father's kidnapping victims. The pair has been separated for a significant period of time (unspecified, but long enough for his wife to suffer in poverty from the absence of his earnings). Rather than present a romanticized view of the reunion between husband and wife, the narrator points out the unjust blame that the wife is likely to face, because their daughter has also disappeared:

Doña Mercedes fue preparada por sus amigos, para recibir no sé si la alegría o el pesar por la vuelta de su esposo, pues en sus tristes circunstancias todo podía caber. Además, en el matrimonio la mujer lleva la peor parte en todo lo que a él atañe; ni mis lindas lectoras dejarán de afirmarlo. Sucede un acontecimiento fatal en la familia, y el hombre culpa a la mujer, aunque ella no tenga culpa. (196)

[Doña Mercedes was prepared by her friends to receive (I do not know which) either joy or sorrow in regard to her husband's return, as in her sad circumstances anything was possible. Moreover, in matrimony the woman bears the heaviest burden in everything related to it; neither will my lovely women readers fail to affirm it. Some fatal event occurs in the family, and the man blames the woman, even if she is not culpable.]

So, just as Barragán equalizes agency in the plot of her novel, she also points to the discrepancy in moral standards set for women versus those set for men. The critique of marriage that the narrator levels above sets the stage for María's refusal to marry and sets up her continuance in the liminal mode.

At the end of the novel, María successfully rescues her father's victims, he dies in a shoot-out with the police, and she is left in the charge of her maternal grandfather, who longs to see her wed and thus protected. He urges: "Un buen esposo a tu lado sería la paz de mi muerte" [A good husband at your side would grant me a peaceful death]. Barragán describes María's reaction: "Pero . . . balbuceó la joven" (220) [But . . . stammered the young woman]. María's hesitancy belies a fear of entering an institution that would deny her the personal autonomy to which she has become accustomed.

Conclusions: The Perpetuation of Liminality

Like all temporary reversals of authority, María's too, must come to an end—or, it *almost* comes to an end. Whereas Turner has found that rites of passage often end in a "return to society as a structure of statuses," María's liminality is never quite resolved, as the convent is another marginal space where society's rules do not apply (1969, 104). Normally in a coming-of-age ritual such as the *quinceañera*, the return to status is marked by a resumption or commencement of sexual relations (marriage); María shuns the marital vow her grandfather wishes to see her take in order to enter the Capuchin order.

By refusing to marry, María refuses, both literally and figuratively, to reproduce the patriarchal model. Opting for convent life means choosing a matriarchal society, one that boasted a history of respected Hispanic poets who were nuns. The best-known examples are the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic Santa Teresa de Avila (real name Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, 1515–1582), a Carmelite, and the seventeenth-century Mexican

baroque poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (real name Juana Inés de Asbaje, 1648?–1695), a Geronomite, whose early feminist messages are the topics of many studies.¹⁶ Although she was not a writer, Catalina de Erauso (1592–1650), known as “la monja alférez” (the nun lieutenant), lived her life in a convent but ran away before taking her vows. Risking charges of heresy, she disguised herself as a man, took the false name Francisco de Loyola, and, as a soldier and later lieutenant in the Spanish army, traveled through South America, leading a life full of drama that included duels, battles, and love intrigues. Barragán’s María is imagined into this tradition of spunky sisters who reject marriage and follow their own agendas inside and outside the convent.

There are several moments in the narrative when Barragán seems to restate Sor Juana’s famous *redondilla*, which begins with “Hombres necios” (Foolish men). In Sor Juana’s verses the poetic voice accuses men of placing blame on women for lapses that the men themselves provoke: “Hombres necios que acusáis / a la mujer sin razón, / sin ver que sois la occasion / de lo mismo que culpáis” (Cruz 1985, 109) [Foolish men who accuse / women unjustly / not seeing that you are the reason / behind the sins for which you blame them]. María hurls the same accusation at Rafael, just before vowing to become a nun: “¡Así sois los hombres todos . . . juzgáis, aborrecéis y despreciáis, sin examinar primero la causa” (Barragán 1934, 201) [Such are all men . . . you judge, you despise and disdain, without first examining the cause]. In another passage, in speaking of how men fail to see that women trick them out of necessity, the narrator restates the same message: “Para alcanzar a conocer [a las mujeres], deberían los hombres hacer un estudio minucioso de sí mismos. Porque la mujer ha sido, y será siempre lo que el hombre quiere que sea” (33) [In order to know women, men should conduct a detailed study of themselves. Because women have always been and will always be what men want them to be]. There is a very close connection, then, between these messages and the famous poem by Sor Juana, which Barragán’s readers might have known, and more important, with which Barragán appears to have been familiar.¹⁷

16. For further reading on the early feminist messages in the oeuvre of Sor Juana, see Cruz 2005; Dill 2001; González Boixo 1995; Kirk 1998; Merrim 1999.

17. According to the early twentieth-century Mexican writer and scholar Ermilo Abreu Gómez (1938) in his book chapter on the history of criticism on the writing of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, well-known nineteenth-century critics such as the Mexican scholar Ignacio Montes de Oca y Obregón (1840–1921) read and wrote about the work of Sor Juana, albeit without the depth that came with twentieth-century criticism. It is likely that a well-read woman such as Barragán would gravitate to the work of an intellectual Mexican foremother; the allusions to Sor Juana’s poetry in *La hija* are evidence of this.

It is, therefore, more feasible to interpret María's entry into the convent as a rebellious act than a domestic-like enclosure.

To conclude, the fifteenth birthday, anthropologically and psychoanalytically significant as a celebration of womanhood, would normally entail the expectation of marriage and a life limited to home, church, and family. In Barragán's novel, however, it is the catalyst for a plot that focuses on the young woman's heroic agency. Barragán's narrative is significant as an early feminist work—not only because it features a dynamic female character, but also because it employs in its narrative strategy dominant (masculine) culture's fissures, gaps, and marginal spaces to create an ambiance in which to subvert the basic tenets of the Angel of the House. Within this space, the author grants the female protagonist freedom to travel, perform the public authorities' job of solving crime, and reject the prospect of a marriage to a man who unjustly questions her morality. Barragán's fantastic liminal agent, María, speaks to the frustrations of women in the Porfirian era (as outlined in Chapter 1) when, surrounded by discourses of progress and scientific advances, they were sheltered, secluded within the home, kept uneducated, and had legal rights only minimally greater than those of minors (Ramos Escandón 1987b, 147).