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Rewriting Womanhood

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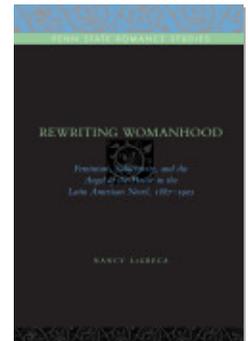
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CONCLUSIONS

THIS JOURNEY HAS LED US through the times and minds of Refugio Barragán, Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, and Ana Roqué. We have rediscovered their texts; traveled into the past to recognize the symbolic social value of their fiction; and analyzed their revolutionary rewritings of womanhood, produced at a time when women who dared to desire higher learning, recalling the biblical Eve plucking the fruit from the tree of knowledge, were ridiculed, deemed masculine, and persecuted. My goal has been to show the cultural, social, and historical value of these women writers (and others like them), as their efforts to redefine the Angel of the House held a wide audience and an important place in the symbolic economy of their times. While the preceding studies of each individual novel and writer illuminate the specificities of the project within the country of origin, a comparative overview yields insight about common approaches to early feminist production.

Women writers of the 1880s and early 1900s witnessed the disruptions of power that arose from the processes of modernization. The rhetoric of equality and education that accompanied ideals of democracy planted the seeds in the minds of women across the region to question the bases of their social and legal inequality. While masculinist discourse relied upon essentializing views of women in Positivist writings to define the limits of women's capacity to learn, writers such as Cabello and Roqué, along with their contemporaries Matto, Capetillo, and others, were drawn to the scientific logic of Positivism for its rhetoric of progress and perfectibility and used scientific-sounding language in their essays and fiction to lobby for the advancement of their sex. Unlike the majority of women in Spanish America of their time, the women discussed in this study were well read and continued to learn and think critically beyond formal instruction. Barragán and Roqué were advocates and reformers of girls' education, while Cabello's essays and fiction emphasized the educated woman's role in civilizing the nation. This shared value points to the essential role of education in

expanding young women's horizons—not only so women would better the nation as homemakers (as ruling-class intellectuals hoped), but also to give them the confidence to critique authority and move beyond their prescribed roles. Education sparked the desire for further exploration, and the Angel of the House's emphasis on abnegation and blind obedience came into stark conflict with the inquiring minds of women. The dynamic fictional female characters who engage in intelligent dialogue and pursue their desires as a means of actualizing themselves as individuals embody the frustration of their authors and their efforts to change the status quo. These lasting fictional models opened doors in the minds of generations of women readers and created examples for future generations of defiant women writers.

Life often resembles literature and this appears true for the writers of this study and others. Cabello, Barragán, and Matto were widowed at a young age, while Roqué and Gorriti were estranged from their husbands. It is probable that the absence of a male head of household allowed these women the privacy to write, free from critical eyes watching over them. The lacuna of male authority in their own lives lent itself to imagining female characters who defy the subservient position of Angel of the House. Indeed, the three women protagonists we have examined break free from the influence of their male Others in their alternative imagined worlds.

Barragán, Roqué, and Cabello draw on similar techniques, using language and imagery to undermine the power of the Angel of the House as a primary social signifier. While patriarchal social forces were behind the dreaming of the angelic domestic ideal, desire for self-realization, fulfillment, and independence fueled this early feminist fiction. Common desires for change pick a common target, and so we have similar literary strategies in play to vie for symbolic power.

All the writers here include and confront the Angel of the House ideal. They present—and glorify—a woman who, at least superficially, resembles an Angel of the House. Although the tenets of virtuous womanhood are contradicted in the narrative or in the actions that the character performs (Barragán's María), or the Angel of the House is put to the task of defending the transgressive character (Cabello's Josefina and Roqué's Matilde), the angelic woman must be included in the narrative as a decoy for fending off negative reactions to the novel. The Angel of the House was unavoidable because she was so intimately linked to these writers' desires, as an obstacle to liberation or because of the frustration she inspired as an unattainable ideal. In any case, because of the reactionary climate for women's social positions in the 1880s–early 1990s, the circumstances were only suitable

for presenting subversive messages couched in a discourse recognizable to the ruling elite and to the typical bourgeois reader. Including the angelic housewife or daughter provided this familiarity and safeguard.

All three writers stripped the Angel of the House of her authority by deconstructing the artificiality of the model or by showing what life would be like outside the model. By handicapping the father figure, Barragán's protagonist engages in a level of agency about which readers could only dream. In the fictions of Cabello and Roqué, each chooses to set up false dichotomies through character development (Blanca/Josefina in Cabello and Julia/Matilde in Roqué) to then show how each model sets an unrealistic standard that their characters cannot achieve as real, mortal humans. The moral downward spiral that the "bad" characters suffer, then, is read as a humanizing representation of women who suffer because of the artificial demands society makes of them. Cabello's focus is on deconstructing the dichotomy of virtue and vice (namely, virgin/whore, Mary/Eve) and critiquing women's education, while Roqué, bolstered by a longer tradition of early feminism by 1903, tackles the onerous task of defending women's sexuality as a natural part of her formation as a subject.

The appeal of the novel to a wide readership was essential to the early feminist project, so creating interest through plot features was necessary in all cases. For Barragán we may point to *costumbrismo* (which inspired local pride and nationalism) and sheer action-packed entertainment—replete with murders, robberies, intrigue, love, and overall drama—that earned her success. Cabello was thought to have drawn on a local personality as the model for her story; thus her novel had gossip appeal to 1880s *limeños*. In addition, she was thought to be one of the first novelists of Peru, drew vaguely on the model of Flaubert's well-known romantic novel *Madame Bovary*, and also included plot fixtures of the time-honored fairy tale of Cinderella (which she reworked into an early feminist version of the tale). The Peruvian's novel was widely read because of her talent for drawing on popular models and giving them a subversive twist. Roqué may have been the most well connected of our writers; she was the first woman ever to be invited into the Ateneo, Puerto Rico's prestigious intellectual organization, and was granted an honorary doctorate from the University of Puerto Rico at the end of her life. Her reputation likely lent name recognition to her work among her peers. Undeniably, the theme of adultery (or, in this case, the verge of adultery), sparked readers' interest, just as readers of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) still enjoy today the piquant draw of sexual transgression. The Positivist, medical theme of "curing" female sexual desire,

the epistolary style, and the positive example of female bonding between the two close friends formed a unique and provocative combination that humanized the wayward Julia to readers. Our authors considered their art as well as their social goals when it came to their subversive projects. A large readership meant power over the imaginations of many.

Barragán, Cabello, and Roqué were of a generation of women writers of the last decades of the nineteenth century who, bolstered by the zeitgeist of the era, the rhetoric of progress, and increasing (albeit spotty) governmental attention to the education of women, formed literary groups, began proto-feminist periodicals, and published their woman-centered writing. Almost all of the women novelists of this era focused on female characters and their plights, and did so in a variety of styles and genres. Several women successfully cultivated the extremely popular travel narrative (both real-life and fictional versions). Flora Tristán, Juana Manuela Gorriti, Eduarda Mansilla, the condesa de Merlín, Barragán, and Zoila Aurora Cáceres all experienced (or imagined) and wrote about the thrill of travel in a period when women's place was in the home. Finding or imagining oneself in a new culture forces a self-reflection and redefinition through new eyes that is only possible in deep cultural interaction with the Other, giving way to processes of imagination of oneself as a subject. Women's precarious place in modernization sparked the content of the novels of writers such as Emma de la Barra, Carmela Eulate Sanjurjo, Cabello, and Roqué, whose protagonists struggle with the superficial demands upon them along with the pressures of conforming to the Angel of the House model. While many women writers exposed and mourned women's emotional and physical suffering through their writing (Roqué, María Néstora Téllez Rendón, Laura Méndez de Cuenca, Matto, Gorriti, and others), some women chose to imagine dynamic women whose agency results in positive life outcomes for them (Barragán, Soledad Acosta de Samper). Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda took up many of these themes and approaches in her novels and plays, so many of which champion the intelligence and passion of women (not unlike herself). Still another way that women writers sought to challenge the status of their sex was by publishing histories of famous European, Asian, and Latin American women; this was true in the case of Zoila Aurora Cáceres, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (in her periodical), Soledad Acosta de Samper, and others. In all these cases one element is constant: they gave voice and agency to fictional women or the "I" of the author, and they as writers presented an example of intelligent, ambitious women whose thoughts and imaginations could not be silenced by an imposed domestic life.

In *Rewriting Womanhood* we have begun to establish what drove women at the turn of the nineteenth century to risk ridicule and alienation by publishing alternative models for female identity. Barragán, Cabello, Roqué, and their contemporaries are on a continuum that can be traced back to the 1500s, in the writing of the Spaniard Santa Teresa de Avila (Spain, 1515–1582), and the 1600s, in the work of María de Zayas y Sotomayor (Spain, 1590–1661) and Sor Juana (colonial Mexico, 1651?–1695), among others, and whose work would set a literary base for later subversive women poets and novelists such as Delmira Agustini (Uruguay, 1886–1914), Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela, 1889–1936), María Luisa Bombal (Argentina, 1910–1980), Alfonsina Storni (Argentina, 1892–1938), Gabriela Mistral (Chile, 1889–1957), Rosario Castellanos (Mexico, 1925–1974), and Rosario Ferré (Puerto Rico, 1938–). While all these women wrote their desires and subverted patriarchal law, each one did so in a way that responded to her social, geographical, and historical context, as we have seen in the case of women writers at the turn of the nineteenth century in the specific examples of this study.

The emergence of a nascent, yet patently formalized, Latin American brand of feminism is discernable in the narratives of Barragán, Cabello, and Roqué. New, empowered visions of female identity present modern images of women in the novels we have examined. Our authors' goals were to redefine womanhood to create an individual as an imagined subject within a symbolic social formation—to write the consciousness of a fictional individual who could work herself into the social scripts of the symbolic order. Their efforts to rewrite womanhood later dovetailed with the endeavors of pioneers of suffrage, editors of feminist periodicals, and educational and legal reformists to pave the road for bourgeois women to advance into the twentieth century equipped with the symbolic tools to achieve greater civic and legal rights.

