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**The Representation
of Women in the Novels
of Juan Valera**

A Feminist Critique



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New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore
Bern • Frankfurt am Main • Berlin • Vienna • Paris

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

DON JUAN VALERA (1824-1905) produced eight full-length novels over a period of twenty-five years, beginning with his most popular novel, *Pepita Jiménez* in 1874 and ending with *Morsamor*, published in 1899, just a few years before his death. During most of this time Valera fluctuated between financial “embarrassment” and economic comfort moving from one diplomatic post to another, often spending for appearance’s sake much more money than he could comfortably afford.¹ Although he chose the diplomatic corps as his vocation, this nineteenth-century Spanish critic, novelist, poet, and playwright also left an extensive epistolary corpus which sheds light on his personality, financial status, political affinities, and literary theory.² Unfortunately, today’s literary historians frequently relegate Valera to an inferior position when they assert that he is the critic who first noted the importance of Rubén Darío, or situate him generationally as a “contemporary” of Pérez Galdós, and a friend of Menéndez Pelayo, and then treat most of his fictional work in a cursory fashion. Since Juan Valera is perhaps most studied today as a novelist, it is also somewhat ironic that he wrote novels primarily as a source of income when he was a “cesante” during Spain’s period of Restoration and then to obtain supplementary income after he had retired from diplomatic service (Thurston-Griswold 89). The double irony is that income from the sale of Valera’s novels, even considering that they were often widely-circulated “novelas de entrega,” was very scant. Luis Monguió provides interesting insight into the plight of some of Spain’s nineteenth-century novelists, among them Valera. He quotes Valera as saying that the money earned from the sale of *Pepita Jiménez* was not even enough to buy his wife a ball gown (111).

From Valera’s contemporaries to the most recent relevant scholarship, critics have attempted to analyze Valera’s eclectic style by appealing to models of classicism, realism, naturalism or other critical modes as measures against which to position his work. Marías points out that Valera

loves everything and concentrates on nothing (584), while according to Havelock Ellis, Valera had a “practical moral attitude toward his fellow-men, which he himself called his Panphilism” (268). This attitude is illustrated by the count entitled “Parsondes” in *Cuentos, Diálogos y Fantasías*. Valera’s Parsondes affirms:

Needless troubles kill the fool, and no one is more a fool than he who worries himself to censure the vices of others merely because he has had no opportunity of falling into them himself, or else has failed to fall into them from ignorance, bad taste, or rusticity. (264)³

Another frequently repeated critical evaluation of Valera’s eclectic nature comes from his contemporary Leopoldo Alas: “Podrán no ser dramas, pero son joyas literarias. ¿Cómo las llamaremos? Ustedes dirán. Yo, entretanto, las llamo ‘cosas de Valera’” (305). In one of the first comprehensive studies of Valera’s novels, José Montesinos prefaces his analysis of the major novels with a statement subsequently echoed by all serious scholarship:

Valera ocupa una posición única en la literatura española del siglo XIX, escriba [sic] novelas, cuentos o cualquier otra cosa. Todo cuanto hace es *valeresco* y queda forzosamente fuera de las clasificaciones usuales. No es posible sumar a Valera a los otros grupos de noveladores, románticos o realistas. (1)

Many critical studies of Valera’s work are genre studies which typically begin with a biography, a traditional approach defended by Valera’s contemporaries as well as later critics. It is not surprising, therefore, that César Barja, writing a chapter of literary history in 1964, reminds the reader of “una relación esencial . . . entre la personalidad del hombre y la personalidad del escritor” (234). DeCoster, on the other hand, argues that the key to understanding Valera’s work and why it defies classification lies in discovering where “Valera the man differs from his contemporaries” (DeCoster 1974, 37). González López makes no apologies for his reliance

on biographical information as a source for understanding the psychology of “Valera’s women,” affirming:

Vamos haciendo un estudio literario, no crítica, de las mujeres de Valera y fuerza es asomarnos a su educación filosófica, a sus modalidades, a su apetencia de saber, a su erudición y agudeza, a las características de su arte, a sus dudas y creencias; y porque hablamos de mujeres, a sus amores también. (54)

Finally, Manuel Bermejo Marcos reminds us that Valera, himself, never tried to hide the fact that “toda su obra rezumaba autobiografía” (75).

Biographical information is important when studying Valera, but equally important to most critical studies is his aesthetic credo. Barja claims that Valera is “uno de los poquísimos que, . . . tiene verdadera estética, verdadero arte literario” (238). Writing in 1968, Bermejo Marcos reflects that “lo que el artista buscaba no era la novela, el poema, o el drama en sí mismos, sino la belleza que podía obtenerse por medio de la palabra, bajo cualquiera de sus formas poéticas” (75). Valera’s belief in “Art for art’s sake,” as evidenced in his own writing, is the subject of Thurston-Griswold’s 1990 study, the aim of which is to provide substantial correlation between Valera’s writing and his philosophy of art.

While during the nineteenth century Leopoldo Alas (Clarín) referred to his fellow countryman as “un autor olímpico” and “un aristócrata del talento” (313) and even as “la esfinge literaria del momento” (240), the study which follows indicates that Valera is more than a man out of time and place in his own century. Modern literary theory offers an opportunity to reread Clarín’s “esfinge literaria” without the necessity of locating him aesthetically or philosophically. Feminist literary theory with its “inextricable link between theory and practice” (Humm x) suggests a new model for analyzing discourse in order to unearth, rediscover, and reevaluate (Selden *Practicing Theory*, 138) the patriarchal ideology underlying a text. A rereading of Juan Valera’s novels in light of what Lacan calls the “patriarchal and phallogentric” culture (199) is not only justified, but scholarship demands that the major fictional contribution to the

canon by this important nineteenth-century Spanish author be reexamined.

Feminist literary theory has its roots in the feminist movement. Many nineteenth-century milestones exist: Susan B. Anthony was born in 1820; Margaret Fuller published *Woman In the Nineteenth Century*, in 1845; the Women's Rights Convention held at Seneca Falls in 1848 marked the beginning of what was to become the international women's movement (Miller 213). Then in 1957 Virginia Wolfe shocked the literary community by claiming that the manner in which men and women produce literature is different. Today the list of feminist critics and critical methods is monumental, and the discipline has been split between those who study representation of women characters in the literary canon and those who practice "gynocritics," studying women writers and how they have often been omitted from the canon.⁴ Patrocínio Schweickart suggests that feminist critics should apply what they've learned from gynocritics about the way women write to general reading by being acutely aware of the way male texts are interpreted. Annette Kolodny, one of the most sophisticated feminist theorists, contends that the goal of the feminist critic is simply to offer new and sometimes different interpretations, claiming as her right the prerogative of choosing "features of a text she takes as relevant because she is asking new and different questions of it" (157). Adrienne Rich who coined the term "re-vision" suggests that feminist criticism is a rewriting of patriarchal culture because it challenges the existing canon asking that it be examined again in an historical, cultural and psychic way. Such analysis becomes an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical approach" (35). And, although Elaine Showalter argues that all feminist criticism is somewhat revisionist because it questions the adequacy of accepted conceptual structures (182), Sandra Gilbert argues us that all feminist criticism aims to do is to "decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority" (6). Jonathan Culler, though not a feminist critic, nonetheless indirectly suggests the relevance of feminist readings of the literary canon when he asks, "[i]f the meaning of