

**WOMEN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF
PEDRO ANTONIO DE ALARCON**

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Foreword

One of the first pieces of Spanish literature I ever read was Pedro Antonio de Alarcón's El sombrero de tres picos. I was greatly impressed with the dynamic and self-sufficient character of "la señá Frasquita". However, the next work of Alarcón's that I read was El escándalo, a novel whose characters, and particularly the female characters, have been almost universally criticized as lifeless caricatures. How could the same author turn out such widely disparate characters? I decided to investigate the matter, concentrating on his short stories rather than his novels for two reasons. First, Alarcón wrote about thirty short stories, compared to only five novels and two very short novelettes. The larger number of female characters should afford a more rounded perspective of their portrayal. And second, Alarcón was very instrumental in the development of the newly emerging genre of the modern short story in Spain, while his contribution to the development of the novel was minimal.

Alarcón is generally considered to belong to the realist school of writers of the second half of the nineteenth century. He is more accurately described, however, as a transitional figure between Romanticism and realism. Allison Peers calls him "un romántico que juega a realista" [a Romantic who plays at being a realist] (512). Peers lists among the salient characteristics of Spanish Romanticism the following; the desire for liberty (399), wild displays of passion (400), patriotism, Christianity, an interest in medievalism (403), sentimentalism and idealism (439), and a love of mystery (476). This study will examine how these elements, which abound particularly in Alarcón's early short stories written during the 1850's, affect his portrayal of women.

Preface

When Colleen Combs asked me to serve as a member of her dissertation committee, I accepted with pleasure and excitement. Not only had she chosen to write about the nineteenth-century Spanish short story, a genre that has been sadly neglected by Hispanists, but she had chosen as the focus of her study an author whose works scholars of nineteenth-century literature read and often enjoy, but write about only infrequently. Alarcón's literary production has generally been deemed less worthy of critical attention than that of Galdós, Pardo Bazán or Clarín. The fact that his work represents a transitional phase between Romanticism and realism is perhaps responsible for some of the critical neglect his work has received. For, while his work is difficult to classify, those difficulties themselves generally hold relatively little interest for contemporary critics. Still, his novels continue to be widely read and appear frequently on master's and doctoral reading lists. It is much less frequently, however, that his short stories are required reading for graduate students.

In this monograph, Colleen Combs has clearly demonstrated that those who read only the Alarcón of El sombrero de tres picos or El escándalo have not really read Alarcón. Not all of his prose is as sparkling and engaging as El sombrero de tres picos; on the other hand, most of it is far less heavily dogmatic than El escándalo. Soon after Alarcón's death, Emilia Pardo Bazán, herself a consummate and prolific writer of short stories and novellas, lamented the unjust critical and popular neglect of many of his short stories, attributing it to the unevenness of his production: "¡Ay! Este suspiro me lo arranca el convencimiento de que, siendo Alarcón un maestro en las novelas cortas, pero un maestro muy desigual, la mayoría del público está más familiarizado con sus bocetos de brocha gorda que con sus finos cuadritos de caballete" (Obras completas, vol. 3, edited by Harry L. Kierby [Madrid: Aguilar, 1973], p. 1384).

Those who read Alarcón a century later will likely concur with Pardo Bazán's judgment, for it is in the stories that we find, not only the hybrid mixture of realism and romanticism that his novels show, but also the most pronounced modernity. As Combs shows, while Alarcón's short fiction is representative of late-nineteenth-century literary innovation in terms of narrative structure and issues of representationality, the representation of women and gender concerns found in these stories reflects a typically fin-de-siècle resistance to change. Thus, while he seemed to welcome the changes in literary style that the closing of the century would bring--experimenting, often to superb effect, with the subtleties of narrative perspective--Alarcón seemed markedly less enthusiastic about the equally dramatic instability in the definition of gender during this period. In fact, the shifting nature of the construction of gender identity during the last quarter of the century seems to have produced in Alarcón the same sort of panic that we see reproduced in other consecrated male writers such as Clarín and Galdós. This anxiety and resistance to change is palpable in the best-known of Alarcón's stories, such as "La Comendadora" and "El clavo." But perhaps nowhere is the fin-de-siècle panic so evident as in "La mujer alta," which was, as it happens, the last story Alarcón published. Combs's discussion of these stories and others firmly situates Alarcón alongside Clarín and Pereda, if not as a thoroughly realist author, then as one who vividly reflects the same anxieties revolving around turn-of-the-century "gender trouble." This study not only provides a much-needed examination of Alarcón as a cultivator of the short story genre, but also opens the way for a closer look at Alarcón's works in the context of nineteenth-century sexual ideologies.

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