

Feminine Agency and Transgression
in Post-Franco Spain:

Generational Becoming in the Narratives of
Carme Riera, Cristina Fernández Cubas
and Mercedes Abad

by

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Introduction:
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CARME RIERA (PALMA DE Mallorca, 1948), Cristina Fernández Cubas (Arenys de Mar, 1945) and Mercedes Abad (Barcelona, 1961) have gained unparalleled acclaim as writers who have raised vital questions regarding feminine cultural agency and transgression in Spain following the dictatorship of Generalísimo Francisco Franco (1892-1975). Riera, Fernández Cubas and Abad first won the attention of the general public as short story writers. Riera published her first two collections of short fiction, *Te dejo, amor, en prenda el mar* and *Y pongo por testigo a las gaviotas* in 1975 and 1976, respectively.¹ Fernández Cubas followed suit shortly thereafter, publishing *Mi hermana Elba* in 1980 and *Los atillos de Brumal* in 1983. Abad, the youngest of the three, began her career in 1986 by winning the *Sonrisa Vertical*, Spain's national literary prize for erotic literature, with *Ligeros libertinajes sabáticos*. Each has maintained her stature in the literary world through

¹ These works were originally published as *Te deix, amor, la mar com a penyora* (Barcelona: Editorial Laia, 1975) and *Jo pos per testimoni les gavines* (Barcelona: Editorial Laia, 1977).

the cultivation of other genres, particularly novels and plays.²

Nonetheless, little scholarship examining a common underlying theme among their narratives—feminine agency and transgression as expressed in generational terms—has been published. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the ways in which female protagonists portrayed in works by Riera, Fernández Cubas and Abad do not simply invert patriarchal paradigms of power but rather interrogate and destabilize isomorphic gendered categories that women have traditionally occupied. I dedicate one chapter to each author, specifically analyzing the ways in which each re-writes the categories of “mother,” “daughter” and “sister” through her narratives.

The title I have chosen to frame this study, *Feminine Agency and Transgression in Post-Franco Spain: Generational Becoming in Carme Riera, Cristina Fernández Cubas and Mercedes Abad*, calls to mind popular Western beliefs that portray women as either passive sexual objects manipulated by male authorities; or as *femme fatales* and *agent provocateurs*, women who stereotypically incite harm by using their aberrant sexuality to ensnare hapless men.

But is transgressive activity gendered, and what—if any—relationship exists between gender and agency? Theoretically speaking, transgression itself is not gendered. However, in as much as Western norms have defined males as active participants and females as passive undergoers of taboo, sexual activity, theories of transgression have mimicked and perpetuated like models of male and female behavior. Historically speaking, this pattern of expectations regarding male and female sexual behavior traditionally represented males as independent agents,

2 Riera is the author of the novels *Una primavera para Domenico Guarini* (1981), *Cuestión de amor propio* (1987), *En el último azul* (1995), *Por el cielo y más allá* (2001) and *La mitad del alma* (2003). Fernández Cubas is the author of the novels *El columpio* (1995) and *El año de gracia* (1987) as well as the play *Hermanas de sangre* (1998). Abad, for her part, has authored the novel *Sangre* and has several screenplays to her name.

both of self-defined interests and of the social hierarchy as a whole. For their part, women typically served as submissive counterparts to male agents; they patiently waited to gain permission to act within patriarchal social systems and were called to surrender to “maternal natures,” instinctively caring for children and extended family members. According to this model, women were ultimately defined as powerless to operate as individuals and branded as self-interested if they acted autonomously. Whereas males appeared to embody agency, implicitly combining sexual potency with self-assuredness in economic, political and social realms, for women, agency was rendered null or dispersed. For instance, female agency might be relatively acceptable if it were allied with maternal functions, such as child-rearing. But one could not accept female agency if doing so meant permitting the female subject to openly express sexual desire. A unique exception to this paradigm in Iberian culture might be found in Renaissance mystics such as Santa Teresa de Jesús, who transcended the secular world while satisfying the requirements of womanliness by being an agent of the Divine.

During the early years of the Franco regime, Spaniards were intensely indoctrinated in accordance with these familiar Western models of gendered agency. According to the nationalist tenets of francoism, a Spanish woman’s place was in the home, and that home should be filled with children.³ A good wife unquestioningly took care of her husband and children, making sure that their needs were seen to before she saw to her own. What’s more, while a wife might appear to have some control of the home since she cared for it as well as its inhabitants, legally she had no right to property, nor could she make any decision with regards to the distribution of property within the marriage. If this were not enough to make most women cringe,

3 Helen Graham’s article, “Gender in the State: Women in the 1940s” is particularly illuminating. The article can be found in *Spanish Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Helen Graham and Jo Labanyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 182-195.