

From the Outside Looking in:
Narrative Frames
and Narrative Spaces in the
Short Stories of Emilia Pardo Bazán

by

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Introduction

No faltará algún lector que al percibir el título de esta pequeña historia crea que voy a presentarle uno de esos matrimonios tan comunes en este siglo, en los cuales el dinero entra por todo y son un negocio como otro cualquiera. No. Voy a referirle un episodio sencillo de la vida práctica, que he visto mil veces, y el lector habrá contemplado otras mil desarrollarse ante sus ojos. (III: 412)¹

THE LINES QUOTED ABOVE are the opening paragraph of Emilia Pardo Bazán's first short story, "Un matrimonio del siglo XIX," which was published when she was just fifteen years old.² The tale tells the story of a young couple that falls prey to the excesses of conspicuous consumption and squanders all of their money during the first months of marriage. There are two noteworthy aspects of this passage: first, a narrative structure that draws in readers by making suppositions about their lived experience, and second, the presentation of a very pessimistic view of marriage. Likewise, many of Pardo Bazán's more than six-hundred published short stories employ various narrative techniques to draw in the reader while one of their recurrent themes is the social institution of marriage, with the vast majority of the stories presenting failed unions. To some degree this finding is not surprising, given the number of nineteenth-century literary works that show a less than blissful state of marital affairs. In her study *El amor en los cuentos de Emilia Pardo Bazán* the critic Ángeles Quesada Novás also asserts the generally pessimistic view of marriage presented in our author's tales: "todas las historias relatadas son historias de fracasos, malentendidos, frustraciones, desdichas, tragedias" (287). The

1 All references made to Pardo Bazán's short stories throughout this study will come from Paredes Núñez's four-volume edition of her *Cuentos completos*.

2 Pardo Bazán got married the same year that she published this story.

prominence of the theme of love in Pardo Bazán's short fictional corpus is evident, given that 180 of her 600 published stories focus on this theme (Quesada Novás 259), including the first and last stories she published, "Un matrimonio del siglo XIX" and "El árbol rosa," respectively.

Pardo Bazán was a particularly compelling and polemical character on the nineteenth-century Spanish literary and cultural scene. While she is best known today as a novelist, she participated in Spanish culture in many capacities. Not only did she contribute regularly to the academic, political and social debates of her time, she also introduced new literary trends to the Spanish public. Her articles published under the title *La cuestión palpitante* (1882-83) informed Spanish intellectuals as well as the general public of French naturalism and the works of Émile Zola while her writings on the Russian novel familiarized her countrymen with the work of their Eastern European counterparts. Her vast body of work includes thousands of essays, a volume of poetry, eight plays, approximately six-hundred short stories, and twenty novels. Moreover, her participation in the printed media of her day as a journalist who regularly contributed both fictional and non-fictional writings to several of the most prominent Spanish and international periodicals was surpassed by few.

The only child of an upper-middle-class Galician family, Pardo Bazán was raised by a liberal-minded father who encouraged her to develop her intellect from a very young age. She was educated in a private French school in Madrid, where she fully immersed herself in her studies. Married in the springtime of her life, at the age of fifteen, she still managed to pursue her literary interests and become one of the leading writers of her time while she raised three children. Her family's prosperous economic situation as well as the willing support of her mother in the administration of her home made all of this possible. Her marriage, however, lasted just fifteen years. The countess became permanently separated from her husband after he insisted that she abandon her pen due to the scandal that ensued because of the supposedly immoral and anti-Catholic issues she raised in *La cuestión palpitante*. This polemic was ultimately resolved, at least in our author's

mind, after she took a trip to Rome to visit a Catholic cardinal who declared that her treatise on French Naturalism contained nothing immoral. This was just one of many polemics in which Pardo Bazán became involved during her more than fifty years as a leading writer and intellectual.

Many of the critiques that other writers of her day made in regards to Pardo Bazán's literary work made reference either directly or indirectly to her sex.³ Since she was one of very few female writers of her generation to gain access to the intellectual circles and debates of her time, Emilia Pardo Bazán often had to strike a difficult balance to maintain her status while still defending her novels against unfair attacks.⁴ Indeed, in the introduction titled "The Androgynous Lady" of her study *Cigar Smoke and Violet Water*, Tolliver observes the challenging position in which our author found herself, as a female writer who rejected the feminine genre of domestic fiction while she held a place in the male Realist tradition. Indeed, Tolliver contends that we find hints of this conflicted lived experience of Pardo Bazán in the distinctly marked masculine and feminine gendered discourse of her short stories. Maryellen Bieder also reflects on this issue, noting that the countess often disregarded traditional notions of appropriate genres of writing for men and women. Bieder asserts: "Pardo Bazán's realignment of the gendered spheres of writing in her criticism and the distance she maintains from the community of writing women tend to confirm her desire to be read—and to read others—outside the framework that imposed gendered assumptions on authors and their writing" ("Women" 109). Pardo Bazán herself declares that neither writers nor writing are bound by gender: "dentro del terreno literario no hay varones ni hembras" (qtd. in Scanlon 144). Nevertheless, we must not overlook the fact that there were very few female writers in

3 The most outspoken critic of Pardo Bazán and her work was Clarín. José María de Pereda, Eduardo Calcaño, Luis Alfonso, Juan Valera and many others also engaged in open debates with her, in which they regularly evoked her gender as a handicap to her abilities as a writer.

4 For a more thorough discussion of the attacks made on Pardo Bazán and her work by her contemporaries, see pages 23-33 of Tolliver's *Cigar Smoke and Violet Water*.

Spain's nineteenth century, and the countess stands alone as a female intellectual and writer who regularly contributed to the male genre of Realist fiction.⁵

From the number of feminist essays that our author published it is clear that she was very concerned with improving women's roles in society. While her feminist non-fictional writings encompass a truly striking breadth of issues, her main area of concern is undoubtedly the improvement of the educational opportunities available to women.⁶ Another principal area of concern for our author is the influence of traditional restraints imposed upon women by patriarchal culture.⁷ She asserts in these writings that in many cases it is the traditional customs to which most women continue to conform that are keeping them from more actively participating in the public realm. Through the development of these themes she also discusses the double moral

5 There were a number of female writers, such as María Sinués de Marco, Carolina Coronado, Faustina Sáez de Melgar, and Cecilia Böhl de Faber, who wrote domestic fiction during the mid-century. These novels, which were written exclusively for a female readership, highlighted the domestic virtues of their heroines, who performed their responsibilities as wife and mother with grace, virtue and selflessness, while always remaining within the domestic space.

6 For a more complete critical discussion of Pardo Bazán's essays, see Mary Lee Bretz, "Emilia Pardo Bazán on John Stuart Mill: Towards a Redefinition of the Essay"; Elizabeth Ordóñez, "Revising Realism: Pardo Bazán's *Memorias de un solterón* in Light of Galdós's *Tristana* and John Stuart Mill"; Maryellen Bieder, "Woman, Literature and Society: The Essays of Emilia Pardo Bazán" and "Emilia Pardo Bazán y la emergencia del discurso feminista"; and Adna Rosa Rodríguez *La cuestión feminista en los ensayos de Emilia Pardo Bazán*.

7 In this study the terms "patriarchal culture" and "patriarchy" refer to the environment created by the repressive social norms that governed women's lives while it gave more and more liberties to men of all classes during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Spain. Unlike the relative progress of its northern and central European neighbors, at the turn of the century Spain still maintained inequitable social mores that did not allow its female citizens to participate in society outside of the domestic sphere. Its antiquated social code forbade women from a university education, the right to vote, to publish or to own property without their husbands' permission. For a more complete discussion of women's roles during this timeframe, see *La mujer en los discursos de género* by Jagoe, Blanco and Enríquez de Salamanca and *La polémica feminista en la España Contemporánea* by Geraldine Scanlon.