

RESEÑAS

CRÍTICA Y ENSAYO

Roberta Johnson. *Gender and Narration in the Spanish Modernist Novel*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2003. xi and 349 pp.

When the title of a scholarly book includes words such as «gender» and «nation,» readers might naturally anticipate some theoretical hand wringing. After all, these terms are slippery enough to begin with, but are especially so when vexed by persistent social, political, and historical tensions within academia. Further, such terms are frequently deployed by theorists from a range of disciplines and with sometimes conflicting objectives—see, for example, the writings of Bhabba, Butler, Foucault, and Nussbaum, all mentioned in the book. Happily for the reader of *Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel*, however, Roberta Johnson chooses not to enter the theoretical skirmishing. This is a felicitous decision not because it permits the simplistic leveling of complex issues (Johnson's approach is anything but simple), but because the outcome in this instance serves as a synecdoche for critical clarity. Indeed, rather than rehearse irresolvable theoretical disputes that could easily scatter her discourse in many directions, Johnson lays out her functional understanding of key terms in the preface and moves directly to the clearly defined task at hand.

This task turns primarily upon the study of women writers in Spain from the early twentieth century who too often have been neglected by critics and literary historians. Johnson sets her critical eye on wider terrain, however, drawing into her discussion several canonical male authors of the time to illustrate clear divergences in the representation of gender and in the conceptualization of Spain as a nation. It is here where Johnson's purposeful succinctness comes fully to bear: she employs the term «nation» to refer to an imagined community of myths as well as to a concrete political entity; «gender» is defined straightforwardly as a social construction that imposes norms on males and females alike. In general contrast to male authors, Johnson attributes to women writers a strong interest in social modernism that engages issues of domesticity, gender roles, and relations among the sexes. The core of Johnson's analy-

sis then gives substance to these general assertions within the context of early twentieth-century Spain.

In the two chapters that begin her study («The Feminist Novel in Spain at the Crossroads of Modernism» and «Women and the Soul of Spain»), Johnson convincingly argues that modernist women writers in Spain invest in social representations of women outside of their traditional roles. Johnson makes this case intelligently and persuasively through contrast with male authors, who generally were far more interested in linking women to eternal values and essential traits of the nation (e.g., Unamuno's «intrahistoria» and Azorín's «el alma castellana»). While in works such as Unamuno's *Paz en la Guerra* (1897) and Azorín's *El alma castellana* (1900) or *Castilla* (1912) women characters form the foundation of the nation through their mythic labor as mothers and homemakers, novels by women writers (e.g., María Martínez Sierra's *Tú eres la paz* (1906) seek to show women as efficacious intellectual beings who function socially and politically outside their assigned roles in myth and metaphor. From the imposing biological discourses of the time, which male writers often used to ensnare women in stories with someone else's interest in mind, to the counter discourses of women that promoted education and independence, Johnson explains how social modernist writing by women refused to embrace the traditional and the canonical as a way of perceiving and living in the world.

Yet as Johnson shows in the two subsequent chapters on Don Quijote and Don Juan, female writers joined their male counterparts in exploring the literary canon of Spain. They did so, however, with a different purpose and understanding of what these canonical figures actually stood for in contemporary society. For example, many male authors envisioned Don Quijote as a symbol of Spanish idealism in the face of an overdetermined materialism in the modern world. But for these writers, Don Quijote was clearly a role to be played by men: in novels by Unamuno (e.g., *Amor y pedagogía*, 1902) and Azorín (*Felix Vargas*, 1928), only male characters are permitted to imagine worlds that clash with reality. However, Johnson insightfully shows how in works by Martínez Sierra (*El amor catedrático*, 1910) and Concha Espina (*La esfinge maragata*, 1914) there occurs a «de-Dulcineaified Spanish woman» (109) who is allowed to launch flights of imagination of her own.

The figure of Don Juan similarly draws forth different reactions by men and women writers in their perception of gender roles. While male canonical authors regularly portrayed Don Juan as a figure linked to a traditional Spain circumscribed by a modern and progressive world (even as controversy surrounded the broader tensions over Don Juan as a symbol of Spain's dynamism on the one hand and decay on the other), women writers (including Martínez Sierra, Blanca de los Ríos, and Carmen de Burgos) more forcefully drew forth Don Juan's social irresponsibility. Importantly, they portrayed him in relation to women with a

greater sense of self and agency who refused to fall prey to the powerful Don Juan of tradition.

In chapters four and five Johnson continues to identify sexual and gender distinctions in fictions of the period with a focus on female protagonists portrayed by both men and women writers. In «Baroja's, Unamuno's, and Azorín's Failed Feminists,» Johnson draws out the myriad of ways in which novels by these authors contest growing feminism in Spain and how each protagonist, as Johnson puts it, «ultimately fails in her personal relationships and comes to a rather unpleasant end» (146). In the following chapter entitled «Biology as Destiny» (the most thoughtful and original of a book that is immensely original throughout), Johnson synthesizes the ideas of Pérez de Ayala, Unamuno, and Carmen de Burgos in response to Gregorio Marañón's ideas on gender. To be sure, as Johnson demonstrates, there is more than a whiff of male supremacy here. Johnson also scrutinizes in this chapter Rosa Chacel's voice of dissonance in *Memorias de Leticia Valle* in the context of gender debates of the time. In particular, she underscores the strong ties of women modernist writers to the Spanish Republic, where ideally (though perhaps not in practice) men and women stood together to proclaim social and legal equality. The women writers examined here (Burgos, Martínez Sierra, Nelken, Montseny, Chacel, Zambrano) advocate strong participation by women in new social configurations of a Spain plunging headlong into modernity with scant tradition to support it. It is here too where Johnson brings gender and nation fully to the fore as a construct of vision, imagination, and agency.

Gender and Nation in the Spanish Modernist Novel is constructed upon the strong foundation of literary history, social hermeneutics, and textual interpretation. Throughout her study Johnson displays complexity of thought while embracing clarity of expression; she is sensitive to nuance and subtle progression in individual writers, but also asserts broad conclusions drawn from the patient reading of texts and their contexts. *Gender and Narration* is a worthy complement to *Crossfire* (1993), Johnson's previous work on early twentieth-century Spain, and will no doubt resonate widely in the field of the modern(ist) Spanish novel.

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Fidel López Criado *et al.* *La cuentística de Wenceslao Fernández Flórez*. A Coruña: Deputación da Coruña, 2002.

El *Equipo de Investigación Wenceslao Fernández Flórez*, de la Universidad de A Coruña, dirigido por el profesor Fidel López Criado, nació con el propósito de estudiar, catalogar y dar a conocer los materiales procedentes del rico archivo del escritor, depositados hoy en la biblioteca de la Deputación Provincial da Coruña.