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Lou Carnon-Deutsch, "Narratives of Desire: Nineteenth Century Spanish Fiction by Women"

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Book Review: Lou Charnon-Deutsch. *Narratives of Desire: Nineteenth-Century Spanish Fiction by Women*. Penn State Press, 1994. 223 pp. \$28.50. £26.00

This study serves as a complementary text to Charnon-Deutsch's 1990 book, *Gender and Representation*, which focused on the depiction of women in canonical, male-authored novels from the nineteenth century. She now turns her attention to women writers of the same period, whose works largely fall outside of the Spanish canon. Charnon-Deutsch asserts that these authors did not use their texts to rebel against the power relations of male-dominated society. Rather, domestic fiction was penned by women to prepare their middle-class female readership for the realities of patriarchal social systems and to help those readers deal with non-supportive or abusive spouses. Consequently, Charnon-Deutsch reassesses the concept of the *angel del hogar* in a less-critical light. Referring primarily to the novels of Sinues de Marco, she shows how the self-abnegation and sacrifice common to female characters can be viewed not as passive submission, but as proactive measures toward the laudable goal of establishing marriages in which both parties come together as non-objectified subjects. These characters seek connectedness with their husbands, but when the ideal is unrealizable despite their efforts, they find solace in supportive relationships with female friends and relatives. Such coping strategies by literary heroines provided guidance and self-esteem for women readers in similarly restrictive situations.

But as Charnon-Deutsch notes, the positive aims of domestic literature were overshadowed by their negative effects. By advocating self-denial and the stifling of personal desires, these novels promoted masochistic behavior in women. They taught wives to define pleasure as the voluntary deferment of their own gratification in order to serve their families.

Thus, these women-authored texts unwittingly worked in collusion with the larger social mechanism of bourgeois capitalism and Catholic conservatism, which endeavored to keep women within their conventional roles despite the social and economic changes occurring in Spain at the time.

After showing nineteenth-century women's writing to be both a product and a proponent of patriarchal institutions, Charnon-Deutsch then highlights certain texts which display internal contradictions that subtly undermine the masochistic message projected by most domestic literature. For example, Rosalia de Castro's *El caballero de las botas azules*, though criticizing its liberated female characters, also explores the need for women to grow intellectually and proposes that writing be included among the socially sanctioned occupations for women. Pardo Bazan's novels uphold traditional class distinctions, but nonetheless, some plotlines challenge the gender system operating in both marriage and parenting. *Los pazos de Ulloa*, *Memorias de un solteron*, and *Insolacion* all feature atypical male characters capable of the shared compassion between men and women idealized in domestic literature. The sympathetic--albeit socially unacceptable--bond between Julian and Nucha in *Los pazos* becomes amplified and legitimized in the two later works, where Mauro and Pacheco not only accept their wives as individuals, but actually facilitate their personal growth. Pardo Bazan is also joined by Monserda i Vidal in suggesting that women can achieve both self-fulfillment and financial independence through meaningful work. Antonia in Monserda's *La fabricanta*, like Fe in *Memorias de un solteron*, finds freedom within the bonds of marriage by expanding her daily duties beyond those pertaining to her immediate family.

The feminist approach of this book draws on Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as well as Foucault's theories of power, sexuality, and discourse to explore issues of

gender formation and culturally constructed feminine desire. Charnon-Deutsch convincingly shows that the nineteenth-century woman writer--whether providing practical models of behavior for women or imagining ideal models of behavior for men--both affected society and was affected by it. Unfortunately, however, Charnon-Deutsch's tightly constructed individual arguments suffer from the loose organization of the book as a whole. The transition between its first portion (dealing with domestic literature in general) and the second (citing exceptions to the norm) is not clearly articulated. This results in unnecessary confusion midway through the book. The introduction only prepares the reader for the first two chapters, and it is not until the book's conclusion that all five chapters are systematically tied together. Furthermore, the pictorial illustrations randomly scattered throughout this study are insufficiently linked to the literary material to warrant their inclusion, although they do provide a tantalizing foretaste of Charnon-Deutsch's proposed sequel to this book, in which she will explore the gender issues involved in other forms of popular culture.

-- Linda M. Willem,
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