

10-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

"Constructions of Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century Spanish America." *Hispanic Journal* 21:2 (Fall 2000): 409-420.

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CONSTRUCTIONS OF DOMESTICITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICA

It is by now a commonplace that in nineteenth-century Spanish American literature the family serves as a metaphor for the nation and that authors express their political agendas through allegories of courtship and marriage. In such readings, potential love matches symbolize the reconciliation of contesting political or ethnic groups and point toward ways for the newly-formed Spanish American nations to negotiate difference without falling into civil war. Most notably, Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* succinctly explains her project—subsequently taken up and adapted by a generation of critics—as one that wishes “to locate an erotics of politics, to show how a variety of novel national ideals are all ostensibly grounded in ‘natural’ heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts at midcentury” (6). At its core Sommer's interpretations of what she identifies as the key novels in nineteenth-century Spanish America are concerned with courtship and the process of arriving—or failing to arrive—at successful matches. Her analysis concentrates on erotic love and the ways by which lovers overcome obstacles to marry and thus consummate the political unions signified by their personal relationships. As she says, “Erotic passion was [... an] opportunity (rhetorical and otherwise) to bind together heterodox constituencies: competing regions, economic interests, races, religions” (14). Her work focuses, then, on the characters' struggles to lay claim to their love objects and on the resolution of those struggles in matrimony. *Foundational Fictions* offers a highly convincing analysis of Latin America's national novels and a rubric for further literary criticism that ties together representations of personal and political events.

While Sommer emphasizes the search for successful (love) matches, however, nineteenth-century Spanish American narratives also tend to display a persistent interest in describing what happens *after* the marriage. This domestic discourse, representing established families, often runs parallel to the courtship narratives as young lovers meet and make their way

against a backdrop of domestic scenes; at other times, the home and the relationship between husband and wife or between mother and child form the centerpiece of the tale. Such constructions of domesticity appear both in Sommer's foundational fictions and in other nineteenth-century texts. Sommer affirms: "The domestic romance is an exhortation to be fruitful and multiply. Exhortation is often all we get though, along with a contagious desire for socially productive love and for the State where love is possible, because these erotico-political affairs can be quite frustrating. And even when they end in satisfying marriage, the end of desire beyond which the narratives refuse to go, happiness reads like a wish-fulfilling projection of national consolidation and growth, a goal rendered visible" (6-7). But it is also frequently the case that many texts do show the consequences of the productive unions that the foundational fictions advocate. Such stories and novels help illuminate our understanding of the nineteenth century Spanish American literary imagination and its role in constructing public discourses about the supposedly very private issue of the domestic sphere.

Men and women alike produced novels, stories and articles revolving around the domestic theme. Although many of these works, especially those written by women, failed to enter the literary canon that established the "national novels" in the early part of the twentieth century, such writings were an important part of the literary discourses circulating throughout the nineteenth century. Their stories and serialized novels, often published in journals and magazines with predominantly female readerships, were both popular and influential. The criteria instituted by later literary critics who valorized features associated with realist literature frequently did not leave room for writers whose works tended toward the romantic and the didactic. Nonetheless, their exclusion from the canon bespeaks neither a lack of popularity nor a lack of interest in domestic topics among the reading public at the time of publication. Like the national romance, domestic tales offered readers the means by which to imagine themselves involved in nation-building activities. On the other hand, domestic ideology, with its rhetoric of sacrifice and self-abnegation for the good of the family, not infrequently came into conflict with the attributes of self-determination and single-mindedness necessary for the heroines of national romances. As we shall see, however, whether complementing or contradicting the national romance, domestic discourses formed an important element of the nineteenth-century Spanish American literary

imagination.

Novels and stories that invoke the domestic trope should be read against the backdrop of nineteenth-century rhetoric about the private sphere, the home, and family. Articles and stories published in magazines meant for a predominantly female audience consistently display certain ideas and themes revolving around the idea of domesticity and women's duties in the home and the family. But by claiming continuity between the home and the nation, authors of domestic narratives also made the case for the importance of women's role in constructing and maintaining the nation. Journals dedicated to women, some even boasting all-female editorial staffs, flourished throughout Spanish America. In Mexico, the weekly magazine *Violetas del Anáhuac* appeared from December 1887 to June 1889, directed first by Laureana Wright de Kleinhans and later by Mateana Murguía de Aveleyra. *Violetas del Anáhuac* contained society news, fashion, stories, poetry, biographical sketches of notable women, instructional material about science, history, and art, and household hints. The editors frequently argued for women's education, praising women such as María Yáñez after her successful defense of her nomination as a school principal: "no puede ser más loable ni más santa la idea que la ha decidido a consagrarse al trabajo, en la flor de su juventud y belleza" (Domenella and Pasternac 448). Nonetheless, women's learning was primarily important because of their role in the home; educated women were vital for raising appropriately domesticated daughters, capable of running the complex affairs of the home. The ideal advanced by *Violetas del Anáhuac* depicts a domestic space in which women devote themselves to the well-being of their families rather than privileging their own wants and desires. This is described as women's highest responsibility, suggesting that women have a duty not just to their families but to society as a whole, given that the family is the linchpin of society.

Similar ideas run throughout women's journalistic writings in nineteenth-century Peru. In Juana Manuela Lazo de Eléspuru's article "La Hermana de Caridad: Reminiscencias", published August 1, 1874 in *El Álbum*, the author uses the image of self-sacrificing nuns as a womanly ideal. Lazo de Eléspuru (1819-1905) begins her description of the sisters by writing, "No es posible profanarlas llamándolas mujeres, no; pues ellas son verdaderamente ángeles emisarios de Dios" (Balta 50). But only two paragraphs later she writes: "Confieso que se despierta en mi alma un orgullo de mujer" (Balta 50) because, if men have kept women out of the

fields of intelligence and ambition, women on the other hand “hemos sobrepujado conquistando glorias, no efimeras y casi siempre malditas, sino inmarcesibles y eternamente divinas” (Balta 50). On the one hand, the nuns are angelic creatures, rising above their gender; on the other hand, their activities demonstrate that women have access to an elevated sphere in recompense for discrimination by men. Lazo de Eléspuru thus makes a virtue out of necessity: although women are excluded from worldly affairs, those are but fleeting glories in contrast with the eternal rewards of heaven. Instead of directly advocating that women participate in public, “masculine” matters, she downgrades the very sphere of activity from which women are systematically excluded and privileges the realm to which they are supposedly restricted.

Other articles in the Peruvian women’s press focus more specifically on the types of activities and beliefs appropriate for women. Teresa González de Fanning (1836-1918) in her article “El lujo” (*El Correo del Perú*, Nov. 3, 1876) explicitly likens herself to a mother giving her child “una medicina repugnante” (Balta 65) as she issues possibly unwelcome advice to her readers, thus invoking domestic discourse on multiple levels. She counsels her readers to economize, arguing that family and, by extension, social stability depend upon female thriftiness. She avers, “La mujer [...] debe ser el ángel del hogar, siempre dispuesta a sacrificar sus placeres, sus comodidades y bienestar, a la holgura y satisfacción de los suyos” (Balta 66). This apparent self-sacrifice, however, is at the same time self-serving, for González de Fanning also points out that in the case of widowhood, women are dependent upon “la pequeña capital” they have managed to set aside from their household moneys. Finally, her criticism of spendthrift household echoes public discourse about the financial affairs of the nation, as she condemns unlimited borrowing and the failure to live within one’s budget. At the time González de Fanning was writing, Peru was enduring an economic slump due to the collapse of the world guano market (Perú’s main export). This economic decline was exacerbated by the national debt, acquired when guano supplies and national affluence seemed inexhaustible.¹ González de Fanning reinscribes public concern about national finances as a domestic topic when she emphasizes the involvement of women in economic issues.

Argentina boasted an active women’s press, especially after the fall of Juan Manuel Rosas in 1852, when the end of censorship meant a general explosion of journals and magazines. Journals such as *La Camelia*

(1852), *El Álbum de las Señoritas* (1854), and *La Alborada del Plata* (1877, 1880), among others, sounded comparable themes to those in other periodicals directed towards women. For example, Josefina Pelliza de Sagasta claimed in “Algo sobre la mujer” (*La Alborada del Plata*, Dec. 9, 1877): “El ser más bello de la creación es la mujer; ella es el centro, en cuyo derredor giran las aspiraciones del hombre. Fundamento principal de la familia, es a un tiempo causa y efecto del móvil que agita la humanidad, de quien es madre. [...] Ella es un elemento radical del verdadero progreso” (Cavalaro 108). These statements rewrite the traditional vision of women as marginal to male interests by placing feminine interests and influence at the center of private and public life alike. Pelliza de Sagasta, González de Fanning, and other authors affirm that education for women is a sign of modernity at the same time that they demonstrate that the role of women in the modernizing, nation-building process begins—and ends—in the home. Women’s journalism in nineteenth-century Spanish America displays a remarkable consistency in elaborating its central theme: since woman’s greatest privilege and duty is to create a morally-uplifting home in which to raise virtuous members of society, her work should be appreciated and facilitated, whether through education or other means.

This idea is a dominant one in fiction of the time as well. In general, writers who invoked the trope of domesticity as the predominant theme in their works did so in order to make their audience take private matters as seriously as they did public ones. Such texts stress the vital role of the home and family in maintaining a stable, smoothly-running society. For example, Clorinda Matto de Turner’s *Aves sin nido* (1889) insistently returns to descriptions of domestic scenes, notwithstanding its apparent emphasis on the thwarted romance between the white Manuel and the mestiza Margarita. Lucía and Fernando Marín provide a model of successful marriage; their family unit is capable of expanding to absorb Margarita and her sister Rosalía and of resisting the external stresses caused by the upheaval around them. In another version of domestic adaptation, Manuel and his mother withstand his stepfather’s inadequacies and weak moral character; as Manuel says, “la madre de la familia es el sol de la casa” (168), and his filial devotion is reciprocated. Successful domesticity is not restricted to the middle class. Even the impoverished Indians Marcela and Juan Yupanqui achieve domestic contentment at the beginning of the novel: “Tomaron descanso en una cama común colocada en un ancho apoyo de adobes; duro lecho que para el amor y la resignación de

los esposos Yupanqui tenía la blandura confortable de las plumas que el amor deslizó de sus blancas alas” (65). Such scenes continually draw attention to the domestic setting of the majority of the novel’s action. To a large extent the novel’s plot revolves around threats to the stability of the private sphere and attempts by its characters to restore domestic tranquility; at one point, the Maríns’ house is literally under attack. The horror of the denouement of the novel, the revelation that Margarita and Manuel are brother and sister, apparently lies in the fact that they will not now be able to establish the domestic paradise modeled by Lucía and Fernando Marín; they are, as Lucía exclaims, “aves sin nido” (219).

The works of Juana Manuela Gorriti (Argentina, 1819-1892) demonstrate the deployment of the domestic motif in a variety of literary modes. Gorriti was a prolific author of short stories, autobiographies, biographies, histories, and even a cookbook. An analysis of her writings reveals her consistent production of domestic narratives that frequently served as political parables in the well-known trope of the home as nation and that provided lessons—sometimes ironic ones—for women in providing domestic contentment. A telling moment in Gorriti’s oeuvre comes with the 1890 publication of a cookbook titled *Cocina ecléctica*. While *Cocina ecléctica* may at first glance seem to be an anomaly appearing towards the end of Gorriti’s lengthy literary career, I believe that instead it may be read as part of a long-term strategy in her work for encoding discourses of domesticity.³

The only part of the cookbook actually written by Gorriti is the prologue, which begins, “El hogar es el santuario doméstico; su ara es el fogón; su sacerdotisa y guardian natural, la mujer” (3: 151). But Gorriti laments,

Ávida de otras regiones, arrojéme a los libros [...] sin pensar que esos ínclitos genios fueron tales, porque [...] tuvieron todos, a su lado, mujeres hacendosas y abnegadas que los mimaron, y fortificaron su mente con suculentos bocados, fruto de la ciencia más conveniente a la mujer. Mis amigas, a quienes, arrepentida, me confesaba, no admitieron mi *mea culpa*, sino a condición de hacerlo público en un libro. Y, tan buenas y misericordiosas, como bellas, hanme dado para ello preciosos materiales, enriqueciéndolos más todavía, con la gracia encantadora de su palabra. (3: 151)

Gorriti begins with a fairly traditional rhetorical flourish evoking the image of the “angel in the house”. Rather than continuing in this vein,

however, Gorriti then renounces any personal claim to the domestic sphere and reconstructs her life history as one of reading, not cooking. Significantly, the writers she lists are all men—Homer, Plutarch, Virgil, Racine, and Chateaubriand—, underlining her willing entrance into a masculine sphere of influence. In yet another twist, Gorriti next points out that these writers only achieved their genius status because of the domestic goddesses at their sides who spoiled them and “fortificaron su mente con succulentos bocados, fruto de la ciencia más conveniente a la mujer” (3: 151). We might be tempted to read this as a self-deprecating statement about Gorriti’s own ability to provide “succulentos bocados”, or a veiled jab at a system in which only men are the recipients of such treats. While the text bears out such a reading, it is also evident that Gorriti is commenting on the fact that women’s practical work has tended to remain unseen (by men), even invisible. While Gorriti says that she has remained blind to the ways in which women’s private work enables the public world of men to function smoothly, however, it is clear that other women have not been so heedless. Gorriti finds herself confronted by the need to confess her blindness to her female friends, who then punish her by forcing her into a public confession of her faults. In this reading, she confesses her sin of behaving, in short, like a man, never noticing the practical efforts that go into sustaining intellectual creativity.

Another reading of this passage, on the other hand, would focus on the phrase “la ciencia más conveniente a la mujer.” The “science” best suited, most appropriate, or even most convenient for a woman is, of course, cooking—the science or art that Gorriti herself has consciously rejected by throwing herself into books. Cooking is, Gorriti points out, the proper occupation for a woman, but it is also the most convenient, suggesting that propinquity plays a larger part in the decision to devote oneself to the domestic arts than does biological sex. In Gorriti’s formulation, literature and cooking become diametrically opposed and are associated with the two sexes: literature with the named men who produce books, cooking with the self-effacing and anonymous women who feed them. At the same time that she puts this opposition into play, however, Gorriti undermines it by refusing to fall into the gender-assigned category of which she herself should be a part. She rejects the “appropriate” and “suitable” occupation of cookery. Astute readers of the time would have recognized Gorriti as the prolific author of numerous short stories, biographies, and articles. Moreover, even as she issues her *mea culpa*, she

pays it only lip service. Her way of making amends for ignoring women's labor is not to undertake those tasks herself, but to create a cookbook collecting the recipes of other cooks, almost all of whom are women. Her prologue concludes by privileging the words of the cookbook's contributors to their recipes as she refers to "la gracia encantadora de su palabra" (3: 151). Gorriti herself remains decidedly a writer and makes no moves towards becoming a cook. Indeed, she does not contribute even one recipe to the cookbook; her role is to oversee the project and write a prologue that not-so-subtly distances her from the "mujeres hacendosas y abnegadas" and their "ciencia conveniente". Hence, at the moment when Gorriti seems to be drawing near to traditional domestic discourse, she erects barriers between herself and that discourse.

If the prologue to *Cocina ecléctica* expresses a certain ambivalence about domesticity and women's role in the home, a similar dynamic can be seen in Gorriti's fictional narratives as well. She frequently wrote stories about families ripped apart by political dissent in which she employed the trope of the home as nation both in order to create effective metaphors for political conduct and to impart persuasive messages to her readers about women's roles in the home and in the nation. The historical backdrop for many of these stories is the struggle in Argentina between the Federalists, the populist party that advocated a loose confederation of Argentine states, and the Unitarians, who sought to establish a strong central government in Buenos Aires, during the dictatorship of the Federalist leader Juan Manuel Rosas from 1831 to 1852. Her stories dramatize the national struggle between the two parties by displacing that conflict onto the personal level. For example, in "El guante negro," Isabel, the daughter of a murdered Unitarian, is in love with the Federalist soldier Wenceslao. When Wenceslao decides to leave the Federalist army and join Isabel's Unitarians, his father, a Federalist colonel, vows to execute him. Wenceslao's mother kills her husband to rescue her son, who then renounces Isabel and returns to the Federalists. In "La hija del mashorquero," Clemencia tries to rescue the victims of her father, a Federalist strongman (the "mashorquero" or death squad member of the story's title). In the end he kills her in mistake for a Unitarian's wife. Clemencia attempts to prevent her father's crimes by warning his potential victims; in other cases, she brings aid and comfort to others. Although she is ultimately killed in a case of mistaken identity by her own father, her very death has the result of redeeming him: "la sangre de la virgen [...] como

un bautismo de redención, hizo descender sobre aquel hombre un rayo de luz divina que lo regeneró" (4: 131). Hence both Isabel and Clemencia, despite seeming to defy their fathers, manage to preserve both their own moral codes and their filial duties.

But while the young women of Gorriti's narratives are torn between political affiliations and romantic love or in Clemencia's case between moral duty and daughterly affections, the mothers face no such dilemmas: their one concern is their children's well-being. Thus in "El guante negro" Margarita kills her own husband in order to save the life of her son Wenceslao. Immediately before, her husband reminds her that early in their marriage she had commanded him "muere, pero no te deshonres faltando a la palabra! Nada puede borrar las manchas del honor!" (4: 64), to which Margarita replies simply, "era esposa, ahora soy madre!" (4: 64). Although her husband is willing to sacrifice his son in order to prevent him from deserting, thus preserving family and military honor, Margarita believes that the physical well-being of her son is more important than abstract notions of honor. Even more than that, her maternal role has completely taken over: "Era esposa, ahora soy madre"—the two roles must be mutually exclusive when husband and son make competing claims. Domestic tranquility having been irretrievably broken, Margarita must die herself, and promptly does so.

In these stories, which typify much of Gorriti's literary production, political issues threaten domesticity in two ways: they break apart pre-existing families and they prevent new ones from forming. But Gorriti cannot be arguing for the isolation of the domestic sphere from the public sphere, because of the active role she has her female characters take—Isabel and Clemencia work to thwart the Federalists and advance the Unitarians, for example, and are praised and sanctified for doing so. In fact, it is their moral duty to undertake these political activities and to further them by using their domestic abilities. Women are the bearers of high moral standards, but they are not meant in Gorriti's scheme to use those standards to create protected spaces—the sacred space of the home—far from political activities.

While Gorriti invokes and subtly critiques the trope of the home as domestic sanctuary in the opening lines to *Cocina ecléctica*, her other writings make it clear that this domestic sanctuary—if it even exists—is by no means apolitical. According to Doris Sommer, "For Gorriti [...] the possible contest [between passion and politics] seems almost irrelevant,

because both desire and power belong to the male world, as capable of producing horror as of winning glory” (107). Sommer argues that Gorriti’s heroines do not fuse erotics and politics as the national novel requires. Nonetheless, I would say that in her stories moral and patriotic duties are intimately bound up with women’s roles in the family, which Gorriti also uses to figure the nation. It might be more helpful to say that rather than evading the passion/politics duality that Sommer describes, Gorriti encodes it differently, substituting familial love for the less reliable, more mercurial passions of romantic love.

Gorriti’s work constructs a narrative space using domestic images that idealize and elevate the figure of the woman. By doing so, she creates a literary space in which she can work with societal norms about women’s behavior in order to impart certain messages about their moral and patriotic duties. Her heroines are deeply involved in the political life of their country, but Gorriti embeds the political message within the supposedly domestic plot. This double-edged message about domesticity is reflected in the prologue to *Cocina ecléctica* in which, as we have seen, Gorriti at once praises the “angel in the home” and carefully distances herself from that image of domestic perfection. The scene of the domestic in Gorriti’s work allows, even demands, that women express and act upon political and moral beliefs. If the home is the domestic sanctuary posited, albeit ironically, in the prologue to *Cocina ecléctica* and woman its priestess and natural guardian, the rest of Gorriti’s work demonstrates that domestic rites are by definition political and moral as well and that the guardian of the home is also the guardian of the nation.

In conclusion, such nineteenth-century texts operated on at least two levels. First they represented domesticity as moral lessons for their female—and male—readers. Secondly, they advanced the idea that domestic stability is the key to national stability. These ideas are interdependent: the authors argue that successful family life strengthens the nation, and they demonstrate how to achieve domestic happiness. Some texts, such as the women’s magazines, are explicitly didactic in their descriptions of the features women needed to acquire to be good wives and mothers; others, such as Gorriti’s stories, focus on the patriotic emotions that allow or force women to subordinate selfish, personal desire to civic duty; and still others use descriptions of domestic scenes as the backdrop against which openly political events are enacted. In all cases, the domestic trope functions to impart lessons about private and public behaviors to the read-

ers. These texts demonstrate that in the nineteenth century, the sequel to romance—the establishment of domestic tranquility— was a powerful means of communicating messages about familial and national roles.

In fact, the domestic image may even be incompatible with the national romance. The rhetoric of domesticity focuses on the self-sacrifice of women and their ability, indeed their willingness, to put the needs and wishes of their husbands and children above their own. But the women of the national romances tend to be much more selfish. Their quest is not to achieve domestic peace but to win the love of the hero and bind him to them through marriage. The national romance demands an almost obsessive selfishness; since the national romance functions to bring couples together despite social and even familial pressures working to keep them apart, the heroines must seek to satisfy their own desires at the cost of all else in order for the desired end—the marriage—to take place. But the domestic angel, faced with the choice between self-interested love and self-sacrifice, should always choose the latter, thus thwarting the required conclusion of the national romance. In brief, then, domestic discourse was a powerful and important means in nineteenth-century Spanish America to advance an ideology that privileged women and women's experiences by safely reinserting potentially transgressive arguments about women's education and advancement into the space of the home and the family circle. It may well be that the incompatibility of domestic discourse with the national romance accounts for its systematic exclusion from the literary canon. Nonetheless, an alternative reading of nineteenth-century Spanish American literature clearly demonstrates the primacy of domestic tropes in articulating arguments about the role of women in the home, in their society, and in the national community.

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NOTES

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Latin American Studies Association convention in Miami, March 16-18, 2000, and at the Faculty Seminar "Gender and Nationalism" at the Hall Center for the Humanities, University of Kansas, November 9, 2000.

¹ See Bushnell and Macauley, 242-6, and Bulmer-Thomas, 69.

² Bridget Aldaraca has written of this rhetoric in nineteenth-century Spain. Aldaraca's analysis focuses on writing produced by men, and she sees it as serving traditionalists'

purposes solely.

³ For more information on Gorriti's life, see Yeager. Nina M. Scott's "Juana Manuela Gorriti's *Cocina ecléctica*: Recipes as Feminine Discourse" provides insights into nineteenth-century cookbooks and Gorriti's contributors. For more literary criticism on Gorriti's work see Batticuore; Meehan; Salgado; and the collections edited by Fletcher and Iglesia.

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