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Fernán Caballero's Lessons for Ladies: Female Agency and the Modeling of Proper Womanhood in *Clemencia*

Leslie Kaiura

According to Lou Charnon-Deutsch, the Spanish domestic novel began in earnest with the works of Fernán Caballero (1796–1877), many of which were written as early as the 1830s but were not published until the late 1840s and 1850s (19). Helen Waite Papashvily, one of the pioneering critics of the domestic novel in the United States, defines such novels as tales of “contemporary domestic life, ostensibly sentimental in tone and with few exceptions almost always written by women for women” (xv). As a group, these novels tend to conform to the gender paradigms of their day, although critics such as Elaine Showalter have argued that they often contain veiled, subversive plots that record women’s discontent and their longings for power and revenge. Caballero is one of few women included in nineteenth-century Spain’s canon, but in spite of literary production that would have been considered “unwomanly” by her contemporaries, we must ask whether or not she participates in this type of veiled subversion by offering women possibilities for agency and independence within her work. Does she subtly undermine traditional ideology, or does she simply reproduce gender ideals such as the “angel in the house,” which exalted women as guardians of morality even as it confined them to a life of abnegation and obedience?¹

As María del Carmen Simón Palmer has shown in her bibliographic work on nineteenth-century Spanish women’s writing, the majority of Caballero’s female contemporaries did not use their writings to critique the feminine condition or assert the rights of their sex. In fact, many went to great lengths to demonstrate their own compliance to domesticity and to justify or conceal their literary activity. Fernán Caballero’s consistent use of pseudonyms, coupled with her assertions that women should not show off any erudition they might possess, seem to place her within this majority.² In Caballero’s case, the woman behind the pseudonym, Cecilia Böhl de Faber, is remembered as one of Spain’s great nineteenth-century novelists even though she was by no means a typical Spaniard. Despite her German, Irish, and Spanish heritage and her early education in Germany, Böhl became a staunch defender of traditional Spain, the Spanish nobility, and Catholicism. A transitional figure, Böhl looked backward in her fiction by romantically idealizing the past and also looked forward to help pave the way for the Spanish realist novel. She is most remembered for her novel *La gaviota* (1849), but she wrote prolifically,

producing other novels such as *La familia de Alvarada* (1849) and *Clemencia* (1852), as well as short stories, articles, and poems.

With the exceptions of a book chapter by Charnon-Deutsch and an article by Noël Valis, each offering a different interpretation of *Clemencia's* resolution, the novel has been largely ignored by critics in favor of *La gaviota* and Caballero's short fiction. Thus this study aims to engage in a dialogue with the work of Charnon-Deutsch and Valis in order to explore further the themes of submission and female agency, primarily by analyzing the novel's moral lessons and how they manifest themselves in the trajectory of its titular heroine. Though Caballero's didactic efforts in the novel reveal a thoroughly traditional conception of Spanish femininity, *Clemencia's* trajectory both confirms this conventional value system and subverts it at times, mirroring the struggle of an author who strove to maintain her own femininity in spite of her unconventional literary career. Caballero does not critique the feminine condition in the novel, but rather she works within the constraints of society to create a heroine with a hard-won, though limited, degree of agency that allows her to decide her own destiny, even if her decision leaves her once again confined to the role of the *ángel del hogar*.

In *Clemencia*, Fernán Caballero creates her ideal female protagonist: the title character is both perfectly educated and supremely abnegated. As the novel begins, the sixteen-year-old, orphaned Clemencia leaves her convent to join her aunt, a widowed Marchioness, and her two cousins, Constanca and Alegría, in Seville's high society. Eager to prevent the lovely Clemencia from competing with her daughters, the Marchioness accepts a request for Clemencia's hand in marriage from Fernando Guevara, a brash young soldier who asks for it only to win a bet. This marriage, as Javier Herrero notes, is clearly a detail taken from the author's own experience. By the time Böhl had turned nineteen, her family was in a difficult financial situation that led to her hasty marriage to a captain in the Spanish army. Herrero describes this marriage as "una completa catástrofe" for Böhl (86), but like her character Clemencia, she was widowed after only one unhappy year. Forty years later, she revealed in a letter the relationship between her experience and the novel, writing "pude sacar de mi corazón el debut en la vida que he dado a la Clemencia de mi novela" (qtd. in Herrero 86–87). Clemencia's first marriage is only vaguely detailed in chapter nine of the novel, a brevity which speaks to the lasting effects of the trauma of a bad marriage on both author and protagonist. Despite her abridgement of the marriage, Caballero uses it and its aftermath as didactic tools through which she explicitly exalts Clemencia's behavior as a proper niece, wife, and widow. It is only in the last of these three roles that Clemencia is allowed a certain amount of agency to direct her own life, and even so, this limited amount of independence comes with dangers that she must carefully avoid.

The Modeling of Proper Womanhood

The first step in better understanding Fernán Caballero's vision of women's roles and agency is to examine the moral advice that she provides for Clemencia and her readers. These lessons are made obvious in Clemencia's proper behavior, which is contrasted with the reprehensible behavior of her aunt and cousins. Furthermore, Caballero intervenes repeatedly throughout the novel with direct narratorial commentary that leaves little

doubt about how her characters and their actions were meant to be interpreted by her audience of female readers. Among the lessons that she strives to teach are the traditional virtues of obedience, silence, abnegation, unconditional love and fidelity, and the ability to learn by study and example while remaining appropriately modest. Through these lessons Caballero seems to be teaching her readers a self-abnegated and masochistic version of femininity rather than offering them positive examples of female agency or independence, since demonstrations of agency by women are typically punished in the novel rather than rewarded.³

Obedience

In Spanish society, women were expected to be obedient to their parents before marriage and to their husband after marriage; in fact, this expectation was clearly inscribed into the legal codes of the century.⁴ Writers that treated the topic of women's roles often insisted that women held authority over the household while men held authority in the public sphere, but when one reads the civil codes, it becomes clear that women's authority within the home was idealized and illusory. Women subject to the authority of a father or husband (that is, all except widows and unmarried women over the age of 23) had legal rights equivalent to those of children and the mentally ill.⁵ Both the legal codes and writings on gender reveal that women were not to be trusted to make decisions regarding their own or their family's well-being. Some of Caballero's contemporaries, such as Faustina Sáez de Melgar, exalted women's dominion over the home while also praising the husband's marital authority. In her 1866 conduct manual, she writes, "bendita sea la autoridad marital, que protege y ampara nuestra inexperta juventud" (76). Other writers suggest that it is better for a woman to be subject to a tyrannical husband than to her own female whims. Dr. Niceto Alonso Perujo, the canon of the cathedral of Valencia, expresses this opinion in his 1882 treatise on marriage: "Ella sufrirá mucho, duro, amargamente, estará acaso sujeta bajo un yugo de hierro; sin embargo, el yugo de su propia pasión sería todavía más funesto, porque tiene por consecuencia inevitable el castigo eterno, mientras que el otro asegura la recompensa del porvenir" (70). As these types of writings indicate, women's agency was often limited by their social and legal status as well as by moral and religious traditions which suggested that women were not capable of adequately directing their own lives. Following this type of thinking, Caballero exhorts her readers to comply unconditionally with Catholic beliefs, including those about marriage and womanhood. She even invokes God in a tangent of narratorial commentary, asking him to keep herself and her readers "en la [...] bella senda de la estricta sumisión," and away from "la pérfida senda de la rebeldía" (138).

In *Clemencia*, Caballero teaches her readers the virtue of obedience by example in the protagonist and counter-example in her rebellious cousin Constancia, who exercises agency when she refuses the advantageous match arranged for her with the Marquis of Valdemar. Constancia shows a glimmer of feminist thought when she is told that women have only two options: marriage or the nunnery. She replies that there are women "que no piensan ni en lo uno ni en lo otro" and expresses her desire to be happy on her own terms (104). Caballero's treatment of Constancia, however, reveals that she did not agree with this burgeoning desire for agency. When the Marchioness learns that her daughter's disobedience stems from her love of a soldier, she sends Constancia to do penance in their

isolated country home. With this turn of events, Constanica commits her greatest sin of disobedience and ingratitude, bitterly complaining that she has been exiled for not sacrificing her happiness “a las miras interesadas de una madre que no am[a]!” (152). Clemencia chastises her, calling this disregard for her mother an “atrocidad” (152), and soon after, Constanica’s true punishment begins when she finds her beloved soldier among the dead after a shipwreck in nearby waters. Later in the novel, Constanica’s penance continues as she seeks to wash away her “malvada conducta” by caring for her mother, who is suffering from breast cancer (271). Almost unrecognizable as the elegant girl of the past, Constanica is finally exalted in several paragraphs of narratorial commentary as a proper woman who is obedient and long-suffering in the face of the “excesivas impertinencias” to which her ailing mother subjects her (268). She is not a nun, but in her simple black dress, her newfound religious devotion, and her selfless ministrations to her mother, Constanica has in effect succumbed to one of the options that she previously rejected.

In contrast with Constanica, Clemencia becomes a model example of obedience by heeding the authority of her guardians. She is presented with a suitor who is less appealing than the Marquis of Valdemar, but rather than protest, she meekly submits to her aunt’s wishes. After all, she knows how unfavorably the Marchioness reacts to defiance, and she has been warned by her aunt that a silly girl “que rehusa un buen porvenir por capricho [...] o por desobediencia” deserves to be shut up in an asylum (126). Thus Clemencia exchanges daughterly obedience for wifely submission, and during her vaguely detailed marriage she is portrayed as an ideal wife. Despite the isolation and cruelty to which Fernando Guevara subjects her, she never defies him, but instead sublimates her pain through religious belief and dedication to her wifely duties. Clemencia never even complains, yet she is eventually worn down by Guevara’s neglect and abuse: her health declines and she falls into what appears to be a depression, barely eating and spending her days lying still on the couch (139). Nevertheless, she shows no signs of resistance, and even after her husband has died, she honors his memory by not telling anyone but her confessor about her suffering at his hands. After his death, Clemencia lives under the guardianship of her father-in-law, don Martín, and his brother, a kindly abbot, and she continues to display a humble obedience toward her elders even though as a widow she is technically free to make her own decisions. For instance, when don Martín suggests that she marry her late husband’s cousin Pablo, Clemencia agrees although the thought of marrying again leaves her anguished. Fortunately, Pablo realizes that don Martín’s match-making is the source of Clemencia’s distress, and out of love for her, he refuses to marry.

Silence and Abnegation

Don Martín is eager for Clemencia to remarry because he does not know about her suffering during her first marriage. This is precisely because Clemencia has mastered two other feminine virtues: silence and abnegation. In fact, Caballero uses Clemencia’s experience with Guevara to preach the virtues of abnegation and to reinforce the common belief that women should not air their marital troubles in public.⁶ Caballero herself rarely mentioned her troubled first marriage, revealing in a letter that to do so, “tendría que hablar mal de dos personas (lo que jamás he hecho ni haré)” (Herrero 86).

Her own silence is echoed in Clemencia, who after Guevara's death, not only kept his behavior a secret, but also mourned him so sincerely "que nadie pudo nunca sospechar su infame comportamiento con ella" (141).

Due to the brief treatment of their marriage, the reader is left to wonder exactly what kind of "infamous behavior" Clemencia suffered at the hands of her husband. The reader must intuit this information, because Clemencia's reaction to her husband's abuse reveals the extent of her abnegation as a wife, as she denies herself even the right to be treated as a dignified human being. Guevara's jealousy of Clemencia's beauty and his misinterpretations of her innocent behavior lead him to suspect her of infidelity, which he uses as an excuse to return to his life of dissipation. His mistreatment of Clemencia escalates until Caballero gives her strongest description of his abusive behavior:

Clemencia llegó, pues, a ser una doble mártir, siendo tratada a la vez con la más insultante desconfianza, las más despóticas exigencias y la más ostensible falta de cariño y de atenciones, siendo a un tiempo esclavizada y abandonada por su marido. Éste encerraba a su mujer, y se llevaba la llave; no le permitía recibir a nadie, ni salir, ni aun para ir a la iglesia; y había llevado la locura de los celos y el placer de mortificarla hasta matar por su mano un pajarito que criaba Clemencia, que era su único compañero en la soledad. (136)

Caballero never gives more detail about Guevara's "despotic demands," and besides the killing of the bird, she never attributes physical violence to him, although it is clear that the relationship is at the very least psychologically and verbally abusive.⁷ However, the strong words that Caballero chooses hint at a situation that probably did contain physical violence as well. For instance, she uses the adjective "atroz" (139) to describe him, and she calls Clemencia's situation a "tormento" (136), a "vida terrible" (139), and "terrible, asustador" (141). Clemencia's abnegation is clear as she resigns herself to her husband's behavior—instead of blaming him, she comes to the conclusion that since Guevara only took her as a prize for winning a bet and does not truly love her, she is not his "true" wife. As such she feels that she does not deserve "la ternura y respeto que se tiene a una mujer propia," thus denying her own basic rights and casting the blame for Guevara's actions upon herself (135).

Instead of employing the kind of detailed realism that she does in other aspects of the novel, Caballero uses the chapter devoted to the marriage as a didactic tool in which narratorial commentary overshadows the narration of events. Her lessons are clear: wifely duty entails abnegation as well as unconditional love and fidelity. In this chapter in particular, Caballero repeats the tendency of so many authors of domestic fiction to teach women a kind of adaptive masochism that exalted abnegation and suffering. According to Charnon-Deutsch, this adaptive response was meant to help women sublimate their suffering in marriage and thereby "avoid the even greater pain of homelessness, prostitution, hospitalization, powerlessness, or hell" (59). As a result, domestic novels such as *Clemencia* "provided women readers a way to imagine the displeasure of self-containment and self-abnegation [and other forms of suffering, I would add] as pleasurable and productive" (60).

For example, another popular domestic novelist, María Pilar Sinués de Marco, agrees with Dr. Perujo that a woman is better off with a bad husband than with none at all, “porque en el mismo sufrimiento, llevado con resignación, hay siempre consuelo, como compensación otorgada por el cielo al deber cumplido; la vida sin deberes es una vida estéril, triste” (95). It is better for a woman to endure a bad marriage by finding satisfaction in the fulfillment of her wifely obligations than to forsake her duties and thereby risk an unfulfilled earthly life, or worse yet, eternal punishment. As such the ideal of the *ángel del hogar* becomes intertwined in many women’s texts with the masochistic glorification of sacrifice and suffering, as we see in these lines, also by Sinués de Marco: “Es preferible vivir en el dolor a vegetar sin emociones y sin afectos; es preferible sufrir a no sentir nada. [...] en el cumplimiento del deber, en la abnegación del sacrificio, [las mujeres nobles] hallan sublimes compensaciones” (95). In a time when single and childless women were seen as a plague on society for not having fulfilled their God-given duties, women were counseled to find joy as wives and mothers in any way that they could, even if that meant bearing abuse by looking forward to rewards in heaven.⁸

Clemencia reacts to her husband’s treatment in a way that thinkers such as Dr. Perujo and Sinués de Marco would have applauded. Instead of defending herself or complaining, she looks to her religious education for guidance. Caballero writes: “Clemencia, en medio de tantos sufrimientos, no se creyó la *mujer incomprensida*, ni la *heroína inapreciada*, ni la *víctima de un monstruo*; creyó sencillamente que Fernando era un mal marido como otros muchos, que tenía que sobrellevarle como hacían otras muchas mujeres” (136, emphasis in the original). Clemencia does not cast herself in these roles because she has not been exposed to the harmful influences of sentimental novels; rather, her understanding of her role as wife is informed only by the reading of religious devotionals, in which she continues to find solace during her marriage. In particular, she consoles herself with this description of Saint Monica’s response to her wicked husband: “Mónica obedecía a su marido como una sirvienta a su amo, y se esmeraba en ganarlo a Dios [...] Toleró por mucho tiempo la mala conducta de su marido, sin hacerle reconveniones, aguardando la hora de que obrase en él la misericordia de Dios” (137).

Clemencia draws hope from passages like this one, which gives value to submission and Christian patience by suggesting that there will be a future recompense for those who practice obedience and self-denial. Caballero’s moralizing becomes even more apparent as she digresses into a discussion of proper reading material for young ladies and insists that all moral behavior stems from a religious upbringing. In these comments, she poses religious faith as a way not only to survive a situation such as Clemencia’s, but also to find value in enduring such trials. To this end, Charnon-Deutsch observes that Guevara “plays a critical role in Clemencia’s development because loving him is the first difficult task she has to perform as part of her ascension to true femininity” (25). Thus Clemencia’s suffering is not depicted as an entirely negative experience because it strengthens her feminine virtues and gives her experiential wisdom for the future. Caballero, like many authors of her time, presents this type of suffering as both normal—“Fernando era un mal marido como otros muchos” (136)—and as purposeful in the life of her protagonist. As in other domestic novels, we may find here some expression of discontent with women’s status and options in society, but not a feminist critique of them as we find in later authors such as Emilia Pardo Bazán or Carmen de Burgos.

Unconditional Love and Fidelity

Abnegation goes hand in hand with the lesson of unconditional love and fidelity. Nineteenth-century ideas about gender placed love as one of the foremost qualities of the female being; for instance, in an 1863 treatise on women's roles, Francisco Alonso y Rubio writes, "La mujer ha nacido para amar. [...]. Suprimid el amor en la mujer, y sería una estatua muda" (66). Love is in woman's nature, and it is part of her duty as a wife and mother. Moreover, it is a way to alleviate the sacrifices and suffering that women's roles often entail, as Joaquina Balmaseda observes in her 1877 epistolary manual, *Lo que toda mujer debe saber*: "[el amor] hace ligera la pesada carga de la vida, él embellece hasta los mismos sacrificios que el deber impone" (98).

Clemencia fulfills her obligation to love even though she has no natural affinity toward Guevara and suffers from his cruel treatment. Caballero writes that Clemencia "se había apegado a su marido, *porque era su marido*. Como otra Santa Mónica, esperaba firmemente que [...] su corazón se abriría a todas las virtudes y buenos sentimientos" (140). Caballero even uses italics to emphasize Clemencia's compliance to her wifely duty: she loves Guevara simply because he is her husband, without being given any other reason to do so. Interestingly, Caballero indicates that Clemencia's hopes for Guevara's reformation are naive—a wicked youth leads to a wicked old age, she remarks—but she still exalts her heroine's tendency to love and hope. Moreover, Clemencia's love is unconditional enough to survive all of the trials of their marriage, because even after Guevara's death, she wishes she had also died so that they could be reunited in another world, where "bajo los ojos de Dios y libres de pasiones terrestres, habrían sido felices" (144).

Caballero also gives her readers a stark counter-example to Clemencia's faithful love in the behavior of her cousin Alegría, whose desire for agency, like her sister's, leads to her downfall in the text. Alegría is vain and openly coquettish, which leads Caballero to identify her as part of a class of "mujeres desalmadas" who have adopted reprehensible French customs (295). She marries the Marquis of Valdemar, and though her marriage brings her wealth and a sparkling social position, Alegría is never happy nor in love with her husband. When Clemencia is reunited with her cousins in Seville after eight years away, Alegría's face and figure show the effects of her busy night life in Madrid, a detail which alerts the reader to her neglect of her role as wife and mother. She expresses envy of Clemencia's widowhood, saying, "Vamos, eres mujer feliz. Mira, no hagas la locura de volverte a casar" (269). In this and other comments, she quickly shows herself to be the opposite of the *ángel del hogar*; in fact, she is perhaps one of the "emancipadas" who according to Caballero would have deserved a husband like the "atroz" Fernando Guevara (139). Alegría's desire to escape the roles that have been thrust upon her by society leads her into an adulterous relationship with an old suitor, and, not surprisingly, she is quickly punished for her behavior. When her husband catches her with her lover and abruptly returns to Madrid with their children, Alegría is left bitter, disgraced, and at the mercy of town gossips. In Caballero's worldview, her punishment is complete: she has lost her reputation, her husband, and her children—perhaps the three things that mattered most to a nineteenth-century Spanish woman.

Education by Study and Example

Education was not a priority for the women of Fernán Caballero's time. Women's education consisted of little more than "matters relating to the domestic sphere of their particular social class" and a strong dose of religious instruction (Davies 18). At a pedagogical congress in 1892, early Spanish feminist Emilia Pardo Bazán complained about the common Spanish opinion of women's education, which still held that "la mujer es tanto más apta para su providencial destino cuanto más ignorante y estacionaria, y la intensidad de educación, que constituye para el varón honra y gloria, para la hembra es deshonor y casi monstruosidad" (74). In addition, avid reading of any texts other than religious works or instructional manuals was discouraged; in fact, novels without clear didactic purposes were considered a danger to women's moral, mental, and physical health.⁹ Caballero follows this trend by censuring the reading of pernicious literature while praising the instructive value of reading the right books. Clemencia is such a loving and abnegated wife precisely "porque no había leído novelas, ni visto dramas de pasión, y conservaba intactas las puras doctrinas de moral cristiana" (136). With the carefully limited education of her youth, Clemencia is untouched by influences that might have made her unhappy by giving her unrealistic expectations about love and marriage. Caballero holds up Clemencia's wholesome reading habits as an example for her readers and vehemently admonishes them, "¡Oh madres! dad buenos libros a vuestras hijas y obligadlas a leerlos" (137). Caballero makes it clear in her didactic narratorial commentary and her moral analysis of the novel's characters that *Clemencia* was meant to be just such a text for young ladies to read.

In the first part of the novel, Clemencia learns through reading, but she also heeds the consequences of Constanca and Alegría's bad behavior. Their behavior provides object lessons in itself, but it also points to a larger lesson about the role of mothers in feminine education. Just as Caballero exhorts mothers to educate their daughters well, she also gives them a conspicuous example of improper mothering in the Marchioness. Caballero characterizes the Marchioness as a woman whose defects of selfishness and egoism stem from being spoiled by her parents and her husband. She is, in a word, "insufrible" (75), and the education she has given her daughters is "viciosa" (76). When the Marchioness complains that her daughters are "mal criadas, indóciles, y desobedientes," a friend bluntly replies, "Tú tienes la culpa, pues no sabes mantener la disciplina en tu casa" (93). Constanca and Alegría learn from their mother's example, and they grow up to have the same traits of selfishness and egoism.

As a result, both daughters come to ruin by the end of the novel due to their lack of suitable mothering and instruction. Constanca has evolved into a morally superior woman, but her rebellion costs her the worldly fulfillment of marriage and children. Alegría, on the other hand, has lost her family through morally reprehensible behavior, and worse yet, she seems unrepentant to the end. Thus the Marchioness is left with two daughters who have failed in their womanly mission, and Alegría's conduct has even denied her access to her grandchildren. In this context, we can read the Marchioness's illness as being a symbolic consequence of her failure as a mother. The cancer devours the very part of her that is associated with maternal care—her breasts—just as her bitterness over the fate of her daughters eats away at her pride. Ironically, although

Clemencia is a motherless orphan, she is the only one of the girls who turns out to be a proper lady, no doubt due to the influence of her substitute “mothers” at the convent where she was raised. Caballero seems to have shared some of her contemporaries’ disapproval of aristocratic women who tended to spend their time engaged in fashion and socializing rather than on properly raising their children.¹⁰ To produce her ideal female protagonist, Caballero had to raise her away from such detrimental influences and thus mark her difference, in social status and in moral behavior, from her aunt and cousins.

Caballero conforms strictly to the ideas about women’s education that were prevalent during her lifetime in the first part of the novel and in her depiction of the Marchioness and her daughters. However, an interesting change occurs when Clemencia goes to live with her in-laws and her late-husband’s uncle, the abbot. Clemencia quickly forms a close bond with the abbot, who “se dedicó a cultivar aquel entendimiento tan apto para el saber, tan ansioso para enriquecerse y elevarse” (178). According to Caballero, the abbot is an ideal teacher with knowledge of virtue and religion as well as of worldly wisdom and society. He carefully directs Clemencia’s reading, and she is so enthusiastic about learning that her late-husband’s cousin Pablo takes an interest and joins in the lessons. Although Caballero continues to conform to the ideas of her day on the surface, from its description, this education is not the shallow, incomplete education typically recommended for young ladies. Rather, it is a serious course of study, a fact which is reinforced by Don Martín’s complaint “¡tanta lección y tanta lección!” and his jibes about Pablo’s newfound studiousness (185). Under the tutelage of the abbot, Clemencia’s wisdom and virtue blossom into a more mature form, and Pablo is transformed from a rough country man into a refined and educated gentleman. Thus Clemencia is given an opportunity afforded to few women of her time to acquire a profound education of the type that usually would have been available only to men. Interestingly, not only are her studies under the abbot a sign of some progressiveness in Caballero’s view of women’s education, but her little home-school becomes even more progressive when Pablo joins in and makes it co-educational. Pablo’s education alongside Clemencia also has another purpose: it allows Caballero to create an ideal man who will be her protagonist’s intellectual and moral equal—and her future husband.

Despite the exquisite education that Caballero allows Clemencia, her progressive impulses only go so far, as we see in one lesson from the abbot. Caballero includes several pages indirectly quoted from his lessons, and the first and perhaps most emphasized of these is that a woman should never show off her intellectual superiority. Clemencia has always been modest; in fact, Caballero praises her early in the novel for not knowing her own worth (93). However, now that she is becoming a well-educated woman, it is doubly important for her to be consciously modest. The abbot counsels her to make a bouquet with flowers from the tree of knowledge, so that her learning becomes something more pleasing than useful; then he goes on to tell her, “Lo que aprendas, librete Dios de lucirlo, pues harías de un bálsamo un veneno” (180). His teachings fall into line with those of many nineteenth-century writers on gender, who warn that learning can be dangerous for a woman because it sows discord and competition between her and her husband. For instance, in 1858, Severo Catalina writes that women’s education “no consiste en formar mujeres sabias: debe consistir en formar mujeres modestas” (61). Novelist Angela Grassi also pointedly warns female readers in 1857 that seeking intellectual equality with men

would destroy “la perfecta armonía de la creación” by turning women into the antagonists of men rather than their helpmates (58). Alegría is a prime example of this type of antagonistic relationship; in the social scenes in the novel’s first section, she takes pride in applying her cutting wit to various targets, using it in a self-confessed quest to make all men fall in love with her (305). Her bold, flirtatious conversation with one of Clemencia’s suitors leads directly to her ruin and serves as a warning to Caballero’s readers. On the other hand, Clemencia’s wisdom, virtue, and modesty naturally draw friends and distinguished suitors to her, demonstrating that it is both inappropriate and unnecessary for a woman to show off to gain love and attention.

Clemencia’s Trajectory from Obedience to Agency

During the first two sections of the novel, Caballero crafts Clemencia into a model example as she learns these lessons of obedience, love, and modesty through experience in her marriage to Guevara and through education in her lessons with the abbot. In the third section of the novel, where Clemencia’s trajectory as an independent woman begins, Caballero uses her protagonist to exemplify how a properly educated young woman is qualified to make decisions and to negotiate the dangers of life independently. Up to this last part of the novel, Clemencia consistently denies her feelings and allows herself to be guided by others. After Don Martín passes away and the abbot’s health begins to fail, the subject of Clemencia’s widowhood resurfaces, this time because the abbot is concerned with her future security. Again, Clemencia promises that she will marry, but the abbot realizes that her desire to marry for love will remain unfulfilled if she is obliged to marry too soon. Therefore, he releases her from her promise, saying, “No te cases, pues: tus ilusiones se pondrían entre ti y tu felicidad” (260). Clemencia, who had no illusions to be broken when she married Guevara (a fact which Caballero praised, we must remember), now has desires that make her want to resist the advice of her wise counselors. However, in this case as well, it is not Clemencia who makes the final decision. Rather, the abbot revises his original advice and gives her the freedom to make her own choice. His decision shows that Clemencia has earned his confidence; despite being a woman, she is experienced and wise enough to make the right decisions about her future. The abbot’s confidence in Clemencia is also doubly significant since he is Caballero’s clearest mouthpiece in the novel.

After the abbot’s death, Clemencia is once again spared from making a decision about marriage when Pablo’s awkward declaration of love only serves to drive them farther apart. Since Clemencia cannot live under his roof as an unmarried woman, she moves back to Seville and establishes her own household. Thus in the final part of the novel, Clemencia is finally independent and free to direct her own life. Since she is a widow, she can live respectably on her own, and Caballero uses this period of time to expose Clemencia to various possibilities for her life. As quickly becomes evident, independence can make a woman dangerously vulnerable to men who would take advantage of her and to gossips who would defame her if given the chance. Clemencia must use her wisdom and experience to interpret this new world and determine the life she will choose. Caballero presents her with three possibilities: to remain a widow, which could eventually subject her to society’s scorn; to marry one of two foreign aristocrats and ascend to a

brilliant social position; or to change her mind and accept the love of the simple Spaniard, Pablo Guevara.

The two suitors that Clemencia attracts in Seville are an Englishman, Sir George Percy, and an Italian Viscount. Of the two, it is Percy who presents the greatest temptation because of his exquisite manners and his talent for conversation. As Clemencia falls for him, it is clear that her attraction is not a platonic love but a true passion—the first of her life. Indeed, Caballero writes that her heroine “se sintió arrastrada con vehemencia hacia Sir George” (275). In addition, if she accepts his proposal, she will gain wealth and a social position that would make her the envy of women from Seville to London. However, in spite of Percy’s charms and nobility, Clemencia is wary of her love for him, feeling “una instintiva inquietud” (277). Her instincts are correct; Percy is a cynical and arrogant man who despite his social graces can be cruel and violent when his desires are thwarted.¹¹ His biggest flaw is his lack of religion, because it contributes to his other moral shortcomings, including his lack of family sentiment, charity, and compassion. Attracted to him nonetheless, Clemencia tries various strategies to correct Percy’s faults as she resists his attempts to seduce her. On one occasion, while Percy urges her to give into passion, she extols the virtues of marriage until at one point she exclaims, “¿No hay más que darle rienda suelta al corazón sin saber antes dónde nos arrastra?” (335). Percy mocks her cautious approach to love, and her reaction represents an unmistakable turning point in her behavior. Instead of quietly accepting his criticism, she chastises him, calling his comments ridiculous and immoral, and judging them to be in bad social and literary taste (335).

After years of accepting advice and abuse, Clemencia has finally developed the courage and confidence to defend herself. Her proudest moment, perhaps, occurs in her final face-to-face interview with Percy, when they are alone one evening and the Viscount calls at her door. Displaying his jealous manner, Percy demands that Clemencia send the Viscount away, but to his surprise, when he declares “Yo no sufro rivales,” Clemencia responds, “Ni yo exigencias despóticas” (339). This is the only moment in the novel where Clemencia stands up for herself and directly refuses to comply with someone else’s wishes. Moreover, by having her heroine use these particular words, Caballero connects Percy with Guevara, since she previously used the phrase “despóticas exigencias” to describe the latter’s treatment of Clemencia. Clemencia could not stand up to Guevara because her conception of her role as wife precluded her from doing so, but as an independent woman, she can protect herself from being mistreated once again.

Following this incident, Percy sends Clemencia a letter in which he criticizes Spanish women for being overly-religious coquettes and asks her to either accept him as a husband or lover, or to reject him completely. Here, Caballero’s Spanish nationalism becomes evident as she casts Percy as a morally bankrupt foreigner intent on corrupting a proper Spanish lady.¹² Clemencia’s offense at these words and the depth of her feelings for Percy become manifest as she faints upon reading the letter, then spends “las veinte y cuatro horas más terribles de su vida” in seclusion as she grapples with her emotions (346). In the end, Clemencia emerges from her encounter with Percy wounded but wiser. Caballero describes her transformation: “[E]n esta lucha destrozadora que sufrieron su pasión y su razón, la dignidad de la mujer se alzó fuerte y brillante como el faro a cuyos

pies se estrellaron las olas de su corazón: del combate salió serena y firme su dignidad, triunfantes sus nobles y elevados instintos” (346). Clemencia’s reason wins out over her passion, a fact which belies the typical idea of the time that women made decisions based on emotion while men based theirs on reason.¹³ In a very “unwomanly” manner, Clemencia sees through her passion and her pain to find the most logical course to take, which is to disregard the men who would possess or wound her in favor of the one who would respect and love her.

When Pablo arrives in Seville at Clemencia’s summons, she tells him that she loves him, but through her language we can tell that her love for Pablo is more of a prudent affection mixed with a love of virtue than a passionate love like she felt for Percy. She describes her feelings with terms such as “profundo aprecio” (351), and it is evident that her heartbreak over Percy led her to appreciate Pablo more (355). Clemencia does love Pablo, but even in her strongest declaration of love, her passion for virtue and goodness overwhelms her feelings for him. She declares that she loves him with “la bella exaltación con que [su] corazón fogoso ama lo bueno” and with “la convicción que se ama a la virtud” (353). This exaltation of virtue and the lack of a more earthly, physical passion in her relationship with Pablo make us wonder if Clemencia has found the love that she was seeking, or if she has simply realized that it is in her best interest to marry Pablo.

Nöel Valis and Lou Charnon-Deutsch are in disagreement about how to interpret Clemencia’s trajectory, particularly her final decision to marry Pablo Guevara. Her choice certainly makes sense on one level: Pablo is the exact opposite of his late cousin, who married her on a whim without regard for her feelings. Pablo, on the other hand, relinquished Clemencia to avoid causing her pain even though he loved her. Yet is Clemencia’s choice, as Charnon-Deutsch claims, a great step forward in female subjectivity and agency? She writes that *Clemencia* is a tribute to “the importance of allowing a woman to reach important decisions about her future alone and unadvised, with only reason and the lessons of experience to guide her” (23). Or is Clemencia’s final decision more of a capitulation than an independent choice, as Valis describes it: “Clemencia has at last accepted and fulfilled the fervent desires of her father-in-law” (259). She writes, “Clemencia chooses Pablo not because she loves him passionately, but because [...] in short, he is good” (258).

When we consider the pattern of Clemencia’s decisions and the trajectories of other sentimental heroines, we can better interpret her agency or lack thereof. As we have already seen, Clemencia’s decisions regarding marriage in the novel are made passively except for the last one. Her only active decision is to reject Percy, the one man to spark her passion, in favor of Pablo, the man for whom she previously denied feeling any romantic love. As such, this decision seems more like a capitulation to the advice she has been given all along than a realization of her desire to marry for love. The analysis of domestic novel plots that Charnon-Deutsch provides in her work helps cast light on this conflict and Clemencia’s trajectory. According to Charnon-Deutsch, there are two kinds of desire manifested by the women in Spanish domestic novels: a desire for the *other*, represented by “adventure, agency, culture, the outside world,” or a desire for the *same*, represented by a love that reflects their own, “a husband who is sensitive, sincere, humble, and generous” (24). The first usually ends in disappointment or death, while the

second tends to be unachievable, leading the women to “fall back on relationships in which the ideal of sharing provides positive rewards, such as those fostered by motherhood or religion” (24).

Although most domestic heroines participate in one of these two plots, Clemencia’s case is more complex and contradictory because she participates in both of them. Unlike María of *La gaviota*, she does not desire fame and illicit passion, but she does desire the ability to make her own decision to remain a contented widow or to marry for love. Through Caballero’s careful orchestration, Clemencia is allowed this agency even though she acquiesces to all of the parental figures in her life. Albeit in a less rebellious fashion than some other female protagonists, she ventures into the world as a single woman and has the chance to decide her own destiny, though we must recognize that her viable options are extremely limited by the society in which she lives. Clemencia embarks on her quest for the *other*, for agency and independence, in order to find the *same*: a man that she loves passionately, and who loves her as she loves him. And as Charnon-Deutsch’s analysis predicts, she finds that this ideal is impossible, or at least unlikely enough that waiting for it is not worth the risk of further heartbreak or the social stigma of spinsterhood.

Furthermore, despite the mild nature of Clemencia’s “rebellion,” there is still a price to pay for her desire for autonomy: disappointment and heartbreak. She is disillusioned and heartbroken when she realizes that Percy is not worthy of her, and she feels guilt and grief over the fate of the Viscount. She is more fortunate than *La gaviota*’s María in that she is only wounded by her brush with passion, not condemned to a life of domestic misery for it. Charnon-Deutsch comments that “*La gaviota* is a morality play about the dangers—instead of the excitement—of feminine passion,” and to a lesser extent, Clemencia can be read the same way (21). Clemencia learns from her encounter with Percy that passionate love, though appealing, is unsafe, and in the end, the man she chooses is not the one who excites her passion, but the one who offers a safe, domestic life away from the corrupting influences of urban, aristocratic society. Her choice banishes the passion and sexuality represented by Percy, and ushers Clemencia into a life of virtuous domesticity and motherhood. In the last line of the epilogue, we learn that Clemencia is expecting a child, a fact that establishes her firmly as the *ángel del hogar*. We may wonder whether Clemencia’s desires could have been better fulfilled if she had waited for another suitor—one who combined Pablo’s goodness with Percy’s attractive charms—but we must consider what she would have risked by doing so. Don Martín once called Clemencia “regina angelorum,” that is, “queen of angels” but she would have lost this angelic status by remaining single and possibly ending as a spinster (198). By marrying Pablo and conceiving his child, she has reached the pinnacle of Spanish womanhood, and as an added bonus, she is lucky enough to have a husband who loves and respects her. As such, marrying Pablo is the best decision that Clemencia can make, even if it might not completely satisfy the modern reader.

Clemencia’s decision not only strikes a dissonant note with the reader, but also with Pablo himself, who questions her motivations and sincerity. When Pablo asks her what has brought about her sudden change of heart, Clemencia’s answer is quite revealing: “He sufrido, Pablo; este es todo mi secreto” (353). Like many domestic-novel protagonists, Clemencia has emerged from the “school of suffering,” where she has learned to weigh

her own desires against the demands of society and to compromise to achieve some of the former without challenging the latter. She recognizes the value of her suffering, because without it, she tells Pablo, she would not have been able to see his true worth and the benefits of the life that he offered. Although Clemencia has not masochistically sought out suffering in her life, she is able to view her suffering as a positive experience since the wisdom that came from it has taught her to be satisfied with the options she has as a proper Spanish lady. As Valis notes, her choice reflects the advice of her guardians, but it is made independently, after Clemencia has weighed the lessons of her mentors against her own experience. Furthermore, the method of her decision-making is also significant. She uses her reason to guide her choice, an act which subverts the gender paradigms of her day, but in the end she attributes her decision to the suffering she has endured, a fact which seems to devalue her education and her capacity for logical, rather than emotional, reasoning. As such, while *Clemencia* does represent possibilities for female agency and subjectivity as Charon-Deutsch suggests, this agency is still strictly limited in order to maintain Caballero's conformity to traditional Spanish femininity.

In her work on nineteenth-century American texts, Marianne Noble writes that the apparent masochism, or glorification of suffering, in "women's sentimentality can be seen as an opportunity for agency that presented itself to authors within the ideological constraints of the culture" (5). Fernán Caballero's manipulation of her protagonist seems to reflect that very idea, as she uses Clemencia's compliance to the feminine ideals of submission and abnegation to facilitate her journey to, and through, independence. Caballero gives Clemencia more agency than was typically afforded to the women of her time, but she gives it to her only within the preset structures of Spanish society. Unlike more progressive women authors who would create more dynamic female protagonists later in the century, she does not seek out alternative lifestyles for her protagonist; rather, she educates Clemencia in the ways of proper womanhood and then allows her to negotiate the options available for her life. The truth remains that society's restraints give her only one acceptable option: to take her best and most immediate opportunity to become a respectable wife and mother. Clemencia, who had rejected her first opportunity to marry Pablo, learns primarily through suffering that such a wise, gentle, and loving suitor is not a commodity to be rejected in the marriage market. And because she has borne the tyrannies, jealousies, and injustices of men like Guevara and Percy, she is truly able to appreciate the love that Pablo offers and to be content as his wife. Thus, although Caballero does not offer a feminist critique of society's limitations on women, she does allow her heroine to come to her second marriage on her own terms, even though that ultimately meant accepting the angelic role that society had written for her.

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Notes

- ¹ For discussions of the “angel of the house” concept in nineteenth-century Spain, see Catherine Jagoe and Bridget Aldaraca’s work on gender in the novels of Benito Pérez Galdós.
- ² See Catherine Davies’s chapter on Caballero in *Spanish Women’s Writing, 1849–1996*, in which she discusses Cecilia Böhl’s attitudes toward her own writing and her opinions on women’s education.
- ³ For a discussion of masochism in *Clemencia* and similar texts, see Charnon-Deutsch’s *Narratives of Desire*.
- ⁴ Fragments of nineteenth-century legal codes that relate to women are reproduced in *La mujer en los discursos de género* (253-303).
- ⁵ For more details about women’s rights, see Mary Nash’s discussion of women’s legal status in *Mujer, familia, y trabajo en España, 1875–1936*.
- ⁶ Caballero also treats this theme in her short story “Callar en vida y perdonar en muerte” (1850), and even over half a century later, in 1919, Spanish feminist Margarita Nelken complains of the silencing of women’s mistreatment in Spanish culture, writing, “la mujer digna no va contándole a nadie sus cuitas íntimas” (174).
- ⁷ Caballero gives us one example of his verbal abuse. When Fernando brings home a painting of a nude Venus and Adonis that scandalizes Clemencia, he insults her and her upbringing in the convent with “cuanto vulgar sarcasmo ha inventado la grosería contra [las monjas]” (139).
- ⁸ To understand how extreme this prejudice could be, one only has to read Adolfo Llanos y Alcaraz’s 1864 text *La mujer*, where he calls the unmarried woman “un mal engendro,” “Aborto de la naturaleza,” “Capricho de Lucifer,” and “La polilla más grande de la sociedad” (72).
- ⁹ For an example of this type of thought, see the excerpt of Ángel Pulido Fernández’s work *Bosquejos médicos-sociales para la mujer* reproduced in *La mujer en los discursos de género*.
- ¹⁰ Faustina Sáez de Melgar’s *Deberes de la mujer* is one instance of a proponent of domesticity criticizing the habits of aristocratic women.
- ¹¹ Percy is never more than verbally abrasive with Clemencia, but we catch a glimpse of his temper when Don Galo brings him news of Clemencia’s marriage. Percy, enraged, asks Galo whether he would rather leave through the door or the window, giving the kind gentleman quite a fright (362).
- ¹² The foreign Viscount is also portrayed negatively when he accuses Clemencia of inciting him to suicide by her rejection, and Caballero blames the coquettish behavior of women like Alegría on the imitation of foreign customs.
- ¹³ This idea also appears in the abbot’s lessons to Clemencia: “con verdad se ha dicho que el hombre juzga por razones y la mujer por impresiones; es decir, el primero con la cabeza y la segunda con el corazón” (183).

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