

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

Decimonónica

Journals

2015

Gender Iconoclasm and Aesthetics in Esteban Echeverría's *La cautiva* and the Captivity Paintings of Juan Manuel Blanes

Christopher Conway

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/decimononica>

Recommended Citation

Conway, Christopher, "Gender Iconoclasm and Aesthetics in Esteban Echeverría's *La cautiva* and the Captivity Paintings of Juan Manuel Blanes" (2015). *Decimonónica*. Paper 151.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/decimononica/151>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Decimonónica by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Gender Iconoclasm and Aesthetics in Esteban Echeverría's *La cautiva* and the Captivity Paintings of Juan Manuel Blanes
Christopher Conway



Figure 1. Scene from John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956).

Bodies in Transit

At the end of John Ford's seminal Anti-Western, *The Searchers* (1956), a cruel Indian hunter played by John Wayne returns a young white woman he has rescued from the Comanche to a family of white settlers. In one of the most iconic scenes in U.S. film history, Wayne comes to a stop outside of the homestead, standing on the unforgiving and sun-bleached landscape, while the settlers carry the girl through a doorway into the cool, shadowy recess of their domestic realm. Although the girl has lived for many years as one of the many wives of a Comanche chief, and has surely lost her virginity to him, she is welcomed back into civilization. Wayne's character, however, defined by savage acts that equate him with the barbarism of the Comanche, is symbolically condemned to remain outside, on the other side of the threshold symbolized by the doorway of the settler's home (Figure 1).

This symbolic scene from *The Searchers* is an apt portal into a constellation of American testimonies, legends, memoirs, biographies, poems, novels and paintings commonly classified under the rubric of the captivity narrative. (I use the term “American” here in a broad, New World sense.) The recurring theme of captivity narratives is that the crossing of borders transforms identity, blurring the boundary between civilization and barbarism. This transformation is particularly explosive when the captives are women, whose virginity or motherhood sacralize them as cultural icons.¹ In *The Searchers*, the captive girl returns to innocence while her rescuer is punished. It’s a contradictory and unsettled story, like that of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca in *La relación* (1542), Gonzalo Guerrero in Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s *Historia verdadera de la conquista de Nueva España* (1567), and the female protagonist of Esteban Echeverría’s foundational poem *La cautiva* (1837). In these tales of captivity, a civilized subject is transformed into a cultural hybrid that challenges binaristic categories. In Echeverría’s poem, a beautiful woman named María takes on the attributes of both a man and a savage to rescue herself and her husband from a bloodthirsty band of Indians who have kidnapped them. Although she survives her captivity, María subsequently dies of sorrow and her spirit is condemned to haunt the frontier space that witnessed her epic struggle to survive. It’s difficult to come up with a more iconoclastic representation of virtuous womanhood in nineteenth-century Latin American literature than this superhuman woman, spattered by the blood of the Indians she has unflinchingly slain.

In the pages that follow, I examine Echeverría’s unsettled treatment of civilization and barbarism in comparison to the more conservative and static treatment of captive women (henceforward *cautivas*) in two canvases by one of the greatest academic painters of nineteenth-century Latin America, the Uruguayan Juan Manuel Blanes (1830–1901). Echeverría represents the frontier as an interior space of contradiction and unrepresentability, whereas Blanes presents it as a conventional and ritualized space of rehearsed imagery; one depicts a frenzy of the self, the other a discrete object of melancholy and male desire. Echeverría, aided by the passionate and violent aesthetic of Romanticism and the sublime, forges explosive imagery, whereas Blanes, restrained by academicism produces contained and conventional imagery. Ultimately, I argue that aesthetic values become the determinant factor in defining whether an artist’s *cautiva* is allowed to be free or not.

Gender Iconoclasm and Romanticism in Esteban Echeverría’s *La cautiva* (1837)

Esteban Echeverría’s *La cautiva* (1837) is an early example of the paradigm of civilization and barbarism, which Domingo Faustino Sarmiento theorized in *Facundo: civilización y barbarie* (1845), a polemic that combined biography, sociology and historiography to discredit the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas and define the cultural origins of Argentinian violence. The binary was omnipresent throughout nineteenth-century literature and journalism as a justification for celebrating the modernizing (and Europeanized) agenda of liberalism and for denigrating cultural actors and elements associated with rural life and the colonial past. The wide dissemination and influence of Positivism in the last quarter of the century formalized the binary, which now authorized itself through technocrats closely associated with the state (as in the case of the Mexican

Porfiriato or the Venezuelan Guzmanato), and through the fetishization of science over religious, metaphysical thinking. Throughout Latin America, pseudo-medical and sociological treatises about racial degeneracy proliferated, pointing Positivist fingers at people of color, prostitutes and the urban poor.² The beginning of the decline of the formula of civilization and barbarism in canonical literary history was signaled in “Nuestra América” (1892), when José Martí explicitly rejected it by name and embraced *mestizaje*, nativism and Pan-Americanism. Echeverría’s *La cautiva* is thus not only a classic of Argentine literature, but a touchstone for the most important cultural debate of nineteenth-century Latin America.

Esteban Echeverría was Argentina’s first Romantic poet and an influential liberal thinker. After a stint in Paris in 1825–1830, he returned to Argentina and became a key member of the Generation of 1837 alongside Juan Bautista Alberdi, Domingo Sarmiento, José Mármol and Juan María Gutiérrez. Under the banner of *abnegemus ergo opera tenebrarum et induamur arma lucis* (let us therefore cast off the works of darkness and let us put on the armour of light), Echeverría and his friends sought to redirect the body politic away from the logic of brute force embodied by Juan Manuel de Rosas and toward the rule of reason and sociability (Shumway 126). They advocated a strong hand to tame rural Argentina, which they considered barbaric, and cast a wary eye on their own Hispanic roots, criticizing Spain for leaving a legacy of indolence and religious fanaticism in the New World (Shumway 136-39). When Rosas dispersed the group into exile, Echeverría fled to Montevideo, where he wrote two key works: a liberal manifesto titled *Dogma socialista* and a vehement Anti-Rosas story titled *El matadero*, which was posthumously published in 1871. Although his death was premature, the trilogy of *La cautiva*, *Dogma socialista* and *El matadero* ensured his place in the Argentine canon as a foundational liberal writer.

The anarchic energy of *La cautiva* and its iconoclastic treatment of gender is tied to the orgiastic representation of barbarism and the unusual depiction of its female protagonist as a hybrid figure. The poem opens with a powerful evocation of the pampas in the afternoon and at sunset. The image of the desert landscape emerges with connotations of depth, mystery and human solitude that can only be given their full measure and praise by the voice of genius: “Las armonías del viento / dicen más al pensamiento / que todo cuanto a porfia / la vana filosofía / pretende altiva enseñar. / ¿Qué pincel podrá pintarlas / sin deslucir su belleza? / ¿Qué lengua humana alabarlas? / Sólo el genio su grandeza / puede sentir y admirar” (9). In this darkening landscape swollen with subjectivity and infused with the mystery of nature, Indians suddenly and violently erupt onto the frontier. Their electric presence is signaled by ugliness, velocity, extravagant gesture, confusion and the thundering sound of hooves. They carry the decapitated heads of white men on their lances, as well as many terrified *cautivas*. As night falls, they make camp and descend into an orgy of bloodsoaked, vengeful celebration. They hold down a mare and tear into its throbbing guts, drinking its warm blood and innards while it convulses: “como sedientos vampiros, / sorben, chupan, saborean / la sangre, haciendo murmullo, / y de sangre se rellenan” (23). Glowing bonfires rain sparks into the sky as the savages fight among themselves to drop their heads into large tureens of liquor. Echeverría’s depiction of savagery is carnivalesque; it’s an orgy of pleasure defined by confusion, instinct and aggression. Readers will recognize dramatic parallels between these scenes and the descriptions of the rabble who linger around the blood-soaked mud of the

slaughterhouse in Echeverría's *El matadero*. Various critics have argued that the savages of *La cautiva* represent the savagery of Rosismo, an argument that is supported by the vengeful language of the Indians: "Guerra, guerra, y exterminio / al tiránico dominio / del huinca; engañosa paz: / devore el fuego sus ranchos, / que en su vientre los caranchos / ceben el pico voraz" (26).³ The followers of Rosas not only gave voice to similarly violent cries, but systematized and promoted their use, as in the case of the slogan "Mueran los inmundos asquerosos franceses, el infame pardejón pardusco Rivera y el unitario sabandija salvaje Lavalle," or "Mueran degollados como carneros todos los enemigos de nuestro amado Restaurador," among other variations (Ramos Mejía 253-54).⁴

One of the captives held by the Indians in Echeverría's poem is a soldier named Brián, who emerges among the mass of savages and valiantly fights against them before being violently restrained and staked to the ground for subsequent torture and killing. Other prisoners are slaughtered in a frenzy of violence that subsides as the savages fall asleep on fields strewn with the bodies of the living and of the dead. Brián's lover, María, emerges on the bloodied field after killing one of her Indian captors with a dagger, and when an Indian wakes up as she walks by, she stabs him in the chest as well. The poetic voice describes her as an avenging angel; as the light of a pure star that pierces the darkness of the horrific scene (40, 45). She is a heroine but she is also demoniacal, the vengeful embodiment of the bloodlust that pulses within her like hot lava: "Absorta el alma, en delirio / lleno de gozo y martirio / queda, hasta que al fin estalla / como volcán, y se explaya / la lava de su corazón" (40). The poem tries to temper this imagery by referring to her as a "timid maiden" when she kneels by the unconscious Brián and lowers her head to kiss his mouth (44). The feminization fails because when the poor man stirs and glimpses María for the first time he doesn't recognize her and believes that she's an assassin with fiery eyes. After María and Brián embrace, he pushes her away because, as he says, her "sanctified body" has been profaned by the savages. María, unfazed, replies, "Advierte que en este acero está escrito / mi pureza y mi delito, / mi ternura y mi valor" (47). These words underline how María has been transformed by the frontier into a new kind of woman: she is a *hybrid* that combines the conventional attributes of the *angel del hogar* (purity, tenderness) and the powers of man (crime, valor). She commands Brián to get up and follow her so that they can escape. She becomes the rescuer, the strong one holding up her man with the "divine power" of love and sacrifice, qualities that are now transmuted into the bodily strength and determination of a man.

In the second half of the poem, María drags Brián across the pampa, and helps him escape a jaguar and a wildfire. According to the poetic voice, she is like a beautiful, delicate flower, persecuted by cruel fate and imbued with robust valor and combative rage against adversity. Brián eventually dies on the pampa, and María carries on alone, until she is found by some Christians who inform her that her son has been killed by the Indians. The warrior angel, Indian-killer and challenger of wildfires and jaguars, a woman quick to anger and rage in battle, and armed with a bloodied dagger, inexplicably collapses when she hears the news, and dies. The poem then closes with the melancholy observation that the spirits of María and Brián haunt a particular tree on the pampa, appearing together at night to wander the darkness. What began as a descent into hell, ends with a colorful and sad legend about ghosts on the plains.

No other female character of nineteenth-century Latin American literature is quite like this *cautiva*. In her violence and masculine drive to take charge of her destiny, she evokes demoniacal or crazy women like Manuela from Ignacio Manuel Altamirano's *El Zarco* (1901), who is driven insane by her lust for status, riches and fantasies, or the murderous Lucía from Martí's *Amistad funesta/Lucía Jerez* (1885) who kills the virtuous woman Sol de Valle in a shocking fit of jealousy.⁵ María, composite of angel and warrior, whom the poetic voice earnestly praises for her noble motives and superior spirit, is an anomaly within the canon of nineteenth-century Latin American literature because Echeverría, from the very outset, explicitly situates her in what we might call a “no woman’s land,” a place where the conventional binaries of gender do not apply. This is one of the key insights that Susana Rotker brought to her reading of the poem when she wrote: “The captive (the real individual called a captive) ceases to exist: no one knows where to put her, in which part of the story (or the narrative of history) to deposit her; no one knows how to tell her story, nor does anyone seriously try to know her” (93).

Some critics, most notably Francine Massiello, have dealt with the anomalous nature of María’s identity by framing it within the broader gender politics of the Generation of 1837 and its opposition to the regime of Juan Manuel de Rosas. Massiello argues that liberal opposition to Rosas self-consciously adopted a less masculine pose in comparison to the virulent machismo and rhetorical and literal violence of the Rosas regime. “As a kind of symbolic marker,” Massiello writes, “women became emblems of resistance, responsible for devising potential subversions of the Rosas regime, or at least for denouncing the silence that had been imposed upon citizens of the nation [. . .]” (23). Through this lens, we may read Echeverría’s hybrid woman as a way of disguising resistance to Rosas through gender-switching or literary transvestism (28).

David T. Haberly poses an alternate answer to the dilemma by arguing for the a crisis of masculinity in Echeverría’s own life, and by seeing the poem as a device for exploring the author’s fears and obsessions over his disempowerment—if not outright castration—as an opponent of Rosas. By tracing lesser known writings of Echeverría, as well as comparing the basic plot structure of *La cautiva* and *El matadero*, Haberly argues that Echeverría was continuously reworking the same plot about how to find a way around and through emasculation to find some kind of heroic virility. The poem is not about women, men or even Indians, according to Haberly, but about Echeverría’s anxieties about effeminacy and political resistance to Rosas. Specifically, the author’s debilitating heart problems made him impotent or fearful of sexual release, resulting in anxious narratives about women or feminized men who have no choice—in the midst of betrayal, abandonment and the savagery of their foes—but to define masculinity as a form of sacrifice and self-destruction. Haberly writes: “the heroine or the feminized hero contradicts and confounds expectations [. . .] by performing a violent, masculinizing gesture that leads directly or indirectly to martyrdom” (304). According to these formulations, we may surmise, María is a projection of Echeverría and a symbol of the author’s belief in the redemptive power of an alternate kind of masculinity that the author could not clearly name or label in the poem.

Massiello and Haberly’s readings, which are not necessarily incompatible, are insightful guides for exploring the complexities of Echeverría’s poem and his relationship to history.

Yet, because my focus here is on the visuality, texture and energy of a poem in comparison to paintings, I don't want to completely resolve the poem's indeterminacy or ambiguity. My reading proposes that the poem's Romantic aesthetic helps us understand its colorful extremism and frames it as the expression of the anarchic passions of human subjectivity. To a degree, this reading evokes Fernando Operé's useful interpretation of the poem's treatment of gender in relation to the frontier. Operé argues that the barbaric space of the frontier breaks down conventional definitions of gender, freeing characters like María and Brián to become something that they should not be: "Al cruzar la frontera, María queda ubicada en un espacio donde desaparecen las reglas de la civilización y en cuyas soledades se produce la ruptura liberalizadora que le permite integrarse a otros mundos, al masculino, al indígena, e incluso al natural, en una simbiosis integradora" ("*La cautiva*" 552). This analysis respects the lived experience and transformed identities of real life *cautivas*, but it may also be seen as an analogue of another kind of unstable space of transformation: Romantic selfhood. Like many Romantic texts, *La cautiva* privileges the concept of deep subjectivity and passion. The poetic voice describes the desert in the afternoon and at sunset as a limitless, mysterious and sublime space that only artists can experience and represent. The coming of night, evoked by a description of the sun as a sleeper, augurs quiet and calm, but also the eruption of scenes of terror and horror. Much like the imagery of tempestuous oceans, vertiginous mountaintop vistas and tempests or inundations, the transition from day into night is a symbolic commonplace about the dark interior of the self. There, in that shadowy world of the self, we see ghosts, demons, confusion and intense feeling, swirling about like barbaric Indians and avenging angels, challenging definition and stirring literary inspirations. Echeverría said as much about his poem in his preface to its first edition in 1837, when he declared that his subject was the intensity of human passions. A true state of passion is feverish and abnormal, he argued, and inevitably leads to crisis (Echeverría v).



Figure 2. "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" by Francisco Goya, from *Paintings and Drawings by Francisco Goya* by William Starkweather (Hispanic Society of America, 1916).

Most readers will be familiar with Goya's famous etching, from the *Caprichos*, titled "El sueño de la razón produce monstruos" (Figure 2), in which a sleeping man emanates ghostly owls and visions in the smoky darkness above his reclining head. When we read

Goya's explanation of the meaning of this etching, it is hard not to think of the *weltanschauung* of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Romanticism, to which Echeverría and his poem *La cautiva* belong. Goya's description of the monsters we see when we sleep faithfully describes the horrific vistas that *La cautiva* paints for its readers:

Imagination, deserted by reason, begets impossible monsters [. . .] As soon as day breaks, they fly each one his own way, the witches, the hobgoblins, the visions, and the phantoms. It is a good thing that these people show themselves only by night and in the dark. No one has ever been able to find out where they hide and lock themselves up during daytime. (qtd. in Holt 55)

The Indians that explode onto the landscape of the night in *La cautiva*, bathing in the blood of the mare like drunken vampires, are monsters that may be read as avatars of Goya's phantoms, or, if we prefer a Freudian interpretation, the anarchic hobgoblins of unconscious desire. Echeverría himself intuited these connotations, when, in his poem "El angel caído," he described the nightmares that lead to disillusionment and sadness as shadows with vacant eyes and black or yellow skin, wandering around the pillow of a sleeper who grinds his teeth. He also refers to the lascivious demon that resides in the flesh of the sleeper, haunting his sleep with those disturbing shadows. If we had a wealth of reliable biographical information about Echeverría's life it might be tempting to psychoanalyze him through such allusions. But my interest here is not in applying Freud, but in the uncontainable energy and vitality that Romantic art brings to representations of the self. The experience of fear and of nightmare visions posits imagery that resists easy categorization. It is in this domain of indeterminacy that we find another way of reading *La cautiva* and comparing it to subsequent pictorial representations of the same subject.

In the Romantic aesthetic, fear and horror were ultimately desirable because they could rattle the individual into a deeper understanding of the self and the world. This was what George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel described as Romanticism's affirmation of the inner life over the outer life, and what Madame de Stael described as Romanticism's emotional, subjective and frightening power (Hugo 55-6, 65). In this context, the sublime provided the Romantics with a ready-made device that explained the nexus of fear, trauma and creation. If Romanticism enshrined the imagination and the individual self as the most important and revelatory seat of human experience and expression, the concept of the sublime validated romantic psychology by explaining how an individual subject could achieve higher state of being through fear. The theory of the sublime originated in a treatise titled *Peri Hupsos* attributed to the second-century Greek writer Longinus. In this work on the art of oratory, the title of which may be translated as "On the Impressiveness of Style" or "On the Sublime," Longinus said that the sublime was characterized by the "attainment of grandeur" in expression, and vehement and uncontrollable emotion in a speaker's expression and reception by an audience (24). Five centuries later, Joseph Addison famously developed these arguments in a series of articles published in *The Spectator* between 1711 and 1712. Addison argued that feelings of sublimity could arise as a result of three aesthetic experiences: grandeur, novelty and beauty. In his account, descriptions of human suffering were capable of instilling feelings of pleasure in readers because they were not immediate or threatening. "Such representations" writes Addison,

“teach us to set a just value upon our own condition, and make us prize our good fortune which exempts us from the like calamities” (68). The idea that the sublime is an aesthetic experience defined primarily by intense emotional experience, and as such, identified with fear and terror, was also echoed by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: with an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste* (1757). In this landmark text, Burke wrote: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (131). The intensity of feeling provoked by the sublime in the subject is pleasurable and salutary, argues Burke, because it exercises the nerves and the sensibility, and prevents melancholy and depression. These and other attributes of the sublime, as addressed in eighteenth-century aesthetics, demonstrate that fear and terror constituted the richest of wellsprings for an affirmative literary expression, one capable of shaking the human subject to his very core and attaining beauty through emotional intensity. As Mario Praz wrote in his classic work *The Romantic Agony* (1933): “The discovery of Horror as a source of delight and beauty ended by reacting on men’s actual conception of beauty itself: the Horrid, from being a category of the Beautiful, ended by becoming one of its essential elements” (27).

Above we mentioned how Echeverría referred to *La cautiva* as a story about human passion, and how the most intense of human passions can lead to a crisis. He writes: “[E]l estado verdaderamente apasionado es estado febril y anormal, en el cual no puede nuestra frágil naturaleza permanecer mucho tiempo, que debe necesariamente hacer crisis” (v). In *La cautiva*, the categories of the feminine and the masculine enter into crisis and become something different than what they are supposed to be. Brián becomes a wounded and defeated man, full of bravado, courage and grandiloquent speeches, but ultimately powerless. María becomes a blood-soaked Amazon, full of initiative, superhuman strength and the will to survive. Her location within the nightmarish space of the frontier, with all of the connotations of interiority and subjectivity mentioned above, transforms her into a different kind of being, one that does not conform to conventional gender norms. The frontier has indelibly marked her and made a return to civilization and conventional categories of gender identity impossible. A hybrid being, at once a slayer of Indians and a loving mother, cannot cross the threshold and reenter the conventional world of domesticity.

Juan Manuel Blanes and the Limits of Academic Representation.

If *La cautiva* was one of the most popular and recognized poems of nineteenth-century Argentina, the motif of *cautivas* also recurred in the work of three important painters: Johann Moritz Rugendas (1802–1858), a German who drew inspiration directly from Echeverría’s poem in several representations of captivity (1845–1848); the Argentine Angel Della Valle, whose “La vuelta del Malón” (1892) depicted the kidnapping of a white woman by Indians; and the Uruguayan Juan Manuel Blanes (1830–1901), one of Latin America’s greatest academic painters, who depicted *cautivas* in several paintings (1880). I want to focus on Blanes in particular, but a brief review of the *cautiva* paintings by Rugendas and Della Valle will be useful to set the stage.

Rugendas travelled extensively in Latin America in 1821–1825 and 1831–1846, completing over 5,000 paintings and drawings about the New World, and interacting with many of the most important cultural luminaries of the nascent republics he visited, especially Chile (Ades 49). The Russian scientist Heinrich von Langsdorff had hired the young Rugendas in 1820 to travel with him to the New World and produce botanical drawings, which were later published in a successful book titled *Voyage Pittoresque dans le Brésil* (1835). Rugendas, encouraged by his compatriot Alexander von Humboldt, and by the success of his first collection of drawings, organized a second, much longer trip to Latin America, during which he endeared himself to important writers, artists and political figures. Sarmiento memorialized him by saying that he was one of two Europeans (the other being Alexander Von Humboldt) who had actually portrayed America truthfully (Ades 49). His paintings about *cautivas* are titled “El rapto de Doña Trinidad Salcedo” (1845) (commonly known today under the title “El Malón”), depicting an Indian raid and featuring a demoniacal savage on a white steed with a frantic white woman over his lap (Figure 3); “El rapto de la cautiva” (1845), showing an Indian racing across a dusty, ill-defined landscape on a piebald horse with a frantic *cautiva* woman behind him; and two paintings titled “El regreso de la cautiva,” one from 1845, and the other from 1848. These paintings were inspired by the true story of a sixteen-year-old white girl named Trinidad Salcedo, who was kidnapped by a band of Pincheyra Indians in 1826, near the Chilean town of Talca. During a chaotic skirmish between the Pincheyra and a military force led by Colonel Thomas Sutcliffe, a British officer serving the cause of Independence in Colombia, Peru and Chile, the young girl escaped and was rescued. “I am not able to describe the sufferings of Doña Trinidad Salcedo,” Sutcliffe wrote in his memoirs, “in language adequate to convey a proper impression of their severity” (133). He reported that she entered a convent and never smiled again. He told her story to his friend Rugendas, who gave him an oil painting depicting the Salcedo kidnapping—probably a scene similar or identical to the painting known today as “El Malón”—and which Sutcliffe praised for its accuracy. In Chile, this image became so iconic that other painters reproduced it in the 1830’s, and Claudio Gay printed a lithograph of it in a historical atlas published in 1854.



Figure 3. Lithograph based on “El rapto de doña Trinidad Salcedo” by Rugendas, published in Claudio Gay, *Atlas Histórico y Físico de Chile* (1854).

Image courtesy of the Peter H. Raven Library, Missouri Botanical Garden.

The Rugendas paintings, which were later used to illustrate an edition of Echeverría's poem, evidence intense movement, color and variety. He populates these paintings with scenes of frenzied action and frames the focal point of *cautivas* in a world of blurred color and motion. "El rapto de Doña Trinidad Salcedo" has a *naïf* quality to it, while "El rapto de la cautiva" achieves a nearly impressionist sense of unity, with the fleeing Indian and his female prisoner suspended in smooth, blended waves of tan, brown and yellow that represent the desert, the horizon, the brush and the sky itself. In all of his *cautiva* paintings, however, the *cautiva* is an appendage of the horse and she is always in anguish or in supplication over her fate. Even upon her liberation, the *cautiva* preserves her identity as the property of an active man, in this case her rescuer. Rugendas may have indeed drawn inspiration from Echeverría's demonic savages, but there is little in these paintings to indicate that the *cautiva* has any role to play other than that of passive chattel for her Indian captor. Angel Della Valle's "La vuelta del malón" (1892), similarly poses the *cautiva* as a passive object; her pale, bare-chested body contrasts with the dark tone of the determined Indian who has slung her over the front of his horse (Figure 4). She seems asleep, and her entire, sensual form seems like a graft from a painting about a much less traumatic experience.



Figure 4. "La vuelta del malón" by Angel Della Valle (1892). Courtesy of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.

The *cautiva* paintings by Juan Manuel Blanes are, in a very fundamental way, quite different from the work of Rugendas and Della Valle because they treat its subject as a discrete body separate from the touch of the Indians. However, his captive women are frozen in neoclassical poses and gestures, and in one case, transformed into an intensely eroticized object of visual desire. In many ways, the key to understand these interpretations of the *cautiva* icon lies in the academic aesthetic that this painter mastered like few others. Blanes belongs in a pantheon of great academic painters that includes the

Venezuelan Arturo Michelena, the Peruvian Francisco Laso, and the Mexican Felix Parra. As Dawn Ades explains, Latin American academic painting was an institutionalized form of art instruction tasked with cultivating the artistic life and fostering national progress (28). Academic painters privileged historical themes and, at least in the case of Latin America, blended classicism with realism (30). Academic painting was also characterized by sharply delineated figures and an ultra-smooth finish in the application of paint. As the art historian Albert Boime writes, one of the conditions of “the academic outlook was a sober application of colour confined within the linear zones, employed to reinforce the linear design rather than detract from it by a sensuous textural appeal” (20). This in turn was paired with “the Academy’s doctrinal concept of the *fini*, or dutifully finished pictorial surface” (20). Blanes met these aesthetic prerequisites although he was never formally trained at an Argentine or Uruguayan academy. He did secure a scholarship from the Uruguayan government to refine his craft in Florence, Italy, which was a typical rite of passage for Latin American academic artists, who eagerly sought patronage to study their craft in the major cities of Europe, particularly Paris. One of his most iconic paintings is the “Juramento de los Treinta y Tres Orientales” (1877), arguably the most celebrated painting of nineteenth-century Uruguay, which depicted the oath taken in 1825 by thirty three revolutionaries who fought against the Empire of Brazil to found Uruguay as an independent state. The variety of color and detail, and Blanes’s outstanding command of gesture and pose, make the gathering of determined revolutionaries compelling, if not absolutely hypnotic. For nineteenth-century Uruguayans, it was even more powerful, because it tapped into communal wellsprings of mythological pride about the founding of their nation. Another of Blanes’s iconic paintings, especially in the annals of the history of Latin American art history, is “La Paraguaya” (1879), which is more spare in its composition; it depicts a solitary and mournful Paraguayan woman, amidst the barren landscape of a battlefield covered by the bodies of Paraguayan soldiers killed during the War of the Triple Alliance, in which the Paraguayan military was devastated by the allied forces of Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil.

Blanes did two major paintings about female captives in or before 1880, both of which are titled “La cautiva.” The first one is uninteresting compositionally, showing the *cautiva* in the foreground while two rather relaxed Indians watch her from one of their makeshift *toldos* or straw shelters (Figure 5). The *cautiva* stands with her head in profile, bowed against the wrist of her uplifted left arm. She is dressed modestly, although the shoulder on the right side of her blouse has slipped down her arm, revealing a swath of pale skin. A touch of troubling rouge on her cheek, suggesting either a blush or sunburn, is the only visible indication, albeit ambiguous, of sexual threat and hardship. This *cautiva* is much paler than the Paraguayan woman from “La Paraguaya,” although their blouses are identically arranged to accentuate their femininity in a way that is not immodest. In gesture and expression, both are isolated and mournful figures who have an air of resignation about them. Their eyes are closed, they have nowhere to look. In the *cautiva* painting, the two Indians, one in a poncho and the other bare-chested, stare out of the canvas, toward their captive and beyond, with confidence and little concern about the possibility of her escape. The painting’s subject, the *cautiva*, is held captive between the gaze of the Indians in the background and the viewers of the painting, who are on the outside of the canvas. The rudimentary juxtaposition of woman and captors is artificial

and the distance that separates the Indians from her create a sedate tone devoid of urgency, fear or tension. As in the case of Angel Della Valle, the *cautiva* seems like a graft from another painting. Although she does not appear to be sleeping like Della Valle's female prisoner, her pose is one of resignation. Finally, most pictorial elements in the painting are sharply delineated, from the brush at her bare feet, to the stalks of straw on the toldos behind the captors. The hazy background of gray and white clouds, with patches of blue sky behind, is undramatic. Nothing in this painting approaches motion and the *cautiva* lacks presence, to say nothing of agency. The stiffness of the painting, and its timid approach to the violence of the subject, gives it a safe, neoclassical style.



Figure 5. “La cautiva” (1880) by Juan Manuel Blanes. Courtesy of the Museo Juan Manuel Blanes de la Intendencia de Montevideo.

The second painting is the more radical of the two, interpreting the *cautiva* as an erotic object (Figure 6). The painting is set on a sunburnt stretch of the pampa populated by an encampment of *toldos* and a mounted band of Indians in the background. Over half of the canvas is composed of blue sky, fringed at the horizon with haze and distant clouds. The focal point of the composition is the *cautiva*, who is centered on the canvas as she sits on her haunches with her bare, left leg and foot exposed on the ground. Her flaxen-haired head, with its slight, upward tilt, is in profile, although there's a slight hint of three-dimensionality to it. She is unselfconsciously bare-chested and her arms are crossed at the wrist with her hands resting on her right leg, suggesting by their position that they are bound together. If the *cautiva* of the previous painting is still clothed like a civilized woman, with little to suggest violation, transformation or transculturation, this bare-

breasted woman is wearing a short leather or rough material skirt around her waist. In short, the Indians have already made her their own. To the right of the *cautiva* and to the left of the viewer is a crouching Indian, whose mouth is slightly agape and who is resting on both elbows while he directs his gaze toward the white woman. Unlike the undistinguished looking captors of the first painting, this Indian is an exotic caricature, with red and white feathers standing up from the narrow headband around his forehead, and more reddish and gray plumage flowing out of his waistband. In his right hand, resting on the ground, Blanes has placed yet another cliché of Indianness, a thin lance or bow. The painting is sharper than the first, its colors brighter, and its figures more stylized. If the first composition evokes a muted, theatrical and stylized Neoclassical theme, this one is more academic in its use of bright color, the finished quality in the application of color and the Romantic treatment of captivity.



Figure 6. “La cautiva” by Juan Manuel Blanes (1880). Courtesy of the Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires.

This second painting once again casts the *cautiva* as the object of two gazes. The Indian hungrily stares at her uncovered form while the implied viewer of the painting occupies an equivalent position on the other side of the *cautiva*. Blanes gives the viewer of the composition the same relative vantage point and location as the captor, but on the other side of the canvas. Indeed, the quality of the Indian gaze is not savage or disordered, but calm and awed; it reproduces the kind of quiet intensity that art patrons bring to the act of looking at a painting. This mirroring of the gaze (Indian/Viewer of the Painting), coupled with the exaggerated interpretation of the captor as exotic, essentially erases the binary of civilization and barbarism. The Indian is not an Other but a masculine looker that mirrors the male viewer of the canvas, who is invited to look upon and hungrily marvel at the abject posture of the barely clothed woman. The *cautiva* seems to be supplicating for release, lost to her surroundings, her slack shoulders and kneeling posture communicating defeat. She has been stripped of everything: her clothes, her modesty, her terror and her awareness of her surroundings. She stares vacantly into space while her captor and the painting’s looker venerate her naked form. Her previous identity is lost and what she has become is an eroticized feminine form, an object of visual pleasure. Indeed, the painting evokes the popularity of nineteenth-century, orientalist

representations of women in European art, which titillated patrons with scenes of women in harems (Delacroix's "Women of Algiers in their Harem," for example), or exotic heroines and temptresses (such as "The Death of Cleopatra" by Jean André Rixens, among many others.) After all, the pictorial world of the *cautiva* is one of atavism, desire and exoticism, much in the same way as the orientalist nudes and figures of European art.

As is probably clear, the captivity paintings of Blanes fall short of being iconoclastic. If Echeverría was working with the exalted and disordered palette of the Romantic sublime, which permitted vertiginous and terrifying flights of fancy, including astonishing scenes of a white warrior woman fighting for her freedom and for the survival of her lover, Blanes was working with a more muted set of colors and expectations. Although Blanes was a master of color and smooth finish, and many of his compositions, such as his beautiful cycle of *gauchitos*, are Romantic in sensibility because of their interest in local color and identity, his expressive range could not be as dynamic and surprising as Echeverría's. The tyranny of academic painting's dependence on sharp forms, bright coloration and smooth finish, often implied the mitigation of motion and energy. With few exceptions, academic painting in Latin America exchanged energy for three-dimensional, yet essentially static vistas of historical episodes and distinguished personages. Moreover, academic painting was primarily modulated by state sponsorship, with all of the politics that such an arrangement implied, whereas poetry was the art of a solitary individual who did not create under the pressure of officialist or nationalist commissions. Echeverría wrote about his demons, casting them in different roles and positions, and essentially labelled *La cautiva* a passion play about human subjectivity. Blanes painted for the state, exhibited his art as a part of state delegations around the world and depended on patronage to create his art. His was not the vocabulary of the sublime, with its tendency to cause vertigo, but the cult of well delineated forms. Whether he chose to be hyperrealist or studiously neoclassical, Blanes was a painter of discrete scenes and figures, whereas Echeverría, in *La cautiva*, was a conjurer of nightmares and inner demons. Why should it surprise us that Blanes did not, and perhaps more importantly, *could not* approximate the intensity and radical nature of Echeverría's depiction of gender in crisis?

Valuing *La cautiva*

I began this essay with an image of the return of the *cautiva* and the expulsion of her rescuer from civilization. In Echeverría's poem, the *cautiva* becomes a savage male to rescue herself and her lover and it is for this reason that she cannot return to civilization to inhabit a conventionally gendered role. Her trial by fire in that orgiastic night of destruction and bloodlust transformed her into a kind of androgynous noble savage: a courageous fighter, a leader, and an agent capable of surviving the hardships of the natural world. One way of understanding the symbolic economy of this formulation, which sets her apart from other heroines of the nineteenth-century canon, is by thinking about Echeverría's poem in relation to the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime and of subjectivity in general. In doing so, not only do we acquire a valuable framework for thinking about *La cautiva* as a coherent work of art (rather than a divided, contradictory or inexplicable text), but we also discover ways of talking about how paintings about *cautivas* in the River Plate came up short in capturing the iconoclasm of Echeverría's treatment of gender. The precise brush strokes of Blanes and others could not match Echeverría's

electric inner landscapes, and did not dare to depict the *cautiva* as an agent, a fighter or even a subject. For them, she was an object, the chattel on the front of the horse of the Indian, or a delicious feminine form to be consumed through the male gaze.

University of Texas at Arlington

Notes

- ¹ For an overview of these kinds of narratives see Fernando Opere's *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives* (2008) and Richard VanDerBeets's *Indian Captivity Narrative: An American Genre* (1984).
- ² For an introduction to this subject see Chapter 2 of Martin Stabb's *In Quest of Identity: Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890–1960*.
- ³ For arguments about the poem being an allegory about Rosas see Haberley 296-98, Massiello 27-28, and Rotker 81-82. The argument about violent language is my own.
- ⁴ For more on the cultural institutionalization of political hatred see Acree 213-15 and Ramos Mejía (375-79).
- ⁵ These *femme fatales* have been symbolically rehabilitated by contemporary feminist and/or post-structuralist interpretations that revoke authorial intent and cultural context. One positive reading of the character of Lucía in Martí's novel may be found in *La novela modernista* by Aníbal González, and another in Juan Carlos González Espitia's *The Dark Side of the Archive*. González Espitia writes: "...the most relevant element that Lucía possessess is an *unrestrained nature*" (49; my emphasis). For *El Zarco*, see Luz Ainai Morales Pino, 22-24.

Works Cited

- Acree, William G. *Everyday Reading: Print Culture and Collective Identity in the Río de la Plata, 1780–1910*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2011. Print.
- Addison, Joseph. “Joseph Addison, from *The Spectator* (1712–14).” Ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1996: 62-69. Print.
- Ades, Dawn. *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1989. Print.
- Blanes, Juan Manuel. *La cautiva*. Colección de Arte Amalia Lacroze de Fortabat, Buenos Aires.
- . *La cautiva*. Museo Juan Manuel Blanes de la Intendencia de Montevideo, Montevideo.
- Boime, Albert. *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Phaidon, 1971. Print.
- Burke, Edmund. “Edmund Burke, from *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1790).” Ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1996: 131-38. Print.
- Della Valle, Angel. *La vuelta del malón*. Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires.
- Echeverría, Esteban. *Rimas*. Buenos Aires: Imprenta Argentina, 1837. Print.
- Gay, Claudio. *Atlas Histórico y Físico de Chile*. Paris: Imprenta E. Thunot y Compañía, 1854. Print.
- González, Aníbal. *La novela modernista hispanoamericana*. Madrid: Gredos, 1987. Print. *Biblioteca Románica Hispánica* 355.
- González Espitia, Juan Carlos. *On the Dark Side of the Archive: Nation and Literature in Spanish America at the Turn of the Century*. Lewisburg [Pa.]: Bucknell UP, 2010. Print.
- Haberly, David T. “Male Anxiety and Sacrificial Masculinity: The Case of Echeverría.” *Hispanic Review* 73.3 (2005): 291–308. Print.
- Holt, Elizabeth Basye Gilmore. *From the Classicists to the Impressionists*. 1st ed. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1966. Print.
- Hugo, Howard E. *The Portable Romantic Reader*. New York: The Viking Press, 1957.
- Longinus, Dionysus. “Dionysus Longinus on the Sublime.” Ed. Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla. *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1996: 22-28. Print.
- Masiello, Francine. *Between Civilization & Barbarism: Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. Print.
- Morales Pino, Luz Aina. “Tensiones disciplinarias: palabra, imagen y subversión semántica en la estética realista de *El Zarco*,” *Decimonónica* 11.1 (Winter/Invierno 2014): 14-29.
- Operé, Fernando. *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008. Print.
- . “La cautiva de Echeverría: el trágico señuelo de la frontera.” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies*, 80.5, 2003: 545-54. Print.
- Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. 2d ed. London, New York: Oxford UP, 1951. Print.
- Ramos Mejía, José María. *Rosas y su tiempo*. Buenos Aires: F. Lajouane y ca, 1907. Print.
- Rotker, Susana. *Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.

-
- Shumway, Nicolas. *The Invention of Argentina*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Print.
- Stabb, Martin S. *In Quest of Identity; Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890–1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967. Print.
- Starkweather, William. *Paintings and Drawings by Francisco Goya*. New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1916. Print.
- Sutcliffe, Thomas. *Sixteen Years in Chile and Peru*. London: Fisher, Son and Co., 1841. Print.
- The Searchers*. Dir. John Ford. Perf. John Wayne, Jeffrey Hunter, Natalie Wood, and Henry Brandon. Warner Bros., 1956. Film.
- VanDerBeets, Richard. *The Indian Captivity Narrative: An American Genre*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984. Print.