

**THE IRONY OF SPAIN'S IMPERIAL DENOUEMENT:
AFRANCESAMIENTO IN LEOPOLDO ALAS CLARÍN'S
LA REGENTA (1884)***

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**A IRONIA DA DENÚNCIA IMPERIAL DA ESPANHA:
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Abstract

This article discusses the ironic portrayal of *afrancesamiento* in Leopoldo Alas Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884) as a commentary on geopolitical realities. A well-known Francophile in his time, Clarín frequently employed elements of French culture and language in his literary works. The ironic use of these French elements in *La Regenta* is viewed as criticism of Spain's patriarchal system and lack of modernization. I discuss how the *afrancesamiento* of the Spanish bourgeoisie thematized in *La Regenta* allows Clarín to comment ironically on attempts to fashion an image of Spain as occidental and superior to orientalized Latin America and its people. This evocation of an imperial context is Clarín's critique of Spain's unreadiness to accept the loss of its colonial possessions and to build a modern, post-imperial national identity for itself.

Keywords

Afrancesamiento – loss of colonies – crisis of national identity – traditionalism vs. modernization – critique of patriarchy

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Resumen

Este artículo analiza la representación irónica del afrancesamiento en *La Regenta* (1884) de Leopoldo Alas Clarín como un comentario sobre las realidades geopolíticas. Un francófilo muy conocido en su época, Clarín empleaba con frecuencia elementos de la cultura y el idioma francés en sus obras literarias. El uso irónico de estos elementos franceses en *La Regenta* es visto como una crítica al sistema patriarcal de España y la falta de modernización. Discuto cómo el afrancesamiento de la burguesía española tematizada en *La Regenta* le permite a Clarín comentar irónicamente sobre los intentos de crear una imagen de España como occidental y superior a la América Latina orientalizada y su gente. Esta evocación de un contexto imperial es la crítica de Clarín a la falta de preparación de España para aceptar la pérdida de sus posesiones coloniales y para construir una identidad nacional moderna posimperial para sí misma.

Palabras clave

Afrancesamiento – pérdida de las colonias – crisis de la identidad nacional – tradicionalismo vs. modernización – crítica del patriarcado

Resumo

Este artigo discute o retrato irônico do afrancesamiento em *La Regenta* de Leopoldo Alas Clarín (1884) como um comentário sobre realidades geopolíticas. Francófilo conhecido em sua época, o Clarín frequentemente empregava elementos da cultura e da língua francesa em suas obras literárias. O uso irônico desses elementos franceses em *La Regenta* é visto como uma crítica ao sistema patriarcal espanhol e à falta de modernização. Discuto como o afrancesamiento da burguesia espanhola tematizado em *La Regenta* permite ao Clarín comentar ironicamente as tentativas de moldar uma imagem da Espanha como ocidental e superior à América Latina orientalizada e seu povo. Esta evocação de um contexto imperial é a crítica do Clarín à falta de preparação da Espanha em aceitar a perda de suas possessões coloniais e construir uma identidade nacional pós-imperial moderna para si mesma.

Palavras-chave

Afrancesamiento – perda de colônias – crise de identidade nacional – tradicionalismo vs. modernização – crítica do patriarcado

1. Introduction

The “end of the Spanish empire” was a protracted process that occurred over the course of the nineteenth century and beyond.¹ It entailed

¹ TSUCHIYA, 2016, p. 5.

vast political, economic, and social changes. One of the most significant political changes in this period was a shift in the power of European empires-some, like Spain, were losing their colonies and their impact on the world, while others, such as Britain and France, were still in the ascendancy. The end of empire caused a crisis of Spanish national identity as the country struggled to formulate a new national trajectory without its colonies. These changes, and above all the geopolitical developments during the post-imperial crisis, particularly the *afrancesamiento* of Spanish culture and politics and its consequences, were represented in many literary works of the nineteenth century. Examples include Benito Pérez Galdós's *La de Bringas* (1884) and *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887), and Leopoldo Alas Clarín's *La Regenta* (1884).

This article discusses the ironic portrayal of *afrancesamiento* in *La Regenta* as an expression of (geo)political ideas. Clarín was a well-known Francophile who frequently used elements of French culture and language in his works. I analyze his ironic use of elements of French culture to criticize the superficial imitation of French habits and French progressivism in Spain, as well as Spain's patriarchal system and lack of modernization, which were seen as the main obstacles to the formation of a post-imperial national identity. Clarín was an imperialist at heart, as confirmed by his own words: "Para mí toda la América que habla español y portugués es España, como lo es toda nuestra península. En este punto me remonto a Alfonso VI de Castilla. Este es un radicalismo tradicional que llevo en lo más íntimo de la conciencia."² Critics consider *La Regenta* a novel that promotes the imperialist views of its author.³ However, this article offers a post-imperialist interpretation of the novel that emphasizes the necessity of letting go of the colonies, as exemplified by the destinies of its characters. I argue that Clarín's ironic portrayal of the *afrancesamiento* of the Spanish bourgeoisie in *La Regenta* is a commentary on misguided nineteenth-century efforts to fashion a new Spanish identity based on a comparison of "occidental" Spain with the subjugated, "orientalized" Latin America. I conclude that Clarín's

² GARCÍA, 2003, p. 281.

³ *Ibidem*.

evocation of an imperial context through certain characters, episodes and allusions in *La Regenta* serves to express a critique of Spanish unwillingness to accept the colonial loss and build a modern, post-imperial national identity—an identity that should not be based on a superficial imitation of the progressive French model.

Although much has already been written about *afrancesamiento*, for the purpose of clarity and consistency I provide a short historical overview of this cultural phenomenon and its ramifications, followed by its effects and use in Spanish literature of the nineteenth century, and finally Clarín's views on its emergence and his role in the diffusion of French influence in Spain.

2. Short Historical Overview of *Afrancesamiento*

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Spain's culture and politics started to be heavily influenced by France. The official confirmation of Spain's political *afrancesamiento* was the crowning of Napoleon's brother, Joseph-Napoléon Bonaparte, as king of Spain in 1808. According to a part of Spanish society, this *afrancesamiento* or "Frenchification" of politics, literature, and fashion corrupted the moral core of the country. This French influence persisted throughout the entire nineteenth century. One of the main reasons for the powerful presence and impact of *afrancesamiento* on Spain in the nineteenth century was the crisis of Spanish national identity that began in the first decades of the century.

The crisis in Spain was caused in large part by the loss of all its major colonies (1810-25, 1898), after which Spain became a third-rate force in world politics. For Spaniards, the succession of military defeats produced feelings of incredulity, failure, isolation, decadence, and bitterness. This pessimistic discourse rose to the fore after the Disaster of 1898, when all the remaining Spanish colonies were lost. At this time "the possession of the colonies was seen as the hallmark of a vigorous nation (...) [and] the loss of Spain's last overseas colonies was experienced as a devastating blow to the country's collective self-esteem."⁴ Hence, this

⁴ JÁUREGUI; RUIZ-JIMÉNEZ, 2005, p. 79.

crisis was so severe precisely because imperialism had been an especially important aspect of Spanish identity for centuries.

The loss of imperial hegemony and the resultant national crisis made possible the orientalization of Spain by other European countries that were at the peak of their imperial power, such as Britain, or were also dealing with crisis and were regaining power, such as France. Weaker, underdeveloped regions were considered subservient and effeminate in the nineteenth century, and were often depicted with oriental characteristics.⁵ The image of Spain as weak and underdeveloped in comparison to progressive European countries, such as Britain and France, was a result of the crisis of Spanish imperialism. In this period, representations of Spain and its culture by foreign authors and artists were typically orientalist and exoticist in style. This tendency began with Lord Byron and was perpetuated by Washington Irving and Victor Hugo, and later by Théophile Gautier and Prosper Mérimée. One of the most famous literary characters that best depicts the orientalization of Spain is Carmen, from Mérimée's novella *Carmen* (1845). Carmen is a beautiful oriental Spanish Gypsy seductress who destroys an occidental Basque/Spanish soldier Don José, strips him of his occidental ways and converts him to an oriental Gypsy bandit. A similar literary treatment reappears after 1898. The figurative emasculation of Spain meant "la pérdida tanto de fuerza física como de equilibrio o control moral."⁶

In this time of uncertain cultural and political identity, France imposed itself on a part of Spanish society as a model of social and political progress. The fascination for France crept into the political sphere between 1804 and 1808 via the Spanish press, especially the *Gazeta de Madrid*, the official journal of the monarchy of Carlos IV. Starting in 1804, this publication often praised imperial France for its progressive character and created an idyllic picture of the country:

⁵ E. W. SAID, 1978, p. 220.

⁶ ÁLVAREZ JUNCO, 2001, p. 217.

“(…) el genio militar de Napoleón, su política regeneracionista (capaz de limar los excesos revolucionarios y de restaurar el orden), el ideario de promoción personal de los más capaces, la abolición de los residuos feudales, la defensa de las nociones de libertad e igualdad y el entusiasmo popular que suscitaban los viajes del emperador. Y todo esto en contraposición a una monarquía hispánica esclerotizada, debilitada por factores internos.”⁷

However, imperial decadence was not the only cause of political crisis in Spain in the nineteenth century. The loss of Spanish America coincided with the domestic conflict between liberals and conservatives,⁸ who had different ideas on how to create a Spanish post-imperial national identity. Until the end of the eighteenth century, Spanish national values and ideals were mostly based on imperialism and conquest, but that was no longer enough for the construction of a stable national and cultural identity. Liberals wanted to create a new order based on progressive bourgeois values. For conservatives, on the other hand, Catholicism and the Church were integral parts of Spanish identity.⁹ With such positioning, conservatives held traditional values and opposed liberal ideas of modernization. Their utopian, nostalgic vision of Spain and traditional views about Spanish history and the nature of ‘Spanishness’ were only reinforced by the Disaster and the challenges of modernization.¹⁰

The disagreement between liberals and conservatives resulted in open conflict in the First Carlist War (1833-40). After Fernando VII’s death, the question of succession was just a pretext to ignite a conflict that had already existed between the two political factions. The First Carlist War was a fight to defend the social and economic values of the Old Regime. Shubert characterizes the result of the First Carlist War as a “victory of liberalism over absolutism”.¹¹ During the Carlist period,

⁷ LARA LÓPEZ, 2016, p. 251.

⁸ BALFOUR, 1996, p. 108.

⁹ RIQUER I PERMANYER, 1994, p. 112.

¹⁰ BALFOUR, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹¹ A. SHUBERT, 1990, p. 58.

however, the *patria* was still identified with the king and God. God was perceived as the only genuine source of power, and it was accepted that Catholicism had helped to defeat Napoleon.¹²

The collision between progressive and traditional values, together with the orientalization and feminization of Spain by France that was facilitated by it, was one of the main obstacles to the formation of a modern Spanish nation. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Spanish nation was still defining itself through the defense of the Catholicism: "[F]ew countries have been more closely identified with Catholicism than Spain (...) The Church has been an integral part of the nation's identity, if not the very basis of that identity."¹³ For this reason, a new Spanish nation could not be built on intellectual or progressive ideas alone.

Spaniards were described by other Europeans as "unusually cruel, avaricious, treacherous, fanatical, superstitious, cowardly, corrupt, decadent, indolent, and authoritarian-a unique complex of pejoratives that historians from Spain came to call the Black Legend, *la leyenda negra*."¹⁴ The Black Legend is a term that refers to the non-Spanish authors' historical writings about the cruelties and intolerance associated with the Spanish Empire and the Spanish Inquisition. In this period, French authors, such as Montesquieu, referred to Spain in a similar way and criticized the Spanish way of governing.

For Spaniards, nationalism and the insistence on traditional values became a defense mechanism, especially when directed against progressive neighbors like France. Animosity against France culminated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, during the Spanish War of Independence against Napoleon (1808-14). During this conflict, Spanish patriots fought against the French and a majority of those who sacrificed their lives for the collective good and for freedom were commoners. For this reason, *el pueblo* became an important aspect of national identity.

¹² ÁLVAREZ JUNCO, *op. cit.*, pp. 363-375.

¹³ SHUBERT, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

¹⁴ WEBER, 1992, p. 244.

The common people had saved the country, whereas the corrupt, anti-patriotic intellectual elite had sold out and abandoned the country. This opinion was widely held because the members of the intellectual and literary elite who worked on resolving contemporary problems in Spain and creating a better and more prestigious image of their country “ciertamente, miraban a Europa, y en particular a Francia, pero eran en busca de normas y soluciones para los males de *su* país.”¹⁵

3. *Afrancesamiento* Through Literature

As noted in the previous section, in the nineteenth century many European writers, above all French writers, portrayed Spain as oriental, exotic, and underdeveloped, and Spanish men as effeminate, weak, passive, and powerless. These pejorative representations further isolated Spain from foreign influences. Every influence from outside, especially from France, was considered anti-Spanish and anti-traditional: “Los modernizadores eran ‘extranjerizantes, antiespañoles, afrancesados’.”¹⁶ It became important to express Spanish national values in the works written by Spanish authors and reject foreign influences that created a negative image of Spain. Some of the most famous representatives of the anti-French literary resistance and promoters of Spanish traditional values were conservative writers such as Fernán Caballero, Pedro Antonio de Alarcón, and Juan Valera. On the other hand, famous liberal writers, *los extranjerizantes*, who were accepting of foreign influences and were implementing them in creation of their works and expressions of political ideas included José de Espronceda, Duque de Rivas, Alcalá Galiano, and Mariano José de Larra.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many writers and intellectuals were exiled on the account of their liberal and “foreign” ideas. The first such exile in the nineteenth century happened in 1813, after the abolition of the liberal constitution of 1812, when more than a hundred thousand

¹⁵ ÁLVAREZ JUNCO, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

people and twelve thousand families —marked as “afrancesados”— were exiled from Spain. This was a political exile that preceded the successive exiles during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *afrancesados*, “doceañistas, realistas, agraviados, y carlistas, moderados, progresistas, cristinos, montpienseristas, republicanos...se vieron obligados a cruzar la frontera pirenaica, huyendo del desquite de sus compatriotas o de la lobreguez de las cárceles.”¹⁷

Over the next twenty years, the exclusion of foreign influences continued. Many liberal literati were expelled from Spain during Ferdinand VII's “ominous decade” (1823-33) because of their anti-absolutist and “foreign” ideas.¹⁸ As Álvarez Junco concludes, work to create a national identity continued after this exile, but without the inclusion of any foreign or suspicious novelties. Instead, writers turned to Spain's medieval past, religion, and chivalry, thus distancing early Romantic literature from the liberals, who were seen as proponents of misguided ideals of modernization and progress adopted from abroad.¹⁹ However, after the death of Ferdinand VII in 1833, many exiled liberal writers were able to return to Spain and become protagonists of political and literary life, thus ending the country's isolation from European literary trends and influences.

4. Clarín: Follower and Promoter of French Culture and Literature

Clarín was highly educated. He completed his doctorate at Universidad Central de Madrid in 1878 when he defended his thesis on “the law and morality”. He had been politically active ever since his youth. At the age of only sixteen he had participated in the Glorious Revolution (1868) as a supporter of progressive and republican ideas, to which he would remain faithful for the rest of his life. He expressed his social critique in literary works, such as *La Regenta*, but also in journal

¹⁷ BARBASTRO GIL, 1993, p. 8.

¹⁸ ÁLVAREZ JUNCO, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

articles-he collaborated with many journals in Madrid and founded his own,²⁰ where he published satirical articles as well as short stories and poems.

As an intellectual, Clarín was immersed in European political, philosophical, and literary trends. Like that of his contemporary, Emilia Pardo Bazán, his creative work was influenced by French culture, literature, and language. He spoke French fluently and translated Émile Zola's *Travail* (1901) into Spanish in 1901; he also wrote a prologue for it. The influence of French literature on his writing is evident in *La Regenta*, which many critics have compared to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856).

When talking about French literary influence on Clarín, it is of especial importance to mention his complicated relationship with Zola's naturalism. Naturalism arrived in Spain late, not until 1879-80, and it was not well received. Clarín was "considerado por sus coetáneos como el máximo representante del naturalismo, en la crítica y en la novela."²¹ Besides Clarín, Pardo Bazán, José María de Pereda, and Benito Pérez Galdós²² also wrote naturalist novels in this period. Their acceptance of naturalism was not unconditional. Pardo Bazán praised Spain's "realismo nacional" over French realism. Galdós also defended the originality and independence of the Spanish novel, saying that Pereda's naturalism was inspired almost exclusively by national currents.²³ In the prologue to *La Regenta*, Pérez Galdós contends that Spanish naturalist writers owed very little to French naturalists:

"[T]odo lo esencial del Naturalismo lo teníamos en casa desde tiempos remotos, y antiguos y modernos conocían ya la soberana ley de ajustar las ficciones del arte a la realidad de la Naturaleza y del alma, representando cosas y personas, caracteres y lugares como Dios los ha

²⁰ With his friend Armando Palacio Valdés, Clarín founded the journal *Rabagás*. He also collaborated in *El solfeo*.

²¹ MARTÍNEZ TORRÓN, 1987, p. 92.

²² Galdós's *La desheredada* (1881) is considered the first Spanish naturalist novel.

²³ CAUDET, 1994, p. 523.

hecho. Era tan sólo novedad la exaltación del principio y un cierto desprecio de los resortes imaginativos y de la psicología espaciada y ensoñadora.”²⁴

Clarín accepted the aesthetic principles of Zola's naturalism, but he openly criticized him for his ties with positivism. This critique appears in Clarín's essay “Del naturalismo”, published in *La Diana* in 1882, where he states that, contrary to Zola's position, art should not be treated as “ciencia exacta de observación (...) la ciencia del positivismo, la negación de la metafísica, de las fuentes superiores de conocimiento.”²⁵ Even though he admired Zola as a novelist, in the prologue to *Trabajo* Clarín accused him of abandoning authentic naturalist doctrine by approaching materialism, socialism, and anarchism, all of which disagreed with Clarín's increasing religiosity.²⁶

The naturalism that Clarín employs in *La Regenta* is different than Zola's, as “[e]l naturalismo español fue un hijo mestizo del francés (...) Pero en muchos aspectos, representa un avance respecto a la narrativa, incluso de Zola. Se verá al aplicar las teorías de *Le roman experimental* a *La Regenta*.”²⁷ On the other hand, some critics, like Mariano Baquero Goyanes, claim that *La Regenta* is not a naturalist novel²⁸ and that “Clarín, próximo a Zola en la morosidad descriptiva, en la observación detallista y en el fondo duro y fatalista, estaría, sin embargo, más próximo a Flaubert.”²⁹

²⁴ PÉREZ GALDÓS, 2012, p. 4.

²⁵ BESSER, 1972, p. 125.

²⁶ GAUDET, *op. cit.*, p. 544.

²⁷ MARTÍNEZ TORRÓN, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

²⁸ BAQUERO GOYANES, 1952, p. 192.

²⁹ MARTÍNEZ TORRÓN, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

5. *La Regenta*: French Influence and Elements of French Culture

La Regenta perfectly illustrates French cultural and literary influence on Clarín. The most discussed aspect of this influence is the undeniable impact that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* had on him. Many critics, such as Clavería, Laffitte, Melón, Eoff, Agudiez, and López-Rey, have pointed out the relationship between *Madame Bovary* and *La Regenta*, framing it as Clarín's "flaubertism", which is reflected in themes (provincial and bourgeois environment, adultery, woman's romantic desire, human stupidity, discrepancy between ideal and reality) and the elaboration of characters and their destinies.³⁰ According to Clavería, Clarín himself acknowledged this influence: "Por muchos lados, según palabras de propio Clarín, se estudia el alma de la protagonista en *La Regenta*, y no es en abstracto como se pinta a Ana Ozores, sujeta, en su ambiente, a las mismas crisis románticas y a las mismas fantasías e ilusiones que Emma Bovary en su rincón normando."³¹ Both Ana and Emma live in small cities, and their provincial life constrains their personal development and limits their aspirations. They are both driven by romantic illusions and disillusion. Their husbands, Víctor de Quintanar and Charles Bovary, blame the nervous crises and capricious temperaments of Ana and Emma, respectively, on the novels that they read.³² Clavería concludes that the influence that Flaubert had on Clarín can be explained by the pressure, incomprehension, and vulgarity he faced in his birthplace of Oviedo, just like his character, Ana, does in the fictional town of Vetusta. For someone like Clarín, Flaubert's way of thinking had not only artistic or aesthetic value, "sino también, un valor sociológico. Mucho más si tenemos en cuenta que parece haber considerado la novela como un medio eficaz de influir y reformar las costumbres."³³

³⁰ For more information, see SOBEJANO, 1981, pp. 22-27.

³¹ CLAVERÍA, 1942, p. 118.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 119.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 125.

As discussed, *La Regenta* is a naturalist work that relies on techniques employed and pioneered by Zola, especially the careful observation of the social world and its influence on the individual. However, Clarín's portrayal of the society of his time in *La Regenta* amounts to a deep and negative, but justified, critique: "Sin perder de vista su condición de moralista, Clarín ejerce una crítica negativa de la sociedad que, más que una condena total, parece un aviso para que se opere el cambio entre las clases que imponen su mezquindad con la más cínica indiferencia."³⁴

The main tool used by Clarín to express this critique is irony, above all as he criticizes the superficial adoption and imitation of French habits and progressive elements of French culture, which are improperly applied, as well as the hypocrisy of the habitants of the imaginary city of Vetusta. The shallow imitation of French progressivism represents, ironically, the failure to accept modernity, of which France was the most prominent model, and to form a new, post-colonial national identity. *La Regenta* represents the clash between conservatism/traditionalism, espoused by the majority of Vetustans, and modernization, represented by a few characters who are criticized and ostracized by society—Ana Ozores, el Magistral, and Álvaro Mesía.

Clarín describes the town of Vetusta as a small, isolated place where people are seemingly governed by old, traditional values and the Church. However, their virtues and religious obedience are presented with irony and sarcasm in the novel, as Clarín reveals their vanity, hypocrisy, and falsity. The main symbol of Vetusta is the cathedral, but the city is characterized by its immobility and social and religious duplicity. The people of Vetusta are portrayed as sinners and superficial followers of fashion; they lead empty lives and are mostly preoccupied with maintaining appearances: "La etiqueta, según se entendía en Vetusta, era la ley por que se gobernaba el mundo; a ella se debía la armonía celeste."³⁵

³⁴ SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, 2000, p. 327.

³⁵ ALAS CLARÍN, 1999, p. 182.

Another good example of these negative characteristics is Ana's aunts' superficial religiosity and obsession with class: "Amaban la religión, porque éste era un timbre de su nobleza, pero no eran muy devotas; en su corazón el culto principal era el de la clase."³⁶ In this false environment, lies, affairs, and adulteries are common. As long as they are well hidden, they do not belie the carefully crafted image of virtuousness.

Finally, the French influence is represented by the *afrancesamiento* of the language, literature, and customs of the Vetustans:

"Francia seguía ocupando en la segunda mitad del XIX un lugar preeminente en Europa a pesar de la expansión industrial de Inglaterra y el rápido crecimiento alemán. Los intelectuales franceses se planteaban imponer y difundir su lengua y su cultura como medio de afirmar el poder de su país. Para Paula Preneron Vinche la influencia francesa toda de lleno a la aristocracia de la ciudad: 'La clase dirigente de Vetusta (...) compuesta por aristócratas totalmente afrancesados (...) que viven en palacios amueblados a la francesa (...) que se visten siguiendo la moda transpirenaica' (1996^a: 317)."³⁷

However, the bourgeois class was the first one to accept and imitate French habits. The Spanish aristocracy, who were very conservative and traditional in their customs, did not fall under the French influence until the revolution of 1789.³⁸ Their eventual "conversión" and desire to follow French fashion and trends testify to the enduring influence of *afrancesamiento*. Even some members of the Church were attracted to French civilization, and "[el] propio narrador se permite en su discurso utilizar palabras y expresiones en lengua francesa, o aludir a escritores franceses."³⁹

Speaking French became prestigious at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

³⁷ SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

³⁸ LARA LÓPEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

³⁹ SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

“Aprender ese idioma era algo de buen tono, lo que explica la profusión de manuales y gramáticas para el estudio de la lengua y también el enorme interés por leer determinadas obras sin necesidad de ser traducidas. No era de extrañar que, al principio del reinado de Carlos IV, la nobleza cortesana adoptase ‘un tono exclusivamente francés’, y que en sus casas se hablase ese idioma de manera habitual.”⁴⁰

The use of French in *La Regenta* is very frequent; the two characters who use it the most are Álvaro de Mesía and Obdulia Fandiño. However, from time to time other characters also incorporate some Gallicisms in their speech when they want to appear cultured. As expected, the use of French by lower social classes is limited. As observed by Suárez Sánchez, the only example in the work is when a poor boy explains the name of a pastry to his friend as they look at it through a store window: it is a “pitisa”, for “pitisú”, or what in French would be “petit-chou”.⁴¹ Even though this episode may seem insignificant, it demonstrates the deep level of *afrancesamiento* in Spain: even street urchins belonging to lower social class are familiar with French.

Besides speaking French, the citizens of Vetusta also like to show off by reading and quoting French authors such as Lamartine, Sand, Pigault-Lebrun, Dumas, and Hugo. They love to read French novels about adultery and prostitution, which corresponds to the false morality and real-life habits of the Spanish aristocracy: “Un falaz discurso de moralidad impera dentro de la alta sociedad. En la práctica, tanto los hombres como las mujeres aristócratas se complacen en tener relaciones extramatrimoniales.”⁴² Álvaro Mesía confirms that adultery was common in Paris: “En París, y hasta en Madrid, se ama a las mujeres casadas sin inconveniente.”⁴³ There are many other references to French habits, likes, and objects in *La Regenta*, such as: “Para la Marquesa no había más que Luis XV y Regencia. Los muebles de su salón amarillo y la chimenea de su gabinete estaban copiados de una

⁴⁰ LARA LÓPEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

⁴¹ SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 317

⁴² SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

⁴³ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

sala de Versailles.”⁴⁴ Another example is the scene of the duel between Víctor and Álvaro—they do not know how a duel should be conducted, so they use a French novel as a source of information.⁴⁵

La Regenta reflects the post-imperial crisis of Spanish national identity and the crisis of Spanish masculinity. The narrative follows the rise and fall of Ana Ozores, the territorial magistrate’s, El Regente’s,⁴⁶ wife, also known as *La Regenta*—an intelligent, beautiful woman—in an imaginary, conservative, and restrictive city named Vetusta. We follow her semi-transformation from domestic *ángel del hogar* to *femme fatale*. Ana marries a much older man, Víctor Quintanar, to whom she is not attracted. Her need to grow spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually—beyond her patriarchal environment—results in her transgressions—two love affairs, first with Vetusta’s priest and confessor, El Magistral, and later with the local philanderer and president of the casino and liberal party, Álvaro Mesía, the character most clearly influenced by French culture and customs.

The conservative society in which Ana lives offers only two options to upstanding young women: marriage or becoming a nun. At first, and as evinced by her marriage to Don Víctor, Ana tries to abide by the rules. She is pretty, so her aunts are able to secure a match to the best available groom despite her lack of a dowry. The entire village admires her beauty and many men are attracted to her, including El Magistral, the local archeologist, Saturnio Bermúdez, and Don Álvaro. She is compared to a goddess: “¡Es una estatua griega!” and “¡Es la Venus del Nilo!”⁴⁷ However, her marriage is a failure. She respects her husband but does not love him; more importantly, she fails to bear him a child. This precipitates a spiritual crisis, expressed in her constant and desperate wish to have

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 261.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 1038.

⁴⁶ In Spanish, like in English, the common meaning of “regente” is someone who rules in the king’s stead until he has reached adulthood. In *La Regenta*, however, “regente” means “territorial magistrate”, which is what Víctor’s title was. This meaning is much less common and unknown to most Spanish speakers (because the administrative figure of the territorial “ruler” has disappeared).

⁴⁷ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 191.

a child: “Ni madre ni hijos,”⁴⁸ and “¡Si yo tuviera un hijo!... ahora... aquí...”⁴⁹ As she fails to fit into the idealized domestic mold of *ángel del hogar*, Ana transforms into its opposite—a seductress admired and desired by men who enters into multiple adulterous relationships.

Ana's inability to have a child and embrace her domesticity opens a way for her transformation into a *femme fatale* and her rebellion against the patriarchal norms and *status quo*. Ana is smart, intellectual, and spiritual and the novel offers insight into her thoughts and internal struggles as she tries to overcome the obstacles imposed by her environment and fit in. She is different from other Vetustans, as her ideas and principles are different; she believes she is superior to the people around her: “Se creía superior a los que la rodeaban, y pensaba que debía de haber en otra parte una sociedad que viviese como ella quisiera vivir y que tuviese sus mismas ideas.”⁵⁰ In the novel, we witness her intellectual development through literature, which was an unusual and undesirable pastime for women in that period: “[E]l mayor y más ridículo defecto que en Vetusta podía tener una señorita: la literatura. Era éste el único vicio grave que las tías habían descubierto en la joven.”⁵¹ Ana reads a lot, and among her readings are works written in French. Her father's library contains many books by French authors. Ana also writes poetry, for which she is ridiculed by her friends and given the “offensive” nickname “George Sand”, which tends to put men off: “Las amiguitas (...) aprovecharon este flaco para ponerla en berlina delante de los hombres, y a veces lo consiguieron. No se sabía quién —pero se creía que Obdulia— había inventado un apodo para Ana. La llamaban sus amigas y los jóvenes desairados Jorge Sandio.”⁵²

Ana is able to escape her restrictive environment through French literature, and the fact that Clarín chooses Sand, a radical French feminist, as a moniker of shame in Spanish society accentuates the difference

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 131.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 203.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 197.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 199.

between France and Spain regarding modernity and female emancipation.⁵³ While in France first-wave feminism was ongoing and gaining strength, as women fought for their right to vote, obtain education and employment, and participate in the intellectual sphere, in Spain this trend was still impossible and deemed inappropriate and undesirable. Ana is ridiculed by others for writing poetry, reading, and wanting to grow spiritually and intellectually, as “[e]l ser literata estaba en efecto mal visto en la época, como el narrador deja claro en la novela.”⁵⁴ Or, as Baroncito – son of the Barón de la Barcaza who is, like his father, in love with Ana – confirms, the perfect Spanish woman is still only expected to be pretty, not educated or smart: “En una mujer hermosa es imperdonable el vicio de escribir.”⁵⁵ While French intellectual and feminist influences were rejected and frowned upon by traditionalist men, trends related to French fashion and beauty were welcomed and praised, even among anti-*afrancesados*. French fashion did not threaten patriarchy or traditional values⁵⁶, but instead made women prettier, more desirable and more perfect *ángeles del hogar* and served as a denominator of social class: “La moda [francesa] sirve, entre otras cosas, para llevar a cabo una especie de competición social, al establecerse rangos diferenciadores a través de la forma de vestir en cuanto a capacidad económica, ostentación y estilo (elegancia).”⁵⁷

El Magistral’s life, like Ana’s, is shaped by other people and against his will—he is satisfying his mother’s wishes and fulfilling her expectations: “Ella [la madre] le había hecho hombre, es decir, cura; ella le había hecho niño mimado de un Obispo; ella le había empujado para llegar adonde había subido.”⁵⁸ Like Ana, he is an avid reader of French

⁵³ In addition, Ana’s malicious identification with George Sand, and not any other French author, is also chosen because Sand’s *nom de plume* encourages a play on words with the Hispanicized form used in the novel, “Jorge Sandío”. Although this type of Hispanization of names was common, “sandío” as an adjective means “fool”, of which Clarín, his character Obdulia, and Clarín’s readers are very aware.

⁵⁴ SUÁREZ SÁNCHEZ, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

⁵⁵ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

⁵⁶ See CUZOVIC-SEVERN, 2018, pp. 08-29.

⁵⁷ VELASCO MOLPECERES, 2016, p. 16.

⁵⁸ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

literature; he often comments on it and recommends books to her. He is seemingly a strong, attractive man with partially repressed sexual desires. In the novel we witness one of his outbursts against one of his servants, and it is clear that these lapses are relatively common. His clerical celibacy is in danger again because of the irresistible temptation that Ana's physical and inner beauty poses and his honor and reputation are ultimately destroyed because of his amorous interest in Ana. Don Álvaro, El Magistral's main rival for Ana's affection, gossips about El Magistral and his dedication to the Church, provoking mistrust on the part of the Vetustans and a rebellion against El Magistral's clerical authority. El Magistral, the representative of the Church, which was so important for Spanish imperialist identity, does not live up to the traditional ideals he is supposed to uphold and loses his vocation and purpose because of his carnal desires. His destiny does not imply a critique of his choices and behavior, or a defense of religion. In fact, what the novel criticizes are provincial ecclesiastical institutions and the way in which they suffocate human nature.⁵⁹ As Clarín himself stated in one of his letters from 1878, "*La Regenta*, aunque sea la expresión de un fracaso, constituye una defensa apasionada del amor entre hombre y mujer."⁶⁰ In this sense, El Magistral's professional/religious disaster is evidence of the clash between modernity and traditionalism and suggests the need to change and modernize Spanish beliefs and social norms. This corresponds with Clarín's own point of view; though he was a devout Catholic, he was also a liberal and open to change and progress, as he writes in one of his letters from 1878: "Era yo liberal, y sin embargo católico."⁶¹ On the other hand, El Magistral's approach to Ana and his relationship with her, reveal the imperialist aspect of his character. He perceives becoming Ana's spiritual father as an act of conquest: "Para el Magistral, la sumisión de Ana representa su triunfo absoluto sobre la voluntad de su hija de confesión: '*él era el amo de todo aquello*' (Alas II, 367). De Pas, ensobrecido por

⁵⁹ MARTÍNEZ TORRÓN, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 114.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

lo que cree la señal incontrovertible de su victoria, no ve que ahí mismo se está fraguando su ruina.”⁶²

In the end, however, El Magistral is defeated in both his professional/imperialist and private plans. He is like Don Víctor—another representation of Spanish masculinity in crisis and a symbol of old imperial values that cannot exist anymore.

Víctor, Ana’s husband, evokes nostalgia for the glorious Spanish past. He reads books from the Golden Age of Spanish literature (authors like Quevedo and Calderón de la Barca) and lives his life according to the moral code that these works propose. Honor is the most important concept for him: “[L]e deleitaba especialmente el teatro del siglo diecisiete. Deliraba por las costumbres de aquel tiempo en que se sabía lo que era honor y mantenerlo.”⁶³ Traditional values from the times of Spanish hegemony are very much alive in Vetusta. This is illustrated in the duel between Don Álvaro and Víctor, described as “esta costumbre bárbara que habíamos heredado de la Edad Media.”⁶⁴ For Víctor, there is no other way of defending his or his family’s honor, damaged by his wife’s adultery with Don Álvaro, than taking the life of his rival and good friend until then, or killing Ana. Víctor dies in the duel; he is an easy target for his opponent, the young and frivolous Don Álvaro, who leaves for Madrid after the duel. In addition, the scene of the duel between Víctor and Álvaro, when they have to look up how to carry it out in a French novel, is highly ironic. This is because duels are part of a Spanish tradition that Víctor prides himself on knowing and by which codes he lives and yet when it is time to demonstrate this practically, he needs to seek instruction from French literature. This shows how the ideals of Spain’s imperial past, or, as the omniscient narrator calls it, of “aquella España de mejores días,”⁶⁵ are no longer applicable. Víctor’s death in the duel emphasizes this, as it demonstrates that he cannot live up to the traditional

⁶² GARCÍA, *op. cit.*, p. 282. My own emphasis. The quote inserted into the quotation belongs to: ALAS CLARÍN, 1989, p. 367. (Editor’s note).

⁶³ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 962.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 147.

masculine ideal, which he worships. He dies at the hand of his rival, a libertine and womanizer who seduced Ana, unable to defend his honor. Hence, Víctor is weak, just like El Magistral, and this is another indication of the crisis of Spanish masculinity. With Víctor's death, the ideals of Spain's imperial past die as well. Víctor's life and destiny remind the reader that the values of imperial Spain must be modernized.

Don Álvaro Mesía, a chief of the liberal party and President of Casino, a gentlemen's club for socialization and recreation, is described as a real Don Juan—an irresponsible young charlatan who seeks only entertainment and carnal pleasure. He, too, sees conquering Ana as an opportunity for personal gain, advancement in politics, and maintaining an image of prestige.⁶⁶ He flirts with her without ever having serious intentions. After the duel, he shamelessly disappears, abandoning the chaos that he has created. He is the most Frenchified character in *La Regenta*. He speaks French fluently and reads works in French. He is not an aristocrat, but as a great seducer and pretender, he manages to rub shoulders with the highest nobility in Vetusta. He travels to France frequently and buys his clothes there, which helps him support an illusion or appearance of nobility and worldliness. As such, he is a model of *buen tono* based on French mannerisms. In reality, he is a fraud and a caricature who is by no means a representation of Spain's ideal man of the future. He is an example of how superficial imitation of French habits and culture is not enough to modernize Spain and how it is, in fact, damaging.

García describes the competition for Ana among several men as an allegory of conquest in which Ana represents America. El Magistral conquers her spiritually and Álvaro physically, while her husband Víctor cannot defend her from either. They end up destroying her and losing her, just as happened with Spain's colonies.⁶⁷ All the characters involved in or connected with the imperialist metaphor end up defeated and destroyed. Their destinies symbolize the end of empire and the necessity of accepting this outcome, even though some characters, such as Víctor and the narrator, express nostalgia for the imperial past.

⁶⁶ GARCÍA, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

The ultimate irony of the work, which also best reflects Spain's inability to move forward and beyond its imperial past, is the treatment of Latin Americans, *indianos*, by the people of Vetusta—as inferior and subordinated to them. They live in a part of the city called Colonia; Colonia is located in the western part of the city, just like America in relation to Europe, and is described as exotic and completely different than the rest of Vetusta, fitting the image of the New World. The creation of the enclave of “Colonia” and its positioning in the West is also highly ironic. It is an indirect allusion to the Asturian region linked to the *indianos* par excellence, which is precisely called “the East”, because it is the most eastern of the regions in the area, bordering Cantabria.⁶⁸ The Colonia is

“un espacio marginal cuyos habitantes tienen un lugar secundario tanto en la sociedad del pueblo como en el conflicto central de la narración. No obstante, lo mismo que el sector indiano para los planes del Magistral De Pas, la colonia y la ideología imperial que la complementa son fundamentales para la construcción textual y conceptual de *La Regenta*”⁶⁹

El Magistral converts the *indianos* and monitors and controls the territory in which they live (Colonia), which is another confirmation of the imperialist aspect of his character and the subordinated position of *indianos*.

Indianos became rich in Latin America and brought their fortune to Spain in order to establish themselves there. Even though some of them are millionaires who contribute to the economy of Vetusta, *Indianos* are ridiculed in the novel, or at least presented as inferior to Spaniards, or at best as “necessary evil”: “Para la aristocracia de Vetusta, los repatriados americanos aparecen como invasores despreciables.”⁷⁰ The names of some of them reveal these qualities and make it hard for readers to take

⁶⁸ It should be remembered that Ana Ozores considers the *indianos* “pasiegos” (see the quote from the novel at the bottom of this page), in the sense of peasants, but perhaps also in reference to the Valley of the Pas, in Cantabria.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 270.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 273.

them seriously: Don Frutos Redondo ('Round Fruit'), a millionaire and one of Ana's suitors.

No matter how rich *indianos* are, they can never become equal members of Spanish society because they are from a lower class and do not belong to the pure Spanish race due to their "Latin Americanism". *Indianos* also cannot marry aristocratic Spanish girls, no matter how much wealth they have, which is their only way of entering a higher social class. This is reaffirmed by Ana's aunts when they consider her options for marriage: "La única esperanza era un americano. Los indianos deseaban más la nobleza y se atrevían más, confiaban en el prestigio de su dinero."⁷¹ However, the way Ana's aunts describe Frutos as "[un] americano deseado y temido"⁷² best reflects the disdain of the society towards *indianos*.

Through the *afrancesamiento* of thier customs and fashions, the Vetustans perceive themselves as part of an occidental culture distinct from Latin America. In Vetusta, Latin Americans are exoticized, otrified and orientalized by Spaniards. The occidentalism of Vetustans is imagined, as it is based on denial of imperial decay. Ana herself expresses the inherited prestige that aids otrification and orientalization of *indianos* when thinking about her marriage options, when she describes *indianos* as her last chance, but "pasiegos y mayorazguetes fatuos, burdos y grotescos."⁷³ At the end, Ana does not choose to marry an *indiano*, "la única esperanza", but a man without hope—Víctor, a representative of Spanish masculinity in crisis, who dreams of medieval times and of conquest. Ana's choice reflects the Spanish non-recognition of the loss of the colonies and the contentious political atmosphere in Spain in the period of decay, which culminated in 1898.

La Regenta demonstrates that Spain was entering a period of deep crisis of national/post-imperial identity. Clearly, there was still a complex of superiority among Spaniards over the former colonies and their inhabitants, and a need to assert Spanish dominance over them. Clarín's Spain harkens back to the imperial Spanish past and, in his novel, he

⁷¹ ALAS CLARÍN, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁷² *Ibidem*, p. 205.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

attempts to revive those times by depicting adherence to old values in his characters and scenes. However, Clarín also demonstrates how these old values cease to be relevant and thus suggests that times have changed, Spain has changed, and nothing can be the same anymore. In other words, Spain needs to accept the loss of its colonies and its own debility. This mood is also captured by the strong influence of French culture shown in the novel: France was still culturally and politically colonizing Spain by the end of the nineteenth century, as Spaniards increasingly adopted French habits and lifestyles. By imitating France, Spain admitted French superiority and accepted it as a model, and thus its own cultural subordination, while at the same time not achieving France's level of modernization and progress upon which a new national identity could be built.

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