

Pre-Modern Heroines for a Postmodern Readership

This paper proposes an examination of recent (published since the late 1960s) editions of nineteenth-century Brazilian and Spanish American novels with a considerable component of romanticism. It focuses upon the way in which editors, translators, preface-writers, and especially illustrators, seek to communicate to current-day readers the significance and worth of novels written under the sway of an earlier esthetic. Both re-issues in the original language and English translations, and both scholarly and popular editions, are surveyed. Of foremost interest is the way romantic heroines are presented to a 1970s-1990s audience, who, accustomed to late twentieth-century feminism, may find these characters insipid or dependent.

This preliminary inquiry covers selected new editions of four celebrated novels: María (1867), by the Colombian Jorge Isaacs; Iracema (1865), the canonical Brazilian work by José de Alencar; Aves sin nido (1889) by Clorinda Matto de Turner of Peru; and Sab (1841), the Cuban antislavery and women's emancipation novel by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda. The first three novels are frequently reprinted; McGrady (13) notes that during its first one hundred years (1867-1967), María appeared in some 150 editions. Sab has been through a number of editions, but it

has been reissued with relative infrequency in recent years. In addition to offering a large sample of editions to survey, these three novels all present the same problem for editors, foreword-writers, and designers: many aspects of their romanticism, and especially the portrayal of their heroines, are not in line with current-day tastes and may strike readers as ludicrous.

Possibly delete: While there are two English editions of Sab, one English Iracema and a new translation in progress, and two existing English Birds without a Nest and a retranslation underway, I could find no English version of María. Though Donald McGrady (13) mentions in passing the novel's being translated into English, my search turned up only classroom abridgements of María with notes and vocabulary in English.

The new editions give clues as to how editors and scholars assess the reading public of the 1970s-1990s. At one extreme is the assumption that current-day readers need considerable guidance to appreciate the innovations and achievements of romantic novels. An example is Silviano Santiago's 1975 annotated textbook edition of José de Alencar's 1865 novel Iracema. Santiago knows Alencar's novel in and out, and his observations are acute. One must be struck, though, by the assumption that current-day readers will find completely alien the conventions of romanticism. Santiago explains, for example, that romantic heroines frequently overflow with emotion, and that they are often singled out for the beauty of their abundant hair.

When I first read it, Santiago's explanation of romantic preferences struck me as too detailed. Years later I wrote a foreword to Iracema and, after considering what general readers know about romanticism, I also explained what features were most prized in the portrayal of romantic heroines.

María is frequently presented without much coaching or preparation of the reader. Many editions begin with Isaacs's words, forgoing any preface. The assumption here appears to be that the romanticism of María is of a type that is readily grasped and appreciated by today's readers. Peculiarly telling is the 1990 edition from Editorial Norma of Bogotá, with its double-headed format. From one side, the volume opens directly onto the text of María. Flipped over, though, it opens onto information about and critical judgments on the novel. The statement this double-header seems to be implying is that, while María is the subject of research, many of its readers will want no scholarly apparatus to come between themselves and the novel.

A number of jackets feature a María who appears older and worldlier than the fifteen-year-old innocent idealized by Isaacs. On the cover of one popular edition, María wears lipstick and nail polish, and seems on the verge of receiving a kiss on the mouth. The very scholarly Cátedra edition, surprisingly, is one of the most aggressive in updating María's visual image. It features a cover portrait of a pale, troubled María against the foreboding backdrop of a turbulent sky. This image accurately

captures the melancholy apprehension that permeates the novel. Yet, in doing so, it transforms María from a girl into a tragic woman whose ravaged face appears marked by years of harsh experience. McGrady's introduction (34) to the same volume that bears this portrait of a mature María reminds readers that unusual youth is an important feature not only of María but of many romantic heroines. These book-jacket portraits suggest that the romantic fashion for young and inexperienced heroines, who are devoid of any irony or cynicism, has given way to a liking for female protagonists who are sophisticated enough to enjoy a self-conscious perspective on the events of the plot.

Two popular editions of the novel offer good, but unlike, solutions to the problem of imaging María. The 1974 version from Ediciones Nautilus (Bs.As.) offers a pen-and-ink sketch of María that is either contemporary with the novel or an excellent imitation of contemporary style. María, peeking out from a bonnet, is unmistakably a teenage girl whose face exhibits the undifferentiated, rounded softness of many adolescents. Like the María of the text, this visual recreation of María appears too docile and unironically sweet for today's tastes. It is a striking circumstance that popular editions of María are likely to feature art that calls attention to itself as a period piece, representing a style that modernity supposedly abolished.

The 1979 Argentine María (Hachette), a nonscholarly edition, bears on its cover a silhouette of María in profile. Apart from

being one answer to imaging a heroine whose creator scarcely describes her, this design is among the least anachronistic. Throughout the nineteenth century, many people had their likenesses taken by silhouette makers. María, who is concerned with creating relics and souvenirs by which she will be remembered posthumously, could plausibly be imagined having her silhouette made.

Certain editions appear to be downplaying the element of romanticism in nineteenth-century works in favor of the social observations they deliver. The Ediciones PEISA edition of Clorinda Matto de Turner's Aves sin nido uses the jacket to showcase the novel's costumbrismo. A sleepy village is shown nestled in the mountains. The 1996 University of Texas Press edition, Birds without a Nest, also foregrounds the novel's value as a social document. Its jacket shows a photograph taken by the anthropologist Gary Urton, showing Andean Indian women in a religious procession. This jacket accurately summarizes some of the novel's principal points of interest, yet there is a notable distance between this objective-seeming, social-science image and the perfect beauty and goodness of both the Indian and the criolla heroines that the novel idealizes.

The jacket of the 1975 edition of Iracema offers a drawing of the titular heroine, looking much like an illustration from an anthropologist's field notes and lacking the mysterious beauty that Alencar gave her. This image seems to be an attempt to

overcome the unease that educated readers of the late twentieth century may feel over the sentimental indianismo of the nineteenth century. Santiago's notes, though, point out that Iracema is not up to current standards of cultural relativism.

Covers of popular editions of Iracema are often truer to the novel's sentimental idealization. For example, the 1969 edition from Melhoramentos has little apparatus. Its cover art, though lurid, successfully captures the allure of Alencar's Indian maiden. Other images on the cover are an armor-clad soldier in combat with an Indian brave in a feathered headdress and the hero, in period dress, visiting Iracema's grave. These figures may not be sophisticated, but they sum up the thrilling exoticism that enraptured Alencar's original readers.

Also serving to downplay the romantic imagination is the cover of the U.S. English translation of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's Sab. Again a photograph is used for the cover, giving a realistic, brutal image of slavery; it gives little clue to Sab's idealized characterization.

While many editions appear to be laying groundwork to introduce readers to romantic narrative, others seem predicated on the belief that today's readers will enjoy these novels because they represent the tastes and outlook of a bygone era. As noted, the most popular editions of nineteenth-century novels are the most likely to feature jacket art that seems too florid and sentimental for modern tastes. In this latter case, it is my

hypothesis that those responsible for presenting the novel appear to be counting on a postmodern type of readership. These postmodern readers, with their nostalgic fondness for period pieces, do not seek scholarly assistance to place works in exact historical perspective. They enjoy certain styles because of, rather than despite, the fact that they appear out of date.

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