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Author
O'Neil, Haley

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The Dehumanization of the Feminine Figure in Bécquer's *Rimas*

Haley O'Neil
University of California, Santa Barbara

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's *Rimas*, famous for their exuberant expression of new love and the agonizing laments over its loss, have traditionally been understood within the context of his tragic biography. Throughout *Rimas*, Bécquer speaks to and about a woman, or women, whom critics have attempted to identify as representations of real women in his life. The desire to create a biographical link between the female figure in the poems and a real woman has allowed critics to qualify his representation of women as a reflection of his personal life, instead of a literary creation. As Susan Kirkpatrick notes in *Las Románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835–1850*, Romantic literature, such as *Rimas*, "encourages the reader to confuse the writer as a person with the text-centered subject of writing or fiction—the lyrical 'I' or the protagonist" (12). The Romantic lyrical voice, therefore, becomes conflated with the voice of the author as an individual; thereby allowing for an interpretation that stems from the personal, and not the literary, elements of the text. In addition, the lack of details about Bécquer's life and the uncertainty regarding the chronology of *Rimas* contribute to the desire to somehow "unlock" the mysterious code of the poems by identifying the female figure. In his essay "Poesía...eres tú, or the Construction of Bécquer and the Sign of Woman," James Mandrell points to the fallacy in this critical focus: "scholars and critics have asked the wrong questions of Bécquer and his poetry, and have literally sought to determine the identity of the 'tú' of 'Poesía...eres tú' without carefully considering the various implications of the texts they are discussing." For Mandrell, these implications include "furthering the hegemony of patriarchal ideologies" through the traditional discussion of the woman in Bécquer's texts (55). Therefore, both Bécquer's *Rimas* and the majority of the texts pertaining to his poetry are implied in

the creation and maintenance of a patriarchal ideological system. A contemporary reading of these texts must remove itself from a biographical understanding and question the sexist ideology that the poems simultaneously create and reflect.

Mandrell concludes his article by stating that "we must begin to read Bécquer in a much more complex manner, not only as the author of the divinely spiritual *Rimas,* but as someone whose life and work have become part of a hegemonic cultural discourse that reformulates and restates its aims in almost every new discussion" (71). While a complete re-reading of Bécquer's texts would be impossible within the confines of this article, I propose a reading of a selection of Bécquer's poems that challenges their traditional criticism and confronts the representation of women as a tool for creating and maintaining masculine ideologies. While women are represented in a variety of ways throughout *Rimas,* I will focus on what I see as the dehumanization of the female figure in several of the poems. Drawing on feminist theory, specifically the work of Luce Irigaray and Susan Kirkpatrick, I will attempt to demonstrate how Bécquer reinforces an ideological masculine hegemony by creating a feminine figure being whose intellectual, moral, physical and emotional deficiencies define her as a being that is inferior to human.

As Luce Irigarary states in *The Sex Which Is Not One,* the creation of feminine imagery within literature has been the result of a univocally masculine voice: "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (86). For Irigaray, texts, and the literary models they have created, must be re-examined in order to uncover the sexist ideologies they have, and continue to, perpetuate: "I am trying, as I have already indicated, to go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting point and at the same time, to (re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary" (*I Love* 164). An examination of the masculine imaginary found in *Rimas* uncovers a series of depictions of women as inhuman characters. Such a portrayal reflects the cultural and political realities of nineteenth-century Spain in which women were classified as inferior subjects who lacked qualities ascribed to the male gender.

Rimas, published as a book for the first time in 1871, was written during a historical moment in Spain when women had no political or social power. As Jesús Cruz points out in his article "De cortejadas a ángeles del hogar," the emergence of European liberalism during the

nineteenth century had no positive effect on the political and social status of women in Spain:

> El liberalismo español, como el de otros países europeos, continuó relegando a la mujer en materia de derechos políticos y jurídicos. Ante la propiedad, una de las piedras de toque del nuevo sistema, la mujer continuó subyugada a la autoridad masculina del padre, y, sobre todo, del marido. (141)

A patriarchal society in which women are the "natural property" (Irigaray, *I Love* 44) of men functions to oppress women into a secondary status in which they are denied rights in the political and domestic spheres. It classifies women as lesser beings, that is, beings not qualified to hold the same rights as men because they do not possess equal intellectual capacities. Politically, the subordination of women did not allow for them to be classified as citizens in nineteenth-century Spain, and with the exception of the years of the Second Republic (1931-1936), women were not considered formal citizens of Spain until 1975, after the end of the Franco dictatorship. This political classification authorized gender stratification: "The gendering of the political sphere was codified by the Constitutional exclusion of women from the universal principals of citizenship espoused by nineteenth-century liberal regimes" (Enders and Radcliff 227). Therefore, under law, women were not only denied many of the rights given to men, they were not recognized as being citizens. Women were not considered among the humans that constituted the nation under Spanish law. The politics of the epoch point directly to the ideology of the masculine hegemony which understood and defined women as beings that were not only inferior to men, but a deficient form of a human being. In her article "Un/Contested Identities," Mary Nash quotes a passage by Federal Republican Pompeyo Gener published in 1889 in *La Vanguardia*, one of Spain's major newspapers. It highlights the dominant mentality regarding gender during the nineteenth century: "In herself, a woman, unlike a man, is not a complete being; she is only the instrument of reproduction, destined to perpetuate the species; while man is charged with making progress, he is the generator of intelligence, and the same creator...of the social world" (27). The characterization of women as incomplete,

less than human and inherently inferior together with the glorification of the masculine intellect justified the social and political stratification of the genders within nineteenth-century Spain. Neither the liberals nor the Romantics included in their program of cultural change a questioning of gender inequality; rather, as Kirkpatrick has suggested, "they preserved traditional gender hierarchy as carefully as they did the hierarchy of class" (60). According to her, within this hierarchy, women were considered both mentally and physically deficient; the belief that women were intellectually inferior translated to the depreciation of their physical form: "the female body was regarded as an inferior version of the male model of perfect humanity; women's physical inferiority mirrored their moral and intellectual deficits" (6). The fact that women were not considered independent subjects, but rather a degraded form of the male subject, created a space within Spanish culture in which the literary imagery of women included the depiction of women as less than, or something *other than*, human. I believe that the imagery of women as dehumanized beings exemplifies the ideology of masculine domination and feminine subordination prevalent in Spain during the time period in which Bécquer composed *Rimas*.

Bécquer's *Cartas literarias a una mujer* allows for insight into how Bécquer perceived the role of gender in poetry. For Bécquer, men and women do not have the same relationship with poetry; while the man is the poet, the person who intellectualizes his surroundings, emotions, and thoughts, giving them poetic form, the woman is the physical incarnation of poetry:

> La poesía es en el hombre una cualidad puramente del espíritu; reside en su alma, vive con la vida incorpórea de la idea, y para revelarla necesita darle una forma. Por eso la escribe.
>
> En la mujer, por el contrario, la poesía está como encarnada en su ser, su aspiración, sus presentimientos, sus pasiones y sus destinos son poesía; vive, respira, se mueve con una indefinible atmósfera de idealismo que se desprende de ella, como un fluido luminoso y magnético; es, en una palabra, el verbo poético hecho carne. (426)

The cultural belief system that gave voice to Pompeyo Gener, which defines man by his intellect and woman by her body, is clearly the

basis for Bécquer's understanding of gender roles within literary discourse. For Bécquer, a woman's body is an expression without literary form; due to her biology, she inherently embodies poetic ideals, but is incapable of intellectualizing poetry and producing a literary creation. On the other hand, ideas and intelligence are exclusively part of the masculine realm, they are an inherent part of the masculine nature, and they reside in the souls of men. Men are the only creators; their intellect gives them the ability to create poetry, capturing that which women inherently possess in their bodies. Such a gender based distinction reduces women to their physicality, their bodies, and denies them the role of an active, creative, subject. As Judith Butler states, the distinction between men/women as described in terms of mind/body formulates an "implicit gender hierarchy" that "ought to be rethought" (12). It also reinforces the notion of the incompleteness of the female form; they possess a natural beauty that may be pleasing to men, but they are not equal to men: they are a deficient form of a human being. Kirkpatrick points to how this common description of women used within Romantic texts serves to create an image of women as incomplete beings: "[Romantic texts] tacitly acknowledge the undeniably gendered character of Romantic paradigms of selfhood by identifying almost exclusively with male figures and coding as feminine those entities that did not represent full, conscious, independent subjects—the beloved, nature, or the poetic creation" (23). In an analysis of nineteenth-century poetry, it is therefore important to consider how the literary ideal of women as the inspiration for poetry is part of an ideology that subordinates women and labels them as incomplete human beings.

The first set of *Rimas*, including poems I-XI as defined by José Pedro Díaz, embraces the Neoplatonic ideal of women as an object of beauty in which the divine spirit is reflected. However, there is nothing corporal, or human, about the woman that Bécquer lauds; she is intangible and unreal. In "Rima XI," the realistic images of women that possess human characteristics are contrasted with the image of the ideal woman as created by the masculine poetic voice:

> "Yo soy ardiente, yo soy morena,
> yo soy el símbolo de la pasión;
> de ansia de goces mi alma está llena.
> ¿A mí me buscas?" "No es a ti, no."

"Mi frente es pálida; mis trenzas de oro;
puedo brindarte dichas sin fin;
yo de ternura guardo un tesoro.
¿A mí me llamas?" "No; no es a ti."

"Yo soy un sueño, un imposible,
vano fantasma de niebla y luz;
soy incorpórea, soy intangible;
no puedo amarte." "¡Oh, ven; ven tú!" (1–12)

Bécquer presents the reader with three women who have been reduced to their ability to please the masculine voice; the first offers sex, the second love, and the third irremediable desire. Bécquer systematically rejects the notion of a 'real' woman. Neither the passionate "morena" from the first stanza, nor the reliable woman with "trenzas" from the second are satisfactory images in that they are contaminated by their corporality and reduced by the possibility of their representation. He, in turn, creates his own image of a woman who lacks all essential human characteristics, but who is presented as the expression of ideal femininity. The idealized muse is devoid of any humanizing qualities; she lacks physical form and emotion and appeals to the poetic voice by the very impossibility of her existence. Bécquer's idealized love is in no way a woman, but rather a nebulous image that he creates to represent something superior to a woman. He defines femininity as something that exists exclusively within the male mind and imagination. Bécquer adopts the role as the creator of the ideal woman, placing himself as the Adam from which Eve is created. The implications of the creator-created dichotomy reject the possibility of autonomous feminine figure and reinforce the idea of inherent male dominance. Irigaray points to how the common utilization of this metaphor throughout Western literature and thought has served to negate the possibility of an independent feminine identity:

> More often than not, these women, or rather this female identity, still apparently originates in man. As our tradition dictates, man originates from God, and woman from man. As long as the female generic- woman- is not determined as such, this will be true. Women will remain men's or Man's creatures. (*I Love* 84)

Kirkpatrick highlights the distinction in Spanish Romanticism between the subjectivity of men and women; while a man is a subject, a thinker and creator, a woman is the "object rather than a subject of consciousness" (60). "Rima XI" clearly conjures the woman that is created by man, and that only exists in the masculine imaginary, as the true feminine figure; whereas the other women are mere degradations of this idealized form. The dehumanized figure is indeed the most attractive to the masculine voice because it explicitly marks the difference between men and women: men are the creative subjects while women are objects of their creation. The images of women within Bécquer's work demonstrate the creation of idealized feminine form based on a patriarchal ideological system that understands women as both a degradation of the masculine, human form, and as entities that are incapable of self-expression.

The dehumanized image of women is also prevalent in Bécquer's *Leyendas*. While for the purpose of the article I have chosen to focus on the *Rimas*, I believe that a passage from "Los ojos verdes" serves as another clear indicator of the contrast between human women and the idealized feminine form that is created within the masculine imaginary that Bécquer presents. In the story, Bécquer gives voice to the fantastical woman: "No soy una mujer como las que existen en la Tierra; soy una mujer digna de ti, que eres superior a los demás hombres. Yo vivo en el fondo de esta agua, incorpórea como ella, fugaz y transparente: hablo con sus rumores y ondulo con sus pliegues" (*Rimas* 174). The woman created by the writer is superior to any human woman in that she is worthy of the man she loves. Within this imagery, Bécquer creates and defines femininity as a quality that is devoid of all human characteristics, both physical and emotional, thereby removing femininity from a possible feminine identity. Women of the "earth" are degradations of the idealized feminine form; beings who are incapable of pleasing the masculine figure.

The similarities between the women in "Los ojos verdes" and in "Rima XV" give insight into the feminine image that Bécquer sees as his muse. As in "Rima XI" and "Los ojos verdes," the image of the woman in "Rima XV" that drives the love of the masculine voice is transparent, fleeting, mysterious, and intangible:

> Cendal flotante de leve bruma,
> rizada cinta de blanca espuma,

rumor sonoro
de arpa de oro
beso del aura, onda de luz,
eso eres tú. (1–6)

Within Bécquer's imagery, the ideal feminine figure is incorporeal and ethereal; she can neither be touched nor clearly seen. She is described through the use of metaphors of nature; while she is not an earthly woman, she possesses the qualities of the elements of nature that are impossible to capture by humans.

The feminine image changes radically in the last poems of *Rimas*, a fact that has traditionally been attributed to Bécquer's abandonment by his wife in what Díaz calls "la referencia autobiográfica más directa" (249). The women in Bécquer's life have been blamed for the shift of tone in the poems; they have been faulted for causing his irremediable suffering, or in the words of one critic: "En el alma de Gustavo Adolfo permanecía aún la huella de la traición de una mujer" (Cubero Sanz 352). Although it is clearly possible that personal events affected his literary creation, his personal experience should not overshadow how his portrayal of women is implicated in the hegemonic system of gender relations. While in the first set of *Rimas* the female figure is dehumanized by the image of a woman as a creation of the male mind, in the third and fourth series, she is depicted as a body without a conscience. The women of these poems are composed of their exteriors; while the idealized woman from "Rima XI" is incorporeal and devoid of form, the women in the later poems are bodies without intelligence, emotion, or spirit. Bécquer eliminates any humanizing qualities from the feminine figure and creates an image that is pure artifice. "Rima XXXIX" exemplifies the reduction of the woman to a mere form:

Sé que en su corazón, nido de sierpes,
no hay una fibra que al amor responda
que es una estatua inanimada; pero . . .
¡Es tan hermosa! (5–8)

The feminine figure, viewed through the masculine subject's perspective, has a human form, but is otherwise completely devoid of any other positive human qualities. Her inability to feel is described as physical malfunction; she is depicted as a body whose parts do not

have the capability of reacting to emotion. The woman has been reduced to a shell, an exterior, whose function lies solely in creating pleasure for men. The woman's beauty and its ability to create pleasure for the poetic, masculine voice, supersedes her emotional deficiencies. She is categorized as an aesthetically pleasing object; she is beauty and nothing more. The image of the heart, the part of the body most closely related to life, which has been grotesquely degenerated, is the central metaphor used in creating a woman who is physically and emotionally deficient. The female figure that results is a literary exaggeration of the cultural understanding of women as inferior forms of the male model of humanity.

According to Irigaray, a patriarchal society in which women are "equated with something other than human and split between the human and the inhuman (half-woman, half animal)" denies women an autonomous identity and reinforces their oppression (*Sexes* 64). The metaphor of the degraded heart that appears in the previous poem, as well as several others, defines the woman as a being that holds a human form, but that cannot function as a complete human being. "Rima XLV" extends the metaphor of the malfunctioning heart as the central image in the depiction of the feminine figure:

> ¡Ay!, es verdad lo que me dijo entonces:
> verdad que el corazón
> lo llevará en la mano..., en cualquier parte...,
> pero en el pecho, no. (13–16)

The image of the heart, which represents both life and love, is degenerated in "Rima XXXIX" and removed in "Rima XLV." While the woman in "Rima XXXIX" has a deformed heart that cannot serve its function as the receptor of human emotion, the woman in "Rima XLV" has removed her heart from her chest altogether, therefore removing any possibility of life or of love. The feminine figure depicted here is defined by her lack of humanity; she is so degraded that she is biologically incapable of feeling emotion. "Rima LXXVII" presents an even more extreme variation of this metaphor:

> Dices que tienes corazón, y sólo
> lo dices porque sientes sus latidos.
> Eso no es corazón...; es una máquina
> que al compás que se mueve hace ruido. (1–4)

The degradation of the feminine figure is extended to the point where the feminine body is described as a machine; her body is not described solely by the lack of human functionality; rather, she is something else that is in no way human. The woman presented mimics the human form, but is not a complete human being.

Contrary to the idealized muses that promise to bring the masculine figure closer to the divine, the degraded forms of the later poems threaten to cause suffering and pain for the masculine voice. Mandrell discusses the implications of the creation of the anti-muse:

> As for the portrait of woman that emerges, all of the negative attributes associated with women in the nineteenth century come to mind: she is vulgar, arrogant, stupid and foolish, hopelessly earthbound in her desires and aspirations, and fully capable of plunging any man in love with her into despair, or worse, dragging him to his death. (62)

The traditional attributes to which Mandrell refers have been so ingrained in the cultural knowledge that traditional readings of the *Rimas* have ascribed these qualities to the women in Bécquer's life. The attempt to translate poetry to biographical history strengthens the sexist implications that they suggest; the poems present feminine figures as dehumanized and degraded forms of human beings, and his critics then ascribe these qualities to women from Bécquer's life. Sexist literary tropes are therefore translated into traits that are placed upon human women. As Mandrell proposes, I believe that the discussions regarding the texts must also be analyzed as perpetuators of a patriarchal and sexist ideology.

While Bécquer's *Rimas* present a particular ideology that creates and maintains cultural concepts of gender, the discussions regarding the texts are often implicated in furthering these ideas. In their readings of Bécquer's poems, several critics have not only failed to question the portrayal of gender within them, but have included their inherently sexist elements as part of their analysis. In his essay "La mujer inalcanzable como tema en ciertas leyendas de Bécquer," Wallace Woolsey explains his understanding of how the unattainable women, as described in "Rima XI," served as the inspiration for Bécquer's poetry and prose. I believe that Woolsey's closing paragraph exemplifies the way in which criticism of the work that does not take into

account the ideologies it represents, in turn, becomes a part of them. Woolsey states:

> Explíquese de cualquier modo el tema de la mujer inalcanzable, no es posible negar su importancia en toda la obra de Bécquer. Da oportunidad al autor de indicar lo inexpresable, de evocar lo inefable, de sugerir los sufrimientos, las esperanzas, los sueños que existen en el fondo del alma del hombre lo mismo que en la fantasía del poeta. ¿Cómo se puede calcular la belleza que se encuentre en la prosa y en la poesía de Bécquer que no existiera sin el motivo de amor imposible, de la mujer que siempre nos escapa? (281)

Woolsey's closing line indicates the patriarchal gender relations that it perpetuates; he is writing the article for "nosotros," men, and men as a category desire an unattainable woman, a woman that solely exists in their mind. For Woolsey, there is a universal desire among men for a woman, a desire that comes from the depths of a man, from his soul. The woman that is the universal object of desire creates pain for all men in that she can never be. For Bécquer, this translates into poetry, his muse is the universal; his poems capture the common experience for all men. Woolsey's reading of Bécquer assumes a male solidarity. For Woolsey, men are the group, the power, and women are the other. As in the poem, this analysis assumes that true femininity is possible only within the realm of the collective masculine imagination. Within this framework the only woman that is worthy of praise and desire is the one that is created by the male mind and the suffering that her impossibility brings becomes the inspiration for artistic creation. For another critic, Manuela Cubero Sanz, the feminine image that Bécquer creates promises a profound love, a love that the women in Bécquer's life were incapable of providing:

> El amor al que aspiraba Bécquer no se fundaba en una mera atracción física, sino en algo mucho más profundo, en una unión espiritual de dos almas que se compenetran en lo más íntimo de su ser. Eso era lo que Gustavo Adolfo esperaba encontrar en el amor de su esposa. Pero Casta Esteban no supo ser la compañera ideal que su marido había soñado. (358)

Woolsey's reading of Bécquer perpetuates a belief system in which the feminine exists solely in the masculine imaginary; therefore marking all women as degraded forms of this idealized image. Cubero Sanz explicitly translates this degradation as part of the inability of women to be truly feminine and please men in the correct way. In both cases, women are culpable of disappointing the man and causing his suffering because they are unable to possess the qualities that define femininity within the masculine imaginary.

While I have highlighted only a few of the poems from Bécquer's collection, and have discussed only one of the various ways in which he creates the image of the woman, I believe that an analysis of this type points to the ways in which feminist thought can be used to reinterpret classic literary texts. During the nineteenth century, women were seen as biologically inferior to men, leading to their oppression in all aspects of life. The belief system in which women are understood as degraded forms of men creates a space in the masculine imaginary where the image of women is equated with an incomplete human form. It is within this space that Bécquer is capable of dehumanizing the feminine figure through both Neoplatonic idealization and physical and emotional degradation. Representations such as these constitute a system of oppression in that they justify the notion of male superiority and dominance over the inferior form that is the woman.

Although *Rimas* was published over a century ago, the assumptions regarding gender in the text are still a part of our cultural knowledge. In order to break down the sexist ideologies that these assumptions constitute, we must analyze the implications of the representations of women within literary texts. A reading of much of the criticism regarding the feminine image in Bécquer proves that the ideologies that constituted the Romantic conception of gender are still prevalent in contemporary literary discourse; the creator-created dichotomy of "Rima XI" reappears in Woolsey's critical essay, for example, while the insufficiency of human women as presented in "Los ojos verdes" is attributed by Cubero Sanz to the women in Bécquer's life. While the personal subjectivity of a Romantic text such as *Rimas* invites the reader to conflate the poetic voice with the person, and therefore literary creations with reality, they must be removed from a biographical context to be analyzed as literary texts. One cannot conclude that in the case of the feminine figure, the various representations of women must be understood as reflections of human women, rather they should be regarded as literary

tropes that stem from cultural and social perceptions of gender inequality. Although I believe that use of the dehumanized feminine figure is just one of the many representations of women in *Rimas*, it highlights how many Romantic texts, despite their liberal affiliations, perpetuated a hegemony that subordinated women by defining them as inferior versions of the male model of humanity.

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