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Abstract

Review of Nuria Cruz-Cámara. *La mujer moderna en los escritos de Federica Montseny*. Rochester & Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2015.

Nuria Cruz-Cámara. *La mujer moderna en los escritos de Federica Montseny*. Rochester & Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2015. 198 pp.

In this monograph, Nuria Cruz-Cámara analyzes and historically contextualizes the different configurations of the modern woman in the novels that Federica Montseny published during the interwar years of the early twentieth century. By focusing on Montseny's variations of the modern woman, Cruz-Cámara not only examines the relationship between this writer's anarchist ideology and her feminist project, but also suggests that, for Montseny, the rendition of the modern woman was an aesthetic and ideological construction that allowed her to destabilize different discourses of gender at the time. Therefore, Cruz-Cámara places this paradoxical writer on the one hand among the most radical proponents of women's liberation and, on the other hand, as a contender to some aspects of liberal feminism.

In the introductory chapter, Cruz-Cámara suggests the need to generate a feminist cultural practice that would revise the different textual and visual representations of women in early twentieth-century Spanish artistic production in order to produce a more coherent view of this complicated historical period. Moreover, such revision should include both canonical and non-canonical texts, especially those silenced by history. Cruz-Cámara's argument in this respect is that in an oppositional dialogue it is easier to see how a certain worldview developed that suited the interests of particular social groups. Within this frame, she highlights the context in which one of the most polemical themes of the time was inserted: the issue labeled the *cuestión femenina*, 'feminine question.' It is precisely amid this debate that the artistic production of Montseny becomes relevant, since in her novels, many feminine characters undermine the archetypes, myths, and literary motives found in the patriarchal traditions of the time. As a result, these creations confront and enter into adversary dialogues with the bourgeois concept of the feminine.

"*Mujer moderna, anarquismo, feminismo*" 'Modern woman, anarchism, feminism,' the second chapter of Cruz-Cámara's study, opens with a display of the different variations and classifications of the concept of modern woman in that period. Showing a remarkable capacity to summarize, Cruz-Cámara revises the implications of the most relevant linguistic inscriptions in relation to new forms of womanhood emerging during the interwar period. Using newspaper articles written by Montseny, Cruz-Cámara unveils the vested interests of social groups behind every variation of femininity produced by ongoing modernity. The way Montseny looks at feminism is important, in my opinion, because it brings out the diversity of ideologies within Spanish feminism, making it clear that there were tensions and dissensions within the groups fighting for the rights of women in Spain.

In this context, Cruz-Cámara analyzes why Montseny's feminist anarchism made her reject all variations of womanhood that had to do with both consumerism and physical appearance, which she considered a fake physical masculinization of women that went against nature. In this respect, Cruz-Cámara approaches an essential point for someone studying Montseny's work from a feminist perspective: the antifeminist label this author has received. Cruz-Cámara's strategy is to contextualize the different variations of feminism existing in Montseny's socio-historical scene. Once this is accomplished, she examines, with a remarkable textual agility, Montseny's rejection of feminism on the account that feminism was for her a bourgeois movement. From this angle, it becomes clear that Montseny's so-called antifeminism is related to a political worldview that links her commitment to defend and fight for women's rights and equality between the sexes to an anarchist ideology. For her, the feminism prevalent in her society was merely a bourgeois trend that defended certain forms of individuality, subjectivity, and social class that she was not only far from sharing, but that she considered signs of social deterioration.

In the second chapter, “¿La masculinización de las mujeres?” ‘The masculinization of women?’, Cruz-Cámara focuses on the apparent contradictions in Montseny's anarcho-feminist ideology, especially on the rejection of feminine figures aesthetically masculinized (such as *la garçonne*), which for her were products of a decadent, anti-natural, and consumerist society. Contrary to this model, Montseny proposes what Cruz-Cámara sees as another form of masculinization, which consisted of ascribing physical strength, sexual desires, and intellectual capacities to women, while at the same time attributing to them a will for independence and freedom. Furthermore, Montseny seems to condone physical violence against forms of womanizing, or *donjuanismo*, thus giving rise to contradictions when it comes to establishing a difference between both sexes. Here it is worth mentioning that Cruz-Cámara contrasts Montseny's ideal of feminine beauty, which points to a strong, robust woman, as opposed to the thin and androgynous feminine beauty praised by *art deco*.

In subsequent chapters, “*La Victoria: On the Modern Woman Debate*,” “Pygmalions and Fierecillas,” “Feminine Sexuality,” “Promiscuity in *La Novela Libre*” and “Revolutionary Women,” Cruz-Cámara analyzes a series of novels with the purpose of explaining Montseny's singular and complex form of feminism. She shows Montseny's ideas about maternity, forms of sexuality through active affirmation or negation of sexually active women, and policies that ruled or should have ruled heterosexual partnerships, while at the same time pointing out that some female characters reject heterosexual unions in favor of individualization. This analytical project is organized under the premise that Montseny's point of view allows for multiple, heterogeneous renditions of “the modern woman.” Cruz-Cámara states that each one of these texts presents types of femininity configured

by different social and personal conditions that may appear contradictory. But what all of Montseny's texts have in common, according to Cruz-Cámara, is an inquiry into the capacity of her characters to subvert and eventually overcome a restrictive femininity that was socially codified and imposed on them. The different versions of the modern woman and the contradictions those variations generated show Montseny's own ideological tension between her anarchist world view, her will to expose the patriarchal circle that oppressed and repressed women, and her wish to promote, through literary creation, the social, intellectual, and economic emancipation of women.

Cruz-Cámara's analysis of the forms of sexuality that Montseny deems acceptable or unacceptable is especially interesting if one keeps in mind Felipe Trigo's novels, although this relationship is not established by the critic. It is through Montseny's articles about Rachilde, Juana de Ibarbourou, and Isadora Duncan that Cruz-Cámara is able to show the contradictions that arise when she tried to align her anarchism with her feminism. In this respect, as Cruz-Cámara demonstrates, in the end those ideological contradictions are not resolved. Nevertheless, Montseny's praise of freedom and individuality, as well as her objection to sexual prudery, which she sees as one of the biggest problems for Spanish women at the time, undermines the anarchist gender politics. According to Cruz-Cámara, one of Montseny's contributions to feminism in her literary production is precisely the creation of female protagonists endowed with sexual desire and independently created personal and social projects who refuse, in many cases, the heterosexual union.

La mujer moderna en los escritos de Federica Montseny is an excellent example of a model of analysis where socio-ideological contexts intertwine with a feminist theoretical framework, providing a critical cultural perspective that dismantles monolithic views of the scene of Spanish feminism in the early twentieth century. My only reservation with the study is that Cruz-Cámara does not establish any comparisons with contemporary writers, although her documentation and footnotes are excellent sources of information that include additional connections.

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