19th-Century Marriage: Space for Fulfillment or Intellectual Prison?

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Marriage in the 19th-century was an immensely oppressive institution for women. Typically, husbands confined their wives to the private space of the home (Matthijs 404). The experience of the 19th-century married woman, however, was understood through distinct perspectives. Two 19th-century authors, Juan Díaz Covarrubias and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, offer disparate visions of marriage in their literature. While in Díaz Covarrubias’ La clase media, the vision of marriage is a woman’s space for fulfillment, Gómez de Avellaneda’s Sab envisions marriage as an intellectual prison. Through literary and historical analysis, this essay seeks to demonstrate these distinct visions of marriage in order to gain a more profound understanding of both the works and the marriage institution at this time.

La clase media envisions marriage as a space for women’s fulfillment through the story of Amparo and Roman. Fulfillment can be understood as the realization or development of one’s full potential; certainly, the 19th-century woman was expected to be fulfilled through her roles as wife and mother. Marriage had become the “object of much social enthusiasm” (Matthijs 401). The reasons for which Amparo and Roman’s love cannot be realized reflect Díaz Covarrubias’
vision. In order to argue that point, the historical context of 19th-century marriage should first be taken into consideration.

Ideals for marriage at this time gave particular significance to the aforementioned roles of the woman. Dr. Michele Adams of Tulane University explains the nature of these roles in society:

The 19th-century cult of true womanhood emphasized that women were frail and pure but nevertheless important in their capacity as morally influential caretakers of their husbands and children... when women began to seek autonomy and freedom from coverture, it was seen by some as a “crisis of the family”. (504)

Essentially, women were considered important and valuable only when compliant with the roles of marriage. According to the discourse of the time, the woman’s role in life was to become the archetype of a woman that is pure, chaste, and willing to sacrifice herself for her family; the “ángel del hogar” (Cantero Rosales, “De ‘perfecta casada’ a ‘ángel del hogar’ o la construcción del arquetipo femenino en el XIX”). Once married, a woman’s husband “... controlled her marital property, he could ‘punish’ her and was ‘responsible’ for her, in the same way as for their under-age children” (Matthijs 401). In this way, Dr. Koen Matthijs of the University of Leuven demonstrates that women became legally and economically dependent upon the will of their husbands.

This sort of dependency was not exclusive to matters of law or finances, however; it extended to all matters of women’s social existence. The construction of gender roles, and thus, expectations for civilized social behavior, were becoming increasingly rigid. Manuals of

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1 My translation: “Angel in the house”.
courtesy and civility\(^2\) had been published as social rulebooks at this time (Lander 86). If a woman followed the rules detailed in a manual, she was identifying as a civilized member of that nation (Lander 86). She could then be deemed fit for marriage and, thus, fulfilled as a woman; rejection of the manual’s values led to the punishment of social exclusion (Lander 86).

A classic and well-received manual of the time was Manuel Antonio Carreño’s *Manual de urbanidad y buenas maneras*, published originally in 1854 (Lander 86). The first chapter is dedicated entirely to God, in which Carreño explains, “Nosotros satisfacemos el sagrado deber de la obediencia a Dios guardando fielmente sus leyes, y las que nuestra Santa Iglesia ha dictado en el uso legítimo de la divina delegación que ejerce” (3). In other words, Carreño stresses that adherence to the laws of God and the Catholic Church were of utmost importance.

This tone reverberates throughout the manual, communicating that virtuosity (especially for women) was a most crucial characteristic of civility. Dr. Susanne Einiegel highlights that Carreño believed the rules of civility should be more severe when applied to women than to men (12). The woman, then, was expected to be a Virgin-Mary-like model of “modesty” (Einiegel 12). She was expected to remain in the home in order to keep her purity intact (Einiegel 12). Her actions, way of dress, and language, for example, were to reflect this purity, so that her role in life might be realized.

Juan Díaz Covarrubias’ Amparo, though single, is the epitome of the ‘ángel del hogar’ in most respects. The narrator explains that Amparo is much like a saint; she is a woman that fosters respect in others and that no one would dare desecrate (Díaz Covarrubias 36). Amparo

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\(^2\) Dr. María Fernanda Lander of Skidmore College explains that when colonies gained independence in Hispanic America, they felt the need to develop a national identity (83). She notes that Spanish-American people understood that they could not compete with the infrastructure, development, or technology of nations like France or England; however, they could imitate their manners and rules for civility (83). The use of translated versions of manuals from larger European nations grew rapidly, and Hispanic Americans began crafting their own versions (Lander 86).
meets fellow protagonist, Roman, and they share a passionate love (Díaz Covarrubias 105).

Eventually, Amparo discloses a secret about her past to Roman; with the aid of her selfish stepmother, she was raped by the aristocratic antagonist, Isidoro. Amparo’s virginity had been robbed from her without her consent, she became pregnant with Isidoro’s child, grew ill, and had her child taken from her and given to another family.

Because of this tragic series of events, she understands that society would not consider her fit to be a wife. This belief is so deeply internalized, that when Roman confesses that he never wants to separate from her, she rejects him: “…mi dishonor, mi afrenta es una barrera que se levanta para siempre entre nuestras corazones. Un hombre honrado no debe unirse con la mujer perdida”³ (Díaz Covarrubias 105). Amparo’s feelings of unworthiness drive her self-punishment of social exclusion. The only choice that is left for her is to dedicate herself to the convent: “voy a sepultar mi marchita existencia para llorar, para pedir a Dios haciéndole el sacrificio de mi vida dé a usted en felicidad cuanto yo le di en amor sobre la tierra”⁴ (Díaz Covarrubias 106). Her refusal to marry Roman is driven by a desire that he will find a suitable woman, one worthy of marriage (Díaz Covarrubias 106).

Amparo feels she lacks the requisite quality of purity needed to marry Roman, which mirrors the rules and ideals of civility in 19th-century society. It is not Roman who judges or punishes Amparo for her past; she takes on this responsibility herself, having understood that she doesn’t meet society’s expectations of a good citizen and woman. Díaz Covarrubias followed his society’s rules when he sacrificed his protagonists’ love for their civility. In this way, the author crafted a vision of marriage in which it is a space for women’s fulfillment as the ‘ángel del

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³ My translation: “My dishonor, my affront, is a barrier that rises forever between our hearts. An honorable man should not marry a lost woman”.

⁴ My translation: “I’m going to bury my withered existence to cry, to sacrifice my life to God and ask that he gives you in happiness what I gave you in love on this earth”.
Amparo’s decision wasn’t made because she believes herself to be unworthy of Roman specifically; she concludes that she will forever be unfit for marriage. Because of this, she decides to spend her life in mourning, asking God to care for her love. She will now spend her days serving God, not as a personally fulfilling choice, but instead as self-punishment. Without marriage, Amparo has lost her opportunity for fulfillment as a woman.

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s *Sab*, in contrast, envisions 19th-century marriage as an intellectual prison for women. The novel’s beautiful, aristocratic protagonist, Carlota, idealized marriage. After marrying Enrique, she discovered the dishonest and greedy nature of her spouse. He belittled and silenced her into a state of mindless submission (Gómez de Avellaneda 260). Carlota’s story contrasts with Teresa’s, who can enjoy the intellectual freedoms of serving the convent as a nun. Historical context will again be useful in understanding *Sab*’s distinct vision of 19th-century marriage.

Not all 19th-century married women felt imprisoned; Dr. Koen Matthijs found that some women were able to find empowerment in the creation of a mother-identity, which acted as a “. . . remedy for their public exclusion and economic subordination” (404). Nevertheless, women were forced to remain in their private sphere of the home, while men were free to dominate all public spheres. Dr. Marta Postigo Asenjo of the University of Malaga cites Carol Pateman’s quote to illustrate the separation of spheres for men and women; “la maternidad es vista como la antítesis de los deberes del hombre y del ciudadano” (282). Essentially, women were barred from participation in any matter the did not deal with family or the home.

There were, of course, exceptions; in her literary work comparing 19th-century nuns, prostitutes, and Protestant women, Dr. Tracy Fessenden of Arizona State University explains that

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5 My translation: “maternity is seen as the antithesis of the duties of a man and citizen”.
religion served as a “primary vehicle” (454) by which women could move beyond the private sphere of the home to which men had essentially banished them (454). More specifically, nuns were considered distinct from the general population of women in that they resided in a different sphere altogether. Fessenden quotes Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, “the first women medical doctors in America” (462) to illustrate the freedom of nuns: “. . . members of these sisterhoods have a far more active participation in the interests of life than most of them [women] had before” (462). Nuns were given the power to manage schools and hospitals, and to work in factories and farms, often dressed in secular clothing (Fessenden 462). Essentially, nuns were allowed various freedoms that the general population of women could not access (454).

Those women who were not under the surveillance of the church were kept under surveillance in much closer and stricter quarters; their homes. The surveillance of women, especially of young girls, appears in an adaptation of Carreño’s manual: Pilar Pascual de Sanjuán’s Resumen de urbanidad para las niñas. Within the adaptation is the rule that girls should never pay visits; they may only receive visitors, and only when accompanied by parents or other members of the girl’s family (20). What differentiates this from a simple, protective act over children is that it was written in a book of rules specific to little girls. The implication is clear that girls were to remain in the private living environment, under constant surveillance of the adults, (and more specifically, the men), in their lives.

Lander argues that the surveillance of women functioned by way of philosopher Michel Foucault’s disciplinary concept, Panopticism (86). Foucault explains that in the Panopticon, “la

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6 As early as the 17th century, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz took advantage of her increased intellectual freedom in the convent. Dr. Ryan Prendergast of the University of Rochester explains that, “Sor Juana ruptured the standard conceptions of what a woman-nun was able to achieve,” (44). Due to her life in the convent, she was able to form connections with individuals that found her writing valuable, unlike many conservative men, who believed it to be “audacious, blasphemous, and unbefitting a woman” (Prendergast 29).
disciplina no sólo se ejerce de arriba abajo sino multidireccionalmente y por eso, va a existir permanente control” (Saenz-Roby 283). Just like prisoners in a Panopticon, women were controlled and monitored into social submission.

This symbolic imprisonment was certainly intellectual. In schools, girls were supposed to sit modestly and remain quiet (Pascual de Sanjuán 20). Jean Jacques Rousseau, one of the influential philosophers of the 18th-century, helped craft this mindset with his work, *Emile*. When writing in regard to women’s education, Rousseau expressed his confidence in the intellectual inferiority of women, “. . .en cuanto a las obras de la inteligencia, éstas las exceden; ellas no poseen la suficiente justicia y atención para lograr éxito en las ciencias exactas” (Cantero Rosales, “De ‘perfecta casada’ a ‘ángel del hogar’ o la construcción del arquetipo femenino en el XIX”).

These ideas remained relevant into the 19th-century, and affected Gómez de Avellaneda personally. She was a controversial female author who craved intellectual pursuits and took pride in her abilities. Gómez de Avellaneda was both highly criticized by male peers and praised for her writing style, in that it was deemed masculine. Critic J. Nicasio Gallego said the following about her writing: “…cuesta trabajo persuadirse que no son obras de un escritor del otro sexo. No brillan tanto en ellos los movimientos de ternura, ni las formas blandas y delicadas, propias de un pecho femenil” (Servera 21). It is likely that the personal struggles of the author influenced the representation of marriage at the time in *Sab.*

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7 My translation: “discipline is not just exercised from above, but instead multidirectionally, and because of that, there will be permanent control”.
8 My translation: “in relation to works of intelligence, these exceed them/women; they don’t possess sufficient fairness and attention to obtain success in the exact sciences”
9 My translation: “It is difficult to persuade someone that these are not works from an author of the other sex. Her writing doesn’t shine with the movements of tenderness or delicate and bland forms, typical of the woman’s chest”.

Sab, the protagonist and namesake of the work, expresses the depth to which Gómez de Avellaneda envisions 19th-century marriage as an intellectual prison. Sab is a slave for Carlota, with whom he is deeply in love. Despite his tragic and limiting condition, he considers women to be the “Pobres y ciegas víctimas! Como los esclavos, ellas arrastran pacientemente su cadena y bajan la cabeza bajo el yugo de las leyes humanas”10 (Gómez de Avellaneda 271). Sab notes that although the slave may change owners and can hold onto the hope of one day buying freedom, this hope is not afforded to 19th-century married women who are, for one reason or another, unhappy (Gómez de Avellaneda 271).

Sab’s despair over the condition of women is his response to Carlota’s marriage with Enrique. As noted before, Carlota romanticizes and idealizes marriage with Enrique, the antagonist who later becomes her husband. The man is focused entirely on money and is a “product of the mercantile world” (Pastor 192), but she imagines him to be the “imagen de un ser noble y bello formado expresamente para unirse a ella y poetizar la vida en un deliquio de amor”11 (Gómez de Avellaneda 122). This idyllic view of Enrique rapidly decays as he spends their married days focused on money and power, dismissing Carlota voice almost entirely. He reacts to her ideas as if they were the “fantasía de una niña que no conoce aún sus propios intereses”12 (Gómez de Avellaneda 260). In this environment, the woman had no reasonable prospect of intellectual growth.

Carlota’s cousin, Teresa, was an orphan without a dowry, described as average-looking and somber, with every reason to envy her cousin (Gómez de Avellaneda 115). However,

10 My translation: “Poor and blind victims! Like the slaves, they patiently drag their chain and lower their head beneath the yoke of human laws”.
11 My translation: “...image of a noble and beautiful being, formed expressly to unite with her and poeticize life in the ecstasy of love”.
12 My translation: “fantasy of a little girl that doesn’t know even her own interests”
Carlota suffers oppression and abandonment in her marriage, leaving her envious of Teresa. Carlota’s voice is dismissed in her marriage to the point of resignation; eventually, her only joy was to mourn her “libertad encadenada”\(^\text{13}\) (Gómez de Avellaneda 261) with her cousin (261). Fessenden’s explanation of the contrast in freedoms of 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century nuns and married women accurately depicts the nature of the cousins’ lives.

Analysis of the distinct visions of 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century marriage in *La clase media* and *Sab* allows for a more profound understanding of the literature. This exploration has incited a curiosity regarding the following: given that Hispanic Americans were seeking the formation of a national identity (Lander 83), what might these works be communicating about the authors’ ideals for the social foundations of their respective nations? In each work, the institution of marriage serves a vastly different function. Was 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century marriage a space for the fulfillment and realization of women in society, or was it an intellectually-limiting space, imprisoning the wife? The first vision might promote a nation founded on a traditional, virtue-based family structure; the second vision might promote a nation rooted in gender equality, one in which women have intellectual clout.

\(^{13}\) My translation: “chained up freedom”.
Works Cited


Pascual de Sanjuán, Pilar. *Resumen de urbanidad para las niñas*, Barcelona:
Faustino Paluzíe, 1895. PDF file.


