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# Reflecting on the Self: Introspective Construction of the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century Poets Carolina Valencia and Carolina Coronado

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Article abstract

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## Reflecting on the Self: Introspective Construction of the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century Poets Carolina Valencia and Carolina Coronado

*This essay explores the construction of the female creative self in nineteenth-century Spain and introduces the virtually unstudied poet Carolina Valencia (born 1860 in Valladolid) through her poem "A la margen del arroyo" (1890). It brings Valencia into dialogue with the established canon through a parallel reading of the construction of subjectivity in Carolina Coronado's "El jilguero y la flor del agua" (1852). This reading of subjectivity interacts with various aspects of nineteenth-century Spanish femininity: the identification with nature, the dichotomy of the angel and the monster, and the language of sentimentality.*

**Keywords:** *Nineteenth century, women writers, female subjectivity, identity construction, Carolina Coronado*

*Este ensayo explora la construcción de la identidad creativa de la escritora decimonónica en España e introduce una poeta casi no estudiada, Carolina Valencia (nacida 1860 en Valladolid) a través de su poema "A la margen del arroyo" (1890). Invita a Valencia a dialogar con el canon ya establecido por una lectura paralela de su construcción poética de la subjetividad con la de Carolina Coronado en "El jilguero y la flor del agua" (1852). Tal lectura de subjetividad interactúa con varios aspectos de la femineidad decimonónica española: la identificación con la naturaleza, la dicotomía del ángel y el monstruo y el lenguaje sentimental.*

**Palabras clave:** *siglo diecinueve, escritoras, subjetividad femenina, construcción de identidad, Carolina Coronado*

A woman alone by the water, reflecting on the temptations, the dangers, the sweet piercing joys that her life can hold, reconstructs herself for herself in the water. Such is the through line of Carolina Valencia's "A la margen del arroyo," published in her *Poesías* (1890).<sup>1</sup> Using poems that bridge the second half of the nineteenth century, this essay brings this relatively

forgotten poet, Carolina Valencia, into dialogue with the work of one of the best-known female Romantics from Spain, Carolina Coronado. Bringing these poets together serves to introduce Valencia's excellent work more fully to the critical gaze as well as to further our understanding of female poetic subjectivity in the nineteenth century. Both "A la margen del arroyo" and Coronado's 1852 "El jilguero y la flor del agua" build a mode of female poetic identity that finds its strength in the self and that breaks with patriarchal expectations without focusing particularly on the experience of oppression.

While work that does predominantly explore resistance to oppression or the frustrations of being forced into a subordinate role of domesticity has been the very fertile main focus of feminist scholarship on the period, this kind of feminine, introspective writing of the self offers another angle of attack for feminist scholars or those seeking to understand female subjectivity. In Coronado, the female poet is a figure of capacity and strength that supersede a male counterpart's while using traditionally feminine tropes; in Valencia, the use of a sentimental, pastoral form serves as a foil for philosophical introspection. Both depend on the symbolism of water and power. Through an exploration of these poems' use of the relationship between water and femininity – in its material, reflectivity and ability to cleanse and quench – and the poets' association with nature through subjective identifications, this essay demonstrates a rich vein of feminine strength within a system of oppression and opens space in the discourse on the multiple feminisms and femininities of the Spanish nineteenth century.

From the publication of the first books of poetry by women in 1840, the second half of the nineteenth century in Spain saw a blossoming of female-authored literary publications, both in periodicals and as books. This entry of women into the literary sphere has its roots in both the process of modernization – largely the explosion in accessible print publications and gradually increasing literacy – and in the artistic and social imaginary of the moment. The Romantic movement, with its focus on literature as the expression of emotion, was also key in creating a path to authorship for female writers. Given that women were linked to emotion in the cultural imaginary, a literary movement that prized the expression of emotion was compatible with both their social role and their lack of formal education (Kirkpatrick, "Romantic" 372). However, this entry into the literary sphere was not smooth, and was in fact met with immediate reprisals. The response to women writers ranged from satirizing any kind of female emancipation as wholly absurd, to conflating female authorship with immorality, to the point that virtue and authorship were largely viewed as incompatible traits (Kirkpatrick, *Románticas* 87-88). The push back against women who claimed

a true vocation for poetry is clear in the case of Coronado, who came to write in spite of a family that saw her reading, let alone writing and entry into the public eye, as a shameful transgression of social gender mores (Valis, "Introducción" 10-11). Even the emotionally charged style of poetry that helped to allow women entry into the field was used against them, as female-authored poetry was assumed to be a surge of powerful emotion, rather than its recollection in tranquility, to the point that "el arte y la reflexión se reservaban para los hombres" (Kirkpatrick, *Antología* 9). This supposition, that female-authored texts are purely emotive, or, in many cases, descriptive or morally didactic – thereby fulfilling woman's role as the moral center of her home – means that poems that use feminine authorial tropes to engage in philosophic introspection and the building up of female strength in subjectivity are by definition a rupture from the rules of the genre imposed on female writers, even when they do not directly engage with political themes or the documentation of frustration at an oppressive system.

The question of the validity of female creation and its relationship to masculine or male creation is present in the peritext and contemporaneous response to the work of Carolina Valencia. Born in Rioseco, Valladolid in 1860, Valencia published in *El Nacional*, *El Movimiento católico*, *La Ilustración Española*, *El Universo*, *La Lealtad*, and later the *Revista Castellana* – notable not only because they show her presence in to the literary sphere, but also in that these are not specifically female-oriented publications, of which there were many at the time – and was awarded the *Medalla de oro* by the Real Academia Española for her poem "A San Juan de la Cruz" in 1891 (Jiménez Faro 321; Vallejo González 157). Furthermore, her book *Poesías* (1890) was prologued and praised for its formal excellence by Emilia Pardo Bazán, who was the most important female literary presence at the time of the book's publication, and who did not often speak in support of other female writers (Tolliver 217-18). Valencia's poetry appears as one of five female poets in the first volume (through 1900) of Jiménez Faro's *Poetisas españolas. Antología general* (1996). A short collection of her poetry, also edited by Jiménez Faro, was published in 2013 under the title *Ambición*. "A la margen del arroyo," however, appears in neither. The only extant academic treatment of Valencia is a brief introduction from 1985 by Irene Vallejo González, which gives an overview of the themes treated in *Poesías*, while it acknowledges that there are great gaps in the biographical data that we have about the poet.<sup>3</sup>

Both Pardo Bazán and Valencia's contemporary P. Francisco Blanco found Valencia's work to be of excellent technical quality, but they gender her creative process differently. Pardo Bazán is highly complimentary of

Valencia's abilities in meter and construction, though she suggests that Valencia may not have received formal education.<sup>4</sup> However, the fault that she finds in the volume is that the content of Valencia's verses does not sufficiently exceed the realm of the feminine to allow her the androgyny of being a "poeta" instead of a "poetisa."<sup>5</sup> Francisco Blanco, quoted in Jiménez Faro's introduction to Valencia in her *Poetisas españolas. Antología general*, complicates that gendering by describing her as both the conduit for verses – that passive, feminine outpouring of emotion – and as exhibiting masculine qualities: "Poesías de una mujer que reúne el nombre y la inspiración de la Coronado con el tono viril y las plausibles audacias de la Avellaneda ... cuya alma es un arpa eólica de la que nacen las rimas como agua de manantial copioso" (321). The dichotomy expressed in this review – the characterization of the poet both by audacious, virile activity and as a passive conduit for the expression of nature's beauty – is reminiscent of the attribution of masculinity to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's verse earlier in the century as a means of expressing the quality of her writing. Describing the creative process as masculine allows its product to be recognized for its art without acknowledging that the work of a feminine mind can also be artful. These two views, that either there is a virile tone (negating the feminine) or that the subjects treated are not deep enough to achieve androgyny (negating depth in theme), both negate an active female/feminine poetic voice. And yet, across *Poesías*, but particularly in "A la margen del arroyo," Valencia uses tropes of the feminine, particularly the construction of an identification between women and natural elements, not only to impart emotion and moral value (or lack thereof), but also as a means of conducting a philosophical reflection.<sup>6</sup>

The expression and negotiation of the gendering of subjectivity and the resistance to systems of bias has been the natural point of entry for scholarship on nineteenth-century female authors. Across the twentieth century, beginning in the 1930s with work like Margarita Nelken's *Las escritoras españolas*, which featured Coronado, Avellaneda, and Rosalía de Castro from the nineteenth century, much of the work on female writers from this period has been a rescue mission. The 1980s and 1990s saw a boom in the work by feminist scholars that brought serious attention to a wider range of female voices with the purpose, in the words of Luzmaría Jiménez Faro, of "remediar el anonimato a que muchas de nuestras poetisas se han visto sometidas, con su exclusión de tantas antologías que, casi por norma, las han ignorado, con un alejamiento muy cercano al desprecio" (*Antología* 7). The construction of a female canon in the nineteenth century owes much to the work of scholars like Susan Kirkpatrick – whose 1989 *Las Románticas: Women Writers and Subjectivity in Spain, 1835-1850* is the

touchstone in the field, and whose 1992 *Antología poética de escritoras del siglo XIX* anthologized the work of nearly every woman to publish a book of poetry in nineteenth-century Spain – as well as to Noël Valis, Lou Charnon-Deutsch, Geraldine Scanlon, Catherine Davies, and many others. Bringing female authors out of obscurity, and exploring the works of those who remain obscure, is an ongoing project.

Because the project of vindicating female authors has to disrupt the male domination of the accepted canon, work that showcases a rejection of patriarchal oppression is a primary means of validating female-authored writing. That valuable and necessary work does hold, however, a trap. It leads to critical treatments that either construct a poetics of victimization, have a singular critical focus on overtly political writing (Valis, “Introducción” 24; Kirkpatrick, *Antología* 67), or bow to the dismissal of work that is – or can be read as – pure sentimentality.<sup>7</sup> There is great value in studies of female authors that go beyond making their work, in the words of Rita Felski, “coextensive with their gender” (93). Without discounting the power of the patriarchy in the output of those who live within it, there is a need to approach texts by female authors without basing that approach in the oppressions that they faced while writing (Felski 57-58). This need does not suggest that their writing is not informed by that systemic oppression, nor that we cannot learn about that oppression from texts, but rather that a sole focus on that oppression leads to readings that let the intricacy and the variance of constructions of self that exist in the work fade into the background, as the foregone conclusion is that the value of a piece must be in its exploration of oppression.

A beautiful example of this can be found in the image that Kirkpatrick uses to explore the plural female subjectivity that is a strong current in Coronado’s verse. She elaborates on the community support of the group of female poets known as the lyrical sisterhood, with its ability to hold up a plural subjectivity, the “lyrical subject as plural, a ‘we’ rather than an ‘I’” (*Románticas* 241), or defines Coronado, in spite of her genius, prodigious poetic output, and crucial position in history, through the ways that she was victimized by society: “In this sense, Coronado’s poetic self is ... a divided self, a victim of the contradictions between the Romantic concept of the sovereign individual and the nineteenth-century ideology of gender” (243). The image that she uses to explore this plural subjectivity is based in Coronado’s conflation of the female poet and a flower.

A mainstay of nineteenth-century imagery, the association between women and flowers is, according to Charnon-Deutsch in *Fictions of the Feminine in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Press*, “the single most common token associated with the feminine” (24). The use of this imagistic universal

where women are not only always represented with flowers but often represented *as* flowers imbues the one with the morality and behaviors that those flowers represent in the popular imagination and the language of flowers: for example, a fully opened rose has probably already tasted love (25). Much of the flower/woman relationship is about either this kind of morality, or about feminine fragility and beauty, often in conflict with the desire for recognition (Kirkpatrick, "Romantic" 276). While in the poem that Kirkpatrick uses, the floral referent, the water lily, is foundational in the construction of a plural, mutually supportive subjectivity, the same flower is used in another poem to build up a strong individual identity that, rather than withstanding the slings and arrows of patriarchy, is at home in and strengthened by the water. A brief comparison of the two water lily poems can demonstrate the coexistence of these two different types of identity constructions.<sup>8</sup>

In "La flor del agua," as Kirkpatrick discusses, the identification between the lyrical sisterhood and water lilies is a physical manifestation of mutual support, where the flowers' grip on each other creates a network of safety. In "En otro [album]. El jilguero y la flor del agua,"<sup>9</sup> the introduction of the female poet / water lily makes reference to "La flor del agua" – in a three-stanza-long introductory sentence bracketed by the verses "A otras flores asida / ... / vivía una florecilla" (Coronado, *Poesías* 649) – but then builds the poetic subjectivity in a very different way. In the poem Kirkpatrick discusses, the water lily fights the bonds of the root that holds her and finds herself torn in what the critic calls a recurrent pull between root and wing, where "the poet's aspirations to flight, freedom, poetic transcendence are held back by the dead weight of her historical and social condition as a woman, a condition that is integral to her psyche and upward yearning" (*Románticas* 240). The poet figures this struggle between "the pull of poetic lust for experience, knowledge, and achievement and the restraint of feminine socialization" as the key to her poetic subjectivity (242-43). In that poem, the strain is violent and painful, with raging waters threatening to dislodge and kill the flower; in the second poem, the *flor del agua* doesn't yearn upward: she, the flower that holds the poem's subjectivity, finds beauty, life, and her poetry in the water that surrounds her. Yes, she is rooted, but in that rootedness, in her sublimation of her existence to the water, she is, as we will see, a better poet than the *jilguero* (the male poet) for all his flying.

The first poem ideates the water as something neither controllable nor steady, whose swells threaten destruction at every turn: "¡Ya se inunda! ... ¡Ya se eleva! ... / ¡Y la corriente la traga! ... / ¡Ya navega ... ya naufraga!" (Coronado, *Poesías* 515); the second finds waters that are not hostile in the

least. The water is, to give but a few examples “linfa latiente,” “cristal sereno,” “agua argentina” (649), “agua mansa y pura,” and “ondas transparentes / que repiten tus trinos amorosos” (650). The flower does not strain against a current, but rather finds nourishment and beauty in the water; leaving it is not the fulfillment of poetic potential, but death: “arrancarme del agua que me alienta / es pretender con ansiedad violenta / sacrificarme a tu ambición insana” (650). The flower’s finery and beauty, representative of the poet’s skill, are gifts of the water, her environment: “Sus galas, su belleza / eran no más frescura / que daba el agua pura / a su gentil cabeza” (649). This conception of the water as the home of female creativity is not confined to Coronado’s water lily poems; in “Yo tengo mis amores en el mar” (1849), she uses the same idea by situating the female character on the water in her “barquilla” (258), the same lexical choice as is used when the lily’s leaf is a boat for the blossom in “La flor del agua”: “en su barquilla la flor” (515).<sup>10</sup>

Because the water in “El jilguero y la flor del agua” is not a force to be fought against, there is space for the development of a different kind of subjectivity, one that is active, rather than reactive. Rather than with the water, the conflict in this poem is between the water lily/female poet and the “goldfinch,” who is the male poet. He, enamored of every flower that he meets, asks her to leave her river and come with him to seek glory. She declines, deciding to remain in the environment that nourishes her and makes her shine. This poem, through register, meter, and the ideation of danger, sets up the female poetic voice as not only wiser than her male counterpart, but also more versed in the art form that they share, and it does so in a way that neither falls back on the victimization of the female poet by society nor creates a mask of masculinity.

The poem starts, in heptasyllabic quartets with enclosing rhyme, with an apostrophic address to the goldfinch/poet that leads into an extended introduction of the coquette male poet, and the water lily in turn. The crux of the establishment of a poetic subjectivity in the poem comes through the extended interaction between bird and flower, where shifts in meter and register allow for a comparison that does not cast the male poet in a positive light. Once the interlocutors have met, and the goldfinch has asked the flower to run away with him to see the sea, the tempo of the dialogue increases, with each lover going from one stanza of speech, to two verses, and finally to single lines:

—¡Ah! vente a otros lugares

—¡Quédate al lado mío!



—¡Verás los anchos mares!

—Me basta con mi río. (Coronado, *Poesías* 650)

This distillation of the argument, while maintaining the short, *arte menor* verses, is the least structurally complex piece of the poem, which has moved from complex multi-stanza sentences offering a multi-layered apostrophic identification between goldfinch and male poet and hyperbaton used to frame and differentiate the introductions. These short statements, however, coming just before the goldfinch's abrupt departure ("¡Adiós! ¡gritó impaciente / el pájaro ofendido!" (Coronado, *Poesías* 650)), form a stark contrast with the subsequent and final section of the poem, which is the flower's elaborate reply. In form, this shift from dialogue to diatribe is signaled by a shift from *arte menor* to *arte mayor*, moving from heptasyllabic to hendecasyllabic quartets.

Such a shift, though not directly commented on in the content of the poem, immediately establishes a higher register and demonstrates a higher level of poetic skill than is evinced by the goldfinch at any point in the poem. Even outside of the more formalized royal octaves and chained tercets for which it is used, hendecasyllabic verse harks to the Renaissance sophistication, the period in which the verse form arrived in Spain.<sup>11</sup> Heptasyllables, in contrast, while holding a centuries-long tradition in Castilian, are more commonly found in the oral tradition, or in verses treating more quotidian topics; its use reached an apex in Spanish verse in the eighteenth century in fables like those by Iriarte and the less didactic work of the eighteenth-century *Escuela Salmantina*. From the single verse statements at the end of the dialogue, the poetic voice moves into a language that is rich in alliteration and hyperbaton. She first invokes the murmuring voice of the water through sibilance: "Si no son estas ondas transparentes" (Coronado, *Poesías* 650). Then she wraps the goldfinch in the culpability implied by his desire through an alliterative chiasmus that contrasts the female poet's home in the water with his callous lust: "arrancarme del agua que me alienta / es pretender con ansiedad violenta / sacrificarme a tu ambición insana" (650). This structure demonstrates the very skill that the male poet (the goldfinch) seeks in his perpetual flight through its positioning of cause and effect. Additionally, the shift from seven to eleven syllable lines with the shift from dialogue to monologue elevates the register used and therefore the poetic ability displayed by the water lily. This shift in meter establishes her as a far better poet, rooted in the water, than he is, free, in the air.

In establishing the ethos of choice in self-construction as a creature native to the element, the characterization of the goldfinch's flight, which

ought to represent the poet's quest for beauty and transcendence, is key. For here flight is not the quest to glory, but rather petulance and brashness. In the final stanzas of the poem, the poetic voice extrapolates on the male poet's insane ambition and foretells his death, offering falcons, whirlwinds, and the North wind as his possible downfalls, along with the slower torments of ambition and pride. She makes no mention of possible glory. The goldfinch in his mad flight, seeking only what is *more*, is Icarus ascendant, not what the flower yearns to be. Her lack of this kind of ambition, when balanced with her relationship with the water that is her muse, makes her an artist. It makes her Dedalus, not the victim of societal oppression. It makes her capable of seeing the beauty and the poetry in life, in not seeking violence and vainglory.

In her chapter "The Language of Treasure," discussing forewords and other peritexts written by Coronado, Casta Esteban, and Marina Romero, Noël Valis establishes the ways in which Coronado uses a self-deprecatory mode strategically, in a way that is "subversively symbolic" (257). Coronado employs this same subversive self-deprecation in the conversation between the water lily and the goldfinch. The lily pretends to agree that the great things the goldfinch will see are so much better – and will therefore be better songs – than what she can sing, but then Coronado immediately creates her lily as the much better poet. Where the male poet of the apostrophic invocation is short-spoken, as well as "joven, vivo y ligero," the female poet's poetic voice is rich with the sweet sadness that is the hallmark of the "female" realm of sentiment, yes, but also of the skill of wordplay, classical allusions, and introspective self-awareness that go so far beyond the reflection or channeling of nature. In this poem, as in "La flor del agua," Coronado creates female poetic subjectivity by inhabiting the connection between women and flowers. And the subjectivity that she develops is personal and constructed out of an ownership of self and environment held in juxtaposition to the wild flight of the male poet, which is not the glory of flight, but rather his hubris and avarice.

Like Coronado's poem, Valencia's "A la margen del arroyo," uses a natural metaphor in the construction of subjectivity, in this case the brook itself. While the poem is, at surface level, the kind of feminine verse that is easy to ignore – pastoral, descriptive, and sentimental – it uses these tropes to create space for philosophic introspection and a layered construction of social and poetic identity, blending art and introspection with the feminine mode. The water is key in this encoding of layers of thought. In his discussion of Narcissus in *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard lays out how the image of the self, reflected in water, leads the water to symbolize the "will to appear of the dreamer who contemplates it" (20). When Valencia's poetic

voice looks at herself in the water, this kind of reflectivity, the way that the doubling that is self and reflection encompasses the real and the ideal (Bachelard 22-23), is the entry into philosophic introspection. The self that she finds in the water is a creative female self that exists in and out of society, and whose creativity interacts with the societal pressures that she faces as a woman, without desiring to create a masculine persona or identity. Because her reverie is a solitary one, it can sidestep “those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) and seek instead the “I” that exists within and alongside them. “A la margen del arroyo” opens with this reverie of self and water:

Sentada en tu ribera, claro arroyuelo,  
Mientras de mis fatigas aquí descanso  
Mirando tu corriente que copia el cielo  
Y entre los verdes chopos forma un remanso,  
Quiero contar tus ondas una por una,  
Escuchar con deleite tu arrullo manso  
Y murmurar contigo de mi fortuna. (Valencia, *Poesías* 91)

In this first stanza, we have the start of reflectivity with “que copia el cielo” and the narrative confusion between the poetic voice and the brook, with “contar” being both to count and to tell, as a story. The words of the poetic voice mix with the sounds of the water both through the synonymous descriptors and the use of “murmurar” in describing the words of the poetic voice, as it is frequently the verb used for the “speaking” of flowing water. Coronado herself uses this term, italicized in the original, as the poetic baseline for the sound of running water in her novel *La rueda de la desgracia* (1873): “Si es verdad lo que dicen los poetas que los arroyos *murmuran*, la voz que se oye en el Urumea es *amor*” (52-53).

The next stanza reinforces the identification between the poetic voice and the brook, using a first-person verbal construction to indicate that both girl and stream arrive in the same way and that both are in need of the solace granted by the locale. “Los dos hemos bajado por esas lomas / Y llegamos rendidos á estas orillas, / Donde ... el ambiente de impregna con los aromas / que exhalan en tu margen mil florecillas” (Valencia, *Poesías* 91). Along with the reinforcement of a plural subjectivity, through the “us” that is girl and brook in “hemos bajado” and the following “Aquí cual dos amigos reposaremos” (92), the river also becomes the foil for the construction of narrative. While the poetic voice asks for stories, the river in this poem never speaks: the entire poem is in the voice of the poet, so the stories that she is told about the river come from herself. It is the introspective

reflectivity of the water and the sounds of its flowing, linked to the voice of the narrator, that will allow her to leave this sanctuary with sweet memories. Where the river, and by extension, the poem, are re-inscriptions of herself, the process that she will undergo is one of self-reflection, an auto-investigation that will bring catharsis.

Valencia develops a similar plural subjectivity and use of the edge of water as a place for deep reflection in other poems in *Poesías*. She develops a “we” that incorporates the encoding of femininity in objects of the natural world in “Las hojas secas,” where the leaves are addressed in an extended apostrophe that ties them to women in society. As an example, when the autumn comes, the leaves are tossed aside in the way of women who have passed their sociosexual prime: “De vuestro airoso tallo volasteis arrancadas, / como tras breves horas en placer gastadas / se arrojan con hastío las copas del festín. // Sois la de un arpa rota las cuerdas inservibles” (16).<sup>12</sup> In facing mortality and the fading of the glory of youth, Valencia builds slowly to a “we,” tying her own future to the fate of the leaves:

Y entonces, cuando todo rebose de contento,  
cuando recobre toda la vida, el movimiento,  
¿Quién pensará en vosotras? ¿quién llorará por mí?  
Perdido para siempre nuestro fugaz lamento,  
Borrada nuestra huella, no habrá por un momento  
Ni un eco en el vacío, ni un átomo en el viento  
Que diga que nosotras pasamos por aquí. (18)

At its conclusion, “La hojas secas” arrives at the metaphoric identification and plural subjectivity that is present from the outset of “A la margen del arroyo.” Additionally, Valencia establishes the edge of a stream as the site of philosophical contemplation not only in “A la margen del arroyo” but also in “La poesía,” which compares the poetry of yesterday and today to two women: the first both Venus rising from the waves and a vestal virgin, the second an earthy female, her vows broken, and virtue lost. In this piece, she sets up the edge of a stream as the place for the most perfect poetry to be born – signaling that the philosophic ruminations that she has there are of that loftier type of verse:

Ardientes y dulcísimos poetas,  
Los que alcanzasteis como don divino  
La vista celestial de los profetas,  
.....

Del aura que suspira en las macetas  
A orillas del arroyo cristalino. (103)

This is the same kind of riverside reverie as we can see in “A la margen del arroyo,” and this plural use of the water’s edge for such a purpose gives weight to the multiple meanings that the water holds.

The next two stanzas in “A la margen del arroyo” are rich with metaphors and allusions that interrogate the social norms and expectations regarding the female poet, and woman in general. Most telling is the contradiction formed by the shape and speech of the river, which connects to the angel/monster dichotomy ascribed to women of the century. On the one hand, the sound that the brook makes, in addition to mingling with the voice of the speaker, is mystical and religious: “qué dice esa salmodia no interrumpida” (Valencia, *Poesías* 92). However, in its form it is a serpent: the brook passes “susurrando por las malezas / como sierpe de acero blanca y bruñida” (92). The snake, invoking the symbolic temptation to sin, is frequently the link between the feminine and evil, and is key in the construction of nineteenth-century female monstrosity (Dijkstra 306).

Beyond its shape, the brook’s reflectivity, in its interaction with the gaze of the poetic voice, adds another layer to the interaction with monstrosity. Its surface of “polished white steel” forms a mirror of the self and reinforces the almost solipsistic reflectivity of the poem. As Bram Dijkstra explores in *Idols of Perversity*,

[m]ost of the popular fin-de-siècle painters offered analogous visual admonitions to woman not to peek into the mirror of self without the tempering supervision of a man to guide her. Only a truly perverse woman – a lamia, she who was the very incarnation of the temptress, the snake of forbidden knowledge – could dare to do so. (138)

The conflation of a woman’s reflection with the sin-tempting serpent appears in a specifically Spanish context in Goya’s symbolic menagerie, as Irene Gómez Castellano discusses in her article “La mujer frente al espejo,” where she analyzes the engraving “Mujer/serpiente” (82). And yet there, as well as the majority of the “vanity” and “in her toilette” visual art, the gaze – and almost invariably the author – are male (80), leading the conflation of woman and serpent to be a warning against or an indictment of female nature or female vanity. Valencia ties her brook to this connotation in the social imaginary without creating that male onlooker but still signaling the societal distaste for women looking at themselves through the conflation of serpent and mirror.

Given that Valencia connects this serpent to the angelic through the invocation of the sound of the waters not as a hiss but as a psalm, the ascription of morality becomes more complicated. To establish the moral coding that Valencia ascribes to the sound of flowing water, her 1891 award winning poem “A San Juan de la Cruz” is useful. There too, the sound of running water is divinely inspired:

Tú, cuyos pensamientos inflamados  
 Como la ardiente fe que los inspira,  
 Con hermoso desorden ordenados,  
 Fluyen serenos de tu rica mente  
 Cual en campiña amena,  
 Mansa, sonora y cristalina fuente  
 Suelta entre flores su armoniosa vena. (14)

The creation of a connection between the sound of flowing water and not only the power to clean and the purity that comes with a lack of stain,<sup>13</sup> but also with the elevated voice of a lauded saint, builds up the sound of water as a moral positive.

The mixing of the diabolical associations of the serpent and the heavenly associations of the river's sound also demonstrates the coexistence of the two faces of the angel/monster dichotomy, as Gilbert and Gubar did with Thackeray's poem “Angel of the Hearth,” where “every angel in the house – ‘proper, agreeable, and decorous,’ ‘coaxing and cajoling’ hapless men – is really, perhaps, a monster, ‘diabolically hideous and slimy’” (29). Such a mixing turns this river into a figurative lamia, the mythological creature with the body of a snake (here, this serpentine river) and the head of a woman (the reflected gaze of the poetic voice). In this way, anything unpleasant about it – the weeds through which it winds, for example, becomes connected to the struggles through which it must pass to arrive at the refuge of this shaded glen. Through this invocation of both sides of the angel/monster dichotomy, Valencia creates space for an introspective and philosophical reflected gaze that neither seeks a masculine voice nor adheres to societal expectations of feminine expression.

In order to arrive at the way that this mirroring will function in moving forward through the poem, it is useful to consider more closely how the female act of looking in the mirror, beyond an accession to vanity, allows access to interrogation of the relationship between the real and the platonic ideal. As Jeniyo La Belle discusses in *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, the female act of looking in the mirror is introspective, rather

than being rooted in vanity; it is a response to the recognition that all is not well:

The man thinks that all his wife is doing before the mirror is creating a superficial, flirtatious appearance that is denigrating her by giving so much attention to this shallow activity and delaying matters of more import. But for the woman, this time in front of the glass is her preparation of her identity – not to flirt with someone, but to take possession of her sense of self. (La Belle 15-16)

This mirror functions not only as a means for a woman to access the way in which the world objectifies her, but also for “creating the self in its self-representations to itself,” which allows the mirror to “reflect and project an otherworldly ideal” (La Belle 2, 16). It can allow access to the Platonic world of ideas, as is discussed by Sabine Melchior-Bonnet in *The Mirror: A History*, where the mirror allows one to see the idea self: “According to the Platonic tradition, a mirror always plays the role of mediator in a system of analogies and hierarchies” (118). Further supporting such a philosophical rationale for female mirror-looking is that fact that “[i]n Italy and Spain, the figure of Philosophy was represented holding a mirror, an allusion to the Socratic slogan, the reflection of the mirror thus designating the mental process of reflection” (136). Bringing that into conversation then with Bachelard’s water as the will to appear, the river as mirror becomes the will to appear to oneself – the will to know oneself, the will for philosophical investigation of the self.<sup>14</sup> By making the brook both serpent and mirror, therefore, Valencia is engaging with both of these levels of introspection: the invocation of a societal taboo, and the philosophical interrogation of identity.

The next stanzas of the poem, in the first of two sociocultural analyses that the poem offers, connect the sound of the waters – the angelic element that is wed to the monster – to a discourse on female sexuality. First, the song that the waters sing produces echoes that lift languidly from the breast of the river: “Cuyos son esos ecos dulces y suaves / Que se alzan de tu seno lánguidamente” (Valencia, *Poesías* 92). Here, because of the curving female associations of the word “seno,” the stream is physically characterized as female, an association doubled by the use of the adjective “lánguidamente.” A contronym (that is, it is its own antonym) meaning both that sweet laziness that follows an orgasm, and the last pained moments of life before death, languidness is a concept that is heavily charged with both eroticism and morbidity, and that is near to ubiquitous as a marker of the friction between the two in nineteenth-century eroticism and aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> Valencia will use this mixing of meanings again in “En el mar,” where the pleasure of

seeing the sea is described as “muelle languidez” (*Poesías* 7). Returning then to the “sweet echoes” that rise languidly from the water in “A la margen del arroyo,” the use of the concept of languidness makes the “extrañas notas” and “armonías lejanas” (92) both cries engendered by the physical act of love and the cries of loss that haunt so many riverbanks – of the Heliades for their brother (before they turn to poplars, also present in the establishing shot of this poem), of Ophelia for her prince, of Coronado for Alberto. The river, by its languidness, mirrors the response to lovers enjoyed and lovers lost. This eroticism stands in counterpoint to the century’s expectation that women should be the object of desire, but not its engenderer.

Those same echoes are then compared to the “ay que despiden las cuerdas rotas / De un arpa que pulsara mano inconsciente” (Valencia, *Poesías* 92), which indicates either discord or the male perceptions of female poetry that think of female poets not as craftswomen, but as souls full of sentiment that flows out in verse of its own accord, not unlike the way that Valencia was described by Francisco Blanco.<sup>16</sup> Finally, these sounds are also:

Ora el sutil acento blando y doliente  
De náyades que viven encadenadas,  
Cautivas de los gnomos y sepultadas  
Eu el fondo azulado de tu corriente. (92-3)

This final equivalence for the murmuring psalm of the running waters evokes a multi-century mythology of creatures who are part woman, part not, and who are bound to the waters, whether they are helpful and violated, as is the case for Richard Wagner’s Rhinemaidens, who suffer punishment like Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer’s trapped girl, crying forever from the mountain stream at the end of “El gnomo,” or are merely another iteration of the sexualized, beautiful femininity of the water as in his “Rima XII”: “Porque son, niña, tus ojos / verdes como el mar” (Bécquer 49). In this poem, where Bécquer praises the green eyes of his beloved, they are the green of the sea, of naiads’ eyes, and of the heavenly virgins of the Prophet, dangerous, racialized, and exotic, and yet contained and distant. The water as a point of access to enchantment is also present in Valencia’s “En el mar,” where below the surface there are “abismos encantados / que pueblas con mil seres misteriosos” (*Poesías* 10). By tying the voice of the water, itself the reflection of the voice of the narrator, to this mythological or supernatural field, Valencia invokes a powerful, dangerous, agentive, imprisoned female sexuality.

Having conjured up this complex web of feminine signifiers, the poem continues by charting a progression of the stages of life, still through the foil



of the water. The progression is often depicted through natural phenomena, such as the phases of the moon or the seasons of the year (Charnon-Deutsch, *Gender* 3). The course of a stream is another logical choice, as the idea of the river as life that ends in the sea (death) is very common in Romantic verse. Valencia uses the stages of life as a way of processing the female subjective self, leading up to a doubled metaphor of death in opposition to the desire to enter more forcefully into the economic world of literary production and canon creation. While plotting this course through the societally projected stages of the (stereo)typically feminine life does not actively engage in breaking gender roles, the self-awareness that it manifests is beautiful and unusual. Further, placing this reading of the stages of her (or the archetypal woman's) life in the rushing of the water underscores the subjective difference of female experience in a way that does not base that difference on subordination.

The first stage/stanza is infancy and childhood, where the water's cleanliness and concordant ability to purify, makes everything jubilant:

¿Es que acaso recuerdas días mejores  
Y piensas en su encanto con amargura  
Y echas quizá de menos las gayas flores  
Que alegraron tu cuna con sus primores  
Mientras tú las nutrías con tu frescura? (Valencia, *Poesías* 93)

The "cuna" here is both spring (water) and literal cradle (woman), and the flowers that surround it are the "mil florecillas" from the second stanza, or the women who surrounded the poetic voice in infancy and who were purified and made better by the "frescura," that is, coolness and clean water. Bachelard argues that water is the embodiment of freshness and coolness, that its symbolism in this vein is so strong as to be automatically refreshing (31-33). Water, too, is purity; a purity that can spread, for the main function of water is to clean, bathe, and purify: from the baptismal font to the washerwomen at the river. Further, it is the job of woman, of the "Angel" to spread purity, as the moral compass and guide of her household (Kirkpatrick, *Románticas* 7). Rather than "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms" (Shakespeare II.vii.143) then, those first days of infancy, before interaction with the world are constructed as the epitome of that cleanliness.

The following stanza demonstrates the realization and appreciation of being the object of the gaze. It is adolescence and first love, the awakening of sexuality. It steers the reader from the innocence of clear waters looking at the sky ("con la transparencia de tus cristales, / Al ver cómo en tus aguas

se mira el cielo" [Valencia, *Poesías* 93]) to the sexual awakening of those bounded by roses: "Y te ofrece sus galas el fértil suelo / Bordando tus orillas con mil rosales" (93). These roses, in the identification between women and flowers, as mentioned before, signify a woman who "appear[s] to have already savored the perfume of love" (Charnon-Deutsch, *Fictions* 25). The sexual connotation here is made stronger by the water itself, as Bachelard posits that the clear water of a river always and already holds a naked woman to rise out of it, that the clarity of the water evokes that entrance, saying that the sexual function of the river "is to evoke feminine nudity. Here is extremely clear water, says a passer-by. How faithfully it would reflect the most beautiful images! Consequently, the woman who bathes there must be White and Young; she must be nude" (33). It is no leap, then, that the transparent crystals of the water, once they are bounded by roses, have tasted sexual pleasure.

That pleasure, the new carnal knowledge offered by it, is couched in the celebratory phrases of an unknown tongue, the language of love: "Vas celebrando a solas tanta ventura / Con frases de un idioma desconocido" (Valencia, *Poesías* 93). What then the consequence for the river-woman tasting love? Enjoying pleasure and adulation for beauty result in dragging the lymph – the life force or soul, and for the woman perhaps reputation – of the brook along the ground: making it less pure, by mixing with, and fertilizing the valley, or for the woman, by coquetry: "Mientras ufano arrastras tu linfa pura / Que fecundiza el valle verde y florido?" (93). The passage of water between flowers narrates the appreciation of being admired, the experience of love, and the loss of that early purity.

Then follows, in Becquerian fashion, the disillusionment and disappointment with the self, here tied to vanity, temptation, and reputation in the association of the woman to the water: "[a]l bajar serpeando de peña en peña / ¿Quién sabe si por dicha no te ha tentado / La vanidad humana tan halagüeña?" (93). Again, "serpear" has all of the connotations of sin, a sin tied to the amorous transgression of having dragged her purity through the valley. Furthermore, the reason for the potential failure, vanity, is both the female social sin of being desired (Charnon-Deutsch, *Gender* 3) and is related to the ethos of self-viewing. In the self-consciousness of this interaction with the gendered construct of "vanity," focused as it is on the male gaze, Valencia engages both with the sin, and with the poetic introspection inherent in the creation of a mirrored other self. While suggesting that it is vanity to enjoy her own beauty, the poetic voice is engaging in an act of introspective observation apart from the male gaze, because that female self-viewing is *not* a created pose designed to attract a male viewer.

The third section of the poem deals with the desire for the other: not a sexual desire in this case, but a desire for sublimation, for transformation, to be that which one is not. Perhaps, it is the desire to fly, perhaps the desire to lose one's life into the creation and rearing of a new one. The first stanza offers two options, the remaining caution against wayward action. Either the brook has found this glen "[p]ara pasar [s]us días aquí olvidado," or it desires to rise from its humble station, to become known, to see the sea: "Donde hall[e] horizonte más dilatado / Y tal vez [s]e conviert[a] en ancho río / que ... Baje a endulzar las olas del mar bravío?" (Valencia, *Poesías* 94). Here we see the same desire for status or recognition that Coronado used in the *jilguero*, and yet, unlike in Coronado, the conflict here is internal. Greatness comes tied to first danger, and then a potential loss of the self. The dangers are broad: "Que el llegarse á los grandes es peligroso / Y á muchos han perdido sus ambiciones" (94). And, like those that Coronado expresses to the goldfinch, are not mild: "Sus entrañas salobres te sorberían, / Y al perderse en su seno vasto y rugiente, / La cinta plateada de tu corriente, / Ni huellas de tu paso se encontrarían" (95). Here the body of the brook, upon reaching the sea, is subsumed completely. Moreover, that body, previously a steel serpent, but now a silver ribbon, reverses the negative connotations of the previous association.<sup>17</sup>

This final stage is the catharsis of the introspection, and it offers, again, layered meanings. In terms of the stages of life, it expresses both the fear of and desire for death. No matter how much the poetic voice in this poem may cajole, the brook before her will, in fact, join the sea. That is as much the function of running water as rootedness is the nature of flowers. Furthermore, that joining with the sea, the sublimation of the self into its vastness, where that vastness is death, is also universal. As Augusto Ferrán gives us in his "Rima XXII," all water flows to the sea, there to die: "Si me quieres como dices, / ¿por qué te apartas de mí? / agua que va río abajo, / en la mar viene a morir" (n.p.). Bachelard, too, posits that every river is and leads to death (75). On another level, where the water is society or the literary market, it offers an ironic warning against the public eye, from within its gaze. Finally, on the philosophical level, the serpent that brought connotations of sin to introspection, once examined, becomes a shining ribbon, cleansed of that stain by the water that makes it up. It is no great epiphany, perhaps, but it is a fascinating representation of the process of working through the social and moral implications of female life, neatly packaged as a sentimental ode.

These two poems, "A la margen del arroyo" and "El jilguero y la flor del agua" offer depth and plurality in the living of the female experience. The water lily's individual identity as a strong and worthy poet adds dimension

to Coronado's use of a plural subjectivity. Valencia's coding of an investigation of the self through the style of a pastoral piece underlines the scholarly importance of reading sentimental work deeply. The use of nature and the importance of the water in both poems speaks to the richness that exists in associations that can appear prosaic. The kind of discrete subjectivity established in these poems demonstrates female poets building worlds, and there is much in the work of poets from the century that is written off as trite, overly sentimental, or pure description that can offer us access to these nuances of the period's social imaginary and can add to our conception of the complexity of identity and subjectivity that came out of the century.

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## NOTES

- 1 The entirety of this book can be found, open access, through the Harvard College Library, from the Fund of Harriet J. G. Denny (Span 5982.7.31).
- 2 Additionally, two of her poems appear in the 1914 *Antología de poetas vallisoletanos modernos*, by Narciso Alonso Cortés, the only other anthology to include her. She is the only female poet to appear in this volume.
- 3 There was a biblio-biographic article in the local Rioseco newspaper about Valencia in 2013, drawing on Vallejo González's article. While this piece does offer some information about the poet, it defines her biography in terms of the work, education, and literary productivity of the male members of her family. While it talks about her brothers' education, it does not mention whether Valencia herself was formally educated or an autodidact like Coronado, and while it elaborates some of her literary successes, it gives no information about how she negotiated her identity as a writer (Franco Revilla). This is not to speak poorly of the authors of the article, as much of this information is very hard to acquire, but it does point to the way that female identity, professional and otherwise, is often written about in terms of its relationships to men.
- 4 The open question of education and family or community support is an important one, because it points to the barriers against female authorship, even as women writers became more commonplace, and because of the great technical skill of Valencia's writing. It wasn't until after 1870 that basic education for women became standard (Davies 27), and even then, education for girls was focused on skills that would help in securing a good match: largely housewifery and correct manners (18). Instruction in reading and writing were by no means standard, and, when included, reading was

- rudimentary and writing more so (Scanlon 15-17). As Valencia was growing up, a shift toward more universal and more comprehensive education for women began, with the 1868 rebellion and Concepción Arenal's publication of *La mujer del porvenir*, but it wasn't until the Bourbon restoration in 1875 – when Valencia was 15 – that much change actually started happening, and in the metropolitan hubs of Madrid and Barcelona (Davies 18).
- 5 This difference is key in Pardo Bazán's self-identification as a poet, as discussed by Joyce Tolliver (219).
  - 6 The mixing of Romantic style with philosophical rumination was typical of late nineteenth-century poetry by men (Ángeles Naval 448).
  - 7 Charnon-Deutsch signals the problem in this denigration of sentimentality: "At a time when men writers, who today count as the scions of nineteenth-century canon, dominated literary production, hundreds of women writers struggled to define spaces where male power may have held sway but where feminine sensibility, refinement, and affiliations were prized instead of denigrated or trivialized. These, now largely ignored, women writers instilled in their readers a sense of self-worth that was sometimes lacking in the works of their male colleagues. Critical rejection of the sentimentality of this writing perpetuates the misunderstanding of the reality in which they participated meaningfully and of the still undetermined effects of this writing on large segments of even the illiterate urban population" ("Nineteenth-Century" 466). For another reading of how poetry seen as "busy with small, often trivial feelings" can hold great critical value, see Vilarós-Soler (67).
  - 8 The "flor del agua" apart from being a water lily, is also the first water drawn from any source on the morning of the Día de San Juan, used as a charm and a panacea (See Vaqueiro, Taboada). While Coronado describes a physical flower, the use of this phrase in the titles of both poems evokes the secret, feminine, spiritual value of this practice.
  - 9 This poem, while it is present in complete collections of Coronado's work, does not appear in *Románticas*, in the Jimenez Faro, Kirkpatrick, or Martínez Torrón anthologies, nor in any anthology that I have found. It is referenced in passing in terms of the danger posed by love in *Historia de la literatura española: siglo XIX* by Victor G. de la Concha (1997, 561), and as a reproach to overly strong feelings in *Del Romanticismo a la crisis de fin de siglo*, by Isabel María Pérez González (1999, 76).
  - 10 Additionally, in "Un encuentro en el valle" (1846), the edge of the water is again the place for female communion with nature (as the poetic voice speaks with a turtledove) and for introspection: "Y al pie de estos manantiales, / entre los mismos juncas, / bajo el propio fresno umbrío, / a cantar tu amor, yo el mío / vengo al campo, al nido sales" (281), where that chiasmus links them in the same sort of apostrophic 'we' between woman and nature as Valencia creates

with the stream itself. (See footnote 15 for other uses of the tórtola by both Valencia and Coronado.)

- 11 Espronceda used this same technique of shift from *arte menor* for a male interlocutor to *arte mayor* for female monologue in *El estudiante de Salamanca*, a choice marked upon for its intimation of sophistication (Carnero 66-67).
- 12 Compare this to Avellaneda's recurring use, as noted by Kirkpatrick, of "the dry leaf, blown before the wind" as "a recurring metaphor for the self overtaken by emotion" ("Romantic" 376).
- 13 Valencia does also tie the sound of running water to that less elevated purity, as in "Mi tumba": "Seren, transparente y armonioso / Corra a mis plantas murmurante río" (*Poesías* 30).
- 14 For the relationship between the mirror and the construction of female poetic and *poietic* identity in the twentieth century, see Mudrovic.
- 15 While I will hold off on a full investigation of this concept in relation to eroticism and morbidity for a future time, a few examples should demonstrate its function here. Coronado uses languidness in speaking of a river in "Mérida" ("El perezoso y lánguido Guadiana" [*Poesías* 88]) and in "Canción" ("Cuando la tórtola dulce / lánguido suspiro exhale / con acento lastimero / recogida entre las ramas. // A aliviar voy mis cuidados / a la orilla solitaria / de un pacífico arroyuelo, / que entre fresnos se dilate" [155]). Valencia too has a turtledove whose song is languid with grief and longing, instead of pleasure: "Sola en el fondo del añoso bosque, / lánguida y flébil como endecha triste, / lanza a los vientos su canción doliente / Tórtola viuda..." (*Poesías* 36). Avellaneda, in describing the lover in "El Favonio y la rosa": "Que amante gira en torno / Con lánguido murmurio" (166). Valencia also uses this kind of languidness, focusing on the erotic content of languid tones in "Balada": "Se escucha a lo lejos fugaz cantilena, / perdidas estrofas de amante cantar, ...que lánguido y suave sus ámbitos llena / Cruzando sus ecos la playa y el mar" (*Poesías* 71). In Pardo Bazán's amorous *Insolación*: "Estas enormidades las murmuró con tono lánguido y quejumbroso, con los ojos mortecinos y un aire de melancolía que daba compasión. Así se quedó de una pieza, así al pronto; que después se le deshizo el nudo de la garganta y las palabras le salieron a borbotones. Ea..., ahí va... Ahora sí que me desato..." (165-66). And in her "Naúfragas," Madrid starts out described as a magical place: "La fragancia de las acacias en flor se derrama, sugiriendo ensueños de languidez, de ilusión deliciosa" ("Naúfragas"). And as a final example, Bécquer's rima LIX: "Yo conozco la causa de tu dulce / secreta languidez" (9).
- 16 The introduction of the harp as a marker in the debate between the naïve and the sentimental in poetry is a reference to Sappho, and her position in the construction and auto-construction of the archetype of the female poet in the

period. For an analysis of this influence in the work of Coronado, see Gómez Castellano ("Tears in Translation").

- 17 Valencia uses similar positive imagery of water as silver in "En el mar" and "Mi tumba;" in the former the sea is an "[e]spejo de bruñida plata" (*Poesías* 8), and in the latter a waterway is introduced via its beautiful reflectivity: first, "Y con paso tranquilo y perezoso / Retratando en su linfa el bosque umbrío," and two stanzas later, "Y en sus ondas de plata rumorosas / se miren las pintadas florecillas" (30).

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