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# Misogyny and (mis)representation: The female subject in the poetry of jos l?de espronceda

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Misogyny and (Mis)Representation:  
The Female Subject in the Poetry of José de Espronceda

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Misogyny and (Mis)Representation:  
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ABSTRACT

This work explores the portrayal of the female subject in the work of the Spanish Romantic poet. José de Espronceda, This study will analyze the misogynistic representation of women and the denial of female subjectivity.

The first chapter discusses the biographical, historical and literary contexts of Espronceda's work. This section will discuss Romantic notions of subjectivity, as well as the ambivalence towards the women during the 19th century. This ambivalence produced a conflict that was reflected in the representation of women as either pure angels or vile demons.

The first work that will be discussed is the poem "A Jarifa en una orgía". I will explore how Espronceda vilifies the sexuality of the female protagonist and how Jarifa is used to reflect the disillusionment of the poet. This section will show how female subjectivity is displaced in favor of the male subject.

The second work I will examine is *El estudiante de Salamanca*. This study will explore how Espronceda treats the figure of the seduced woman, Elvira. It will also analyze how Elvira's dualistic nature serves as a means for the poet to express his Romantic vision.

The third work I will analyze is “Canto a Teresa”. “Canto a Teresa” is dedicated to Espronceda’s former lover, Teresa Mancha, and is part of a larger poem, *El diablo mundo*. This chapter will examine how Espronceda portrays Teresa using the Madonna-whore model. This section will also discuss the conflicting opinions on the question of misogyny in this poem.

## Introduction

Romantic art, according to Hegel, is characterized by the “externalization of desire, consciousness’s “appetitive relation” to the world of objects” (Kirkpatrick 14). The object of this desire is often a woman, and it is no different in the poetry of the Spanish poet José de Espronceda. Espronceda’s works present a variety of female objects of desire: prostitutes, specters, demons, and angels. Whether or not these “objects” are true subjects is another matter. Espronceda’s female characters are often misrepresented instead of represented as proper subjects. Espronceda’s women fall victim to the misogynistic stereotypes of the 19th century. They are Madonnas or whores, angels or demons, saints or sinners. In addition to suffering from these binaries, Espronceda’s female characters are often used as mere projections of the male subject. Their own subjectivity is nullified by their use as a vehicle for the Romantic’s ideals and desires.

This study aims to show how Espronceda’s portrayals of female characters reflect the misogyny and misconceptions towards women during the Romantic period. The first chapter discusses the concept of Romantic subjectivity, the ambivalent status of women in the 19th century, and how both contribute to Espronceda’s notions of female subjectivity.

The subsequent chapters each examine a different poem of Espronceda’s that has a prominent female character: “A Jarifa, en una orgía”, *El estudiante de Salamanca*, and *Canto a Teresa*. The discussion of each work will show how

Espronceda demonstrates a polarized view of feminine identity, and how female subjectivity is subordinated to the expression of Espronceda's Romantic vision.

## Chapter 1

### Romantic Subjectivity and Misogyny

José de Espronceda y Delgado is considered to be the foremost representative of Spanish Romanticism. His life, which began March 25, 1808 in Almendralejo, and ended in 1842 in Madrid, coincided with a period of artistic and political upheaval in Spain. As a youth, Espronceda rejected the military career his family favored and opted instead to study the liberal arts with Alberto Lista, who encouraged his literary career (Carnero 44). In 1823, Espronceda joined a newly formed secret society, “*Los numantinos*”, that aimed to thwart absolutism and promote the liberal movement. When the society was discovered a year later, Espronceda secluded himself in a convent to avoid repercussions. There, he began his epic poem, *Pelayo*. After Lista’s school was shut down in 1825 for fostering “subversion”, Espronceda continued his studies at his teacher’s home.

Due to the animosity towards liberals, Espronceda left Spain for Lisbon, Portugal in 1827, where he was quickly expelled for being a political refugee. Later that year Espronceda traveled to London, and began a period of exile that would last for five and a half years. During his time in London, he came in contact with liberal circles dedicated to the overthrow of Fernando VII (Carnero 45). During his years in exile Espronceda traveled to Brussels and France, where he participated in various liberal uprisings, including the 1830 revolutions in France

that led to the overthrow of the Bourbons, which Delacroix depicted in the quintessential Romantic painting *Liberty Leading the People* (Carnero 47). Not all of his exploits were so noble; Sebold states that Espronceda took advantage of his exile to take the “Grand Tour” of Europe, and maintained an “actitud alegre y despreocupada del dandy” as well as enjoying the money that his mother frequently sent him (352)

The same year that Espronceda began his exile, Teresa Mancha, his future lover, arrived to London. Teresa was the daughter of Epifanio Mancha, an exiled colonel of the Spanish army. According to Robert Marrast’s biography of Espronceda, he and Teresa met in Lisbon and developed their friendship in the Spanish liberal circles they both frequented in London (Rodríguez Fischer 76). In 1829 Teresa married a Spanish merchant, Gregorio de Bayo to help her family’s financial situation (Sebold 352). Teresa had two sons with Bayo, but Teresa soon abandoned her family and was living with Espronceda in Paris. Espronceda was granted amnesty in 1833, and Teresa followed him to Madrid (Carnero 47). Bowing to pressure from his mother, Espronceda agreed to install Teresa in a separate residence while he lived with his mother (Rodríguez Fischer 77). In 1845, their daughter, Blanca, was born (Prieto de Paula 391). Teresa, tired of Espronceda’s long absences and affairs with other women, broke off the affair in 1836 (Sebold 353). Teresa’s death in 1839 inspired the second canto of *El diablo mundo*, known as the “Canto a Teresa”

After his death on May 23, 1842, Espronceda’s character began to take on mythic proportions. The combination of his romantic life and political activities

led Espronceda to be cast as the “Spanish Byron”. Antonio Ferrer del Río wrote the following biographical sketch that would solidify his character for years to come:

Dotado de singular arrojo, capaz del más férvido entusiasmo, amaba los peligros, y se esparcía su ánimo imaginando temerarias empresas.[...] Impetuoso el cantor de Pelayo, y sin cauce natural su inmenso raudal de vida, se desbordó con furia gastando su ardor bizarro en desfrenados placeres y crapulosos festines [...] Hacía gala de mofarse insolente de la sociedad en públicas reuniones, y a escondidas gozaba en aliviar los padecimientos de sus semejantes [...] (Carnero 57-59)

As a result of this and other biographies, Espronceda transformed into the epitome (or caricature) of Romantic sensibilities; daring, patriotic, sensitive, disillusioned yet idealistic.

In her study of Spanish female Romantic poets, *Las románticas*, Susan Kirkpatrick devotes several sections to the concept of Romantic subjectivity. Kirkpatrick cites Hegel’s assertion that the Romantic art is characterized by the “exaltation of desire”(14). She then goes on to define the three archetypes of the Romantic subject, the “Promethean transgressor of the barriers to desire, the superior and socially alienated individual, and the self-divided consciousness” (14). These archetypes most frequently apply to male subjectivity but also relate to how the female subject/object is treated by male authors. The presence of the female as an “other” of the male is often the embodiment or object of this desire,

an instrument of social alienation, or an alter ego that represents the male's own divided consciousness. The "other" of the male Romantic subject, human or nonhuman, is "frequently identified as feminine, whether she is nature, the representation of a human woman, or some phantom of desire" (Homans 12). The female subject, then, in Romantic works tends to be an object rather than a proper subject, a vehicle for the male subject's desires or Romantic ideals.

Historically, the Romantic period was an ambiguous time for women in Spain. The liberal society of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was ambivalent about women's status in society (Kirkpatrick 55). Traditionally, men and women had been strictly separated from men in social situations, but by the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were freer to interact with men (Kirkpatrick 59). The change in women's social roles began to affect a crisis in the masculine perception of male- female relationships and power structures. Women were traditionally seen as subordinate and mute participants in their relationships with men and were portrayed in literature as decorous, idealized beings (Del Barco 190). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the changing dynamics between men and women produced a conflict in the Romantic male:

La voluntad de participar en la sociedad cultural romántica obliga a la mujer a sentirse como varón, engrandecer sus conquistas para achicar las de ellos. La pérdida del "secreto" [femenino] desorienta al varón, que no sabe cómo ofrecerse o luchar contra esa nueva apariencia de la mujer. (Del Barco 190)

To many critics, this conflict produced a paradox that reflected one of the greatest failures of Spanish liberalism: the refusal to integrate reforms for women into the liberal project:

La falta de libertad de los primeros liberales españoles se dejó sobre todo sentir en sus mujeres. No supieron liberarlas, las quisieron como su rémora, se sometieron a ellas en la dirección de la familia y, en definitiva, de la sociedad. Se diría un fenómeno matriarcal el retrogradismo de los liberales del siglo XIX en España. (Braga, cited in Rodríguez-Fischer, 76)

The threat of disrupting the primordial power balance between men and women provoked a defensive reaction that was frequently expressed in the works of Romantic male writers (Del Barco 199). Romantic representations of women categorized them as either angels or demons, and served to “provide the psychological and moral separation and subordination of women” (Kirkpatrick 59). These literary representations of women attempted to stave off these social changes by denying female subjectivity and promoting misogynistic portrayals of women.

Another phenomenon that contributed to the disruption of feminine social norms was the increase in female readers during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The increase in female characters, the focus on female psychology and romantic plot lines reflect an acknowledgement of the female reading public, as well as an active attempt to gain female readership. Moralists of the day were concerned that the reading of novels would lead to the corruption of women, giving them

“dangerous” ideas and fantasies due to women’s lack of reason and excessive emotions. (Carnero 366)

The challenge to traditional female social roles led to a reinforcement of the “ideology of domesticity”, the belief that women belonged exclusively in the home. This in turn led to the popular image of the “*angel del hogar*” in Spanish literature (Kirkpatrick 59). The concept of “*angel del hogar*”, the domestic angel, created female subjects that were docile, submissive, good wives, good mothers, and good homemakers. The “*ángel del hogar*” was pure, innocent and free of desires beyond the health and happiness of her family. Even some female writers of this period supported this model. The following selection from Angela Grassi demonstrates the belief that being a good woman meant being a good wife and mother:

Limitamos nuestra ardiente ambición a hacer la felicidad del hombre, y nuestro orgullo a inspirarle las virtudes que le engrandezcan a nuestros ojos e inmortalicen su gloria [...] ¿Existe acaso alguna gloria, por brillante que sea, comparable a la que reporta una dulce madre de familia, amante de sus deberes y pronta siempre a sacrificarse para el bien de los demás.

(Grassi 3-4, cited in Fuentes Gutiérrez 197)

This selection emphasizes a women’s duty to sacrifice herself for her family; all her desires and ambitions must be directed towards the good of her family, rather than to herself.

Perhaps the most notable example of the pure female subject is Doña Inés in Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*. Inés, who has spent her whole life in convent, protected from the outside world, is constantly compared to an angel. There is no sensuality in Zorrilla's descriptions of Inés; it is almost as though she has no corporal presence. One of the rare descriptions of her body refers to her hands in the act of praying; it would seem that Zorrilla wants to emphasize that her body is a vessel of purity and holiness and has no connection to lust or sin. Although Don Juan romances Inés, she maintains her virginity, and after her death, she begs God for the chance to save Don Juan's soul, using her own as collateral. Inés's willingness to sacrifice herself for the sake of her pure love for Don Juan epitomizes the 19<sup>th</sup> century patriarchic vision of the female subject (Schuriknight 103). Inés's purity, and her pure (i.e. non-sexual) love, earn Don Juan's salvation and restore order.

The concept of the *ángel del hogar* derives much of its inspiration from the cult of the Virgin Mary. The Madonna became the ideal image of a woman; a virgin, pure and without sin, but also a mother and a wife. It was her willingness to submit to God's (masculine) will that ensured the salvation of mankind.

The existence of a feminine ideal presupposes an unholy and evil opposite. The opposite of the *ángel del hogar* was the "*mujer demoníaca*", who was characterized as frivolous, vain, proud, and promiscuous (Fuentes Gutiérrez 196). One of the many origins of the "devil woman" is the apocryphal first wife of Adam, Lilith, who refused to submit to his will and was banished to wander the earth as a type of witch-phantom. The devil woman image strengthened with

religious teachings blaming Eve for the original sin and the downfall of man. The early Christian writer Tertullian's violent condemnations of Eve extended her transgressions to all women: "Woman! You are the gateway of the devil. You persuaded him whom the devil dared not attack directly. Because of you the Son of God had to die" (quoted in Beauvoir 156). The Virgin, the epitome of holiness, became the antithesis of Eve, the agent of damnation (Beauvoir 159).

In contrast with the *ángel del hogar*, the *mujer demoníaca* was associated with temptation and sin. Sexuality was an essential component of the Romantic *mujer demoníaca*. Erotic love or passionate feelings were not deemed proper for women; only male subjects were permitted to express these sentiments. Once a woman expressed sexual or erotic tendencies she was immediately cast as a "wicked" or "devilish" woman (Fuentes Gutiérrez 207). As Simone de Beauvoir points out, a sexual woman has traditionally been seen as a threat to the male:

No longer is the female she who nurses the little ones, but rather she who eats the male [...]. The womb ...becomes a pulp of humors, ... a dark contractile gulf, a serpent that insatiably swallows up the strength of the male. [...] The same dialectic makes the erotic object into a wielder of black magic, the servant into a traitress, Cinderella into an ogress, and changes all women into enemies. (Beauvoir 179)

The expression of female passion almost always ends in disaster or destruction, because the existence of that passion transgresses deeply imbedded social values (Fuentes Gutiérrez 208). Even within Romanticism's titanistic challenge to authority, female passion was not permissible.

In keeping with the Romantic tradition, the female characters in Espronceda's poetry are consistently treated as objects rather than subjects. The primary role of women in Espronceda's works is the object of desire (Kirkpatrick 121). Although their titles would suppose female subjects, in poems such as "A Jarifa" and "Canto a Teresa" the subjectivity is clearly male; the presence of women in these poems serve merely to represent the frustrations of the poet, "the object world that fails to correspond to the values imagines and desired by the lyrical, masculine subject" (Kirkpatrick 127). Kirkpatrick notes that on a few occasions Espronceda's works "suggest the possibility of a female subjectivity" (121). However, when this possibility is presented, Espronceda reverts to the model of the female as an object or a reflection of male subjectivity. As Francisco García Lorca notes, in Espronceda's poetry, "fuera de él [el hombre] la mujer, como mujer, no tiene existencia posible" (quoted in Marrast 625).

Another aspect of Espronceda's depiction of women is the Madonna-whore dichotomy that prevailed in the Romantic period. Espronceda's women are either "ángeles" or "demonios". As Ricardo Landeira comments, Espronceda's conflicting portrayals of women demonstrate his Romantic vision. Espronceda seeks an ideal woman, a pure, Madonna – like figure who embodies love itself. The poet is inevitably disillusioned, however, because this Madonna does not exist, or because the ideal woman somehow disappoints him. The Madonna-like woman is then demonized and characterized as a whore (198). Landeira believes Espronceda's disappointment with love is representative of his greater dissatisfaction with life. In Espronceda's Romantic vision, the ideal he searches

for can never be reached; the pure ideal is degraded by impure reality. Landiera speculates that Espronceda demonizes his imperfect women as a punishment for having “defrauded” him; their imperfections destroy his ideal and lead to his disenchantment with his own Romantic self (198). Espronceda uses his female subjects as a means of projecting his frustrations with the impossible and ephemeral nature of love and with the Romantic’s perpetual conflict between the ideal and reality.

## Chapter 2

### Idealism and Disillusionment in “A Jarifa en una orgía”

The poem “A Jarifa, en una orgía” presents the female as a prostitute, a sexual object that inspires disgust in the poet. The name of the prostitute, Jarifa, is significant; it is a name of Arab origin, which establishes her as an exotic “other”. Lou Charon-Deutsch has noted that exoticism is a fetishizer of the female body that establishes the female subject as a sexual object (254). Jarifa is portrayed as a *mujer demoníaca* and a “source of love that is damned” (Landeira 195). The poem, set in a brothel, begins with the poet seeking her company, looking for solace:

Trae Jarifa, trae tu mano  
ven y púsala en mi frente,  
que en un mar de lava hirviente  
mi cabeza siento arder.  
  
Ven y junta con mis labios  
esos labios que me irritan,  
donde aún los besos palpitan  
de tus amantes de ayer. (vv 5-8)

In the second half of the stanza the poet already begins to express disillusionment; Jarifa’s lips “irritate” the speaker because they have kissed other

lovers before him. Jarifa's lack of purity leads the speaker to cynically question the concepts of virtue and truth:

¿Qué la virtud, la pureza?

¿Qué la verdad y el cariño?

Mentida ilusión de niño

que halagó mi juventud.

Dadme vino: en el se ahoguen

mis recuerdos; aturdida,

sin sentir, huya la vida:

paz me traiga el ataúd. (vv 9-16)

The disenchantment the speaker feels due to the impossibility of achieving truth and purity make him want to flee from the world and find repose in death.

Returning to Jarifa's failure to fulfill his desires for a pure woman, the narrator turns his attention away from his own suffering and insults Jarifa:

Huye mujer; te detesto,

siento tu mano en la mía

y tu mano siento fría

y tus besos hielo son.

¡Siempre igual! Necias mujeres,

inventad otras caricias,

otro mundo, otras delicias,

¡o maldito sea el placer!

Vuestros besos son mentira,  
mentira vuestra ternura,  
es fealdad vuestra hermosura,  
vuestro gozo es padecer (vv 21-32)

The insults hurled at Jarifa become directed at all women. The speaker accuses them of being false, of lying about their affections. This stanza is also a condemnation of erotic love; the speaker damns pleasure because it disguises the emptiness of sexual expression. Later in the poem the speaker declares pleasure to be an “engaño” that instead of bringing happiness brings discontent and strife.

In the following stanzas the speaker expresses the ambivalence of his desires. In the fourth stanza, the speaker longs for love, a “delite divino”, that does not exist in this world. Interestingly, the speaker claims that this search for ideal love that led to his deception and disenchantment:

y es la luz de aquel lucero  
que engañó mi fantasía,  
fuego fatuo, falso guía  
que errante y ciego me tray. (vv 37-40)

The speaker reiterates this irony later in the poem, when he remarks that when he searched for glory in the “tierra de virtud”, all he found were “hediondo polvo y deleznable escoria” (v 67). The virginal women he encounters turn to smoke and mud and rot. There are two possible implications of this image; first, that the virginal women are a deception in themselves, or, that the act of touching or

discovering them contaminates their purity. This disillusionment leads the speaker to hate the harsh reality of life. Although he feels deceived and longs for a pure love, the narrator admits that he seeks the same pleasure that he claims to find repellant:

¿Por qué este inquieto abrasador deseo?

¿Por qué este sentimiento extraño y vago

que yo mismo conozco un devaneo,

y busco aún su seductor halago?

.....

¿Por qué en pos de fantásticas mujeres

necio tal vez mi corazón delira ...? (vv 45-48, 51-52)

As Landeira notes, the narrator (who possibly represents the poet) portrays himself as a prisoner of his desires, a victim who “falls into the morass of eroticism and suffocating sensuality” (195). In his study of misogyny in the poetry of Espronceda, John Beverley cites Tom’s Lewis’s commentary on this poem and its implications for male-female relationships in Espronceda’s poetry:

[M]en play the role of subjects possessed by an infinite desire for a totally fulfilling relationship; women both literally and symbolically function as objects of limited capacity whose

inevitably disappointing inadequacies are signaled by their

infidelity or their career as prostitutes. (Lewis 43, cited in Beverley 53)

In his attempt to escape from the deception of erotic love, he bids women to leave and not to make him suffer any longer. The poet calls these women “mujeres voluptuosas”, emphasizing that it is their sensuality that causes his crisis. The narrator’s longing for physical pleasure, returning to Landiera’s idea of defraudation, shows him to be a being dominated by base instincts rather than lofty ideals.

The last stanza of the poem returns the attention to Jarifa. The poet calls Jarifa over to him, a contrast from the previous stanza where he orders her away. The speaker recognizes Jarifa’s feelings “tú has sufrido como yo” (vv 109-110). Kirkpatrick notes that this is one of the few occasions in Espronceda’s poetry where a female is portrayed as a subject. She argues that here Jarifa is no longer an “other”, or an alien being; by comparing Jarifa’s suffering to his own, the poet acknowledges that Jarifa also has feelings, she suffers, so therefore she also desires (Kirkpatrick 130). Alvin Sherman disagrees with Beverley’s and Landeira’s judgment of “A Jarifa, en una orgía” as a misogynist poem. Sherman shares Kirkpatrick’s view that “A Jarifa” is the best example of the poet’s identification with the female subject. Sherman sees Jarifa as “a metonymy of the Romantic’s struggle for acceptance; she is the narrator’s constant reminder of his own marginalization” (119). Sherman proposes that when the narrator rejects Jarifa, what he is really rejecting is his own marginalization.

Sherman also claims that within the context of the work, the narrator's criticism of Jarifa reflects his masculine frustration with "the destiny of the female gender (and Espronceda's feminine, marginalized self) within the confines of a patriarchal society" (119). Sherman sees Espronceda's treatment of female subjects as part of the creation of an androgynous subject; the absorption of the feminine as part of the Romantic search for wholeness (113).

Although Kirkpatrick makes a valid point in noting the possibility of female subjectivity at the end of the poem, the poet still takes an ambivalent stance towards Jarifa's subjectivity. Jarifa is only recognized as a subject in so that she reflects or shares the feelings of the poet. Her subjectivity is by no means independent from that of the male subject. While Sherman argues that the feminine absorption into the masculine is not misogynistic, it still denies the female an independent subjectivity. In this "absorption", the female is still merely a reflection or a compliment of the male; the female used as a means to complete the male subject. Although Sherman sees this as androgyny, it gives priority to the construction of the male subject over that of the female.

### Chapter 3

#### The Projection of Romantic Vision in *El estudiante de Salamanca*

*El estudiante de Salamanca* also demonstrates an ambivalent treatment of the female subject. As with “A Jarifa”, the possibility of female subjectivity is raised, only to be ultimately rejected in favor of an image of the female as a projection of male desires. *El estudiante de Salamanca* is Espronceda’s version of the Don Juan legend. The protagonist, Don Félix de Montemar is the titular student of Salamanca, a young, arrogant, unholy man. Early in the poem he is characterized as a *burlador de mujeres*:

Corazón gastado, mofa  
de la mujer que corteja,  
y hoy despreciándola, deja  
la que ayer se le rindió (vv 108-111)

The concept of el burlador is essential to the Don Juan archetype. A burlador seduces women and then leaves them, destroying their honor, and symbolically destroying the woman as well. A woman’s honor was directly linked to her virginity, and if that was lost outside of marriage her reputation was irrevocably ruined. The Don Juan character robs women of their most important social asset for sport; he is the misogynist *par excellence*.

The female protagonist, Elvira, experiences two distinct and contrasting characterizations in the poem. In Part One, Elvira is portrayed as a pure, angelical woman:

Bella y más pura que el azul del cielo,  
con dulces ojos lánguidos y hermosos  
donde acaso el amor brilló entre el velo  
del pudor que los cubre candorosos;  
tímida estrella que refleja al suelo  
rayos de luz brillantes y dudosos,  
ángel puro de amor que amor inspira  
fue la inocente y desdichada Elvira. (vv 140-147)

Elvira's identity centers on her virginity. She is beautiful because she is pure, and her purity inspires love. Elvira's innocence leads her to naively fall in love with Don Félix. Believing that Don Félix loves her, she succumbs to his seduction and loses her virginity. Espronceda describes Elvira's feelings as a union of her body and her heart: "Cuando sus labios con sus labios sella...dulce lo mira, extática lo adora" (vv 247, 250).

Although Elvira loves Don Félix, the seduction begins to change her. By surrendering herself to physical love, she becomes vulnerable to corruption:

cuando al placer su corazón se abría  
como al rayo del sol rosa temprana,  
del fingido amador que la mentía  
la miel falaz de sus labios mana  
bebe en su ardiente sed, el pecho ajeno  
de que oculta en la miel hierva el veneno. (vv 248-253)

Don Félix's false love and deception are poisonous to Elvira. Espronceda highlights that Elvira's suffering results from naively thinking that physical love would be long lasting:

dulces caricias, lánguidos abrazos,  
placeres, ¡ay!, que duran un instante,  
que habrán de ser eternos imagina  
la triste Elvira en su ilusión divina. (vv 160-163)

As with "A Jarifa" physical love is fleeting and leads only to disillusionment.

In Part Two of the poem, Espronceda describes the Elvira distraught and driven to madness over her lost love:

Blanco es su vestido, ondea  
suelto el cabello a la espalda;  
.....  
una lágrima sus ojos  
brotan acaso y abrasa  
  
su mejilla; es una ola  
del mar que en fiera borrasca  
el viento de las pasiones  
ha alborotado en su alma. (vv 216 –217,226-231)

Despite having been seduced, Espronceda describes her dressed in white, and still portrays her as a beautiful creature. There is a great deal of sympathy in Espronceda's portrait of the suffering Elvira; she is not shown to be evil or vile,

but rather is portrayed as a woman full of love who is slowly consumed by her madness and a broken heart. Nor, in this section, is she shown as a damned creature, the poet calls her “Amada del Señor” and “flor venturosa”.

Before her death, Elvira writes a letter to Don Félix, telling him that she is about to die. Elvira’s letter has a self-deprecating tone; she begins by asking forgiveness if the letter should annoy him. Elvira does not blame Don Félix for seducing her, nor does she make any demands of him: “Adiós: ni amor ni pasión te pido... / Oye y perdona si al dejar el mundo / arranca un ¡ay! su angustia al moribundo” (vv 376-378). Elvira expresses no regrets about their relationship, “Yo las bendigo, sí, felices horas” (v 387) and only laments having lost the love of Don Félix. The letter demonstrates Elvira’s submissive position in her relationship with Montemar; she considers him to be the superior, dominant force, even to the point that she feels compelled to ask forgiveness from Montemar, the man guilty of her mental illness and death.

Elvira’s death is peaceful; at the moment of her death a name escapes from her lips, which the reader supposes as Montemar’s. Espronceda uses nature imagery to convey the sense of sadness surrounding Elvira’s death: “...Tristes flores / brota la tierra en torno de su losa; / el céfiro lamenta sus amores” (vv 428-430). At the end of Part Two, Espronceda describes a melancholy but picturesque scene at Elvira’s tomb: “y allá en la tarde, cuando el sol declina / baña su tumba en paz su ultimo rayo” (vv 433-444).

Part Three of the poem, which is structured like a play, focuses on Don Félix after the death of Elvira. Montemar demonstrates a severely misogynistic

attitude towards the deceased Elvira. The scene opens with Montemar at a table playing cards with other men, and he bets Elvira's portrait in an attempt to win money. Elvira's portrait and her death mean nothing to Don Félix. When Elvira's brother, Don Diego, arrives and accuses Don Félix of her death, he sarcastically remarks "¡Quizás una calentura!". Don Félix shows no concern over Elvira's death, nor does he recognize his culpability:

Don Diego,  
mi delito no es gran cosa,  
Era vuestra hermana Hermosa,  
la vi, me amó, creció el juego,  
se murió, no es culpa mía;  
y admiro vuestro candor,  
que no se mueren de amor  
las mujeres hoy en día. (vv 673-680)

Don Félix completely dismisses Elvira's tragedy; to him, Elvira was simply an object, a beautiful woman that he saw and "played" with. By sarcastically rejecting the notion that women can die of love, Don Félix refuses to recognize Elvira's suffering. By denying her feelings, Don Félix denies Elvira's subjectivity.

Don Diego, infuriated with Montemar, challenges him to a duel. As Part Four begins, Don Félix kills Elvira's brother, and sets out into the dark streets of Salamanca. As he walks alone, he hears a sigh and feels breath against his face; he asks if someone is there, and suddenly before him appears a "fatídica figura /

envuelta en blancas ropas” (vv 719-720). Curious, Montemar decides to follow and call to her:

>>En vano dueña es callar  
ni hacerme señas que no:  
he resuelto que sí yo,  
y os tengo que acompañar,

>>y he de saber dónde vais  
y si sois hermosa o fea,  
quién sois y cómo os llamáis,

Y aun cuando imposible sea (vv 797-804)

Montemar expresses the dominance of his will over that of the mysterious woman; he will follow her no matter what she says and will not stop until he finds out who she is. In this way Montemar demonstrates his titanistic nature and the Romantic male subject's desire to know what is forbidden to him. In the following stanza, Espronceda adds another element to Montemar's desire to know the mysterious woman:

>>y fuerais vos Satanás  
con sus llamas y sus cuernos,  
hasta en los mismos infiernos,  
voz adelante y yo detrás (vv 805 – 808)

This stanza reflects a change in Montemar's attitude; he is not merely interested in following a potential lover, but he also wants to discover her identity, whatever it may be.

Montemar continues to follow the mysterious figure. When she finally speaks, she warns Montemar not to follow her: "Hay riesgo en seguirme" (v 915). The woman in white tells Montemar that he is offending God. Montemar ignores her warnings, and feels even more attracted to her:

-<<Siento me enamoro más vuestro despego,  
y si Dios se enoja, pardiez que hará mal:  
veáme en vuestros brazos y máteme luego>>(vv 919-921)

Montemar's defiance of God's wrath reflects the titantistic aspect of the male Romantic subject. Montemar embodies the idea of the Promethean transgressor, the mortal who chooses to defy the gods to obtain the object of desire. The female, the figure in white, is the object of desire, and thus is a used means of creating the male subject.

While still following the woman, Montemar sees a funeral procession. To his shock, he sees two men being sent to their graves; one is Don Diego, and the other is Montemar himself. He frantically asks who is being buried, and a man replies "Al estudiante endiablado / don Félix de Montemar (vv 1123-1124). Montemar, refusing to believe that he is dead, turns to the woman in white and suggests that they go to her home because of the late hour. The woman responds that it is indeed too late, and gives him an even stronger warning:

-<<Cada paso que avanzáis  
lo adelantáis a la muerte,  
don Félix. ¿Y no tembláis,  
y el corazón no os advierte  
que a la muerte camináis?>> (vv 1160-1164)

Ignoring her warnings of death, don Félix orders her to continue walking ahead. The woman stops at an enormous door; it opens seemingly by itself, and the woman and Montemar enter. They appear to have entered a cemetery; there are urns, broken columns, and statues. The atmosphere is mysterious and forboding: “Todo vago, quimérico y sombrío / ... / ...un silencio aterrador y frío” (vv 1221, 1225). As they make their way through this otherworldly place, the descriptions of the woman in white portray her as a ghostly, ethereal creature:

Que allá su blanca misteriosa guía  
de la alma dicha la ilusión parece  
que ora acaricia la esperanza impía  
ora al tocarla ya se desvanece;  
blanca, flotante nube que en la umbría,  
su airosa ropa, desplegada al viento,  
semeja en su callado movimiento;  
.....  
Y ágil, veloz, aérea y vaporosa,  
que apenas toca con los pies el suelo,

cruza aquella morada tenebrosa  
la mágica visión del blanco velo  
imagen fiel de la ilusión dichosa  
que acaso el hombre encontrará en el cielo,  
pensamiento sin formula y sin nombre,  
que hace rezar y blasfemar al hombre. (v 1285-1292, 13010- 1307)

Here the woman in white begins to appear as a supernatural being; her appearance suggests both a phantom (“apenas toca con los pies el suelo”) and an angel (“la ilusión dichosa / que acaso el hombre encontrará en el cielo”). This dualistic nature of the woman in white is emphasized by her power to make men both pray and blaspheme.

When Montemar makes his final request to the woman to make herself down, a mysterious and menacing funeral procession begins, which culminates in a gathering of ghosts that proclaim Montemar to be the husband of the woman in white. Finally, the face of the woman is revealed to be a cadaver:

Y ella entonces gritó:<<¡Mi esposo>> Y era  
--¡desengaño fatal, triste verdad!—  
una sórdida, horrible calavera,  
la blanca dama del gallardo andar... (vv 1518-1521)

Montemar finds himself part of a macabre wedding scene; don Diego, Elvira’s murdered brother appears, and reveals that his skeletal bride is doña Elvira. Don Félix, trying to make light of the situation, makes a comical remark about doña Elvira’s appearance: “Su faz no es por cierto ni amable ni hermosa,” (v 1536).

Doña Elvira then embraces her new husband, a grotesque mockery of physical love:

El cariado, lívido esqueleto,  
los fríos, largos y asquerosos brazos  
le enreda en tanto en apretados lazos,  
y ávido le acaricia en su ansiedad;  
y con su boca a Montemar, y a su mejilla  
la árida, descarnada y amarilla  
junta y refriega repugnante faz. (vv 1554-1561)

Throughout this section of the poem Espronceda emphasizes Elvira's horrible appearance; instead of the beautiful young woman of Part One, Espronceda presents a rotted, disgusting corpse. Carlos Feal notes that this Elvira is "poseída de una sensualidad frenética" (19) and represents the height of female corruption. Elvira's kiss is literally a kiss of death; once Elvira embraces Montemar, the two are united forever in death:

>>Y en mutuos abrazos unidos,  
y en blando y eterno reposo  
la esposa enlazada al esposo  
por siempre descansen en paz;  
y en fúnebre luz ilumine  
sus bodas fatídica tea,  
les brinde deleites y sea  
la tumba su lecho nupcial.>> (vv 1594-1601)

The marriage between Montemar and Elvira seals his damnation. The last line of the stanza also makes an ironic connection between sexuality and death; the marital bed, traditionally a symbol of new life, is here portrayed as a tomb.

Elvira is one of the most ambiguous female subjects in Espronceda's poetry. In the first part of the poem, her characterization closely reflects the *ángel del hogar*, paradigm. She is described as pure and angelic, but unlike the typical *ángel del hogar*, Espronceda portrays Elvira with a strong physical presence. Espronceda emphasizes Elvira's lips, breasts, and cheeks, giving her character a sensuality that is usually absent from depictions of angelic women. Elvira falls from grace once she gives in to don Félix's seduction, and her death and madness can be seen as a punishment for losing her honor. As we saw earlier, Espronceda's depiction of the aftermath of the seduction treats Elvira kindly; she is not shown as evil, and her suffering is portrayed with sympathy. By recognizing her suffering, Elvira is granted a real subjectivity.

Beverley views the seduction of a virgin as related to the male Romantic subject's identity and search for the sublime. Beverley quotes Kant's assertion that the sublime is reached by achieving inner satisfaction from the contemplation of an exterior object; that satisfaction occurs when man is aware that he is superior to the object contemplated (57). In the case of a seduction, the sublime is achieved when the female subject is subordinated. Beverley contends that Espronceda demonstrates an ambivalent attitude towards female sexuality: "Espronceda desires the woman as virgin (pure, ethereal, soft, bland, etc.). The problem is that he also wants to make love to her as a woman, and [...]"

she responds in kind (57-58). By freely responding to the male's attentions, the female thus avoids subordination and ruins the male's chances of reaching the sublime. In this manner the female "castrates", or takes power away from the male (Beverley 58). The suffering and death of Elvira can be seen as a punishment for having denied the male subject his experience of the sublime.

In the fourth part of the poem, we see Elvira transformed into two different manifestations. The first manifestation is the woman in white, who attracts don Félix and compels him to follow her. In the beginning of this section the identity of the woman is not known, and she exudes mystery. The second incarnation of the deceased Elvira is a *mujer demoníaca*, a damned specter that leads Montemar to his death. Several critics see this as a vindication for Elvira. Donald Schurlknight comments that Elvira does not fit in to the "patriarchal socialization of her gender" (21), because she does not save don Félix from damnation, like doña Inés saved don Juan Tenorio.

Sherman sees *El estudiante de Salamanca* as a work that shows the female rebellion against male domination. Sherman proposes that Espronceda and Montemar have two different attitudes towards Elvira; he believes that Espronceda, by clothing the skeletal Elvira in white, treats her as a pure subject, and that it is Montemar, and not Espronceda, that insists on Elvira's evilness. Sherman concludes that by damning Montemar, Espronceda is criticizing his misogyny, rather than Elvira's loss of purity (118).

These readings seem to view *El estudiante de Salamanca* in terms of its similarities / differences to Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*. While both works share

the same premise, Zorrilla's work is a traditionalist, conservative Romantic work (Schuriknight goes so far as to claim that Zorrilla's work is not truly Romantic ("Zorrilla" 105)) that ends with the message that love redeems all. Espronceda's work is more subversive, and in the end has very little to do with love. They also assume that the demonic Elvira is the same as the angelic Elvira of the first part of the poem. In the first part of the poem, Espronceda gives no indication that Elvira will become an evil "angel of death". The sympathetic portrayal of her peaceful death, where she is an "Amada de Dios", seems to contradict the creature that she becomes in end of the poem. The demonic Elvira is so far removed from the original Elvira that it would seem that they are not the same person.

According to Pedro Salinas's reading of the poem. Montemar first begins to follow Elvira because "su destino de enamorado le manda a seguirla, descubrirla, conquistarla" (150). Seducing and conquering women is part of Montemar's identity. However, Montemar's purpose begins to change as he continues to follow the woman; he no longer follows a woman, but rather "un misterio, a un ser problemático y secreto" (Salinas 150). Montemar's desire to know the woman is not a sexual desire, but rather is "el romántico anhelo del alma ante el mundo y ante su misterio, el anhelo por descifrar el secreto de la realidad" (150). In his search, Montemar represents the Romantic man, who rebels against God to discover the secrets of life (Salinas 151). Elvira is not an actual woman, but is the embodiment of the mysteries of life that the Romantic

man seeks out. Montemar's dies because once he discovers the "Truth", which is not an ideal but a nightmare, the only thing that remains is death (Salinas 153).

Considering Salinas's interpretation, the ghostly Elvira is no longer a subject, but a projection of the Romantic male's desires. While the Elvira of the beginning of the poem presented the possibility of a fully rounded female subject, but her transformation into a demon rejects Elvira's previous characterization. Elvira becomes an idea, a vehicle for Espronceda's exploration of the Romantic male subject. Instead of a feminist revenge fantasy, Elvira is used as a feminine representation of death and destruction.

## Chapter 4

### The Degradation of the Ideal Female in *Canto a Teresa*

“Canto a Teresa” (1840), one of the most personal of Espronceda’s poems, examines how the sin of a once perfect woman leads to her disgrace and death. “Canto a Teresa” is the second canto of the long poem *El diablo mundo*. The poem tells the story of Adán (Adam) and his destiny in a diabolic world. John H.R. Polt has identified two themes in the poem: the encounter with evil, whose protagonist is Adán, and the search for meaning of good and evil, whose protagonist is the Poet” (Polt, no pag.). “Canto a Teresa” is seen as a digression of the main poem, Espronceda himself included a footnote that calls the canto a “desahogo del corazón” and instructs that the reader may skip this canto if he or she wishes. Critics have historically followed Espronceda’s instructions and have treated “Canto a Teresa” as a separate entity from the rest of *El diablo mundo*. Polt contends that “Canto a Teresa” is an ironic digression (a technique borrowed from Byron) and has several thematic links with the rest of the poem. Most notably, Polt sees a connection between Adán’s suffering and disillusionment with his love for Salada and the poet’s own despair over Teresa. “Canto a Teresa” contains the same conflicting images of woman as *El estudiante de Salamanca*: Espronceda portrays Teresa as both an ideal angelic woman and a corrupted demon.

As stated earlier, Kirkpatrick notes that the subjectivity of *Canto a Teresa* is clearly male. Given the autobiographical nature of the poem, the “yo” who narrates the poem is considered to be Espronceda himself (Sebold 348). The canto begins with the poet lamenting a love lost: “¿Por qué volvéis a la memoria mía, / tristes recuerdos del placer perdido [...]?” (vv1500-1501). Espronceda reminisces about the days of love and adventure in his youth, and regrets that they are seemingly gone forever. Espronceda idealizes his younger self, full of ideals and dreams:

Yo amaba todo: un noble sentimiento  
exaltaba mi ánimo, y sentía  
en mi pecho un secreto movimiento,  
de grandes hechos generoso guía.  
La libertad con su inmortal aliento,  
santa diosa, mi espíritu encendía,  
contino imaginando en mi fe pura  
sueños de gloria al mundo y de ventura. (vv 1540-1547)

At the height of his idealism, he meets a woman, “la mujer y la voz de su dulzura / que inspira al alma celestial ternura” (vv 1570-1571). Russell Sebold notes that Espronceda presents this ideal woman with imagery from chivalry novels: “del gótico castillo” (v. 1558) “antiguo torreón” (v. 1559) “¡ay!, arrancada de sus patrios lares / joven cautiva” (vv 1561-1562) (Sebold 349). Sebold also mentions the influence of mystical poets in the following description of Teresa:

Hay una voz secreta, un dulce canto

que el alma sólo recogida entiende,  
un sentimiento misterioso y santo  
que del barro al espíritu desprende;  
agreste, vago y solitario encanto  
que en inefable amor el alma enciende,  
volando tras la imagen peregrina  
el corazón de su ilusión divina. (v.1580-1587)

According to Sebold, “[a]mar la era como participar en la sublime conversación de los místicos con Dios, que levanta a sus interlocutores humanos hacia sí” (349). Espronceda echoes chivalry and mystical literature to characterize Teresa as an object of adoration.

In the next stanza, Espronceda provides an autobiographical context to the poem. He states “Yo, desterrado en extranjera playa [...] oír pensaba el armonioso acento / de una mujer, al suspirar el viento” (vv1588, 1594-1595). This line refers to Espronceda’s exile in Portugal and London, where his relationship with Teresa developed. The following stanzas describe Teresa as the perfect woman:

¡Una mujer! Deslízase en el cielo  
allá en la noche desprendida estrella  
si aroma el aire recogió en el suelo,  
es el aroma que le presta ella.  
Blanca es la nube que en callado vuelo  
cruza la esfera y que su planta huella,

y en la tarde la mar olas le ofrece  
de plata y zafir donde se mece.

Espronceda uses the images of stars, light, and clouds to describe Teresa, all bright, beautiful, and pure. Sebold and Kevin Larsen have both noted that the descriptions of Teresa in this part of the poem emphasize her angelic nature. The poet emphasizes that Teresa is beautiful because she is pure, and also because she is a “fantasía” and a “ilusión”. This illusion is what produces love and desire in the poet:

Mujer que amor en su ilusión figura,  
mujer que nada dice a los sentidos,  
ensueño de suavísima ternura,  
eco que regaló nuestros oídos,  
de amor la llama generosa y pura,  
los goces dulces del placer cumplidos  
que engalana la rica fantasía,  
goces que avaro el corazón ansía,  
.....

y esa mujer tan cándida y tan bella  
es mentida ilusión de la esperanza.

Es el alma que vívida destella

su luz al mundo cuando en el se lanza, (v.1604- 1619, 1622-1625)

The Teresa that Espronceda describes is an ideal, a concept of love rather than a real woman (Sebold 350). Sebold gives a reason for the impossible perfection of Teresa; the soul of which the poet speaks is not Teresa's soul, but instead is that of Espronceda: "Espronceda está pintando a su propia alma, o bien la personificación de una aspiración del alma" (351). Espronceda uses Teresa as a symbol of the Romantic soul in love with itself: "El romántico se ama a sí en la mujer" (351). Again, the female object of desire is a reflection of the male subject, as is not recognized as an independent being.

After describing her purity and beauty, Espronceda mourns the fact that Teresa is no longer with him and that time has passed so quickly. But instead of continuing to praise Teresa, Espronceda begins to focus on the corruption that led him to lose her:

Tú fuiste un tiempo un cristalino río,  
manantial de purísima limpieza;  
después torrente de color sombrío  
rompiendo entre peñascos y maleza,  
y estanque en fin de aguas corrompidas,  
entre fétido fango detenidas. (vv. 1694-1699)

At the beginning of this stanza, as well as in previous ones, Espronceda equates Teresa with the beauty and purity of nature, but later she is compared to filth and weeds. Instead of a life giving, clean river, Espronceda associates Teresa with stagnate, diseased waters. She has lost her purity and her beauty and has become ugly and vile.

In the following stanzas, Espronceda describes Teresa's fall from grace, comparing to a fallen star and a fallen angel:

¿Cómo caíste despeñado al suelo  
astro de la mañana luminoso?  
ángel de luz, ¿quién te arrojó del cielo  
a este valle de lágrimas odioso?  
.....

Mas, ¡ay!, que es la mujer ángel caído  
o mujer nada más y lodo inmundo,  
hermoso ser para llorar nacido  
o vivir como autómeta en el mundo;  
sí, que el demonio en el Edén perdido  
abrasara con fuego del profundo  
la primera mujer, y, ¡ay!, aquel fuego  
la herencia ha sido de sus hijos luego. (v. 1700 –1703, 1708- 1715)

The names Espronceda uses for Teresa in these two stanzas are significant; the “ángel de luz” and the “ángel caído” can be seen as references to Lucifer, who is also called the angel of light and the fallen angel. By using these terms, Espronceda demonizes Teresa and makes her a creature of sin. Espronceda also alludes to Eve, “la primera mujer”, whose sin caused the damnation of mankind. By referencing Eve, Espronceda blames Teresa for her corruption and implies that she is naturally inclined to sin (Larsen 69).

While never explicitly stated, given Espronceda and Teresa's history and certain references in the poem, the reader can infer that Teresa's sin is that of adultery. The crime of adultery was considered a sin against God but also against the family and the patriarchal structure of society. Espronceda emphasizes the seriousness of her discretion by mentioning the consequences on her family: "tus hijos, ¡ay!, de ti se avergonzaran, / y hasta el nombre de madre te negaran" (v 1762-1763). For a woman of the nineteenth century, whose primary purpose in life was to be a mother, having your children deny you as their mother was one of the greatest disgraces imaginable. Espronceda reinforces this shame in a later stanza:

tus hijos, ¡ay!, en tu postrer momento  
a otra mujer tal vez acariciando,  
madre tal vez a otra mujer llamando; (v. 1817-1819)

Espronceda imagines Teresa's role being taken by another woman, presumably more deserving, and implies that Teresa will be forgotten by her own children. Sebold notes that Espronceda's use of the adjective "tus" is not accidental; the adjective refers to her children with Bayo, not her daughter with Espronceda. For Sebold this serves to emphasize her sin of adultery (351). It also creates a distance between Espronceda and Teresa's disgrace; by not mentioning the daughter that they share, he avoids incriminating himself in the act that led to Teresa's degradation.

Espronceda describes Teresa's corruption as a spiritual and physical suffering. He describes her "penosa y última agonía" (v 1812) and her once happy life that has given away to "triste soledad" and "aislamiento" (v1815). Later the poet describes the destruction of her body, "tus mismos manos de dolor mordiendo" (1832). In this same stanza, Espronceda claims that her death is a result of her sin: "¡Espantosa expiación de tu pecado!". Teresa's suffering and death are not accidental; Espronceda views them as consequences of her sin. Espronceda finds Teresa at fault for her own death, as well as for her absence that makes the poet suffer (Larsen 69).

Sebold identifies another aspect of the poem that serves as a reproach to Teresa. The epigraph of "Canto a Teresa" is a stanza of the poem *María* (1840), written by his friend Miguel de los Santos Alvarez:

Bueno es el mundo, ¡Bueno! ¡Bueno! ¡Bueno  
como de Dios al fin obra maestra,  
por todas partes de delicias lleno,  
de que Dios ama al hombre Hermosa muestra!  
¡Salga la voz alegre de mi seno  
a celebrar esta vivienda nuestra!  
¡Paz a los hombres! ¡Gloria en las alturas!  
¡Cantad en vuestra jaula, criaturas! (Espronceda 368)

The verse he cites gives little indication of the theme of the poem, but its plot clearly relates to the content of “Canto a Teresa”. The poem relates the story of María, a young and virtuous young woman whose parents die in an accident. The only relative who can take her in is the owner of a brothel. Her relative wants her to start working as a prostitute, but María resists temptation and maintains her purity. Sebold sees this poem as Espronceda’s way of insulting Teresa:

Colocar un fragmento de este relato en el umbral del poema dedicado a Teresa era como decirle a ésta: Mira el ejemplo de esta niña que, rodeada de vicio, fue buena y tú, en cambio, rodeada de la virtud —un marido que te amaba y dos niños que te adoraban— optaste por ser mala. (358)

The inclusion of this poem may also serve as an ironic reference to the theme of “Canto a Teresa” and the poem *El diablo mundo* as a whole. The stanza from María describes the beauty and goodness of the world, but the last line reveals that the world is a cage. Similarly, in the last stanza of *Canto a Teresa*, Espronceda also praises the beauty of the world, only to reveal in the last two lines: “truéquese en risa mi dolor profundo.../ Que haya un cadáver más, ¡qué importa al mundo! (v 1850-1851). Both stanzas treat the beauty of the world as an illusion, a facade that hides suffering and disenchantment.

Teresa’s fall and subsequent death are used as a means to reflect the poet’s struggle between reality and his Romantic ideal. The source of Espronceda’s suffering is not Teresa’s physical death, but that her sinfulness made her imperfect (Landeira 197). Espronceda cannot reconcile the conflicting

concepts he has of women; they are either saints or sinners, but nothing in between. In regards to Teresa, Espronceda's frustration stems from her inability to incarnate the attributes of both the Virgin and Aphrodite (López-Landiera 144) Espronceda's disillusionment comes from the pain of having lost the ideal version of the world and of himself, and the realization that a perfect love and beauty are not attainable (Sebold 360).

There is considerable debate as to whether "Canto a Teresa" is a misogynist work or not. For Sebold, "[e]n el romanticismo mundial no hay obra más hermosa ni a la vez más odiosa que el *Canto a Teresa*" (362). He reserves an even harsher judgment for Espronceda; "Espronceda es el machista más aborrecible que cabe imaginarse" (358). Other critics defend Espronceda and claim this work is an outpouring of emotion from a suffering man:

[Espronceda] es sólo un profeta del desencanto,  
poseedor de un nihilismo pacífico que permite un himno  
al amor perdido tan intenso como el *Canto a Teresa*.

(Martínez Torrón 18)

Commenting on an essay by López-Landiera that faults Espronceda for caring more about his own desires than the death of Teresa, Martínez Torrón offers another opinion in Espronceda's favor:

Por mi parte estoy en desacuerdo con esta opinión, que me parece altera el sentido de la obra de Espronceda, que es un canto amargo por la pérdida de la felicidad amorosa y de la mujer que amó tanto y que tanto le hizo sufrir. (191)

Robert Marrast, author of an extensive biography of Espronceda, sees the poet's portrayal of Teresa as sympathetic:

En el *Canto a Teresa*, incluso después del doloroso final de esta pasión, aquella no es objeto de desprecio sino de real compasión por la infamia en la que poco a poco fue cayendo y de la que era en parte responsable la sociedad. (217).

Martínez Torrón and Marrast see Espronceda as the suffering and empathetic former lover. However, his portrayal of Teresa as a once pure but now vile creature who is being punished for her sins belies any compassionate feelings for her. Also, Espronceda makes no connection between himself and Teresa's sin; he places the blame solely on her. In regards to Espronceda's suffering, there seem to be more verses dedicated to the poet's pain than to Teresa's. The trajectory of the poem clearly follows Espronceda's side of the relationship, from his idealistic youth to meeting Teresa and finally seeing her destruction. There is no mention of the poet making Teresa suffer, only of Teresa wounding Espronceda. Espronceda displaces the focus of a poem supposedly about the suffering of a woman and turns it into a lament for the lost of his own illusions. The female subjectivity of *Canto a Teresa* is pushed aside in favor of the male Romantic's dilemma.

## Conclusion

The female “subjects” in José de Espronceda’s poetry are at best objects or projections of the male Romantic’s desires. Espronceda and his male subjects have a conflicted concept of women. They alternately reject and pursue the female objects of desire, and see them both as heavenly creatures and degenerate sinners. Espronceda prizes an impossible image of feminine perfection, the embodiment of the unattainable Romantic ideal. Since this ideal can never be reached, his frustration results in a bitter backlash against the female. In each of the poems discussed in this paper, Espronceda demonstrates an ambivalent portrayal of female characters that results in their misrepresentation.

In “A Jarifa en una orgía”, Espronceda treats Jarifa as a sexual object worthy of disdain. The sexual woman is portrayed as a deceptive corruptor of men. The poet seeks a perfect woman and an ideal love that is incompatible with the reality that surrounds him. The poet projects his frustrated search for perfection onto Jarifa, and blames her and all women for not fulfilling his dream. When he finally acknowledges Jarifa’s suffering, it is only because the poet sees himself and his own suffering reflected in Jarifa.

Elvira of *El estudiante de Salamanca* also serves as a vehicle of the poet’s Romantic vision and subjectivity. Elvira’s dual portrayal as an angel and demon represents the Romantic ideal and the Truth that only leads to death. The first

incarnation of Elvira presents a woman of flesh and blood who loves, suffers, and presents the possibility for real female subjectivity. However, by transforming her into a demon, Espronceda denies her subjectivity by making Elvira the representative of mystery and object of Montemar's Romantic quest.

*Canto a Teresa* continues Espronceda's use of women to explore the Romantic male's conflict between the ideal and reality. Teresa is beautiful as long as she embodies the ideal of feminine purity, but once she commits a sin she begins to decay and waste away. This poem not a eulogy to Teresa, but rather it is a lament for Espronceda's loss of ideals and youthful dreams.

Espronceda's portrayal of women is less about the women characters themselves and more about the development of male subjectivity. The subjectivity of the female characters is sacrificed in order to create women that are only concepts or reflections of male desire and the male self.

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