

Sexual Fascination and Aesthetics in Benjamín Jarnés: A Reconsideration

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Throughout the history of Western art, (mostly male) artists along with their theorists and critics have interpreted—both in terms of creation and reception—the female nude as a symbol of beauty. Any reader familiar with the works of Spanish avant-garde writer Benjamín Jarnés (1888–1949) knows that male heterosexual fascination with the female body is also a constant in much of his fictional writing. He himself declared that “el imperativo categórico del arte es ... la sensualidad” (“Musas cubanas” 105). And though numerous critics have argued that through his characters’ sexual encounters Jarnés endeavored to create an equal footing for women, this article argues that the objectified and idealized female body in the works of Spain’s most prominent “lyrical” or “intellectual” novelist only serves to perpetuate this tradition by insisting on his female characters’ ultimate value as objects of pleasure and symbols of natural and artistic beauty.¹ Taking a cue from the now well-established feminist revision of the history of the Western artistic nude, this article proposes a reconsideration of Jarnés’s portrayal of women and representations of erotic encounters between men and women in order to demonstrate

1. This actually contradicts conclusions that I have reached in earlier articles about *El profesor inútil* and *La novia del viento*. See note 6.

that, while women do play an important role in distracting male protagonists from an overly cerebral outlook and do try or claim to take personal agency, none of these women truly succeed in emancipating themselves from their traditional function of providing a source of pleasure for male characters and a male author.²

In Jarnés's fictional world, the status of women compromises any possibility of assuming a different role. The exceptions to this jarnesian prototype are portrayed as socially marginal figures who draw negative attention to themselves while never ceasing completely to be objects of curiosity.

As Lynda Nead asserts,

Anyone who examines the history of western art must be struck by the prevalence of images of the female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes 'Art.' The framed image of a female body, hung on the wall of an art gallery, is shorthand for art more generally; it is an icon of western culture, a symbol of civilization and accomplishment. (1)

This same association, which inevitably objectifies and so contains the female body, becomes even more significant in the early twentieth century as "popular culture becomes more visual—and potentially sexualized—with the new

2. With regard to art history, Lynda Nead expounds: "In its articulation of differences, an engaged feminist practice necessarily breaks the boundaries of the high art aesthetic symbolized by the female nude. Unity and wholeness give way to differences and a recognition that the female body is in a continual process of definition and change. And finally the coy play on eroticism and aesthetic experience is replaced by a direct address to the relationship of desire, visual representation and the female body. Rather than 'being framed,' it is a question of who draws the lines, where they are drawn and for whom" (33).

techniques of the movies and mass-produced photographs and newspapers” (Clark 164). The mechanized creation and distribution of images of women, as historian Mary Nash explains, had an inevitable impact on the elaboration of gender identity as “these models of feminine identity become decisive manifestations of informal social control and help channel women into historically constructed gendered relationships” (26).

Benjamín Jarnés, as writer of fiction, frequent chronicler of social trends and critic of the cultural production of his day, wrote frequently about themes as varied as the myths of the ancient Greeks, the operas of Richard Wagner and Betty Boop and Mickey Mouse and so was familiar with both the historical and the more contemporary and seemingly endless imagery of women created for consumption by men. In fact, as Víctor Fuentes argues, this is perhaps the most notable element of his work; “La concepción del mundo que informa la obra de Jarnés es eminentemente sensualista, vitalista; se estructura sobre la sensualidad, con énfasis en su función congnotiva, el deseo y el placer” (“Dimensión” 241). Fuentes further qualifies Jarnés’s preoccupation with the erotic, stating that “el tema del erotismo—rebajado en los años en que escribe, a las lindes de la pornografía por los cultivadores de la llamada novela ‘erótica’ adquiere una dignidad artística y humana desconocidas en nuestras letras” (251). In a later article on the same theme, Fuentes continues to see in the works of Jarnés a “sexualización de los objetos y la representación fantasmática inherente a la sexualidad” (“Metaficción” 73) but considers the author a forerunner of later writers who establish “una relación entre placer y escritura y celebran el erotismo y el descubrimiento del cuerpo” (73) that culminates when “el placer erótico se

funde con el placer del texto” (74). Rather than just being about sexual attraction between men and women, Jarnés also argues that these relationships are the basis not only for the creation of life, but also artistic creativity. He shows through his reformulation of the medieval legend of *Viviana y Merlín*, that the union of the two characters “es un producto claro y limpio del alambique espiritual, con sabor a toda la fábrica humana: sexo, corazón y mente” (229).

Given the roles accorded to both men and women in his works, several critics have argued that Jarnés has elevated the status of women, fictional and real, to a more equal footing with men. Fuentes, for example, sees that “La promoción de la mujer que tanto impulso gana en nuestro país en los años veinte, tiene máxima expresión literaria en la obra de de nuestro autor. Sus libros, dirigidos tanto a lectora como lector, propagan el principio de la igualdad de los sexos” (“Dimensión” 246). In “The Role of the Sensual in the Art of Benjamín Jarnés,” Marion W. O’Neill concludes that “Jarnés urges men to consider the erotic with a new perspective in order to define a more complex, vital relationship between themselves and the feminine—and further, between themselves and all physical reality” (262). Francisco Solguero notes in his edition of *El aprendiz de brujo* that Jarnés is “el escritor vanguardista que más y mejor ha sabido dibujar el universo femenino en sus obras: mujeres modernas, poseedoras de una gran sensibilidad, que encarnan en pleno siglo XX el mundo de la mitología clásica, bíblica o literaria, recreándolo en situaciones actuales” (117n11).

Other critics, however, have argued that Jarnés’s representations of women were fetichized, and so quite in line with the prevailing aesthetic misogyny of the Avant-Garde. In an analysis of Jarnés’s short story “Androméda,” Juli Highfill

correctly concludes that the narrative fails to elevate women beyond their status as sexual objects, but her study does not consider the full consequences of the text's later incorporation into the novel *La novia del viento*.³ Roberta Johnson postulates that Jarnés was well aware of the psychological meaning of the proliferation of images of women for men, but laments the lack of any exploration of “el efecto que estas imágenes tenían en la mujer de la época, pero quizás eso sería ya pedir demasiado” (109). But Johnson's argument, while similar to the ones offered here, also does not provide enough evidence from the corpus of Jarnés's work to justify its conclusions.

While the present article argues for a reconsideration of the role of women in the works of Jarnés, one cannot categorize his female characters. Although these fictional constructs, like their iconic counterparts in the visual arts, are “constantly subjected to the judgmental gaze” and “caught in a perpetual cycle of judgment and categorization” (Nead 81), they are also “generally stronger personalities than their males who through persistence and innate charm seduce the men physically and/or spiritually” (Bernstein 139). In her early book-length study of Jarnés's work, Emilia de Zuleta views jarnésian women “más allá de convenciones familiares y sociales, casi siempre en pugna con ellas” (30). Zuleta observes the “mujer auroral, toda vehemencia, luz y estímulo” who is “lectora voraz y atenta, inteligente gozadora de las artes plásticas, la música el teatro, el cine. Ama la vida libre, a su entero arbitrio, la naturaleza y, a veces, los viajes, la velocidad y los deportes” (30).

In spite of this well-rounded characterization, a foundational dialectic permeates the portrayal of women. José Carlos

3. See my “From ‘Andrómeda’ to *La novia del viento*” for a fuller critique of Higfill's analysis.

Mainer discerns “una f emina ideal, s mbolo de la vitalidad frente al exceso intelectual al que preocupa el var n, alegre compa era y, a la par, su tentaci n permanente” (40). In short, women balance the excessive rationalism of men with their vital and innate sensuousness, but it is not surprising that the portrayal of female characters as simple objects of heterosexual fascination abound. In *El profesor in til* (1926), the narrator presents a fragmented representation of a library full of women: “Nucas, brazos, gargantas, senos semivelados o desnudos” (189). This objectification, of course, impedes the nameless and useless professor from engaging respectfully with women. “Yo siempre hab a so ado una novia as  ... Tambi n la quise alegre, muy d cil” (182). He believes that woman is at her best: “anterior a las impertinencias de su charla, a la necesidad de sus caprichos” (207). Through the veiled discourse of art history, Julio Aznar, the protagonist of Jarn s’s 1927 *El convidado de papel*, is similarly distracted by the “fascinador problema pl stico que es todo cuerpo desconocido de hembra” (109). In spite of confrontations with women who try to nudge him beyond a merely contemplative state, Julio’s view of women evolves little as he reappears in later works. In *Paula y Paulita*, published in 1929, he says of the younger of the mother-daughter pair that gives name to the novel, “De ella s lo veo ahora su belleza epid mica. Y querr a detener aqu  mi examen. ... Que Paulita no fuese m s que hermosa, un delicioso ejemplar en quien detener mis ojos. No una mujer en quien pensar” (49). Julio sustains this logic in *T ntalo* (1935), insisting that “el pensamiento no debe ser funci n de la mujer lozana, sino de la raqu tica” (108), and even as late as in the 1940 *La novia del viento*, dreams of “la mujer d cil, sumisa, individuo m s d bil, que no aspira a llegar a la plena regi n de las ideas” (78).

While Juli Highfill refers specifically to “Andrómeda” in isolation rather than considering it as a part of *La novia del viento*, her view of the representation of the female body as “a dumping ground, for everything desired, feared and loathed by Man” (71), certainly relates to any of Jarnés’s male characters. And while heterosexual male admiration of that body is an attempt to derive pleasure and contain inherently male sexual insecurities simultaneously, “the notion of the gaze has important links with men’s control of objects through ownership of capital” (King 136).⁴ The objectified, non-reflexive woman that Jarnés’s fictional alter ego often idealizes throughout his novelistic works is essentially one more commodity for, and of, the masses, a twentieth-century “muñeca mecánica” (Jarnés, *Aprendiz* 331) that the author takes to an extreme in his 1929 *Locura y muerte de nadie*. Protagonist Juan Sánchez loses hope of finding some distinct identity for himself when he learns that his mother was “¡Del coro! ... ¡De la masa! (151) and characterizes her as “una espéñdida máquina donde tirar docenas de ejemplares de hombres. Un aparato de reproducir” (132).

In his study of Jarnés female characters, César Pérez Gracia perceives many of Jarnés’s female characters as:

seres de carne y hueso, y al mismo tiempo, ... réplicas de la mitología griega o de las páginas bíblicas ... Seres de varios planos, de una memoria plural, con un pie en el presente, en una ciudad de

4. Laura Mulvey elaborates upon the Freudian concept of castration anxiety: “Ultimately, the meaning of women is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (21).

este siglo, y una larga sombra de alusiones a diosas y heroínas del pasado literario. (7)

So more than simply depicting a woman as an object of male sexual desire, Jarnés also partakes, like countless painters who painted Venus, in the age-old tradition of disguising a woman's portrayal as a symbol of beauty by referring to them as mythological beings or insisting on their timelessness. In the 1931 *Escenas junto a la muerte*, the narrator becomes infatuated with a woman he calls "Juno." "¿Por qué llamarla Juno? Es que se reveló con un gesto de soberbia, y para todos los vicios hay una diosa tutelar como hay para todas las virtudes en una santa" (31). In *Viviana y Merlín*, Jarnés's adaptation of an Arthurian legend of seduction, "Viviana es la viborilla de los capiteles románicos, que crece y se refina en artes de fascinar ... Es la temible-y adorable-sierpe de toda serenidad paradisíaca con Adán o con Arturo" (190). Viviana's powers of creativity, beauty and seduction are further related in mythological terms:

Las tres gracias antiguas se nos convierten en dos, y en dos rivales que aspiran, como siempre, a la ideal manzana. ¿Por qué no reducirlas a una sola, a la única gracia verdadera, a la que surge de la armoniosa plenitud de las fuerzas humanas. Esta gracia podría representarla fielmente Viviana. (228)

Further allusions to Viviana appear in the *Eufrosina, o la gracia*, where both she is praised as "símbolo de la gracia" (65) and, conversely, "la gracia es Viviana, que astutamente se burla de la fuerza y se arrodilla en cambio ante la sabiduría" (89). However, in *Eufrosina* Jarnés focuses on the middle of the three Graces to articulate an image of artistic beauty. She is ambiguously both deity and intimate companion who

accordingly reacts to a kiss received from the ubiquitous Julio Aznar: “En nombre de la gracia, del mito *Eufrosina*, te perdono. Y, como mujer, y como amiga, te lo agradezco” (240). Julio acknowledges an ontological uncertainty, reflecting: “una mujer es la fatalidad. Tres juntas pueden ser un símbolo feliz. Hay un mundo real y otro ideal. Pero entre los dos, hay un mundo simbólico...” (166).

As fictional constructs, Jarnés’s female characters are inherently timeless, literally existing outside of time; but timelessness inferring eternity is also often also a common trait since “las mujeres representativas no pueden morir” (*Profesor* 171).⁵ In *Viviana y Merlín*, the female enchantress “no tiene edad ninguna y escoge de cualquier época sus medios de seducción y de transporte” (169). There is some inconherence when Dolly, the principal female character of the 1943 *Venus dinámica*, aspires to this timelessness: “Quisiera ser yo misma, siempre. No la belleza pura, en constante y fría espera de adoraciones, de embelesos, sino la gracia pura, en pleno estremecimiento, ardiente dinamismo aventurero” (264), but she does clearly insist on some form of perpetuity: “No quiere ser delicia inerte, ni para gentes de ayer ni para gentes de hoy. Quiere ser aceite para gentes de todos los tiempos” (264).

Throughout history, representations of the female body, especially artistic nudes, have often been assigned abstract names, such as “Venus” or “Aphrodite,” in order that its creators avoid social and religious condemnation. Giving a real model’s portrayal a mythical name allows the male

5. In addition to timeless women, timelessness itself is characterized as feminine. “La gracia es inmortal. Es mujer cuya belleza resulta mucho más tiempo que la de Ninón las inclemencias del tiempo” (*Eufrosina* 110).

framing and consequent control of the female image in art to continue without judgment well into the twentieth century, but it has the unfortunate consequence of “transforming her from individual into mere symbol determined by male desire” (Lloyd 347). Clearly, Jarnés needed not resort to such rhetorical tricks to highlight male lust, but he nevertheless perpetuated a tradition that, in spite of the best of intentions, diminishes female subjectivity and individuality. By decoupling their artistic portrayal from their immediate surroundings, both in place and time, as Juliana Starr insists, “women are too often deprived of their subjectivity, functioning merely as objects—visual representations of male objectivity” (31). And while Víctor Fuentes sees in the “corporeización de Venus, la divinidad que afirma el poder absoluto de lo erótico sobre el hombre” (“Dimensión” 246) and Rafael Conte argues that Jarnés’s *Viviana* “ilustraba a la perfección su reivindicación de la figura de la mujer y el erotismo como elementos fundamentales para la creación de una literatura y edificación de una vida humana renovadora” (Jarnés, *Viviana* 82), one could counter like Starr that precisely this celebration of female beauty, both natural and artistic, reveals a persistent chauvinism since “by exaggerating her beauty while ignoring her individuality, she is fetichized, and thus reassuring rather than dangerous” (15).

However, this reassuring, or idealized, vision of female characters in the works of Jarnés is rather deceiving, since, as is the case with other kinds of heteroerotic fiction, “although literature dealing with them frequently appears to focus on a woman, the real focus is usually the man who is affected by the woman he describes” (Wolff 208). In simple terms, the image of women created by men with only a masculine experience and perspective says more about the subjects than

their objects: “The ultimate truth of these images of women does not rest in their ability to capture feminine experience or women’s life problems; it inheres, ironically, in their capacity for revealing masculine dilemmas and postulating fantasized solutions to them” (218). Jarnés’s portrayal of women presents this very dynamic of female characters that often serve merely as screens upon which their male counterparts project their sexual desires. J. S. Bernstein wrote of Jarnés’s male protagonists: “All of them are intellectually inclined, and none has an unskilled occupation. But none of their intellectual life is wholly devoted to the pursuit of any single goal” (138). In referring to King Arthur’s court, Merlín is initially identified as “el cerebro del palacio” (*Viviana* 111), and later Viviana calls him “archivo ambulante” (141). Just as she serves a timeless model of femininity, so too does Merlín represent a model that Jarnés also embodied in his male characters. The nameless and “useless professor” who despises his own “faena de pedagogo a domicilio” (*Profesor* 81) would lead to Julio Aznar as an accountant in *Paula and Paulita* and topographer in *La novia del viento*, the philosopher Arturo in *Locura y muerte de nadie* who prefers to work in the insurance industry as a “detective de falsas catástrofes” (55), the “erudito número uno” Zósimo (who has published the three-volume *El sexo y el arte* and the erotic novel *La verdad en el pozo*) and his sidekick, the protagonist and “erudito número dos” Gustavo of *Venus dinámica*.

These educated men presumably enjoy economic stability but are inordinately passive and seem only to be moved to engagement by the presence of a woman; “intellectual abstraction becomes subjugated to ... instinctual desire” (O’Neill 267). Moreover, as Roberta Johnson specifies with regard to *El profesor inútil*, the Jarnesian male protagonist

inordinately exhibits “una conciencia ocupada con su propia existencia que empieza o acaba en la observación de una mujer” (103). The useless professor himself recognizes that “los ojos son los primeros y los últimos reductos del instinto. ... La pasión empieza en la retina, y luego se complace en avanzar a ciegas” (150). Frustrated by the late arrival of his student Ruth, he avows: “Para vengarme quiero ver todo su cuerpo desnudo. Una mano basta para reconstruir toda la suave arquitectura” (110). In *La novia del viento*, Julio’s identified profession as topographer is not arbitrary given his resistance to consider women beyond their surface appearance (Highfill 68). We see that through his portrayals of women and, more significantly through the emphasis on his male characters’ overly voyeuristic sexual fascination, Jarnés accentuates the “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 19) of his female characters who appear as “the leitmotif of erotic spectacle” (19).

The typical male Jarnesian character fantasizes about the women he observes from a distance and with whom he occasionally interacts, but usually they must compel him to intimacy. “¡Eres tonto!” exclaims Ruth to the misogynistic protagonist of *El profesor inútil*. “Tendré que ser yo quien dé la lección. ¡Ven conmigo!” (144). In *El convidado de papel*, Eulalia confronts a passive Julio: “No quieres saber nada. Te contentas con soñar. ... No te das cuenta de que verdaderamente existo; de que tengo una carne y una sangre” (150). So women do come to possess agency in Jarnés’s fiction, but they rarely do so outside of the context of intimate sexual relations. Jarnés acknowledges and even embraces the contemporary female figure—real or fictional—who challenges “women’s restrictions to the home and contested discriminatory practices toward women” (Nash 32), but the fact that “heterosexual female

pleasure became the most important sign of sexual modernity in the early twentieth century” (Clark 174) seems only to reinforce the author’s propensity to idealize, symbolize and so objectify women. “By giving up the armor of the corset, long dress and hat, by moving freely, she increased her sexual desirability” (168–69).”

Nevertheless, the increased public appearance of the more exposed female body, still belies the continuation of restrictions to her full participation in public life. Mary Nash concludes this new image of the “nueva mujer española” ironically “also maintained the core of traditional gender and identity by redefining women as essentially mothers and childbearers, albeit in a new way” (32). This is tellingly born out even in Jarnés’s aesthetic pronouncements—particularly in his works of the “género intermedio.”⁶ “La voluptuosidad anda siempre del brazo con la creación. No se engendra sino voluptuosamente. ... Cuando algo va a nacer, ya podemos dar por supuesto que alguien ha pasado por un trance voluptuoso. Comenzando por la creación artística, acabando por el nacimiento de un niño” (*Esther* 155). Given

6. A number of Jarnés’s works, tellingly ones in which female interlocutors play fundamental roles in the development of ideas, have been characterized as belonging to a “género intermedio,” which present, in his own words “un desfile de ideas, de anécdotas, de tipos, de individuos” (“Baroja” 348). Not surprisingly, several critics have debated exactly which works belong to this category and which characteristics distinguish it from the rest of Jarnés’s corpus of essays and novels given that the former tend to tell stories, the latter are based on clearly evident theses and both are imminently lyrical. There is consensus in the inclusion of *El libro de Esther* and *Eufrosina, o la gracia*, but others have included *Viviana y Merlín* and even works that Jarnés himself categorizes as novels. *Stephan Zweig, Cumbre apagada* is often ignored, but would also seem to match. See Conte, Pego Puigbó and Watts for fuller considerations of these works.

the male point of view of Jarnés's writings, most assuredly the voluptuous trance is male sexual stimulation. The resulting sexual encounters, often initiated by female characters, are not explored and so, in spite of what critics imply, do not explicitly position women on an equal footing with men.⁷ Excessively erudite male characters on their own limit themselves to visual pleasures and lack the needed experience that only women can bring in order to lead a more engaged life. In *El libro de Esther*, one reads that "Conocer is otra cosa. Es el resultado ... quizá de una contemplación que abarca la vida entera" (160–61), but Jarnés's fiction—like the history of the world in which he lived—only accords this contemplation to men. Jarnés himself would later write in *La novia del viento*, "El hombre ... nunca sintió gran deseo de conocer a la mujer ... Es más cómodo hacer de la mujer una propiedad bien amurallada, un coto despóticamente cerrado. Su sabiduría acostumbra a detenerse en el umbral del llamado eterno femenino" (75).

The knowledge to which Jarnés alludes, be it theoretical or carnal, still is the bawdy of men. *Viviana y Merlín* begins simply as the retelling of a medieval legend of seduction, but the conclusion suggests an allegory about the creative process: "¡Gracia y Sabiduría! El conjuro de los dos amantes ha creado un mundo nuevo de formas. Deja inerte a la fuerza bruta, pero empapa de agilidad la fuerza eterna. ¡Viviana y Merlín

7. Again, I too have admittedly reached similar conclusions in the past. The idea that in *El profesor inútil* "Jarnés ... señala el poder que poseen las mujeres para reconstituir la dinámica" ("La mirada" 153), or that "*La novia del viento* reveals masculine weaknesses and feminine strengths through the visual arts (and by means of its own literary art) in order to demonstrate the possibilities of more equitable social and human relations" ("From 'Andrómeda'" 265) does not account for Jarnés's aesthetic pronouncements, especially in his works of the *género intermedio*.

han inventado un arte!” (219). Just as women and men bond for procreation, so too, argues Jarnés, do grace and wisdom combine in artistic creation. Regrettably, however, men always symbolize wisdom and women are never portrayed as anything more than grace. The roles are never reversed as Viviana herself ultimately aspires to be—and achieves—precisely what Merlín hopes for, “un escudero silencioso, capaz de bruñirle el arma de una intuición, de aligerarle todo el peso del abrumador instrumental por quien la ciencia se adquiere” (145).

In several of his late works, Jarnés does present female characters that evolve beyond being mere disciples that help their male counterparts achieve their vital or artistic wholeness. They become professionals or artists or simply engage men in intellectual pursuits as equals. María Pilar Martínez Latre identifies:

Mujeres de tiempos antiguos y modernos ... todas ellas capaces de romper con las convenciones sociales, opuestas a la visión patriarcal de la sociedad, mujeres sin trabas, desinhibidas, que llevan la iniciativa en las relaciones amorosas, que se sienten atraídas por hombres pasivos y tímidos, marcados por sus roles profesionales, pero dispuestos a vivir en la voluptuosidad y el erotismo. (415)

Nevertheless, these women do not achieve the same degree of professional or artistic of Jarnés’s male protagonists.

La novia del viento expands upon Julio Aznar’s brief encounter in “Andrómeda” with “La Bella Carmela, la *genial* creadora de danzas apócrifas de Oriente” (*Novia* 57), by presenting Brunilda, whose strong personality and Germanic name link her explicitly to the nordic mythological Valkyries. Her seriousness of purpose and self confidence are evident: “hay en aquella voz una firmeza, una gravedad, que sorprenden a cualquier aficionado a lo blando, a lo muelle, a todas las

cuales, fin, de la mujer esclava, dócil instrumento. Hay en esta mujer un estilo señorial, no de sierva” (90). She initially confounds Julio, who characterizes her in symbolic terms: “Claro, usted es algo más que una mujer, es un hada omnipotente, es una . . . heroína nibelúngica” (107). An abstract symbol—along with its artistic representation—threatens much less than the actual person that inspires it. But Brunilda’s “actitud viril, decidida” (119) reflects her aspirations of being more than the object of the male gaze.⁸ Brunilda is an artist who organizes an exhibit of female nudes. When Julio asks if she will include a self-portrait, she responds: “No me interesa continuar viviendo como mujer sino como artista” (112), and so personifies “a de-colonization of the female body by women artists and an exploration of female subjectivity and eroticism from the perspective of women” (Nead 65) that her contemporaries are not ready to accept.

In *Constelación de Friné* (1944), published under the pseudonym Julio Aznar, Friné, a hetaera of ancient Greece who, though a prostitute, is a free woman and highly educated and respected for her knowledge and culture as well as her physical beauty. The female protagonist as child “siempre soñó con ser poeta, como Safo, o filósofo, como Aspasia” (51). In order to do so implies that she dominate men, “no sólo por su gracia y hermosura, sino también por su vivaz inteligencia” (51). But while physical attractiveness becomes secondary to intellect as she sets out to conquer Athens, with time “ella sólo ambicionaba dos cosas, oro y poder” (63). By seducing “monarcas, atletas, sacerdotes, filósofos,

8. “It is only by adopting, however covertly, the ‘masculine’ attributes of singlemindedness, concentration, tenaciousness and absorption in ideas and craftsmanship for their own sake, that women have succeeded, and continue to succeed, in the world of art” (Nochlin 169–70).

artistas” (95) she gains the power necessary to become “la ciudadana más rica de Atenas y de su tiempo” (94), but in the process of acquiring this wealth, she succumbs to the same weaknesses as the men. The association of intelligence and creativity, however, makes success without physical seduction impossible for a woman.

It becomes especially ironic that two of Jarnés’s most noteworthy female characters are Mercedes from his 1938 *Su línea de fuego*, and Thalía from his 1942 *Stefan Zweig: Cumbre apagada* precisely since neither of these women is portrayed in a sexual context. Mercedes is a reporter, “inquieta, incapaz de seguir viviendo dos semanas en la misma ciudad, de pensar dos días seguidos en la misma cosa” (*Línea* 83) who visits a military hospital while covering the Spanish Civil War. She asserts: “Ahora mi faena está por encima de todo” (117), even love. This obsession, more admissible as professionalism were she a man, blinds her to the need for attention of her former lover, a paralyzed fighter pilot who commits suicide in the face of her potential success and his inability to continue as a hero:

Unos momentos fue él siguiendo la lectura de aquel libro; en algún instante sintió—le dolió—la grande, la risueña vehemencia de Mercedes al ir forjando aquellas páginas de las cuales ... podría surgir una figura de las letras, la recompensa de muchos aplausos alentadores, la gloria, en fin. (177)

Cumbre apagada revives Thalía, one of the three Graces, who was left in “aquella gaveta de editor mediterráneo, donde me dejaste hace algún tiempo, encerrada en un libro, con Eufrosina y Aglae” (70).⁹ She proclaims: “¡Me

9. Jarnés left the manuscript of *Eufrosina o la gracia* with editor José Janés in Barcelona before leaving Spain in 1939. Janés published the work in 1948 after Jarnés’s return and just before his death.

aburría tanto! En nombre de las tres, vengo a ayudarte... No puedes pasar sin mí” (70). Thalía engages in a detailed, yet fictional, conversation with the narrator, presumably Jarnés himself, and a doctor about the life and works of recently deceased Austrian intellectual Stefan Zweig. She participates meaningfully in the conversation while “tomando notas, subrayando frases, escogiendo fragmentos” (279) but eventually simply disappears when is no longer of use. In spite of her equally informed contributions to the discussion, she is never really considered more than “¡una mujer reducida al papel de ‘cosa’, a vago ensueño o a lascivo juguete!” (297).

Brunilda, Thalía and Mercedes each attempt to achieve some agency through intellectual and creative achievements normally associated with men. “To write, or more generally to represent, is to take power; it is to tell your own stories and draw your own lines, rather than succumb to the tales and images of others” (Nead 82). These characters, however, prove to be more than simple disciples or objects of fascination of men and consequently fail to achieve the status of their male counterparts. Brunilda finds no shortage of female models for her work but must shutter her exhibit when the conservative community reacts unfavorably to the fragmented and uncontextualized nudity. Friné finds the recognition to which she aspires, but only by becoming a prostitute: “En la zona, por decirlo así, intelectual, si no alcanza la estatura de Aspasia, ¡qué pronto logra engarzar sus encantos físicos con el sentido filosófico, al menos rítmico, de los encantadores versos de Homero o de Píndaro!” (*Constelación* 67). Perhaps more than Mercedes’s professional zeal, her inattentiveness to her companion’s suffering prompts him to take his own life. Even though her success is unrelated to his failure, his death, as Pérez Gracia observes, makes Mercedes “la Venus

fracasada ante esa fuerza superior de la guerra y sus heridas incurables” (65–66). Finally, Thalía, who contributes as much as her male counterparts to the discussion on Stephan Zweig, is not portrayed as an object of pleasure and so is not even accorded the same status of existence as her male interlocutors.

In conclusion, we see that while women as images for heterosexual male consumption abound, Jarnés also sees them as essential for the realization of a complete life in which, according to Armando Pego Puigbó, “la educación estética del hombre abraza . . . la doble dimensión de Gracia y Sabiduría, cuya unidad es simbolizada en el abrazo amoroso” (425). But what never becomes evident, in spite of what Pego Puigbó argues, is that “Mujer y hombre se complementan en ambas dimensiones” (425). Just as in the history of Western art, and patriarchy as a whole, Jarnés’s female characters generally symbolize and contribute to the articulation of beauty by the hands of men. And while many critics insightfully highlight the crucial function of his female characters who reveal and undermine the passivity of their male companions and occasionally achieve some protagonism as they aspire to occupy spaces traditionally accorded to men, nevertheless the author’s persistent masculinist conception of artistic and vital fulfillment in terms of heterosexual union prevents the realization of any professional, artistic or intellectual parity.¹⁰

10. In her analysis of “Andrómeda, Juli Highill insightfully asks: “How can Woman stand for Truth, Wisdom, and Knowledge, when through most of history, she was denied access to knowledge? And how can she stand for Art and Creativity, when traditionally, she could not be an Artist?” (70). Toril Moi cynically concludes in her biography of Simone de Beauvoir that “the female intellectual will never be able perfectly to display the cavalier disdain of a dandy: she is doomed to lose out in the game of distinction” (92).

Jarnés aptly summarizes this view in his article “Musas cubanas,” in which he suggests that “la sensualidad es la eterna enemiga de lo trascendente porque lo trascendente es un señor muy envarado, muy ceñudo, que ha renunciado a las pompas y vanidades del mundo, es decir, al mismo mundo” (105). Here he implicitly rejects the possibility that a woman, long the personification of sensuousness, could ever do more than distract a man (“lo trascendente es un señor”) from realizing a noble destiny that is exclusively his.

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