The (Post) Imperialist Rebellion of the Domestic *Femme Fatale* in Galdós's *La de Bringas*

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Abstract: Nineteenth-century Spanish imperial crisis emasculated patriarchal authority and extended to a domestic crisis, facilitating female access to the public sphere. Benito Pérez Galdós presents personifications of traditional masculine ideals who prove inadequate as imperial subjects. Protagonist Rosalía de Bringas's emergence as a cultural, economic and *fatal* subject—effected by French fashion and prostitution—positions her as a new imperial subject. However, her geopolitical split ironically suggests modernization through cultural colonization of Spain, reaffirming Galdós's pessimistic view of Spain's imperial future.

Keywords: domesticity – masculinity – *afrancesamiento* – domestic *femme fatale* – imperialism

Benito Pérez Galdós's works are a significant source material for understanding habits, customs, politics, and gender relations in Spanish society at the end of the nineteenth century. Jo Labanyi states that Galdós was a writer whose works were considered primary examples of the 'national novel' by Restoration critics, which contributed to debate on the creation of the modern nation (2). Through the presentation of the chaotic daily life of the Bringas family in *La de Bringas* (1884) and *Tormento* (1884), Galdós draws many parallels with historical events and ruling structures (Peter Bly 64), such as royals and bourgeoisie, whom he criticizes because of their *afrancesamiento* of Spain.

The state of the Bringas family, including patriarch Francisco's lack of masculine authority and dominance, symbolizes the problem of the Spanish nation and empire in the nineteenth century: loss of hegemony of Spanish masculinity over the colonies expressed through crisis of domesticity and feminine empowerment. The goal of this article is to demonstrate the consequential relationship between crisis of Spanish imperial masculinity and crisis of domesticity in nineteenth-century Spain. I demonstrate this through Rosalía de Bringas's transformation from *ángel del hogar* to *mujer infame* (adulterous woman), or what I term the domestic *femme fatale*, later explained, and new imperial subject—Spain's new (and only remaining) hope for retaining and regaining the status of imperial force after losing almost all overseas colonies now centers on a

woman. As I further discuss, this new imperial subject is dependent on a geopolitical split between Spain and its cultural rival France and the proposed solution is therefore ironic and Galdós's way of expressing the irrecoverability of lost Latin American colonies and imperial power.

The context of the Spanish national project is imperial decline and a national crisis of masculinity that had been deepening since before the Napoleonic period. From early medieval times to colonial conquests, Spain was a country whose national identity and image were represented by excessive bravery and masculinity. These representations were especially praised in the period of Spanish imperialism (fifteenth-sixteenth centuries), when the Spanish empire was at the peak of its power. George Mariscal describes the domination and importance of the masculine gender in Imperial Spain, labeling virility and manliness as highly esteemed virtues in a heroic age of conquest. Women, and all that was feminine, were considered weak and evil, whereas men were considered good and strong. Even women's innate biological characteristics, such as menstrual bleeding, were used as a proof for women's inferiority, and, as Mariscal explains, "this complicated argument by which the female body was constructed as naturally subservient to its male counterpart was transferred to other groups considered defective, especially Jews and Moors" (42). Similarly, Sidney Donnell concludes that "through the notion of inferior blood, the governing Spanish discourse feminized the country's enemies both at home and abroad" (28).

The social position of women in the nineteenth century was difficult, as they were in a lesser position in comparison with men. Emilia Pardo Bazán, in her famous essay "La mujer española" (1890), comments that the difference between sexes was greater in nineteenth-century Spain than it was in ancient Spain, due to unequal rights between men and women:

> Repito que la distancia social entre los dos sexos es hoy mayor que era en la España antigua, porque el hombre ha ganado derechos y franquicias que la mujer no comparte…Cada nueva conquista del hombre en el terreno de las libertades políticas, ahonda el abismo moral que le separa de la mujer y hace el papel de ésta más pasivo y enigmático. Libertad de enseñanza, libertad de cultos, derecho de reunión, sufragio, parlamentarismo, sirven para que media sociedad (la masculina) gane fuerzas y actividades a expensas de la media femenina. (22)

As also commented by Adrian Shubert, women in the nineteenth century couldn't vote nor did they have many employment options. The situation of the married woman was even worse: "[U]pon marriage she automatically lost most of her legal rights and became an appendage of her husband" (32). Shubert further opinionates that, "[a] woman's role was to get married and be a good wife and a good mother. Her realm was the home; beyond was the realm of men. These ideas were so deeply ingrained that even

political progressives and early advocates for improving the position of women adhered to them into the last third of the nineteenth century" (33).

However, the *status quo* of the gender power balance and vision of excessive Spanish masculinity were interrupted in the nineteenth century. This was the epoch of decline of Spanish imperial power and crisis of national identity. The crisis in Spain after 1825 was in large part caused by the loss of all the major colonies (1810-1825, 1898), after which, as commented by José Álvarez Junco, Spain became a third-rate force: "Volvió a la situación periférica en que había estado en épocas remotas, cuando ni siquiera era una monarquía unificada" (502). Due to the growing disparity between Spanish imperialist ideals and the realities of Spain's declining power, Spanish national identity was in crisis and the imperialist national project was collapsing. Hence, the representation of epic Spanish masculinity was in decline, as observed by Pablo Jáuregui and Antonia M. Ruiz-Jiménez:

> The successive military defeats of the Spanish Monarchy produced feelings of incredulity, failure, isolation, decadence and bitterness. This was a collective self-perception full of complexes and self-pity, based not only on an awareness of decline but also on a sense of incredulity in the face of this decadence. This kind of pessimistic discourse rose to the fore after the Disaster of 1898. At a time when 'the possession of colonies was seen as the hallmark of a vigorous nation' (Balfour 1996: 107), and when fashionable theories of social Darwinism ranked nations into superior and inferior 'races', the loss of Spain's last overseas colonies was experienced as a devastating blow to the country's collective self-esteems. (79)

One reason the Spanish empire weakened and why its image was so diminished in comparison to what it used to be in the previous century, was that remaining colonies, although numerous—Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines, Caroline and Mariana island, Ceuta, Melilla, Rio Muni y Fernando Poo—were producing so little capital for the metropolis that the nineteenth century Spanish empire as an economic force was insignificant and far inferior to ascendant empires (Alda Blanco 17).

As commented by Michael Ugarte, the last Spanish attempt at recovering its imperial power was colonization of Northern Africa, where the principal rival was a more powerful France:

> Spain's role in the colonization of northern Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was ambivalent. An empire (Spain) in clear decline was competing with another one (France) beginning to assert its colonial power, particularly in Africa. France, by the end of the nineteenth century, had gotten the upper hand in the grab for Africa's

> bountiful resources, and it had done so through diplomatic maneuvers highly detrimental to Spain. (179)

On the other hand, Spain still identified itself as an empire, despite enormous loss of territories and decline in imperial power; Spain could not let the colonies go. As Akiko Tsuchiya states in the "Introduction" to *Empire's End* (2016), "the end of empire" is a process that occurred over the course of the long nineteenth century and beyond (5). There is no precise date or event (loss of the majority of the Latin American colonies in 1825 or even loss of the last colonies in 1898) that represents the final end of Spanish empire. Blanco comments that the vision of Spain as a modern nation was closely linked to the idea of an empire, even though Spain was presented as a nation without imperial identity on the historical scene of the nineteenth century:

> [E]xiste una desconexión entre la manera en que la narrativa histórica contemporánea, por lo general, representa la España del XIX como nación sin una identidad imperial, y el modo en que la España decimonónica se conceptualizaba a si misma como nación imperial. Podría decirse, entonces, que se ha desvinculado la noción del imperio de la de la nación en la narrativa histórica del siglo XIX, hasta tal punto que el imperio decimonónico ha desaparecido de la historia nacional. Es notable esta desvinculación en cuanto que, como veremos a lo largo de este libro, la clase política y la intelectualidad decimonónica—que forjan la España moderna—conceptualizaron el modo de llevar a cabo el proyecto liberal de construir la nación moderna como inextricablemente ligado a la idea de imperio. (20)

This demonstrates how problematic the concept of the Spanish empire was in the nineteenth century, a condition I denominate "(post) imperial" when talking about Spanish national identity and Rosalía de Bringas's rebellion.

The crisis of Spain's imperial/national identity wasn't only based on loss of territories and power, but also on the geopolitical situation in Europe. Powerful northern empires, notably France and Britain, were building images of their own imperial authority partially through cultural and political colonization of Spain during and after the Napoleonic era. France was the force most responsible for the orientalization of Spain: "[O]ne can see that Spain had already been orientalized by France in the famous dictum (attributed to Alexandre Dumas) that 'Africa begins at the Pyrenees'" (Ugarte 179). Prosper Mérimée's novella *Carmen* (1845), about a Spanish *femme fatale*, built such a French imperialist image of Andalusia as a geographically

European but behaviorally gypsy and ambiently arabesque playground for the Occidental masculine imagination[1].

Notably, *afrancesamiento* was a phenomenon that facilitated subordination and orientalization of Spain by France. Luis Barbastro Gil explains that "afrancesamiento", the influence of France on the customs of daily Spanish life, was a political matter, which evidenced "la fragilidad del sistema político español a comienzos del siglo XIX, la hegemonía política de Francia en el concierto internacional de esta época y en la propia política interior española" (8). Exactly *afrancesamiento* of Spain through customs and fashion was one of the main issues criticized by Galdós in *La de Bringas* and one of the main flaws of his new imperial-national subject centered on a woman.

Galdós employs Rosalía's obsession with luxury, in general, and French fashion, in particular, to draw a parallel with the Bourbons, the royal Spanish family of French descent, and criticize them in *La de Bringas*. As Ricardo Gullón observes, Francisco de Bringas shares his name with the current king, Francisco de Asís de Borbón, and the freedom that Rosalía exerts in her marriage is equivalent to that of Queen Isabella II. Additionally, Bringas's temporary blindness, further explained, is "equivalente a la del rey Francisco, en el piso principal de Palacio, negándose a ver lo ridículo de la situación en que doña Isabel le mantiene" (Gullón 508).

The parallel with the monarchs and their presence in the daily life of the Bringas's family (e.g., The Bringas family lives in the Royal palace, and the Queen gives gifts to Rosalía, some real and some simply imagined) banalize the royals and present them as a source of hypocrisy and falsity in society. At the same time, royals are the source of *afrancesamiento* of the middle bourgeoisie, which slowly colonizes Spain. The royal couple propagates luxury and material values that members of the middle bourgeois class, like Rosalía, try to imitate at any price. This is colonial imitation of imperial (French) fashion that restates the dichotomy colony/empire between Spain and France. The behavior of the royals and its impact on society serve as a pretext for the poetic justice fulfilled through the Glorious Revolution (1868), when Queen Isabela is exiled to France.

[1] The loss of imperial power in the nineteenth century made possible the orientalization of Spain by other European empires, such as France and Britain. As stated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1977), weaker and underdeveloped regions were effeminate and depicted as Orient in the nineteenth century (220). In this period, Spain was presented as weak and underdeveloped in comparison to other progressive European countries and marked as the representation of European exoticism or more precisely Orientalism by foreign authors. This image came from Lord Byron and was ratified by Washington Irving and Victor Hugo, first, and later by Théophile Gautier and Prosper Mérimée (Joseba Gabilondo 23). As explained by Álvarez Junco, "Puesto en términos positivos, orientalismo podía traducirse como belleza, melancolía, ruinas, honor caballeresco, hedonismo o pasiones intensas; pero políticamente, y como comprendían bien los destinatarios de tanto elogio, significaba quedar relegados a la decadencia, e incluso a la barbarie" (200). Similar degeneration reappears in the year 1898. The emasculation of Spain as a term means "la pérdida tanto de fuerza física como de equilibrio o control moral" (Álvarez Junco 217).

According to Dorota Heneghan, another important aspect of Galdós's critique in *La de Bringas* was Spain's struggle with transitioning into modernity. Heneghan comments that Galdós saw Spain's integration into modernity as problematic, in large part due to limitations imposed over women, as he "used the partially developed feminine subjectivity and women's limitations to access the public sphere to express both his dissatisfaction with the incompleteness of Spain's modernization and his desire for a better future" (38). A better future was dependent on letting go of the colonies, ideals of glorious, invincible empire, as well as on change in the realm of gender roles: "[T]he reconfiguration of traditional ideals of femininity and masculinity was a necessary condition for Spain to advance—in a tangible way—with the process of modernization" (Heneghan 6). As I further comment, Galdós portrays examples of changing, non-normative masculinity in his novels, embodied by men who are feminized, weak and politically passive and incompetent.

In my analysis, I mainly focus on *La de Bringas*, but I also discuss *Tormento* to complement the interpretation of the central female protagonist of the former, the fallen angel and "new imperial subject", Rosalía de Bringas. Galdós's critique of domesticity, which is, according to Bridget Aldaraca, the central point of his social critique, is present in both novels, as they demonstrate how rigid laws of domesticity cause feminine rebellion against them (21). At the same time, the focus of my analysis will be Galdós's critique of crisis of Spanish imperial power and hegemony of masculinity, which made possible female rebellion against patriarchy.

Tormento (1884) presents Rosalía at the beginning of her and Francisco's marriage. Its plot is of less significance for my analysis, as the main female protagonist is not Rosalía, but Amparo, the servant in the Bringas household, who is in love with Agustín, Rosalía's rich cousin. Nevertheless, Amparo is an example of the unfair treatment of women under patriarchy, besides Rosalía: "¡En qué condición tan triste estamos las pobres mujeres que no tenemos padres, ni medios de ganar la vida, ni familia que nos ampare, ni seguridad de cosa alguna como no sea de que al fin, al fin, habrá un hoyo para enterrarnos!" (*Tormento* 162).

In *Tormento*, Rosalía's husband, Francisco, is described as an administrative officer thirty years her senior who is "excelente y aun excelentísimo padre de familia" (125). Despite being a good husband and father, Francisco is described as very miserly: "No sabía lo que era una deuda; tenía dos religiones, la de Dios y la del ahorro" (*Tormento* 123). Rosalía is described as a very beautiful, young woman with a peculiar genealogical obsession, which she uses to confirm her aristocratic social status:

> Su flaco era cierta manía nobiliaria, pues, aunque los Pipaones no descendían de Iñigo Arista, el apellido materno de Rosalía, que era Calderón, la autorizaba en cierto modo para construir, aunque sólo fuese con la fantasía, un profundísimo árbol genealógico […] Rosalía Pipaón

> de la Barca. Esto lo pronunciaba dando a su bonita y pequeña nariz una hinchazón enfática. (*Tormento* 125)

With her "noble origin" came the taste for a luxurious life that required an adequate living space, such as a Palace, in which they ended up living: "Para esta señora había dos cosas divinas: el Cielo, o mansión de los elegidos, y lo que en el mundo conocemos con el lacónico sustantivo de Palacio" (*Tormento* 125).

As Elena Delgado explains, starting with *Tormento*, Rosalía perceives her marriage as a cage and her dressing room, "Camón," constitutes the only place where the domestic authority established by Francisco, based on order and frugality, remains subverted (37). She considers a luxurious life to be a right bestowed upon her by her beauty and "aristocratic" origin. However, Francisco is a patriarchal man who rules his family according to the traditional norms of domesticity, which limits his wife to the confines of the ideal of the *ángel del hogar*. Rosalía is aware of these social constraints and norms, as she many times mentions the importance of honor for her and tries to preserve it. As Lou Charnon-Deutsch concludes, "basically she believes that against all odds she can increase both her contacts with the outside world and power in her own household and still maintain her honor" (71).

La de Bringas, published the same year as *Tormento*, again focuses on the middle-class bourgeois Bringas family and Rosalía's obsession with luxury and social class. In many sequences in *La de Bringas,* Rosalía blames her stingy husband for denying her the luxurious life she deserves: "La pobrecita no podía lucir nada, porque su marido… que fuera muy tacaño y que la tuviese sujeta a un mal traer, deslucida y olvidada" (87). Such depiction of her husband foretells the cause of Rosalía's rebellion, which results in his marginalization and, eventually, subordination to his wife.

Galdós describes how Rosalía exceeds domesticity in the turbulent historic period of the Glorious Revolution in *La de Bringas*. To satisfy her needs for expensive and luxurious things, above all dresses and clothing that maintain the appearance of her nobility, Rosalía must hide things that she buys, borrow money, and at the end even prostitute herself. The fact that she operates behind her husband's back and is always in fear of his discovery confirms the irony of her liberation and testifies to still existing limitations of women under patriarchy.

In both works Galdós portrays problematic and non-normative Spanish masculinity in the character of Francisco as well as Manuel Pez in *La de Bringas*, and Don Pedro Polo in *Tormento*. These are not isolated cases in Galdós's novels. As I discuss in continuation, *El amigo Manso* (1882) and *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887) also offer examples of Galdós's critique of Spanish masculinity in crisis.

Don Pedro Polo from *Tormento* both testifies to the crisis and debility of the current Spanish masculinity and serves as an example of imperial nostalgia. Pedro is the cause of the protagonist Amparo's suffering, as he keeps threatening her with secrets from her obscure past. He was once a priest, but he lost his clerical power and function

because of accusations of child molestation, which left him in poverty, sickness and misery.

Don Pedro is the symbol of weakness and loss of power of Spanish masculinity and many times in the novel he dreams of recuperating glorious Spanish masculine strength. Symbols that occur in his dreams are horse, beard, sword—like in the heroic medieval times of Cid and other heroes—and finally names of the great conquerors Hernán Cortés and Napoleon. One of his dreams well represents the decline of Spanish imperial power and its current weakness: "Ya no era aquel desdichado señor, enfermo y triste, sino otro de muy diferente aspecto […] Iba a caballo, tenía barbas en el rostro, en la mano espada […] tenía sospechas de estar conquistando un grandísimo imperio […] ganaba con un puñado de hombres batallas formidables […] A Hernán Cortés y a Napoleón les podría tratar de tú" (*Tormento* 158).

Also, in *Tormento*, the Spanish unacceptance of the loss of and post-imperial desire for the (ex)colonies are expressed through Agustín, Rosalía's young and rich cousin, whom she desires to control because of his wealth. He earns his fortune in Latin America, more precisely Mexico (which was already independent at this time), as he himself proclaims: "A mí me han hecho como soy el trabajo, la soledad, la fiebre, la constancia, los descalabros, el miedo y el arrojo, el caballo y el libro mayor, *la sierra de Monterrey, el río del Norte y la pútrida costa de Matamoros*..." (140, emphasis added).

As further explained in *Tormento*, Agustín's money and gifts are responsible for "spoiling" the protagonist and provoking her lust for luxury. When Rosalía fantasizes about her future with Agustín, she calls him an "animal" who needs to be tamed: "me casaría con este animal…*Yo le desbastaría, yo lo afinaría*" (*Tormento* 150, emphasis added). Blanco reminds us that this "civilizing mission" is "uno de los pilares discursivos de la ideología colonialista" (22). The image of desire and nostalgia for the imperial past when Spain controlled the colonies (Mexico) is enhanced in *Tormento* by Amparo's vision of Latin America as a savage and frightening place, in other words in need of control: "Por nada del mundo iría yo a esas tierras" (163). However, this Spanish "wish for imperialism" now as its subject has a woman who yet, through her colonial imitation of French fashion, contributes to French hegemony and the orientalization of Spain. Further, Rosalía's attempts to control/domesticate Agustín fail, which represents symbolical irrecoverability of the colonies and impossibility of the resolution of the imperial crisis in Spain.

In *La de Bringas*, Francisco is presented as somewhat dull, which is why Rosalía very easily manages to cover up her financial transactions behind his back. Bringas is blind to all of that and even though he is ostensibly a very tough and strict ruler of the house, he has no idea of what is really happening at his home nor in Spain (Virgilio Moya Jiménez 43). He is passive, lacks political orientation and as such is clearly incapable of contributing to the well-being of the nation: "*No era político* Bringas, ni lo había sido nunca, aunque tenía sus ideas, como todo español, por cierto muy moderadas. *No sentía ambición*, y por no tener vicios, ni siquiera fumaba" (*Tormento* 19,

emphasis added). Francisco's metaphorical blindness to both his private and public life is represented by his real, physical blindness that suddenly occurs while he is working on a piece of art:

> -¿En dónde está la ventana, la ventana?
> -Ahí, ahí, ¿no la ves?... -gritó Rosalía, volviéndole hacia la luz.
> -No, no la veo, no te veo, no veo nada... Obscuridad completa, absoluta...
> Todo negro... (*La de Bringas* 122)

Physical blindness completes the image of Francisco's weakness and lack of authority and with that the portrayal of Spanish masculinity in crisis. Tsuchiya reminds us that contemporary theorists, from Foucault to feminist critics who study visual arts, have identified vision with power ("The Construction" 38).

The moment when Bringas goes blind is the pinnacle of Rosalía's power, even though she had already achieved some agency through her fetishistic obsession, which, according to Tsuchiya, was a substitute for her lack of authority ("The Construction" 38). In the moment of his biggest physical weakness, Bringas recognizes that he treats his wife as a slave and consequently gives her more power over money and decisions made in the house: "Mira, hasta ahora no se ha hecho en la casa más voluntad que la mía. Has sido una esclava. De hoy en adelante no se hará más que tu voluntad. El esclavo seré yo" (*La de Bringas* 178).

Through Francisco's recognition of the limited and subordinated position of his wife, *La de Bringas* points out the difficult and absurd situation of every woman enslaved by the ideal of *ángel del hogar*. However, after he begins to recover, Francisco immediately tries to recuperate his "old" control over the household. This testifies to the temporality of both his realization and change of gender relations and the irony of Rosalía's liberation. Besides, the words *esclavo/esclava*, used by Francisco, have imperial/colonial connotation and they are related to Rosalía's formation as an imperial-national subject, who "domesticates" a Spanish man, becomes the head of the family and who is at the same time colonized by French fashion and customs.

The character of Pez, a friend of the Bringas family and Rosalía's future lover, is another example of Spanish problematic masculinity. Heneghan comments that through the image of Pez in *La de Bringas*, as a fashionable dandy-like man who is passive and rather useless both politically and socially, Galdós expresses his critique of current Spanish masculinity and its lack of vitality and initiative (55). The fact that he is a follower and imitator of French fashion effeminates and distances him from the image of normative Spanish masculinity, and complicates modernization of the country due to the lack of an autonomous cultural model:

> With the image of Pez as a partial dandy and the depiction of him as an individual whose compliance with the dictates of normative masculinity remains questionable, Galdós made unambiguous his criticism of bourgeois men's inability to take a full lead in the political system of the post-1868 Spain and, thus, his disillusionment with incompleteness of Spanish modernization. (Heneghan 56)

Pez isn't the only dandy-like male in Galdós's novels. Several of Galdós's male characters are fictional dandies or *señoritos* like Joaquinito Pez in *La desheredada* (1881) and José María Bueno de Guzmán in *Lo prohibido* (1885) (Heneghan 41).

In *El amigo Manso* there is also a critique of Spanish masculinity and its debility through the protagonist Máximo Manso. He is presented as an effeminate, weak and passive man who doesn't participate in the political life of the country. Eva M. Copeland comments on this: "[M]uch of the criticism about the novel characterizes protagonist Máximo Manso as weak, meek, gentle, and passive—words that are not without gender connotations. I argue that Manso is ultimately unable to embody the normative bourgeois masculine role and that this can be seen in his actions throughout the narrative (110)".

Lastly, in *Fortunata y Jacinta* men are presented as either lacking moral values and incapable of taking any responsibility, like protagonist Juan, or as weak, socially awkward and hysterical, like Fortunata's husband Maximiliano, who loses his mind because of her. Biruté Ciplijauskaité points out Galdós's presentation of women who are superior to men, but still unable to escape the control of men over their lives: "Casi todas las mujeres que se mueven a través de esta novela tienen más energía, voluntad, incluso rectitud que los hombres. Pero pocas logran salir adelante. Tanto Fortunata como Jacinta son moralmente superiores a Juanito, pero es él quien rige su destino, deslizándose complacido por encima de todos los obstáculos" (325).

All these representations of problematic masculinity are an expression of Galdós's pessimism and disappointment in the decay of Spanish imperial power. In such an ambient of passive, weak, backward-looking men, it is no surprise that women not only gain space for rebellion against domesticity but are eventually the only remaining, feasible subjects of society and politics in crisis.

This change in the *status quo* of gender relations is best presented in *Tormento* and, above all, *La de Bringas*, through Rosalía and Francisco's marriage. It is a change that reflects the depth of the Spanish national/imperial crisis of the period and loss of hegemony of Spanish imperial masculinity: a once heroic and invincible nation that symbolized masculine strength and bravery was now presented as dependent on women and feminine agency.

Rosalía's acknowledgment of the goodness of her husband in *La de Bringas*—"Ante todo, no se cansaría de repetir que era un *ángel*, un ser de perfección" (87, emphasis added)—evinces Francisco's loss of masculine authority. This confirms the

switch of gender roles in this novel—Francisco is the only real *ángel* in the work, while Rosalía exceeds the domestic ideal and is converted into a domestic *femme fatale,* which I further explain.

Although described as perfect, it is obvious that Francisco does not satisfy Rosalía's needs—the material ones at the first account, but also sexual and emotional ones. The portrayal of a man as an *ángel* who is impotent in the eyes of his wife is his direct feminization and castration, which reflects the social atmosphere of the period in Spain, marked by political/imperial crisis. Francisco's feminization and castration persist throughout the entire novel and culminate with his domestication and Rosalía's masculinization, which positions her as the head of the family who provides for its existence and who takes care of her disabled husband.

In such a marriage, shopping for expensive dresses and exotic materials becomes Rosalía's means of physical and emotional satisfaction. This addiction to fashion is described in *Tormento*: "Fuertemente oprimida dentro de un buen corsé, su cuerpo, ordinariamente flácido y de formas caídas, se transfiguraba también, adquiriendo una tiesura de figurín que era su tormento por unas cuantas horas, pero tormento delicioso, si es permitido decir así" (154). Tsuchiya observes that Rosalía's need to dress up and buy luxurious clothing is related to her repressed sexuality and appetite that could not be satiated and concludes that this repressed sexuality is related to Rosalia's oppression as a woman ("The Construction" 37). Gullón similarly explains that luxury, which was the bourgeois ideal that dominated Rosalía's world, was created in the courts and palaces as an expression of erotic tensions (509).

Besides satisfaction, shopping and change of dresses, hours spent in the "Camón" allow Rosalía to undergo an external metamorphosis that she aspires to internally and to resist "no sólo el orden doméstico establecido por su marido, sino también las limitaciones de su situación social" (Delgado 38). Delgado concludes that the danger of Rosalía's ornaments and fashion is double—on the individual level, because they go against domestic economy and rules established by her husband and, on a collective level, because such metamorphosis allows her to move from the domestic to public sphere and from bourgeois class to aristocracy (38). I add that, on a wider level, such *afrancesamiento* of the protagonist threatens the national identity, especially after domestic roles are reversed and all other potential subjects prove unfit to carry the imperial project.

The public sphere was traditionally reserved exclusively for men and Rosalía's aspirations to enter it testify to changes in gender relations and roles, made possible by political crisis and loss of imperial power of Spanish masculinity (represented through the feminization of her husband). At the same time, Rosalía believes that by providing expensive clothes for herself and her children she contributes to family honor, as described in *La de Bringas*: "[N]o es que quisiese tener lujo, no; más juzgaba que su decoro y el contacto con altas personas le imponían deberes ineludibles; creía que ella y los niños no debían hacer mal papel en las casas a donde iban" (88).

Charnon-Deutsch describes Rosalía's matrimonial life as boring and concludes that "her only means of escaping the boredom and crassness of her existence with Francisco is by ascending the social ladder, or at least appearing to do so" (68). This apparent "boredom" with marriage is, again, a step toward abandonment of the angelic ideal, because the *ángel del hogar* was predicated on the predetermined married life of a woman. Rosalía is tired of the hypocrisy and falsity that comprised her matrimonial life and she needs more than a position of a good and submissive wife could offer. This feeling of repression by domesticity is expressed through her words: "Pero para sí anhelaba ardientemente algo más que vida y salud; deseaba un poco, un poquito siquiera de lo que nunca había tenido, libertad, y salir, aunque sólo fuera por modo figurado, de aquella estrechez vergonzante…envidiaba a los mendigos, pues éstos el ochavo que tienen lo gozan con libertad, mientras que ella…" (*La de Bringas* 167). This ostensible freedom, which Rosalía longs so much to achieve, is not free. As her appetite for clothing becomes stronger, she falls into more debt. In the end, the only solution to repay the money without letting her husband know about her lies and secret transactions is to prostitute herself. Such reversal of roles in the Bringas's family, with Francisco bound to the home and with Rosalía's conducting public transactions behind his back, represent a challenge to the family's conventional division of power (Charnon-Deutsch 66).

Throughout the novel, Rosalía acquires the traits of a *femme fatale*, who challenges patriarchal norms with her behavior and sexuality. According to several critics, like Rebecca Stott (125), Julie Grossman (97) and Mary Ann Doane (3), *femme fatale* is a projection of masculine fears and desires related to political change and feminine emancipation and independence in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *femme fatale* is a non-domestic figure of excessive and uncontrolled sexuality who challenges patriarchal norms and disrupts patriarchal dominance. In other male authors' works of the period, like Mérimée's *Carmen* (1845), and Ramón del Valle Inclán's *Sonata de estío* (1903), *femmes fatales* are usually punished at the end through either their death or marriage and subordination to men. Thus, their subordination restores masculine power and dominance of patriarchy over women. Therefore, it is predictable that the representation of *femme fatale* in Spanish literature culminates at the end of the nineteenth century—when the crisis of Spanish masculinity deepens and when the loss of the colonies becomes a traumatic domestic reality for the once powerful former empire.

Although Rosalía initially seems more domestic than *fatale* because she is a married woman and a mother, at the end of the novel she uses her body and physical beauty to achieve her material goals—products of French fashion—and becomes a prostitute, or *mujer infame*.[2] Therefore I denominate her, among other examples in the

[2] In the "Introducción" to Eduardo López Bago's novel *La Prostituta* (1884) Pura Fernandez comments that the year 1884 is the *annus mirabilis* of the novel about infamous women "con la aparición

literature of the period, like the protagonists of Juan Valera's *Pepita Jiménez* (1874) and Leopoldo Alas Clarín's *La Regenta* (1885), as a domestic *femme fatale*.

The *ángel del hogar*, like *femme fatale,* is a product of masculine fantasy created in the nineteenth century. They are two antithetical ideals, but necessary for each other's existence. As stated by Aldaraca, *ángel del hogar* represents a masculine wish for a return home: "In Spain, the iconization of woman as an eternally young and virginal mother has much more to do with a nostalgic longing for home, that is, with a return to the relationship between male child and mother, than it does with the relationship between adult men and women in marriage or outside of marriage" (20). Examining the dualism *ángel del hogar*/*femme fatale* within the context of peak imperial failure and inversion of domestic roles, this longing turns to crisis, and the *ángel del hogar* of realism obtains traits of the *femme fatale*. This collapses the dichotomy into a unity, deconstructing the imperial-domestic system. The inability to censure the fatale woman who is now the subject of both *hogar* and nation signifies the irrecoverability of the mother/child (Spain/colonies) relationship that forms the basis of the image of Spanish imperial hegemony. The duality of family/*ángel del hogar* and prostitution/*femme fatale*, which characterizes Rosalía de Bringas, is at the core of her liberation from patriarchal norms and her formation as split imperial-national subject.

The presence of rebellious domestic *femmes fatales* in Spanish realist/naturalist literature was precisely the result of the social and political situation in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century, which was marked by religious backwardness, uneven transitioning into modernity, and inner political problems related to the decay of imperial power and loss of the Latin American colonies. Spanish national identity was split or trapped between past and present, colony and empire, Orient and Occident. Considering that the *femme fatale* embodied masculine fear and helplessness before change, this figure, with added domestic dimension, was an ideal choice for Galdós's critique of Spanish empire and domesticity.

There are many references in both works to Rosalía's desirable beauty and perfectly shaped body, which relate her to a representation of the *femme fatale*: "Era hermosa, y le gustaba ser admirada" (*Tormento* 156). Also, many times Rosalía's rich and fashionable friend Milagros refers to her good shape and attractiveness: "Si es usted elegantísima…si cuanto usted se pone resulta maravilloso. La verdad, no es porque sea usted mi amiga…A todo el mundo lo digo: si usted quisiera, no tendría rival. ¡Qué cuerpo! ¡Qué caída de hombros! Francamente, usted, siempre que se quiere vestir, obscurece cuanto se le pone al lado" (*La de Bringas* 137). Silvia Tubert mentions the frequent comparisons of Rosalía to Rubens's works and baroque Venus in *La de Bringas* and sees them not only as descriptions of her beauty, but as a way of situating her in a certain social class (371).

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de obras como *Tormento* y *La de Bringas* de Galdós, *Ángel caído* de M. Lorenzo Coria, *Cleopatra Pérez* de Ortega Munilla, el primer volumen de *La Regenta*…" (12).

Like *femmes fatales* in other male authors' works, Rosalía challenges patriarchal norms, and disrupts the code of domestic female behavior. However, Galdós does not present his protagonist as a sinner, nor is his intention to punish her and defeat her at the end, but rather to describe the conditions that provoked her transformation. Rosalía's transformation into a prostitute and her loss of honor at the end may seem a punishment that Galdós intended for the adulterous woman, but I see it above all as a tool for the expression of the irony and pessimism regarding Spain's current political (national/imperial) situation.

Rosalía becomes a dominant figure in *La de Bringas* and a "new hope" of Spanish imperialism in crisis. What constitutes Rosalía as a new imperial-national subject is her domination and domestication of her husband, manipulations behind his back, and her endurance and capability to overcome every crisis in the period of the decay of Spanish imperial hegemony and power. As also commented by Charnon-Deutsch, "whatever desires and goals will constitute her next stage in life, it is left clear that she will play a more strategic role in acquiring them" (74). However, the ways in which Rosalía gains her agency and liberation from patriarchal subjugation—prostitution and secret scheming—made possible by her husband's disability and debility, tell us about the weakness of this new imperial-national subject and, consequently, the Spanish nation. In other words, her emancipation is ironic, incomplete and temporary.

As previously mentioned, the rigid rules of domesticity and limited rights of women motivate Rosalía's rebellion, but it is important to remember that what creates the space and opportunity for enacting her revolt is the current political situation in Spain, marked not by real modernization of gender relations but by imperial decline and crisis of a (post) imperial national identity. Through representation of Rosalía's matrimonial dissatisfaction and the limitations that patriarchy imposed over her and other women (Amparo in *Tormento*), Galdós criticizes domesticity, but above all employs this example to express his pessimistic view and critique of both Spanish masculinity of the period and the lagging modernization of the nation. It is debility and disability of her husband that provides Rosalía with an opportunity to exceed domesticity, not her individual empowerment and emancipation as a woman. This is why Galdós's employment of ironic feminine empowerment has a double function: critique of extant patriarchal paradigms and pessimism regarding the imperial project.

This irony of feminine empowerment is evident in in the final scene of the novel, where we see Bringas, still blind and dependent on Rosalía, and Rosalía fully immersed in her role as the head of the family. She is portrayed as a determined woman who is keeping her self-created power within the household and who now supports the entire family by prostituting herself: "[L]a suerte de la familia depende de mí. Yo la sacaré adelante" (*La de Bringas* 295). She holds the future of her family in her hands. The last scene of the novel is the moment of Francisco's complete loss of masculine authority, and Rosalía's biggest power and control over her husband and family, but also a moment of her biggest defeat. Everything that she fought for—luxurious life and

appearance of nobility—is destroyed in this moment, as the Revolution begins, and her family moves out of the Palace, predicated to survive from Rosalía's prostitution.

From a wider perspective, women were considered to destabilize the social order or, as Delgado describes them: "careciendo del equilibrio y moderación del varón, la mujer tiende por naturaleza al caos y la anarquía, características contagiosas, capaces de desestabilizar el orden social" (38). In addition, Rosalía was under notable influence of foreign, primarily French, fashion and habits. The gifts that initiate her taste for luxury, which eventually leads to her prostitution and independence from her husband, are bought with her cousin Agustín's colonial money. This leads to her *afrancesamiento* through fashion. Through her *afrancesamiento*, Rosalía contributes to imperial crisis and maintains a split (colonial/imperial) of the Spanish national identity.

The irony reflected in Galdós's growing pessimism regarding the future of Spain's imperial status is best expressed in his *Episodios nacionales II* (1875), when Fernando VII says: "[H]ay que despedirse de las Américas" (114). To express the irrecoverability of the lost colonies, Galdós portrays women as dominant national/imperialist figures and men as passive and weak. *La de Bringas* is not the only case of such portrayal of dominant but limited women, as others are *Tormento*, *Fortunata y Jacinta* and *La desheredada* (1881).

Considering the political involvement of Galdós's novels, it is not a coincidence that *La de Bringas* revolves around the year 1868. This year was important for Spain's internal and external politics, as it was a year of Glorious Revolution and separatist uprising in Cuba, which led to the Ten Years' War for Cuban liberation (1868-1878). Cuba was one of the last colonies under Spanish control and it "became the largest slave society in Spanish American history and the source of great wealth for the Spanish state and Spanish investors" (Christopher Schmidt-Nowara 131). However, neither the Glorious Revolution nor the victorious war with Cuba brought the expected changes/results. Lisa Surwillo comments on this:

> The revolution of 1868 in Spain had represented a moment of hope, but the Bourbon Restoration that squelched the chances for a progressive nation arose from both the failure of the Gloriosa and the success of the Ten Years' colonial war. Spain defeated Cuban insurrectionists but lost in the long run from its win, in these novels. Thus, the crisis of the nation is shaped by the uncertain future of a volatile empire. (67)

Mary L. Coffey also comments on the progression of Galdós's pessimism related to colonial empire expressed in his works:

> As his view of Spanish colonialism develops in the nineteenth century, Galdós becomes less sanguine about the possibility for progress on a national scale, and when Spain experiences the colonial losses of 1898,

> the author's perspective grows increasingly pessimistic. Overall, Galdós's fiction from the 1870s, 1880s and beyond continues to insist that Spaniards re-imagine the nation as an entity without pretensions to empire, but over time the author's approach to this project shifts from denial to acceptance. (65)

Considering Coffey's observation, it can be confirmed that *La de Bringas* is one of Galdós's novels of the "end of the empire", in which he portrays the impossibility of recovery of imperial power through ironical feminine empowerment. His later novels, as commented by Ugarte, send even clearer message about it: "[T]he early twentieth century was a time that for many marks the definitive end to Spain's old 'greatness'", which is above all visible in two of Galdós's novels: *Aita Tettauen* (1905) and *Carlos VI en La Rápita* (1905) (182).

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the examples of *La de Bringas* and *Tormento*, Galdós demonstrates how the loss of both Spanish imperial power and the political hegemony of Spanish masculinity provoked a crisis of domesticity in the middle bourgeois families in the nineteenth century. This crisis of domesticity is reflected in the loss of male authority within the family, which makes possible female access to the public sphere. In the case of Rosalía, Galdós demonstrates how consumerism, through French fashion and prostitution, effects female emergence from the private sphere. This change provokes masculine fear and need to impose control over women, which culminates with the *femme fatale*, an independent, excessive and destructive female figure who needs to be tamed and controlled. As Delgado states: "La construcción social de la feminidad, articulada en el código de la moda, subraya, pues, la idea de lo femenino como un exceso que debe ser contenido, moral y físicamente" (39).

Simultaneously, Rosalía's consumerism relies on (post) colonial money and French fashion and products. She uses these means, and others achieved through prostitution, to establish her own independence and agency, at first behind her husband's back and later with reversal of the master/slave roles. Rosalía exceeds domesticity and she is a new, although ironic, split imperial-national subject who confirms the irrecoverability of Spain's imperial power. Rosalía's character helps us understand the emerging rebellious figure of domestic *femme fatale* and her domestication of men, which, at the same time, reflects the depth of the Spanish national/imperial crisis caused by imperial decay and *afrancesamiento* of the country.

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