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### **Review / Reseña**

*Santa: A Novel of Mexico City* by Federico Gamboa, Translated and Edited by John Charles Chasteen. University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

### **Prostitution and Desire in Porfirian Mexico: Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903)**

**Christopher Conway**

The University of Texas at Arlington

The vagaries of the academic publishing market in the United States have made the publication of English translations of key works of Latin American intellectual, cultural or literary history rare. Despite a boom in Latin American cultural studies among scholars working in a variety of distinct disciplines, and an ever-growing body of scholarship on ethnicity, gender, violence and urban space, the field is lacking translations of primary works for the same scholars to utilize in their undergraduate and

graduate courses. Oxford's Library of Latin America Series, edited by Jean Franco, has been a notable exception to this trend because it has brought nineteenth-century memoirs, forgotten short story collections, historical miscellany and lesser-known novels to the English language reading public and classroom.<sup>1</sup> "The Americas" series published by Texas Tech University Press has also been breaking new ground by publishing important, contemporary Latin American literature and non-fiction, such as Manuel Zapata Olivella's *Chango, The Biggest Baddass* and David Toscana's *The Last Reader*. Hackett Publishing has sought to inject Latin American primary texts back into the teaching market by publishing an abridged and unabridged translation of *The Mangy Parrot*, José Joaquín Fernández Lizardi's foundational novel and chronicle of Mexican life at the turn of the nineteenth century, in addition to readers that present a mosaic of selections of primary texts related to a particular topic or period.<sup>2</sup> Hopefully, faculty will adopt these kinds of books for their courses because they offer students the rewards of working in textual laboratories of meaning and ideology, rather than only through the exposition and restatement of information.

I begin this review with these observations about publishing and teaching because University of North Carolina Press and the distinguished historian John Charles Chasteen have done the field of Mexican and Latin American Studies a great service by translating Mexico's most important and influential novel, Federico Gamboa's *Santa* (1903), into the English language for the very first time. It is difficult to overstate the importance of Gamboa's Naturalist novel about prostitution in Mexico City. It was Mexico's first modern bestseller, selling over fifty thousand copies in three

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<sup>1</sup> The Library of Latin America includes works such as *Memoirs of the Last Soldier of the Independence Movement* by Nataniel Aguirre, *Peruvian Traditions* by Ricardo Palma, *Amalia* by José Mármol, *Torn from the Nest* by Clorinda Matto de Turner, *Sketches of Life in Chile, 1841-1851* by José Joaquín Vallejo, *Free Pages* by Manuel González Prada, *Selected Writings of Andrés Bello* by Andrés Bello, *El Libertador: Writings of Simón Bolívar* by Simón Bolívar, and others.

<sup>2</sup> Hackett Publishing has published the readers *Afro-Latino Voices* (ed. McKnight and Garofalo), *Latin American Independence* (eds. Chambers and Chasteen), *The U.S.-Mexican War* (ed. Conway) and *The Tupac Amaru and Catarista Rebellions* (eds. Stavig, Schmidt and Walker), among others. Full length works include *The Mangy Parrot* (abridged and unabridged) by José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, *History of How the Spaniards Arrived in Peru* by Tiu Cusi Yupanqui, and *The Underdogs* by Mariano Azuela, among others.

decades (González Peña 6). The novel also inspired movies (including Mexico's first sound film in 1931) and the classic bolero "Santa," which was written by the legendary Agustín Lara, who played one of the novel's characters (the blind piano player Hipólito) in a 1948 play. The paradoxical myth of the tragic prostitute with a heart of gold became emblematic of something profound in the Mexican national imaginary. If Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz could opine on the question, he would probably return to the arguments of his landmark *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and argue that the obsession springs from the specter of the violated mother, embodied by La Malinche, and the source of a violent machista lexicon organized around *La Chingada* and the verb *chingar* (Paz 65-88).

What is *Santa*? *Santa* tells the story of a village girl from Chimalistac who is cast out of her home after losing her virginity. The girl embraces prostitution in Mexico City and becomes one of the city's most desired courtesans.

More than a sensual appetite, theirs seemed an urge to vent some dark desire, to crush and bruise that spicy, delicious, unresisting flesh whose owner was bound for hell and with whom each customer could act out his desires with impunity...One could say that the most lascivious denizens of the entire city passed through Santa's bedroom, hardly giving her time to change position. The fallen woman! That is exactly the way they wanted her, the way they dreamed of her—the supremely attractive forbidden fruit. (Gamboa 50-51)

Santa tries to escape her life on two separate occasions by leaving the brothel and taking up with two separate men, but despite her best intentions, in both cases she is unfaithful and is cast back into prostitution. The only man who forgives her sins in the end is Hipólito, a blind piano player, who rescues Santa and tries to help her as she dies of an agonizing venereal disease that is in all likelihood syphilis.

Gamboa sets out to reconcile carnality and spirituality through his protagonist, whose bodily suffering serves a cleansing function. In his study of the novels of Federico Gamboa, Bart Lee Lewis amply demonstrates the author's preoccupation with eroticism and its relationship with spirituality, terms which he dialectically conjugates in different ways in the novels that precede *Santa*: *Apariencias* (1892), *Suprema Ley* (1896) and *Metamorfosis* (1899). Lewis writes:

The fall from grace, provoked by a carnal seduction, leads Santa into an orgiastic acceptance of eroticism, but this major motif is tempered by the continual and pervasive promise of spiritual love with Hipólito...The thesis, carnal love, and its antithesis, spiritual union, must go full circle in their ideological engagement in order to fuse in synthetic reconciliation. (Lewis 151)

Besides this interest in the dialectics of the body and spirit, Gamboa uses the story of the prostitute with the heart of gold to indict modernity as embodied in Mexico City and the Positivist ethos of late Porfirian Mexico. This critique was not without its historical contradictions, since Gamboa slavishly idealized Porfirio Díaz.<sup>3</sup> In the pages of *Santa*, Mexico City is loud, dirty and constantly in motion. It is a space of alienation and degradation that throbs on the page.

The plot may not be overly complex or original—especially in comparison to other period novels in the canon of European and Latin American novels about prostitution—but what makes *Santa* great reading (and great for scholarship and teaching) are Gamboa's narrative set pieces.<sup>4</sup> For example, in a lengthy description of the fountain in the courtyard of the Tivoli Central restaurant and dance hall, Gamboa highlights the filth and detritus of the establishment by noting “the suspiciously colored” pool of water in the base of the fountain, which is full of “empty bottles, the butts of cigarettes and cigars, and occasionally, a lock of hair, a torn up photograph, or a comb hurled there by the anonymous hands of someone tormented by jealousy and hoping, by means of a sterile fit of spite, to achieve forgetfulness” (Gamboa 72). The passage is signature Gamboa: hard-hitting and drawing toward what is ugly, but also expressing idiosyncratic flights of fancy and surprising, humanizing details. He begins with filth, which is common enough, but works his way back to the mournful poetry of loss

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<sup>3</sup> For an accessible and reliable introduction to the life of Gamboa, and an overview of the themes of his novels, see Ordiz, 11-54, in the Cátedra edition of *Santa*. Also Rafael Olea Franco's excellent “La construcción de un clásico: Cien años del mito de Santa” in his edited anthology, *Santa, Santa Nuestra*, will help readers situate the novel in time and Mexican literary history.

<sup>4</sup> Models for and analogues of *Santa* include *La Fille Elisa* (1877) by Edmond de Goncourt, *Nana* (1880) by Emile Zola, *Música Sentimental* (1882) by Eugenio Cambaceres, *Irresponsable* by Manuel T. Podestá (1889), *Resurrection* (1899) by Leo Tolstoy (which Gamboa was reading as he began writing *Santa*), *La Lucero* (1902) by Augusto D'Halmar, and *El mal metafísico* (1916) by Manuel Gálvez, among others.

through the image of the torn photograph and the cast-off comb. The relatively minor objects emerge as the corroboration of something deeper than dirt, something that, through Gamboa's technique, becomes more poignant and evocative.

Another masterful set-piece, full of motion, color and interest for contemporary readers, is the description of the celebration of *El Grito* in Mexico City, its streets bursting under the gaslights as waves of people push against and immobilize horse drawn carriages. I challenge anyone to find a more vivid and enduring description of the celebrations of Mexican Independence during the Porfiriato. The hyperbolic narration of a murder that takes place in the brothel, and the pathetic, last moments of its victim in a pool of blood, remains disturbing over a century after its writing. Here Gamboa describes the victim's failed attempts to evade the gun barrel that will kill him:

The victim, already covered in a funereal pallor, crouched and writhed in a useless attempt at evasion, tripping over the furniture, his hands fluttering crazily over the seat backs, his bulging eyes fixed on the black hole at the end of the barrel, oscillating with it, up and down, all his love for life, pleading eloquently, humbly, poignantly, revealing his convictions that he was about to die. (Gamboa 166)

Through this *danse macabre* Gamboa achieves something greater than drama: the existential, and compassionate, evocation of every individual's struggle with mortality, ducking and weaving with the barrel of unavoidable death, who is an unrelenting and unerring dance partner. The murder is followed by a trial exposing the spectacle and corruption of the judicial system in early twentieth-century Mexico.

Our translator is John Charles Chasteen, professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who is both a distinguished scholar of rigorous monographs and a generous teacher who has prepared excellent textbooks. Chasteen's translation of *Santa* is excellent, as the above quotes confirm. Most notably, he captures the energy and vigor of Gamboa's prose. In his brief introduction, Chasteen states that he has striven to make the translation modern and economical, meaning that he has edited and slightly abridged the novel in places. Most of the purists who might object are probably not going to need a translation in the first place,

whereas most lay readers and faculty working in English language classrooms will side with Chasteen on this matter. There is one, abridgement, however, that I wish Professor Chasteen had not made: the omission of Gamboa's prefatory dedication to the novel. This page-long dedication is, in truth, a part of the novel itself, for it introduces the character of Santa from beyond the grave, calling on Gamboa's friend, the sculptor Rafael Contreras, and by extension Gamboa the novelist, to speak for her, now that she is dead and cannot speak for herself. The dedication establishes two contradictory forces at work in the novel: on the one hand, a humane defense of a marginal and oppressed figure (the prostitute) and on the other, a self-indulgent pleasuring in that figure's body. As the literary critic Elzbieta Sklodowska shows us in an important interpretation of the novel, Santa literally calls on Contreras to penetrate her body to find her truth, an image that casts the girl again in the role of a prostitute (Sklodowska 118). To know Santa, the dual figure of the artist (Contreras/Gamboa) needs to palpate her body, explore it, get inside it. It's a shame that students will not be able to read this dedication, because it alerts them to some of the bodily contradictions of the narrative voice of the novel, which is both critic of Santa's victimization and a victimizer.

This minor criticism aside, Chasteen's translation of *Santa* is an invaluable contribution to literary critics and historians who are interested in posing the topics of urban development, women's history and sexuality studies to their students. Materialists will delight in Gamboa's astute criticisms of capitalism. I have taught the novel several times over the years in Spanish, and it never fails to provoke student interest and excellent discussion. The anthropological and sociological content relating to prostitution and city life in the Porfiriato is fascinating and lends itself to many fruitful conversations.

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