

**The Making of *Leoncia*:  
Romanticism, Tragedy, and Feminism<sup>1</sup>**

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*Leoncia*, a long-forgotten play by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1814–1873), staged in 1840, but never published, appeared in print for the first time in 1917, thanks to the efforts of a prominent Spanish literary historian, Emilio Cotarelo y Mori. This very first piece of theater that Gómez de Avellaneda authored collected dust for three quarters of a century, and would have continued to do so if not for the sudden resurgence of interest in the Cuban-born Spanish dramatist, owed to an unauthorized publication of her private love letters. It is not totally clear why Gómez de Avellaneda decided against publishing her first play, which had a very successful premiere in Seville and enjoyed a warm reception by Spanish theater critics. The encouragement the author received from her first reviewers stimulated her to continue on a road leading to national recognition and international literary fame as a dramatist.

Between 1840 and 1844, Gómez de Avellaneda published a volume of poems, several novels, and theater pieces. Although some have argued that *La Peregrina*'s<sup>2</sup> legacy is indebted mostly to her poetry (Bleiberg, Ihrle and Pérez 741), the contribution she made to Spanish theater is equally significant (Piñeyro 152; Smith 236). By 1859, she had produced a total of seventeen plays, including five original tragedies: *Alfonso Munio* (1844), *El Príncipe de Viana* (1844), *Egilona* (1845), *Saúl* (1849) and *Baltazar* (1859), “matching in productivity and creativity many of her male counterparts, and frequently surpassing them in popular reception” (Gies 193). The first and the last of these tragedies were applauded as masterpieces; *Alfonso Munio* earned the author immediate recognition in literary circles of the capital, while *Baltazar* was announced as one of the top plays in nineteenth-century Spain.

The first reviewers of *Leoncia* were positively impressed by the play, describing the premiere as a total success:

Un drama, primera composición de una joven española [ . . . ] debía excitar y excitó vivamente nuestra curiosidad. Es tan raro el número de producciones originales que se representan en el teatro [ . . . ] *La Peregrina* ha triunfado en la empresa que se propuso [ . . . ] Hemos visto a un público, bien difícil de contentar por cierto, escuchar con una atención sostenida los últimos actos del drama, y hemos sorprendido el llanto en los ojos de personas. (Cotarelo y Mori 426)

(A play, the first composition by a young Spaniard [ . . . ] was bound to excite our curiosity and so it did. It is so rare to see original productions in our theaters [ . . . ]. *La Peregrina* triumphed in the enterprise she proposed to herself [ . . . ] We saw our hard-to-please public pay great attention to the last acts of the drama, and even shed tears. [translation mine])

Other reviews, referred to by Emilio Cotarelo in his comprehensive book *La Avellaneda y sus obras*, attest to the fact that, in the eyes of her contemporaries, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda positioned herself as an innovative and talented dramatist from the very beginning of her career. Her plays catered to the contemporary audience's heightened interest in national theater. Avellaneda produced highly original work for the Spanish stage, which at the time was still heavily populated by foreign productions and Golden Age Comedia *refundiciones* (recasts) in spite of the successful competition coming from Duque.

*Leoncia* presents a tragedy of a noble soul who struggles for acceptance amidst a web of social prejudice, while simultaneously working to maintain her dignity. The structure and enactment of the plot conform to the aesthetic criteria of the romantic literary model. Gómez de Avellaneda depicts a love triangle consisting of three characters: Carlos Maldonado, a young aristocrat, his fiancée Elena de Castro, a young maiden of noble lineage, and Leoncia, a mysterious mature woman, for whom Carlos feels a fatal attraction. The situation becomes exacerbated by rumors of an alleged affair between Leoncia and her friend, an elderly man by the name of Count Peñafiel. The love theme serves to set the stage for a conflict modeled on the ethics and aesthetics of romanticism, between a virtuous but disgraced individual and a cruel, corrupt society.

Gómez de Avellaneda appropriates the strategies of the male-generated and male-centered romantic discourse to construct her female protagonist. Leoncia is not a typical idealized female character objectified by male desire, but a full-fledged romantic hero(ine), who exercises agency in her confrontation with a hostile environment. A noble heart and a virtuous soul, she has experienced many dark moments in her life. Seduced in her youth by an immoral libertine, she gave birth to a beautiful daughter, only to lose her in a shipwreck soon after. Leoncia's mother perished in the same disaster, while her father died of grief and shame some time later. Devastated by all this loss, Leoncia

has been blaming herself ever since for “murdering” her own family (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 71). As the plot progresses, the author emphasizes more fully the archetypal nature of the romantic heroine’s experience. Leoncia suffers unjust persecution and debasement by Madrid’s society, and in a moment of extreme anguish, cries out, “No tengo padre, ni madre [ . . . ] Soy sola en el desierto del mundo” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 67) (I do not have a father or mother [ . . . ] I am all alone in the desert of the world; [translation mine]). Like many other romantic protagonists, Leoncia experiences *Welschmerz*, although she does seem to find some comfort in the presence of her only friend, Count Peñafiel. This goes along the lines of an early Romantic paradigm, according to which an anguished individual can find temporary solace in a virtuous friend (Sebold 32–33). One of the first examples of this paradigm appears in 1777 in *Oda XXI, A la mañana en mi desampara y organdad* por Juan Meléndez Valdés (1754–1817). The poet reveals his mental torment caused by the experience of living in a “corrupt world” and describes himself as “Huérfano, joven, solo y desvalido” (189) (Orphaned, young, lonely, and powerless; translation mine). Yet, in spite of his feelings of grave distress, abandonment, and even suicidal thoughts, he has a friend whom he addresses in his *Elegy II, A Jovino: el melancólico*, complaining about his painful solitude, confessing that his heart longs for virtue, “su corazón por la virtud suspira,” and imploring him to come to his rescue (Meléndez Valdés 202).

Avellaneda’s Leoncia also has the privilege of having a friend who is able to offer her a helping hand in a moment when she is “young,” “alone,” and “without shelter”: “sola, joven y sin amparo” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 67). Avellaneda goes to great lengths to convince the readers / spectators of the non-sexual nature of the relationship between her female protagonist and the Count. Peñafiel treats Leoncia as his daughter, and when she confesses feeling alone and abandoned he reminds her of his support and his “paternal affection” for her (67). In response, Leoncia accepts that the count is indeed a father figure in her life (73).

The Romantic hero is a rebel who defies “the moral and social conventions of his time” (Bevan 40), and longs to recover his faith in the meaning of life through his search for the absolute ideal. It would seem at first that Leoncia feels a passionate, all-encompassing love for Carlos, but just like male heroes in Romantic drama, she is infatuated with the idea of love, and her feelings are highly egocentric. Leoncia wants Carlos’s love and esteem as an antidote against slanderous rumors of an affair with the Count. She feels devastated, violated, and trampled by her past, and at the same time humiliated by society (Cotarelo y Mori 426). In scene seven of the first act, when Carlos asks Leoncia to trust him, she refuses to disclose anything that in her mind could diminish his respect for her. Unlike her young suitor, Leoncia has a clear understanding of the many obstacles that stand in their way, and

when Carlos offers her a Rousseauian escape from the corrupt society, she knows that she can't accept it. At that point, the discourse of the play moves from a depiction of a typical romantic conflict with social norms, to a feminist questioning of the patriarchal order. Leoncia does not believe Carlos will be able to overcome the patriarchal infatuation with feminine purity, and knows that he may reject her once he has a more intimate knowledge of her life. Yet she is not willing to let go of him completely, because she needs to hold on to this idealized love, which is a source of vital energy for her, as of course should be the case for a true Romantic hero. Their conversation in scene eight is suddenly interrupted by the arrival of the count Peñafiel. Carlos, inflamed by jealousy, storms out of the house. He now believes the rumors of her alleged indiscretions and frivolous behavior, and out of spite, frustration, and disappointment, decides to go ahead with his previous plans to marry Elena. The culmination of the conflict takes place when Leoncia receives the notice of the impending wedding, and in a moment of emotional distress, takes off for the young bride's house, disguised as a dressmaker and armed with a dagger. Once inside the house, Leoncia hears Elena sing the favorite song of her mother and suddenly realizes that the maiden is her long lost daughter. Moments later, Carlos's father, Don Fernando, walks in, and Leoncia recognizes in him the man who seduced her and ruined her life. Furious, Leoncia attacks Don Fernando with the dagger, but as Elena interferes in between them, she turns the dagger against herself and commits suicide. The tragedy concludes with the realization that Carlos and Elena are brother and sister.

The representation of the theme of love in this play has an undisputable romantic identity, as it connects the primary source of love with the process of neoplastic ideation within a context of imagined reality. That is, it shows the thought process of fashioning an ideal passion based on desires and illusions. José de Espronceda wrote in his canonical poem *El diablo mundo* "es el amor que al mismo amor adora / el que creó las sílfides y ondinas, / la sacra ninfa que bordando mora / debajo de las aguas cristalinas" (228) (it is love that adores love itself / that which created sylphs and water nymphs / the sacred nymph that embroiders and lives in pure waters [translation mine]). In her first play, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda writes that "La actividad naciente del corazón, que busca un objeto en quien complacerse; la necesidad de amar . . . ¡éste es el origen del primer amor!" (*Leoncia* 12) (the nascent activity of a heart searching for an object of passion; the need to love . . . That is the origin of the first love! [translation mine]). In her last novel, *El artista barquero*, Avellaneda conceptualizes the egocentric nature of romantic passion, stating that "se ama el amor y no al amante . . . Se ama la propia facultad de amar que comenzamos sentir en nosotros" (*Obra selecta* 162) (we love the love itself and not the lover . . . we love the very ability to love, when we start experiencing that feeling [translation mine]). According to this view, love is linked to

the empirical experience, associated with a natural need of a human being to exteriorize a sensible subjectivity. Love does not emerge as a result of a spell or some sort of contagion from outside; it is always a materialization of the sentimental longing of the protagonists. On the other hand, for the authors of Romanticism, love is essentially tragic, as it bears the hallmark of death or disillusionment. It is an ideal embellished by the fantasies of young minds, yet very much disconnected from reality, and therefore destined for failure, as Espronceda has demonstrated so masterfully in his *Canto a Teresa* (228).

Maria Prado stated that unfulfilled tragic passion is the main theme of *Leoncia* (159). Indeed, the reader can clearly identify the theme of love as the literary device central to the development of the plot. It makes the emotions run high and powers the conflict. The female protagonist does not conceive her life without love. In scene seven of the first act, she reprimands her young suitor for being late because she feels alive only next to him, “Sólo existo cuando estoy junto a ti, y desde ayer, no te veo” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 13) (I only exist when I am next to you, and I have not seen you since yesterday [translation mine]). Carlos responds with his own set of complaints, but in the end accepts that they can’t live one without the other (13). While making her argument, Maria Prado opposes Emilio Cotarelo’s view of inexorable and fatal destiny as the main theme in *Leoncia* (65). In ancient Greek theater, the force of destiny is an important theme and, “its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them” (Bloom 72). In Spanish Romantic theater the representative play which develops this theme is *Don Álvaro o la fuerza del sino* (1935) by Angel Saavedra Duque de Rivas (1791–1865). In *Leoncia*, indeed, it can be argued that the heroine struggles against and is overpowered by her fate. The power of destiny becomes particularly evident in the final scene of the third act, which seals Leoncia’s defeat, as she realizes the fruitlessness of her efforts just like many classical heroes before her. The heroine goes through stages of hope, anguish, jealousy, and desperation. It appears that Leoncia’s unfulfilled love, or better said, her betrayed passion, exacerbates her emotional distress and pushes her to the fateful encounter with her offender in the final scene. Yet, we can’t help but wonder why she refuses Carlos’s proposal to run away? Had she attempted to escape the corrupt society in order to fulfill her love, and had she encountered Elena and Don Fernando under more forceful circumstances, the primary status of the fate theme would have a stronger case. Leoncia acts in the way she does mainly because she does not believe in the existence of an idyllic land where she can hide from society. She is pursuing a cause, which differs from the typical romantic idealistic search for an eternal love. Deep inside, Carlos’s mind is contaminated by the patriarchal idea of feminine purity, and therefore he will never be able to offer Leoncia what she really wants: a moral redemp-

tion on the basis of the purity of her virtuous soul. That is why she does not accept his proposal to escape from society, and that is why she rejects what she considers a degraded version of love, since it requires a conscientious transgression of moral rules. The criticism of the play focuses on one main problem: a society that does not attribute value to clean consciences and pure hearts. For an individual to be considered virtuous, it is necessary to follow a strict set of arbitrary social rules. Carlos bitterly complains about that, “desgraciados aquellos que, apoyados en la rectitud de su corazón y en la pureza de su conciencia se atreven a infringir la más ligera de sus leyes!” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 7) (poor are those who guided by the righteousness of their hearts and pure consciences dare to violate the lightest of the laws [of the society] [my translation]).

In a broad sense, it appears that the conflict conforms to the typical Romantic model, where the tragic outcome emerges from the clash between an idealistic individual and a corrupt society. The society is positioned to win because it has a total control over the moral framework, which gives it power over all of its members, but especially over those who desire to be recognized as virtuous. The ability to manipulate the concept of virtue, particularly as it applies to women, is what enables the society to include or exclude individuals at will, and that power is what enables the patriarchal order to exercise dominance. On the other hand, if we take a close look at the causes of social marginalization of Leoncia, it becomes evident that she is denied the possibility of happiness, not because of her social class, status, race or religion (which happens quite frequently in romantic literature), but because she does not conform to the social standard of a virtuous woman in mid-nineteenth century Madrid. Basically, we are in the presence of a conflict between the ideal or absolute virtue, based on “a knowledge of the true good,” and a virtue based on opinion, which Plato considers a “shadow of virtue” (Janet 406). This conflict is truly the central theme of the play, while the themes of love and fate are secondary and have more of a supporting role in the structure of the play.

Gómez de Avellaneda was deeply concerned with the success the patriarchal order achieved in manipulating the concept of virtue with the purpose of controlling the individual conduct of women (Selimov 216). Her first novel *Sab* (1841), written approximately during the same time as *Leoncia*, presents similar concerns, although it challenges the relativist approach to moral values and principals in a much more direct fashion than the play:

Virtue! But what is virtue? Of what does it consist? I have wanted to understand it, but in vain have I asked men for the truth. I remember that when my master sent me to confess my sins at the feet of a priest, I asked God’s minister what I should do in order to attain virtue. The virtue of the slave, he replied, is to obey and be silent, serve his lawful masters with humility and

resignation, and never to judge them. This explanation did not satisfy me. Well then, I thought, can virtue be relative? Is virtue not one and the same for all men? (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography* 140)

The character writing these words is an Afro-Cuban slave, and thus his questioning of societal moral relativism has been traditionally interpreted within the context of anti-slavery discourse. At the same time, the references to social injustice articulated by the slave also have been considered as an early example of feminist criticism directed at the patriarchal social order in Cuba and Spain alike (Kirkpatrick 156). Sab, who is the hero of the novel, questions the limitations of the position he occupies in the social hierarchy, and suggests a parallel between his social status and the role assigned to women in the patriarchal society. It is plausible to suggest that Avellaneda uses the black protagonist as a metaphor of a subaltern condition, and as Nina Scott has pointed out, “critics have rightly noted that in *Sab* her feminism consistently overshadows her denunciation of slavery” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography* xxiv). The novel clearly identifies women as subalterns and universalizes their social inequality through the discourse of the Afro-Cuban protagonist (Guerra 709). Sab’s anguished cries, caused by the lack of ability to realize himself as an individual and contribute to society in proportion to his own talents, represent the voice of all marginalized groups, who find themselves in a subordinate or subaltern position:

But it is not God, Teresa, it is men who have shaped my destiny [. . .] Who have said: [. . .] Do you feel the noble ambition of wanting to be useful to your fellow man, and to employ for the general good and for its delight the abilities which weigh heavily upon you? Well, bow down under their weight and ignore them, and resign yourself to living in a useless and despised way, like the barren plant or the filthy animal. . . . It is men who have imposed this dreadful fate upon me. (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography* 144)

Doris Sommer has rightfully noted that the author expresses her own existential anxiety in the novel as she identifies herself with the slave, not only in relation to her subordinate status in the patriarchal hierarchy, but also as someone who produces subversive epistolary discourse (25). Most importantly in the context of this essay, Avellaneda demonstrates, both in her private writings and in the novel, through Sab, the technology of domination, which is based on the manipulation of the norms of public and private conduct and their passive acceptance by the subaltern group: “Oh, women! Poor, blind victims! Like slaves, they patiently drag their chain and bow their heads under the yoke of human laws” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography* 144). As Ger-

da Lerner has suggested, “the domestic subordination of women provided the model out of which slavery developed as a social institution” (99).

What is particularly relevant to our discussion is that the role of women is similar to that of slaves in having been forced to accept a relativist idea of virtue based on “obedience, humility,” and “resignation” (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography* 146). The parallel between the two subaltern groups, women and slaves, runs deeper if we consider it in the context of the domination of their bodies. The power of a slave-holding society is directly connected to its ability to own and control the lives and the bodies of other human beings, violently forced into a subaltern position. In case of “free” women, control is exercised indirectly, by regulating their behavior, which is exactly what Avellaneda criticizes in *Leoncia*. The control over the female body has been, and continues to be, the fundamental obsession of the patriarchal society, which uses it to uphold its own dominance (Palencia Villa 41). The patriarchy dominates women by forcing them to adjust their behavior according to a set of established values, with one of the more important components being the association between feminine virtue and virginity.

In the religious context it has been a given that a female must be a virgin in order to serve God, while a male must only maintain abstinence in the sacred times (Martínez Díez 126). In the context of the institution of marriage, the traditional prerequisite for women is to be a virgin in spirit and body (Martínez Díez 126). That differs significantly from a “masculine position, in which a virtuous or virginal life would disqualify masculinity” (Glocer Florini 62). In addition to its role in the ethical dimension, feminine virtue has a monetary value in the social economy of the patriarchy. The price that is paid for an individual in a slave-holding society is equivalent to the traditional transaction that is required for a marriage to take place, such as dowry the groom receives from the bride’s family in some cultures, or the compensation he is obligated to pay to the bride’s family in others. What is especially significant in both cases is that the amount of dowry or compensation can be negotiated in proportion to the age, beauty, and bodily integrity of the bride. In a patriarchal society, sexual integrity is the norm, according to Freud, and “implies a virtuous condition which defines a woman as ‘normal’ and worthy of being loved” (Glocer Florini 66).

Gómez de Avellaneda arrives in Sevilla with emotional baggage, which she acquired as a result of a negative social experience in Cuba and Galicia. Her first conflict with the male dominated cultural hegemony took place when her family tried to arrange a marriage of convenience against her will. Upon arrival to La Coruña, the eighteen-year-old writer has to endure the consequences of her Galician step-father’s greed, being unable to recover her share of inheritance and dowry, which her biological father left her. She did not find much support from her brother or her paternal uncle, both of whom attempted to use her as commodity and give her away in arranged marriages for personal

benefit. Gomez de Avellaneda resisted in both cases, and that resistance reaffirmed her independent conscience and her belief in her own self-worth. This personal experience undoubtedly influenced the configuration of the protagonists in the novels and plays she later published.

Chronologically, the premiere of the tragic drama *Leoncia* coincides with the intensification of public scrutiny of the feminine image. The intensification occurs as a consequence of anxiety, which the patriarchal order felt in light of the increase in participation of women in the process of cultural production. The advances of the Enlightenment in the area of recognition of personal merit, and the focus on individual emotions in Romanticism empowered women to make a public use of reason and express emotions through literary devices. The transformation of European society in the eighteenth century “brought with it a shift in definitions of gender difference and a new way of representing and experiencing subjectivity that opened a channel through which women could assert themselves as producers of print culture” (Kirkpatrick 2). These changes threatened to destabilize the hegemony of patriarchal power, based traditionally on a strict hierarchical differentiation of traits, which determine gender roles and define masculinity and femininity. The eighteenth-century moral discourse on love prepared the foundation for a much more optimistic view on passions and their role in the human society (Bolufer Peruga 12). A positive valuation of moderate affections began competing with the traditional negative view of passions developed in the moral and religious literature of the Old Regime. Prior to the Enlightenment, love has been frequently depicted in terms comparable to sickness (Boase 1) and madness (Singer 62). The new eighteenth century moral discourse leaves the door open for the possibility of reconciliation between love, the natural inclinations of individuals and social usefulness, all within a context of the new sensibility acceptable for women as well as for men,

se aspira a que mujeres y hombres se empapen, a través de un proceso de ósmosis, de los sentimientos y virtudes de los personajes, que sufran con sus penas y se complazcan con su felicidad, modelando a imagen y semejanza de los héroes y heroínas de la literatura sus propios deseos y aspiraciones amorosas. (Bolufer Peruga 13)

(It is hoped that women and men will blend and absorb through osmosis, the feelings and virtues of the characters, and that they will suffer their punishment and will be pleased with their happiness, accepting literary heroes and heroines as models for their own desires and aspirations of love. [translation mine])

In the eighteenth century, the growing concern of the patriarchal society with the modified social role of women translated into an increase in public

criticism of such traits as “martial nature,” “nerve,” “disembarrassment,” and “licentious behavior” attributed to women (Jago, “La misión de la mujer” 23). In the nineteenth century, however, the triumph of the ethical and aesthetic values of Romanticism forced the establishment to change tactics, by shifting from direct recriminations in the press to promotion of the ideal of feminine domesticity “advertised as the essence of natural womanhood,” an essence which would later be captured by the term “angel del hogar” (Jago, *Ambiguous Angels: Gender in the Novels of Galdós* 14) (angel in the house). Hence, there is a substantial increase in the number of publications, by male and female authors, focused on forcing the hegemonic gender models on the awakening female consciousness. A large number of articles, monographs, anthologies, and speeches appear in print after 1840 describing the nature of women and prescribing their role in society (Jago, “La Misión De La Mujer” 23). That is exactly when Avellaneda publishes her *Leoncia*, soon followed by two novels *Sab* and *Dos mujeres* (1842), which present a similar questioning of the dominating ideology.

The cultural hegemony of the patriarchal narrative influences and splits the emerging female voices. On the one hand, the newly acquired access to the production of print culture opens the door for feminist discourse, and empowers women to engage in challenging the hierarchy of power in society. At the same time, a number of them join the ranks of apologists of the patriarchal dominance. They write mostly for periodicals and journals, addressing traditional women, focusing on the importance of their status as wives and mothers, and promoting such traits as tenderness, modesty, humility, and submissiveness (Cantizano Márquez 285).

In the foreword to *Leoncia*, Emilio Cotarelo suggests the possibility of the subject of drama being connected to a stormy love affair between the author and a certain student of law in Seville by the name Ignacio Cepeda (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* xi). The relationship stayed out of the public scrutiny until it was revealed in the 1914 unauthorized publication of Avellaneda’s private letters by Lorenzo Cruz de Fuentes.

Avellaneda’s personal letters reveal her strong feelings toward the addressee, and show that she suffered greatly from the fact that they were not reciprocated (Kirkpatrick 145). From the very first epistle, the emotional motivation of the author becomes evident, as she engages in what “is essentially an act of seduction: the writer attempts to produce an image of herself that will please and capture his desire” (136). Significantly, in some of her first letters, Avellaneda writes to her lover about her work on *Leoncia*, shares her frustration with rehearsals and the actors, and finally pleads with him to attend the premiere. It appears the affair was not going well, which made Emilio Cotarelo suggest that the plea could mean that the writer “had some vague hopes to attract him back to the fold of her unfulfilled love” (Gómez de Avellaneda,

*Leoncia* 122). According to the critic, by requesting the addressee's presence at the drama function, Avellaneda intended to sensitize him with the pathetic picture of the sufferings of her heroine. Romantic authors believed in the transformative power of their discourse, and considered the task of sensitizing their readers and spectators as their public mission. Some, such as the Colombian novelist Jorge Issacs, included references to that mission in the body of their literary production (7).

The love letters reveal Avellaneda's main dilemma: Cepeda refused to formalize their relationship, mostly due to the social prejudice against independent women. Women writers, in particular, were disregarded as marriage material in the traditional patriarchal society, as noted by Nicasio Gallego in his prologue to Avellaneda's volume of poetry (x). Judging from Avellaneda's letters, the public image of the young playwright and her independent lifestyle did not conform to the model of a virtuous woman for Cepeda, and he became openly uncomfortable with Avellaneda's passionate expression of her feelings toward him (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Autobiografía y epistolarios de amor* 31). Avellaneda confronted Cepeda's apprehensions caused by the negative social perception of female sexual agency, but in the end, in spite of all her efforts, she failed to transcend the role of a secret lover (161).

In *Leoncia*, the contrast between the negative social opinion, based on rumors and gossip, and the true inner virtue of a noble human heart, emerging from the individual behavior and moral qualities of the heroine, is the building block of Avellaneda's argument. The importance of the subject of virtue is revealed from the first scene, which presents a counterpoint between the two characterizations of the protagonist. Carlos speaks highly of Leoncia, sharing his admiration for her spiritual qualities in his conversation with his friend Gaspar, who for his part, makes damaging remarks about the lady. The latter brings up the alleged affair with Count Peñafiel, suggesting that it was based on economic interests and saying that "el Conde es anciano, pero es rico" (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 4) (the Count is old, but he is rich [translation mine]). Gaspar is not impressed with Carlos's emotional outburst about Leoncia's spiritual superiority and the purity of her heart, as he assumes that Carlos is sexually motivated. Hence Gaspar's practical advice to Carlos: he should enjoy his freedom and passion, and only start thinking about marrying Elena after he fully satisfies his desire for Leoncia (5).

This dialogue exposes the power of the collective public opinion and its damaging effects on the reputation of individual members of society. Gaspar does not even try to support his allegations about Leoncia's supposed frivolity with proof. For him it is sufficient that "the whole of Madrid knows" about her alleged affair with the Count (Gómez de Avellaneda, *Leoncia* 5). The ability to control public opinion and the perception of the concept of virtue is instrumental to the dominance of the patriarchal order. The manipulation of social

norms was a means to exercise power, administer discipline and punish. Gaspar underlines the relativist position of the society toward the virtue, the lack of which is tolerated if appearances are kept (7). Of course, Carlos is outraged in the face of slanderous allegations against Leoncia. He recognizes that he lives in a hypocritical society, but at the same time he is incapable of thinking outside of the patriarchal box, and demonstrates that his expectations fall well within the framework of the hegemonic ideal of female purity. His acceptance of Leoncia is contingent upon the confirmation of her female purity. Early in the play, Carlos reveals that he hopes to discover that she is “tan noble y pura como mi corazón la desea” (11) (as noble and pure as my heart desires her [translation mine]). This statement serves to justify Leoncia’s mistrust of Carlos, and supports her decision not to run away with him. Espronceda’s “Canto a Teresa” is a clear example of what happens after the first illusions dissipate: the very same Romantic hero who anxiously seeks to join his idealized object of love, perceiving her as a beautiful “butterfly” and “crystal pure water spring,” is the one who will later reject her as a “fallen angel” and “filthy mud” (Espronceda 231), seeing in her an “emblem of a vitiated object world” (Kirkpatrick 129).

It is legitimate to assume that Avellaneda aspired to convey the encoded message to Cepeda, and to make him see the Romantic perspective on the intrinsic virtue of individuals. Entrenched in his traditionalist views, he proved not to be very receptive to the romantic idea of virtue and the possibility of female sexual agency. However, this was not a personal failure on the part of the playwright, but it had to do with a larger issue in European societies:

the position of the female subject in relation to the Romantic elaboration of a language of subjectivity was contradictory: on the one hand, the new aesthetic movement seemed to encourage women’s participation by valorizing feeling and individuality, but on the other hand, women found it difficult to assume the many attributes of Romantic selfhood that conflicted with the norm tying feminine identity to lack of desire. (Kirkpatrick 10)

The increased access to the production of literary culture in post Enlightenment Spain allowed women writers to participate in the liberalization of Spanish society. Gómez de Avellaneda felt empowered enough to question the ethical and aesthetic values of patriarchy from a position that appeared to be protected by the Romantic ideology. However, by appropriating Romantic paradigms in her private and public discourses, Gómez de Avellaneda unwittingly excluded herself from the group of women considered virtuous according to the patriarchal norm. As Susan Kirkpatrick noted, citing Cora Kaplan, “the appearance of any sexualized sensibility was the mark of a degraded and vitiated subjectivity” (10). In *Leoncia*, Avellaneda depicts a heroine as

a subject and agent of action. She criticizes the role attributed to women as objects of male consumption, described in the mid eighteenth century by Jean J. Rousseau in his apologia for inequality in male and female education entitled *Emile, or on Education*: “woman is specially made for man’s delight” (336). Leoncia defies this model by exercising agency in her search for the romantic ideal of love. Her failure to achieve it and her suicide are intended to influence her audience in favor of a much more liberalized model of female subjectivity. In her first play Avellaneda rejects moral relativism and defends the concept of virtue from a position based on the consideration of the intrinsic qualities of the individual, rather than on the role that has been imposed on her/him by the social hegemonic order. Joan Torres-Pou notes that in this process of appropriation of the language of power, Avellaneda’s narrative and epistolary discourse become inevitably contaminated by the rhetoric of the same patriarchal tradition against which she raises her voice (58). However, such “contamination” actually enables the playwright to establish a channel of communication with the public, which was by large complacent with the dominant patriarchal ideology. Avellaneda’s first play presents an argument that conflicts with the hegemonic ideology on many levels. And in particular it demonstrates a profound lack of conformity by the writer with the techniques of manipulation of the concept of virtue and her determination to reconfigure the prevailing hierarchical cultural paradigm in the Spanish society of her time. If we consider the fact that “women were in general excluded from the theater, except as actresses,” Gómez de Avellaneda’s public display of talent and her ability as a woman writer to persevere within a literary field dominated by men, becomes an inspirational model for many other female dramatists who “from mid-century on” followed her example (Gies 191). *Leoncia*, Avellaneda’s first theatrical piece, is emblematic in the sense of being the stepping-stone for this collective endeavor.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this article, entitled “El amor, el destino y la virtud: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y su primer drama *Leoncia*,” appeared in *Arbor*, the journal of the Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.
2. Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s pen name.

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