

Narrating the Naturalist Novel: Matilde Cherner's Approach in *María Magdalena* (1880)

Abstract

This article examines the narrative strategies employed in *María Magdalena: estudio social* (1880) by Matilde Cherner. I argue that Cherner's work is a foundational and revolutionary contribution to Spanish Naturalism primarily for its narratological experimentation within the *novela lupanaria* (brothel novel) tradition. Though the novel follows some conventions of Naturalist fiction, it simultaneously resists and expands the boundaries of these conventions through innovative narrative techniques, layered narration, and an implicit critique of gender roles and patriarchal society in the novel's structure itself. Rather than merely depicting the inevitability of social determinism, *María Magdalena* interrogates it by foregrounding a female voice—albeit mediated through male narrators—and exploring the limitations imposed on women within a rigid moral and social order. Through this complex interplay of narrative voices, pseudonymity and framing devices, Cherner challenges the objective approach of Naturalist literature, introducing ambiguity and subjectivity into a genre traditionally dominated by male scientific authority. In doing so, Cherner's novel can be considered as pioneering in its own style within Spanish Naturalism.

Key words: Naturalism, novela lupanaria, Matilde Cherner, María Magdalena, narrative techniques, 19th-century Spanish literature, Rafael Luna

In this essay, I focus on analyzing the narratological innovations that structure the 19th century novel *María Magdalena: estudio social*, by Spanish author Matilde Cherner. I analyze,

specifically, the different narrative layers that make up the novel, its pseudonymous authorship and the way gender roles are intertwined in its narrative structure. Through this focus, I also show how the author manipulates narrative form to pose questions of authorship, gender and scientific authority.

This novel recounts the memoirs of María Magdalena, or Aspasia, a woman who, due to social reasons, must turn to legal prostitution to support herself. This decision leads her to despair and a subsequent death from a venereal disease. Although the plot is essentially that of a 19th century *novela lupanaria*, the work—published under the pseudonym of Rafael Luna in 1880—contains several distinctive narrative features that, together, construct a meta-literary reflection on authorship and knowledge, and that also make *María Magdalena* a pioneering example of narrative experimentation within Spanish Naturalism. Despite the importance of her work within the literary tradition of the time, as I will argue, Cherner still remains understudied in academic circles. Therefore, as a secondary though no less important objective, I also aim to shed light on Matilde Cherner's name, authorship and her importance within 19th century Spanish literature.

I now intend to examine the principal narrative devices that make this novel a stand-out case in Naturalist aesthetics. The uniqueness of this book becomes apparent from the very beginning when an authorship issue is raised: Matilde Cherner chose to publish it under the masculine pseudonym Rafael Luna. A few pages in, we discover that the body of the narrative is structured in a style of framed stories: first, we read the words of the assumed Rafael Luna (which one may or may not choose to consider as being Cherner's own words) offering a cautionary foreword to the reader; next, an anonymous narrator (who I will later argue could well be Rafael Luna) whose main interlocutor is Doctor Benavides; and finally, the memoirs of María Magdalena, the novel's protagonist and the narrator of the majority of the text. This multiplicity of narrators

entails an authorial complexity that provides a starting point for describing the technical aspects of this Matilde Cherner novel.

One implication of this narrative complexity that arises is the role that gender plays in constructing the novel, specifically in how characters are represented within the story. It is also fitting to consider how these multiple layers affect issues of authorship. What does it mean that Cherner published this novel under a male pseudonym? What are the implications of the fact that the memoirs of a woman—the novel’s central narrative—are “hidden” within a framed structure that is only accessible through the male characters that read her story? What roles do the other characters in the novel play from a gender perspective? How does Cherner represent male and female characters? Is there any correspondence between the narrative multiplicities and the gender multiplicities the novel presents? These questions guide my analysis of the relationship between authorship, mediation and gender in the text.

Considering these elements, my main argument is that *María Magdalena* stands out within Spanish Naturalism for its narratological experimentation. Through its narrative multiplicities, pseudonymous authorship, and the strategic positioning of characters and narrators, Cherner reimagines Naturalist tradition itself, transforming it into a vehicle for epistemological and gender critique. In doing so, she not only reworks the conventions of the *novela lupanaria* but also expands the possibilities of the fin-de-siècle Naturalist novel, offering a case of Naturalist acceptance but also deviation, a distinctive take on the narrative strategies that would later characterize the movement.

***María Magdalena* within Naturalism in 19th Century Spain**

I now turn to the foundational tenets of both the Naturalist and “novela lupanaria” subgenre to better contextualize the novel. At its outset, the Naturalist novel emerged at a time when

scientific methods and experimentation were on the rise. A clearly observable feature of these novels is the—almost blind—faith in science as the ultimate authority on knowledge, ethics, and morality. Fin-de-siècle novels openly embraced this quest for objectivity, frequently veering into absolutist scientism. Naturalist novels of the era would often feature protagonists with scientific backgrounds—doctors, hygienists—and other authoritative figures such as the clergy and monarchs. It is no surprise that, as Pura Fernández has noted, the “philanthropic physician,” Doctor Benavides in *María Magdalena*, functions as the means by which María Magdalena’s memoirs are interpreted, thereby becoming an authority figure who validates the female narrative (255). Likewise, there was a common, widespread conviction in determinism—especially that reinforced by the powerful influence of society—as the source of a person’s character, temperament, and ultimately behavior. However, it was not only society that was believed to cause one’s fate; genetics also played a role in determining the fate of characters in such Naturalist novels.

By adhering to those features of Naturalism, *María Magdalena* anticipates the conceptual frameworks of Émile Zola and Emilia Pardo Bazán. I will revisit some of the proposals by these two pioneers of the genre. Zola, in *The Experimental Novel*, states: “Determinism dominates everything. Scientific investigation and experimental reasoning combat, one by one, the hypotheses of the idealists and replace novels of pure imagination with novels of observation and experimentation” (40). This all-pervasive determinism can be found all throughout the novel. For instance, the anonymous interlocutor in the first chapter reflects on how adverse circumstances in María Magdalena’s life led her to prostitution: “Por la primera vez en mi vida, me puse a considerar, por su lado de vergüenza y oprobio para la sociedad que la tolera, la prostitución legal de la mujer / For the first time in my life, I began to consider—on its side of shame and disgrace for the society that tolerates it—the legal prostitution of women” (Cherner 22, translation is mine).

In this way, the author employs social determinism to illustrate how the environment and societal norms exert a direct influence on María Magdalena's fate.

In Cherner's novel, from the very first pages, it is made clear that her aim is to address the "social ulcer" of legal prostitution and to portray the protagonist as a heroine in light of "la situación triste en que la desgracia y los vicios sociales la habían colocado / the sorrowful situation into which misfortune and social vices had placed her" (6). This passage is significant because it both aligns with and departs from the approaches that Zola and Pardo Bazán would later articulate for the genre. For one, it is understood that these social vices are the root cause of the heroine's suffering. Most importantly, however, is that by tackling the subject of prostitution—legal or otherwise—the novel thematically situates itself within the fin-de-siècle Spanish tradition, which usually focused on issues that society neglected or deemed too controversial to be represented in literature.

The portrayal of events—though typical of a Naturalist novel—operates on yet more complex dimensions: Cherner "[subjects] *thought* and *passion* to the same laws that govern the fall of a rock" in order to narrate, objectively and systematically, the negative consequences that legal prostitution brings to society (Pardo Bazán 17, emphasis mine). It is, effectively, María Magdalena's memoirs that make up the main body of the novel; in other words, Cherner goes beyond depicting only external appearances. Instead, the reader encounters what is essentially an autobiography—and at times the diary—of a character, with the *thoughts* and *emotions* that will lead the protagonist to her eventual downfall. As readers, we do not observe María Magdalena's fall from outside but, instead, we are given a documentary-like view of the protagonist as she acts in her social circles. For this reason, as an early arrivée to Naturalism, the novel reveals the consequences of this "social ulcer" in a manner that is faithful to both public reality and María

Magdalena's personal, inner reality. It is, so to speak, an almost first-person look at the society of late 19th century Spain.

Cherner, however, adopts a more complex stance toward Naturalism by presenting María Magdalena as a heroine. The protagonist—a prostitute who is set to become a martyr later—might be seen as a character typical of what Zola would associate with idealistic, purely imaginative novels (41). As would occur years later with the radical Naturalists, it is possible that Cherner was employing “sensationalistic plots and lurid representations of deviant sexuality to awaken the reader’s fascination and fear” (Tsuchiya 13). If this is the case, the novel is then an ambiguous case within the Naturalist tradition, since it establishes a determinist plot from the outset yet utilizes a heroine-figure, whether to capture the reader’s attention or to lend greater force to the social critique the author intends to portray.

As a final note on Naturalism in *María Magdalena*, I turn to the way that the protagonist's memoirs are presented. The protagonist's story is read through the documents she leaves to Doctor Benavides, who assures that he has not altered “a single comma” from them (Cherner 24). This clarification is essential to Naturalist aesthetics, for as Zola asserted—citing Claude Bernard—the narrative must be a sort of photograph that captures reality's phenomena with as much detail as possible: “the observer simply and purely records the phenomena that lie before his eyes” (33). It is under this premise that we read María Magdalena's memoirs, through the documents held in possession by Doctor Benavides, within Matilde Cherner's fictional narration. This narrative technique—reminiscent of *Don Quixote's* narrative premise—gives the novel a level of complexity rarely seen in 19th-century Naturalist works. This kind of textual organization sets the stage, then, for a discussion of the novel's layered narrative structure.

A Layered Narrative

I believe one particular aspect of this novel, its narrative multiplicities, warrants closer examination. First, of course, I must clarify what is meant by narrative multiplicities: As previously mentioned, the novel includes—at a minimum—two narrative levels, though a third may also be identified. The first level is the conversation between an anonymous, homodiegetic narrator and Doctor Benavides; the second consists of Aspasia’s memoirs. These different layers of narration are what I refer to as narrative multiplicities. Before describing these two main layers, it is worth considering the possibility of a third, more ambiguous narrative layer found in the preliminary note (Foreword).

Why might this preliminary note, entitled “Dos palabras al lector” be considered a third narrative level? Just as Doctor Benavides, María Magdalena, and the other characters in her story are fictional, Rafael Luna is, in a sense—and beyond just a pseudonym—a fictional creation of Matilde Cherner. According to Fernández, Cherner “hides her boldness behind the masculine pseudonym,” which was not new for the author, since Rafael Luna was a well-known name in Madrid and Salamanca’s journalistic circles (253). Fernández also argues that the possible reasons for this pseudonym were “to avoid the aura of frivolous and lighthearted writing associated with women’s writing... but perhaps also to claim a masculine moral authority” (255). Along these lines, María de los Ángeles Rodríguez Sánchez describes the works published under the pseudonym Rafael Luna as “proto-feminist, given their defense of female identity” (“*La ilustración*” n.p.). It is therefore very likely that Rafael Luna was an editorial strategy on Cherner’s part to avoid censorship or the harsh criticism that would have fallen upon a female author daring to break into the literary sphere of Naturalism.

Nonetheless, it may be appropriate to interpret the preliminary note as a third narrative level because Rafael Luna could possibly be the same homodiegetic narrator who interacts with

Doctor Benavides. Critical studies of the novel do not delve deeply into the identity of this anonymous interlocutor. However, this section of the work provides clues that allow us to build such a hypothesis. First, although the novel contains very few gender markers, we do observe that Benavides refers to his interlocutor as male, calling him his “amigo” (Cherner 17). It would not be surprising for the time that the two individuals who receive a manuscript, carefully study it, and publish it are male. Moreover, this anonymous narrator has access to a broad audience. Referring to María Magdalena’s manuscript, the narrator makes it clear that he intends to publish it, “seguro de que causará en el ánimo de todos los lectores la profunda impresión que ha dejado en el mío / certain that it will leave on all readers the deep impression it has made on me” (24). With few exceptions, it could be fair to say that, at the time, it was easier for a male writer or journalist—someone like Rafael Luna—to reach such a wide audience. Additionally, a writer or journalist, along with a doctor, serving as narrative authority in the novel is a common trait in Naturalist fiction. If, however, this anonymous subject is understood to be female, then the case for this novel as revolutionary in the genre becomes even stronger. My hypothesis regarding this third narrative level, in sum, lies in the possibility that Cherner could be Rafael Luna not only as a protective pseudonym for herself but also, at the very least, as an inspiration for the anonymous narrator who, in the end, brings María Magdalena’s story to light and intends for her to become a martyr before Spanish society. Future research on Matilde Cherner’s authorial persona under the name Rafael Luna could further develop the hypotheses proposed here.

Another aspect that enriches Cherner’s narrative play involves the theme of identity. As can already be seen, the author makes two name changes that have both extraliterary and intranarrative implications. After manipulating authorship by adopting the name Rafael Luna, Cherner introduces a name change for her protagonist—who goes from María Magdalena to

Aspasia. What does this imply? Critical interpretations often draw on intertextual references. One interpretation by Pura Fernández is that, much like the Aspasia of Classical Greece, María Magdalena exerts a transformative force on “the mentalities of those around her, dissolves prejudices, and inspires models of social reform which, in the end, are undermined by the inertia of traditional morality” (260). Tsuchiya, for her part, argues that it is Aspasia’s courtesan education that which allows her to “transcend [the concept] of a conventional woman,” at least in the eyes of Ciro La Sierra, the male protagonist whom she initially plans to marry, in an effort to find her way of of the ulcer of prostitution (204).

Both interpretations suggest a protagonist in twofold or carrying two identities: on one hand there is María Magdalena, the victim of a society that forces her into brothel work for survival and, on the other, Aspasia, the woman who challenges the traditional notions of femininity of the time. While Naturalist narrative rarely breaks the “inertia of traditional morality,” it is worth noting that the name Aspasia transcends the narrative level of memory since, even after her death, both Doctor Benavides and his interlocutor refer to her as Aspasia, not María Magdalena. Matilde Cherner clearly understands the implications of concealing or revealing an identity, and thus, the manipulation of names in the novel does not seem to be a gratuitous decision.

In any case, what we have so far is that Matilde Cherner constructs a layered narrative complexity in the style of Cervantes, in which Aspasia’s memoirs are presented as an *objet trouvé*. This false sense of discovery may well have been, as previously suggested, a strategy to avoid censorship. As Elena Losada explains, Matilde Cherner challenged:

“[the] conservative and patriarchal discourse on femininity which they, however, transgressed through their own biographical experience. A republican, federalist, and clearly feminist, Cherner distanced herself in her ideals from the ‘ladies of respectable

liberalism' ... and instead reflected the spirit of the turbulent years of 'La Gloriosa' and the First Republic." (157, 158, translation is mine)

This suggests that the layering of narrative voices and the framing of Aspasia's story as a found manuscript were not merely stylistic choices but strategic ones, allowing Cherner to voice a feminist critique while shielding herself from the social and institutional backlash of her time.

In this way, Cherner's writing presented a feminist narrative shielded beneath the layers of the "found manuscript" and further protected by the cautionary use of a male pseudonym. It is noteworthy that Losada emphasizes how Cherner challenged the conservative and patriarchal discourse through biographical experience, especially given that much of Rafael Luna's body of work was dedicated to women. Even before publishing *María Magdalena*, Cherner was known to write news articles and opinion pieces for the magazine *La ilustración de la mujer*, which—though not always overtly ideological—did adopt a critical and liberal stance, often addressing the situation of women's rights and education ("La ilustración" n.p.).

However, when publishing *María Magdalena*—a book addressing a matter of great social importance in Spain and that, had it been published in another country, might have reached the world—it becomes clearer why Cherner used the pseudonym Rafael Luna (Cherner 5). Indeed, by using the masculine veil of Luna as a shield, Cherner expresses her social critique as she denounces the moral and legal authority of her time—a system deeply rooted in scientific narratives that naturally sought to privilege men and that perpetrated the idea of a society in which women were expected to embody the ideal of the "angel of the household". This theme of gender roles, fundamental to the novel, will be explored in further detail in the following section.

Gender Roles within Narrative Layers

Let us now return to the topic of gender roles. Just as Cherner plays with narrative multiplicity, she also juxtaposes different perspectives on femininity and masculinity—perspectives which align with the Naturalist worldview of the nineteenth century, and others that present alternative stances, thus offering a more nuanced writing within Naturalism, particularly regarding the role of women. In the following paragraphs, I will analyze how femininity and masculinity are portrayed in instances such as María Magdalena’s actions as narrated by her, Ciro La Sierra’s perception of the protagonist and Doctor Benavides’s interpretation of her memoirs.

Gender roles, as has been extensively discussed, have been reckoned to be performative by nature. As Judith Butler explains in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, gender is not a tangible thing but rather a set of expressions constructed through performance; in other words, “gender is always doing” (25). In this way, Butler’s notion of gender as performance provides a useful lens through which we can read the novel, since the characters’ performances become intertwined with the novel’s notion of narrative authority. Additionally, the characters’ actions and enacted thoughts—their way of “doing” gender—will allow us to see characteristics that, when compared to culturally constructed frameworks rooted in the sex/gender binary, reveal a gender identity that we can interpret and describe (Butler 137).

What gender roles can be identified in María Magdalena/Aspasia? To answer this, we must return to the context of the nineteenth century. The determinist and scientific discourse found in literature at the time privileged the male gender, as men were thought to be naturally less susceptible to “genetic defects” and to the unfortunate fates that befell women. As Tsuchiya has explained, the Spanish and French literary traditions of the fin-de-siècle period relied on a binary conception of gender, and Cherner’s work emerges, in fact, as a challenge to this Naturalist

approach to representation (193). On the other hand, it is necessary to consider the concept of the “angel of the household,” associated mainly with bourgeois female identity. This ideal portrayed the woman as a muse, an inspiration, a pure spirit who led the care and maintenance of the home—both physically and emotionally—in contrast to the hysterical woman of the lower classes, who was expected to fulfill her husband’s sexual and reproductive needs (Aldaraca 59). Let us first, then, begin to interpret the gender roles played by the novel’s protagonist.

María Magdalena is introduced as Aspasia and only when she has already died. It is also inferred that her death is due to a venereal disease that she contracts as a result of her work (Cherner 11). It is interesting that the story is framed within the male-centered perspective of the anonymous narrator and Dr. Benevides. As has been mentioned, the naturalist novel tends to present the male figure in a position of moral and political authority. In contrast, women are portrayed as mortal victims of a patriarchal society, as is the case with María Magdalena and her mother. In this passage, Cherner paints a vivid image of the decay in which their lives take place:

"Nosotras verificábamos al ver acercarse la hora de nuestra total ruina, *sin procurar hacer nada para detenerla* ... Pero si se reflexiona que yo no tenía más que trece años, y que mi madre, aunque jóven, se hallaba enferma y abatida, *víctima de su educación y sus costumbres*, no pudiendo soportar ni aun la idea de sujetarse al trabajo, á la servidumbre, tal vez se convierta en lástima y conmiseración el sentimiento de reproche que al pronto inspire nuestra *inercia* / We verified as the hour of our total ruin approached, *without trying to do anything to stop it* ... But if one reflects that I was only thirteen years old, and that my mother, although young, was sick and dejected, *a victim of her education and her customs*, unable to bear even the idea of submitting to work, to servitude, perhaps the feeling of reproach our *inertia* initially inspires may turn into pity and commiseration."

(Cherner 37, emphasis mine)

Early in its pages, the novel paints the scene of the decay and eventual death of María Magdalena's mother as an unsolvable problem for women. The role of women is, rather, determined by the society in which they live. Therefore, it is understandable why the character of María Magdalena is presented as a lifeless woman, deprived of agency in the face of the misery that befalls her because she is a woman in this society and because she lacks a patriarchal figure who ensures the well-being of the household.

It is not surprising, in fact, that critics have identified that it is the male figure who “holds the key” to interpreting the protagonist's autobiographical account. It is the man who, through his actions—unlike the lifeless María Magdalena—sets out to publish her novel and subject her to scientific knowledge and experimentation (Tsuchiya 197). Male identity, in the case of Dr. Benavides and his interlocutor, is what determines the course of action for what remains of this woman—namely, the reinterpretation of her writings and her life by men who represent and monopolize access to scientific and official discourse. This could be the reason why María Magdalena, as desirous as she is to abandon her life in the brothel, lacks the agency to do so: “

No sé, en fin, si por oculto instinto, resolví abandonar el pasivo papel que hasta entonces me habían impuesto. Quizá solo desde aquel punto principié á ser culpable. Quizá desde el día que así pensé, añadí a la culpa de hecho la de consentimiento / I do not know, in short, if by some hidden instinct, I resolved to abandon the passive role that had been imposed on me until then. Perhaps only from that moment did I begin to be guilty. Perhaps from the day I thought that way, I added to the guilt of action the guilt of consent” (Cherner 70).

Up to this point, we see no shift in the typical gender roles set forth in 19th-century society, as men continued to hold a position of authority and control—especially over women, according to

the era's social determinism.

However, it is precisely this subordinated position that allows Matilde Cherner to carry out a social critique of legal prostitution and, by extension, of the gender roles introduced at the beginning. María Magdalena, even in her inferiority, chooses to oppose the status quo of the gender identity assigned to her, as she had “la horrible idea ... de devolver al mundo el daño que me había hecho ... vengarme en los hombres, a los que su corrupción y desenfreno hacían mis esclavos / the horrible idea... of returning to the world the harm it had done to me... to take revenge on men, whose corruption and debauchery made them my slaves” (Cherner 70, 71). I believe this marks the beginning of what Elena Losada identifies as a “profound critique of the middle class and its pre-established gender roles,” since from the brothel she goes on to live with Ciro La Sierra, in whom we see an initial approach to how María Magdalena might challenge the concept of both feminine and masculine identity. A man of traditional values representing the official and patriarchal discourse of morality, Ciro undergoes a gradual transformation in his concept of femininity. At first,

La Sierra, tan excéntrico y original como es, ha incurrido en la manía de creer á las mujeres seres inferiores, incapaces é indignos de interesar nuestro corazón, y mucho ménos nuestro pensamiento; por esto huye de ellas sistemáticamente, y solo cuando la imprescindible necesidad le obliga, concede que las mujeres pueden ser útiles para algo ... No ve en la mujer la compañera del hombre, su media alma que dicen los poetas, y sí solo la hembra. / La Sierra, as eccentric and original as he is, has fallen into the obsession of believing that women are inferior beings, incapable and unworthy of engaging our hearts, and even less so our minds; this is why he systematically avoids them, and only when absolutely necessary does he concede that women might be useful for something... He does not see in

a woman the companion of man, his soul's other half as the poets say, but merely the female. (Cherner 88, 89)

Ciro's view evidently assigns less importance to women than of the traditional "angel of the household" as he is largely indifferent towards them and seeks them out only to satisfy carnal desires. However, as his relationship with María Magdalena deepens, Ciro's transformation becomes increasingly evident. So much so that by the end of their relationship—when María Magdalena decisively returns to Salamanca, allowing Ciro to marry his cousin in obedience to his father and to preserve the family's social status—we witness a shift in his perception of her. When a friend of Ciro's speaks of his cousin, he refers to her as an angel of the household in nearly every sense: "huérfana, rica, de tu misma familia, adorable, encantadora ... un ángel, en fin / an orphan, wealthy, from your own family, adorable, charming... an angel, in short," to which Ciro replies: "¿Y me querrás decir de qué sirven los ángeles en... la tierra? / And will you tell me what use angels are on... earth?" (Cherner 212).

Clearly, Ciro's perception of women has changed, thus revealing the subjectivity and contingent nature of gender identity, as it always depends on a context through which the differences between masculine and feminine are judged (Butler 137). The identity he once judged as feminine, that which he assigned to María Magdalena, has shifted from that of an "angel of the household" to that of a woman who is not necessarily "wealthy" or "charming." I return, then, to Fernández's observation regarding the name Aspasia, as she is indeed a "transformative force" capable of questioning the prevailing prejudices and dominant models of a traditional society and morality and producing social transformation (260).

One of the factors behind this transformation is the fact that María Magdalena is intelligent and talented, which, according to Tsuchiya, eventually leads Ciro to overcome his own misogyny

(88). Without a doubt, María Magdalena's education was essential in challenging the image of the "angel of the household," a fact made evident, for instance, by her fascination with books—particularly *Don Quixote*. The "medico-social" narrative of the time considered the reading of fantastical literature as harmful and dangerous to women's minds. However, there is no evidence that this was the case for María Magdalena; on the contrary, she demonstrates an intellectual rather than emotional interest in books, since these works "revelarán el por qué de mi miseria [y] ... darán fijeza y lucidez á mis descarriadas ideas / will reveal the reason for my misery [and] ... give fixity and clarity to my misguided thoughts," thus opposing the traditional narrative of woman as "angel of the household" (Cherner 74). Moreover, the passages about *Ciro*, his cousin, and María Magdalena can also be read as Matilde Cherner's critique of arranged marriages, which often perpetuated gender stereotypes (Rodríguez Sánchez 376). Cherner, then, critically positions herself against a society built on a dominant male identity that, knowingly or not, harmed women by establishing and reinforcing stereotypes such as that of the "angel of the household." In making the case for the revolutionary nature of this novel, Cherner gives depth and nuance to the characters of *Ciro* and María Magdalena—unlike one-dimensional characters often found in Naturalism—in order to develop more complex gender perspectives and challenge the dominant ideologies of late 19th-century society.

This gender interplay also complicates the question of agency within the novel. We cannot say with full certainty to what extent María Magdalena/Aspasia acts as an agent of change beyond the confines of her memoir. It is worth remembering that the protagonist's story is only validated through a male perspective. Metaphorically speaking, it is the male authorities—Dr. Benavides and the autonomous narrator—who hold "the key" to unlocking this woman's autobiographical account (Tsuchiya 197). In a sense, and drawing on the positivist narrative of the time, their

analysis of Aspasia's memoirs—of the “pluma femenina”—is an extension of the autopsy Dr. Benavides performs on the protagonist (Cherner 23). The woman remains, so to speak, an object of study for the scientific production of knowledge, a discourse that is homogeneously male. Even so, it is still worth asking why Cherner assigns this “male gaze” to the analysis of a narrative that is so deeply critical of women's conditions and of prostitution. My interpretation, however, continues to align more with the possibility of an editorial strategy: through this interplay of authorship and narrative layers, Cherner weaves complex gender identities that deviate from the norm and thereby sustains her critique—while also promoting her work under a “great name,” that of the already well-known Rafael Luna.

In conclusion, *Maria Magdalena* exemplifies how Matilde Cherner used narrative form as a site of innovation and critique within Spanish Naturalism, making it a special case that should be looked at in more detail. Through her use of multiple narrators, framed storytelling and pseudonymous authorship, Cherner transforms the *novela lupanaria* from a genre of mostly social documentation and analysis into one of narrative experimentation. The novel's layered structure—linking author, narrator and protagonist—reveals how questions of gender and authority are embedded in narrative form itself. By relying on the novel's narrative multiplicities as both technique and critique, Cherner thus transcends Naturalist conventions of objectivity and authority while maintaining its deep observational gaze. The narrative multiplicity—whether in authorship, narrators, or textual levels—becomes, therefore, a literary device that helps us to appreciate how Cherner leaves her mark within the *novela lupanaria*, anticipating the founding works of both mainstream Naturalism and the more Radical Naturalist movement in Spain.

Moreover, these narratological multiplicities extend into the novel's portrayal of gender roles. More than just a critique of the century's patriarchal society, Cherner constructs complex

characters who both change and inspire change in others—as seen in the transformation of María Magdalena into Aspasia and the effect this has on Ciro’s initially misogynistic worldview. These narrative techniques allow Cherner to explore, as has been shown, the dynamics of gender and society while also offering a nuanced representation of the discourses surrounding the naturalist novel.

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