

Visions of the Green Fairy: Gendered Absinthe Consumption in Modernista Poetry

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As the drink and muse of the *poètes maudits*, absinthe emerged in *modernista* poetry as both a stock image and script within a *modernista* repertoire of creative borrowing and “drinking” from past literary sources. Absinthe and associated images activate the literary memes of thirst, vessel, and inspiration, and can be grouped with a more generalized trope of the glass. Critics Miguel Gomes and Andrew Brown, for example, consider absinthe consumption along with the wine glass and other drinking imagery in their respective examinations of the rhetoric of drinking and influence in *modernismo*. I contend that absinthe can be differentiated from wine as a mode of indexing intoxicating artistic experiences, and this article probes the gender and consumerist performativity of *modernista* poetics that “muse” and stage the drinking of absinthe. In particular, I draw links between the visual culture of absinthe and the ways that two *modernista* poets employ the drink to enact gendered lyricism. Comparing Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera’s absinthe-themed poetry and Delmira Agustini’s repurposing of masculinist drinking tropoi, I make a case for rethinking *modernismo*’s drinking imagery as a gendered repertoire shaped by both the aestheticization and erotics of commodity consumption as well as the inebriated imagination and creativity associated with *modernismo*’s Romantic forbearers.

I begin with a discussion of the development of absinthe as a commodity and its visual representations in turn of the century art and commercial posters before turning to Nájera’s rendering of the glass trope in two lyric poems “El hada verde” and “Para un menú.” As an elegy dedicated to “martyred” French Romantic poet Alfred Musset, “El hada verde” represents the death of the poet as a product of his seduction by his “Green Fairy” rather than portraying him as

a victim of his own abuse of absinthe. Nájera's bohemian imaginary is then contrasted with the figure of the consumer and the connoisseurial sensibilities of the dandy in "Para un menú," whose lyric subject consumes liquor and women alike. After analyzing Nájera's poetry, I consider Delmira Agustini's treatment of the glass trope in "Mis amores" and the image of the vampire in "El vampiro." After synthesizing the import of these poems in relation to "El poeta y la diosa," I present a reading of the seduction scene between poet and muse, wherein he is offered absinthe. I hold that Agustini's "El poeta y la diosa" offers a critical lens by which to scrutinize the canonical encounter with the muse. Specifically, Delmira pushes the aestheticization and erotics of consumption and intoxication towards a collapse of the *modernista* performance of masculinity and aesthetic taste present in Nájera's poems.

ABSINTHE'S APPEAL: FROM FRENCH SYMBOLISTS TO LATIN AMERICAN MODERNISTAS

The mystic quality of absinthe celebrated by Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, and Alfred de Musset among others, came from its capacity to bestow creativity through synaesthetic perception of reality. Its distinct form of inebriation and its aesthetic appeal were the two key factors in its popularized consumption during the late nineteenth century. Instead of dulling the senses, the bizarre clarity of absinthe consumption freed the imagination and allowed a perception of a sensuous harmonious universe by experiencing all sensations at once.¹ Such a perception across the senses fed and helped sustain the "conceptual framework for synaesthesia" of both symbolist and *modernistas* as it "encourage[d] interplay among the graphic, verbal, and auditory arts, and the appearance of poetic structures based on music or painting" (Jrade, "Modernism" 13). Drawn to the French cultural connotations of absinthe, *modernistas* sought to replicate the aesthetic encounter and consumption of the so-called Green Fairy, as the drink was termed and rendered through both commercial and artistic visual culture.

Painters such as Eduard Manet, Albert Maignan, Pablo Picasso, and others also documented what Doris Lanier considers "the great collective binge" of absinthe that occurred between 1880 and 1914 (1). On the cultural and celebrity circuit, stage and early film actress, Sarah Bernhardt and her partner did their part to popularize the drink

by appearing in colorful advertisements with glasses in hand extolling its virtues (Lanier 13). While symbolist poetry portrayed the mesmerizing (and sometimes terrifying) qualities of the Green Fairy, artistic visual representations tended to reflect the counter-narrative of a troubled social reality impacted by the drink. By displaying either the figurations of the Green Fairy as “a seductive and treacherous crippler of man” as can be seen in Maignan’s “La muse verte” or the stolid and sick faces of absinthe drinkers depicted by Manet and Picasso, these painters represented the absinthism that realist novels and newspapers condemned as “slowly poisoning the nation and causing the race to degenerate” (28). For example, Picasso’s “Absinthe Drinker” is one of several paintings within his blue period that depicts the physical misery and muted psychological despondency that accompanied absinthism, especially as it related to the lower working and bohemian classes. Whereas Picasso’s painting emphasizes the physical deterioration and premature death associated with the drink, Maignan’s painting (Fig. 1) possesses a narrative quality that reveals the drink’s fatal fascination as the tormented poet—his writings awash on the floor—is seduced, enveloped and possessed by his muse, the Green Fairy.

The literary and visual encounter with the Green Fairy reproduced a figural form of femininity to which it would attribute its genius and entrapment, evincing masculine anxieties of a dwindling seminal economy while absinthe’s feminine mystic was commodified through advertisements. For example, both the Robette Absinthe poster (Fig. 2) as well as Maignan’s painting envision the absinthe goddess/muse/fairy wearing post-Victorian fashion, where the female body was taken out of the constrictive hourglass corset and made “larger-than life” in the S-shape “Junoesque curves” of Art Nouveau/Edwardian fashion (Steele 218). The sumptuous image of the Green Fairy utilized in art and commercial representations took the form of a fair woman beautifully draped in chiffon-like fabric, reminiscent of Robette Absinthe’s iconic 1896 poster. This type of transparent and delicate attire, as Valerie Steele explains, was part of the ideal feminine image, which projected “not only magnificence and splendour [. . .] but also exquisite daintiness and *froufrou* seductiveness” (ibid). The construction of the absinthe muse as Janus-faced—with its creative allure and its capacity to enslave and destroy, drew from its material and symbolic transformative properties. The drink’s physical morphing from its original green color to an opalescent milky green and the

ornate *louche* preparation dagger were translated into a visual and literary imaginary that fused woman, drink, and poetic inspiration, as well as the peril of emasculation.²

Fin de siècle posters similar to those of Robette and Terminus absinthe, according to Jill Carrick, promoted the development of commodity-oriented culture in the late nineteenth century by ‘naturally’ linking the signs of woman and art to commodities through an aestheticization that eschewed the female experience. Aesthetic language, as a “formal system of abstract visual signs” of beauty, prestige, value, and desirability were “applied to a given ‘product, its packaging, surroundings and [. . .] the posters themselves’ in order to create commodity fetish (Carrick 112). The fetishistic aura of absinthe, for example, connoted “not only value and spirituality, but the ‘distinction’ and cultural connoisseurship of the buyer” as seen in Sarah Bernhardt’s promotion of Terminus absinthe (ibid). As such the sign of woman in these absinthe posters as well as its anti-absinthe propaganda (Fig. 3) amounted to a symbolic manipulation that consigned the “female sign” into a dominant exchange system within patriarchal power relations.³ Lost in the fetishistic aura of the posters were female experience and subjectivity; in their place, “formulas of femininity” were systematized and circulated on an unprecedented scale (119). These posters and paraphernalia, styled in Art Nouveau’s aesthetic, helped bridge pre-industrial imagery (i.e. nature, myth, pagan tradition) with the emerging commodification of the drink.

DRINKING (TO) THE MUSE: NÁJERA’S SCRIPTS OF MALE CONSUMPTION

The drinking glass trope in Nájera’s poetry displays, on the one hand, a fraternal lament of absinthism, and on the other, a supercilious hyper-masculinity constructed through its connoisseurial prowess. Nájera’s contradictory poetic scripts are products of the *modernista* internal conflict that critics such as Catherine Jrade and Priscilla Pearsall have detailed. Once located squarely within the Romantic tradition, recent scholarship has re-examined Nájera’s *precursor modernista* poetics, revealing how the poet partook in the decadent aesthetics he explicitly denounced in his earlier poetry. For instance, both “El hada verde (Canción del bohemio)” and “Para un menú,” from his 1888 collection *Ala y abismo*, evince the Baudelairean decadence he repudiated for inhibiting the artist’s creative freedom

by holding it captive to exterior reality. Specifically, the drink and the performance of masculine consumption constructs a poetic subject that vacillates between estrangement and camaraderie just as it wavers between genius and victimhood and dandy libertine in its encounter with woman as a drink commodity.

Written twenty years after Baudelaire's "Poison," where the wicked effects of absinthe trump those of opium and wine, Nájera's "El hada verde (Canción del bohemio)" recreates Baudelaire's horrific encounter with the muse/drink through a collective lament of the poet's vocation as torment, enslavement, and death at the hands of the Green Fairy.⁴ The poem's parenthetical title "Canción del bohemio" emphasizes the sense of belonging to a brotherhood of *poètes maudits* through its identification with French poet Alfred Musset, subject of its eulogy. Yet, as Eliana Rivero notes, the poem's object/subject is tripartite according to three imprecations implicit in the lyric subject's "tú:" the fever, the muse and Musset.

¡En tus abismos, negros y rojos,
fiebre implacable mi alma se pierde,
 y en tus abismos miro los ojos,
 los verdes ojos del hada verde!
 Es nuestra musa glauca y sombría,
 la copa rompe, la lira quiebra,
 y a nuestro cuello se enrosca impía
 como culebra!
 Llegas y nos dice: —¡Soy el olvido,
 yo **tus dolores** aliviaré!
 Y entre sus brazos, siempre dormido,
 yace Musset.
 ¡Oh, musa verde! **Tú la que flotas**
 en nuestras vidas enardecidas,
 tú la que absorbes, tú la que agotas
 almas y vidas.
 En las pupilas concupiscencia;
 juego en la mesa donde se pierde
 con el dinero, vida y conciencia,
 en nuestras copas, eres demencia
 ¡oh, musa verde! Son ojos verdes los que buscamos,
 verde el tapete donde jugué,

verdes absintios los que apuramos,
 y verde el sauce que colocamos
 en **tu sepulcro, pobre Musset.**

(Gutiérrez Nájera 262-3, emphasis mine)

She notes that “los tres interlocutores están ciertamente unidos en el significado simbólico de la composición—el “hada” mora en los abismos de la fiebre, que son imagen y remedo de la muerte y olvido en que está sepultado el lírico” (130). This unification between fever, fairy/muse, and Musset, is also suffused symbolically through Nájera’s employment of color as we see in the poems final verses: “son ojos verdes los que buscamos, / verde el tapete donde jugué, / verdes absintios los que apuramos, / y verde el sauce” (lines 22-25). Paradoxically, this sense of fraternity between poets besieged by the demented genius wrought by absinthe is constructed as a shared alienation, a poetic isolation, wherein the poet rehearses his alienation from reality, echoing a familiar script of poetic disenchantment.

Between the fairy’s eyes and the tree (“verde el sauce”), we find clues of this alienating reality in the green rug and absinthe, which metonymically construct the homosocial space of the gambling hall. Both rug and drink create the interior space of congregation between the lyric subject, Musset, his implicit male readership, and the seductive and inimical muse. With the exception of the rug that links specifically to the lyric subject, all other verbs in the final stanza underline the collective partaking and affliction of fever, the drink, and mourning of the deceased poet. Both Nájera and Musset died as a result of their alcoholism, an association between his elegiac song and his own destiny. Despite the collective suffering that the lyric subject melodramatically bemoans, the fever that afflicts these men is not solely related to their physical and mental degeneration (“demencia”) but to what was perceived as the entrapment of man by the sexualized women, rarefied here into the muse/fairy. As such fever becomes a pathology that attenuates male strength (as well as his “dinero, vida y conciencia”). This affliction, as an insatiable passion, foregrounds the values of bohemia with its sentimental and destitute appeals, hinting at both the creative heights and social costs of such a discourse and the dandyesque squander of money and life on all things pretty and frivolous.

In turning to “Para un menú,” we find a radical turn from the lamentation of Nájera’s bohemian song to the robust pronouncements

of a lyric subject modeled after the unassailable figure of the dandy. In terms of *topoi*, thirst, wine and glass are intermixed with that of love with a cynical bent that subverts the melancholic tone of the poem's opening verses.

Las novias pasadas son copas vacías;
 en ellas pusimos un poco de amor;
 el néctar tomamos. . . huyeron los días. . .
 ¡Traed otras copas con nuevo licor!

Champán son las rubias de cutis de azalia;
 Borgoña los labios de vivo carmín;
 los ojos oscuros son vino de Italia,
 los verdes y claros son vino del Rhin.

Las bocas de grana son húmedas fresas;
 las negras pupilas escancian café;
 son ojos azules las llamas traviesas,
 que trémulas corren como almas del té.

La copa se apura, la dicha se agota;
 de un sorbo tomamos mujer y licor. . .
 Dejemos las copas. . . ¡Si queda una gota,
 que beba el lacayo las heces de amor!
 (Gutiérrez Nájera 274)

As such the initial correspondences in the poem lament the state of past girlfriends as empty glasses (vessels), into which the lyric speaker enjoined by his male readership poured love and from which they reap and drink the nectar of said affections. From there, the lyric subject takes to his central task of cataloging his past conquests in terms of a connoisseurial menu of wines, which links each woman's phenotype ("rubia de cutis azalia") to her geographical origin (Champagne, France). Blonde hair and fair skin of the supposed former mistress resembles the pale hue of champagne and signal her as French. While those of dark eyes stand in for wine from the darker recesses of Europe, which due to his rejection of Spain, may correspond to Italy.⁵ What had seemed a sustained affair of luxurious partaking of wine and love in the first stanza ("el néctar tomamos. . . huyeron los

días. . .”), where time is fleeting in the midst of savoring the pleasures of liquor and women, shifts into an emphasis on the fleeting nature of that pleasure in the last stanza as the male lyric subject directs his accompanying readership to leave behind the wine glasses (and women) to look for “dicha” elsewhere. The exclamatory final statement of “¡Si queda una gota, / que beba el lacayo las heces de amor!” scornfully and callously bequeaths the remaining drops of liquor that represent the despoiled remains of love to the “lacayo” or waiter to finish off the dregs of the lyric subject’s conquests. Gomes describes the poem as “una aleación del motivo de la copa del mal amor” that emphasizes love’s frivolity and supports hedonistic pleasure over than of mourning the disappearance of the ephemeral (465). The drinking glass theme also recalls the *carpe diem* tradition, since it links the transitory nature of pleasure produced by the drink to the beauty of the young women that have yielded their nectar to the poet-suitor.

By representing women as consumable beverage (wine, coffee, tea), as a part of the leisurely activity of the privileged class of the *mundo burgués* as seen in “Para un menú,” Nájera portrays a dandy-esque variant of masculinity, which finds in women nothing distressing other than an insufferable *ennui*. The second stanza clearly demonstrates this metaphor of woman as consumable object (fresa, café, té) while it illustrates how her lips and eyes break with propriety and evinces her willingness to be taken and consumed. This is contrasted, of course, with “El hada verde” where Nájera is not detailing the colors and bemusing of the everyday found in “Para un menú” but is instead joining an all-male chorus of elegiac wailers within the realm of Romantic despondency. Here, Nájera associates the feminine with the highly destructive absinthe drink. The powers of the muse are—in Nájera’s imagination—a product of her contradictory nature as simultaneously the source of greatness and inspiration and the destructive abyss of death to which his lineage of *poètes maudits* succumbed. It is necessary that the muse be inextricably linked with absinthe since the drink communicated a symbolic synesthetic spectrum that *modernismo* so desired to tap, drain, and possess as its own.

These two poems represent two seemingly contradictory artistic lyric subjects that hint at ways that Nájera responds to the assault on the principle of art for art’s sake by the ever-encroaching reach of commodification. As previously mentioned, the lyric subject of “Para un menú” is closely associated with the dandy, while “El hada

verde” invokes a bohemian poetic speaker. Class implicitly differentiates the drinking behaviors of these two lyric subjects: the dandy and the bohemian. The dandy possesses the economic means by which to become a cultural producer without literary professionalization. He participates in the market as connoisseur, producing and espousing “taste” through consumption and appraisal of symbolic and material commodities, such as we see in “Para un menú.” Conversely, the bohemian rejects the degradation of art implicit in its professionalization, embracing, at least rhetorically, the romantic valor of voluntary destitution in its championing of art for art’s sake. In “El hada verde (Canción del bohemio),” the poet ensnared in the arms the green muse, both romantically sacrifices his life and in the decadent sense also wagers his existence on the delirious artistic potency of absinthe, visually evoking Maignan’s “La muse verte.” The simultaneously emerging orders of capitalism and democratization of the period affected the rebelliousness of the individuated pursuits of bohemian *poet maudits* and dandy alike. Scornful of the constraints on their art by the tasteless dictatorial economic power of the *rey burgues, modernista* poetics conceived of itself as estranged from bourgeois society and capitalist modes of production. In contrast, the figure of the dandy was free to devote himself to a process of self-perfection, a “creación de su propio personaje, de su persona como producto artístico” (Bruña Bragado 64). However, this cultivation of personal originality, where the dandy “se deshumaniza para construirse en una mercancía,” illustrates the convergence of aestheticization and commodification (63). “Para un menú” displays the dandy as possessing the power to enter and exit homosocial space as well as the female body structured as an imaginary menu that only temporarily satisfies his taste for liquor and women. This consumption of drink and woman amounts to a masculine reinvention of vampirism in dandy-guise. Thus, without being wholly possessed as Musset by the seductive abyss of absinthe/woman, the dandy enters and exits, leaving woman and glass drained in his wake.

DESTABILIZING GENDER AND INGESTION: AGUSTINI’S GREEN VAMPIRE

Credited with appropriating the complex and paradoxical language of *modernismo*, Delmira Agustini’s poetry altered *modernismo*’s sexual metaphors and reflected her exploration of the nature of writing,

desire, and her place in the artistic landscape. Patricia Varas characterizes Agustini's subversive poetics as a powerful gendered hybrid, while Jade's book-length study of the poet calls attention to Agustini's dialogue with the movement's leader, Rubén Darío.⁶ Both critics emphasize the poet's employment and transformation of monstrous representations of women including vampires, serpents, and free-floating heads. These revised tropes figure as a critical engagement with the literary and cultural world that straitjacketed not only women's writing but also their bodies (in corsets) under the patriarchal sway of what Jill Carrick calls "formulas of femininity," pervasive in turn of the century visual culture.

Agustini's poetry contains numerous examples of the drinking glass trope, since the trope is prevalent in *modernista* verse to which she constantly responds. Adapting the figure of the glass proves to be a fertile metaphorical link between poetic inspiration and woman that Agustini resignifies. As previously mentioned, Gomes points to Agustini in his examination of the nature of *modernismo's* imitative originality as a product of the rhetorical employment of this trope. Granting Agustini a unique space within the *modernista* canon, Gomes finds that the poetess's verses presents "una inversión—sexual y tonal—del menú de Gutiérrez Nájera" (466). Her posthumous poem "Mis amores," according to Gomes, displays the woman not as a passive object captured and possessed by the male poet—"presa del cazador, copa que hay que apurar, licor, carne"—but rather it is she who possesses and catalogues men.

Hoy han vuelto.
 Por todos los senderos de la noche han venido
 a llorar en mi lecho.
 ¡Fueron tantos, son tantos!

 Ellos me dieron sed de todas esas bocas. . .
 de todas esas bocas que florecen en mi lecho:
 vasos rojos o pálidos de miel o de amargura,
 con lises de armonía o rosas de silencio
 de todos esos vasos donde bebí la vida,
 de todos esos vasos donde la muerte bebo . . .
 El jardín de sus bocas venenoso, embriagante,
 en donde respiraba sus almas y sus cuerpos,

.
 ha rodeado mi lecho [. . .]
 (qtd. in Gomes 466)

The female lyric subject transforms men into beautified glasses as she enumerates their contents and ornamentation: “vaso rojos o pálidos de miel o de amargura / con lises de armonía o rosas de silencio” (6-7). In contrast to Nájera’s “Para un menú,” the various substances of these men transformed into glasses are not beverage products but rather intangible qualities such as silence, life, and death. Gomes’s perfunctory analysis of “Mis amores” overlooks the vampiric desire that Agustini pursues in the poem, where the red or pale glasses suggest glasses of blood and/or pale vessels drained of their sweetness or their bitterness. Playing with sexual communion and vampiric predation, Agustini’s consumption of (male) lovers is not within the realm of commodities, but rather at the intersection of gothic and scientific discourses that posited a degenerative nature of female sexuality.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the vampire had come to represent woman as the personification of everything negative that linked sex, ownership, and money. According to Bram Dijkstra, biology and medicine “used Darwin’s discoveries to transform the scattershot gender conflicts of earlier centuries into a ‘scientifically grounded’ exposé of female sexuality as a source of social disruption and ‘degeneration’” (“Evil Sisters” 3). The anthropomorphized mating rituals of the insect and animal world constructed monstrous images of human sexuality as a gendered battle between civilized male order and the destructive natural state of woman. Even the seemingly saintly, sexually inhibited woman was deemed a “latent vampire” and a “biological terrorist out to deplete the creative energies of every civilized male” (4). As such, female sexuality was perceived as a threat to the seminal economy of the prevailing order. The vampire represented the sexualized woman intent on depleting men, by diverting him from the ideal and seminal economic continence; such thirst, hunger, desire to drain was explained biologically as an impulse to restore the energies and blood women lost through menstruation (“Idols of Perversity” 239). Agustini’s poetics draws from these monstrous representations of women to disrupt this misogynist imaginary of the encounter with the feminized Ideal. Her subversive staging of the gendered encounter between poet and muse, lyric subject and its object, male and female,

is motivated by the desire for rapprochement and the quelling of anxieties over the exhaustion of poetic energies.

In the poem “El vampiro” from *Cantos de la mañana* (1910), Agustini’s turning the tables on her male oppressor is at its most explicit. Like “Mis amores,” this modified sonnet projects the female lyric subject’s identification with the vampire in her addressment to her lover/poet. Jade compares the poetess’s vampirism with the creative cannibalism of Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifiesto Antropófago* (1928). By claiming the identity of vampire, Agustini no longer discursively negates a dependent status imitative relation with *modernista* precursors and Darío. Instead, her poem attempts to purge and resignify the figure of the vampire away from its traditional and male-centric negative aspects to transform it into a signifier of female experience from a woman’s perspective. Adriana Gordillo views the poet’s adoption of feminine supernatural figures as having the effect of reassessing and opening a window into sexuality from the perspective of that new woman capable of questioning the bourgeois foundations from the same imaginary that gave it its form through fear and negation (96).

En el regazo de la tarde triste
Yo invoqué tu dolor. . . Sentirlo era
Sentirte el corazón! Palideciste
Hasta la voz, tu párpados de cera,

Bajaron. . . y callaste. . . Pareciste
Oír pasar la Muerte. . . Yo que abriera
Tu herida mordí en ella — ¿me sentiste? —
Como en el oro de un panal mordiera!

Y exprimí más, traidora, dulcemente
Tu corazón herido mortalmente,
Por la cruel daga rara y exquisita
De un mal sin nombre, hasta sangrarlo en llanto!
Y las mil bocas de mi sed maldita
Tendí a esa fuente abierta en tu quebranto.

¿Por qué fui tu vampiro de amargura?
¿Soy flor o estirpe de una especie oscura

Que come llagas y que bebe el llanto?
 (Agustini *Poesías completas* 186)

“El vampiro” revisits the predatory scene of vampiric seduction invoked in Baudelaire’s “The Vampire” and “The Metamorphoses of the Vampire.” For example, she mirrors certain aspects of these poems that focus on the lyric subject’s victimhood, his imprisonment and impotency (“Sudden as a knife you thrust into my sorry heart”) (“The Vampire” lines 1-2), with “Tu corazón herido / mortalmente, / Por la cruel daga rara y exquisita / De un mal sin nombre” (lines 11-13). Yet, she radically departs from the cold-blooded victimizer perspective with her query of “¿me sentiste?” that displaces the masculine horror of violence and depletion with an implicit accusation of callous insensitivity to her attempts at communion (line 7). The “dollification” of the male lover (“tu párpados de cera”), often cited as a playful *posmodernista* exaggeration *modernismo*’s poetics, here becomes play in the hands of the female lyric subject, who despite this does not seek diversion or the reduction of the male subject into a plaything. Rather, she enjoins that their bond be felt (“¿me sentiste?”). The gendered consumption here is underlined by a series of active verbs (*invoqué* tu dolor, tu herida *mordí, exprimí*. . .tu corazón herido, *tendí* a esa fuente abierta en tu / quebranto”) that are softened by its intimate tone, where despite affection (“dulcemente”), bitterness and enmity persist in the paradigm of vampiric consumption.

Both “Mis amores” and “El vampiro” contest the oppressive social perceptions that envisioned independent women as sexual predators bent on “depleting men’s vitality and their economic potency as well as [their] seminal fluids” (Jrade, “Vampiric Seduction” 94). Moreover, these two poetic examples demonstrate Agustini’s defiant alliance with these monstrous “male-created images of female rebelliousness and disobedience” (*ibid.*). However, before Agustini’s lyric evolved its asserted resistance and its ingenious co-opted *modernista* discourse, her desire to write and enter the literary arena took its first initial steps in her first poem collection, *El libro blanco (Frágil)* (1907). As part of this literary and sexual exploratory phase, “El poeta y la diosa” not only displays Agustini’s struggle to approximate and resist the patriarchal weight of *modernismo* but it also evinces a tense dialogue with the drink trope, which reveals an inversion of the

male-centric anxiety of depletion, where the bitterness of vampiric consumption has not yet taken root.

In distinguishing Agustini's lyric from her explicitly articulated vampiric desire to her initial engagement with the literary arena in *El libro blanco (Frágil)*, it is possible to trace back and detect how her writing readily interacts and interrupts the ideological underpinnings of *modernismo's* language and imagery. Whereas the later phase of solidified identification with the *femme fatale* is a poetic embodiment and performance of the contradictions present in the misogynous construction of the new woman, the earlier work "El poeta y la diosa" exhibits an alternate masculinity that seeks to interact with the source of creative inspiration, intoxication, and sexuality from the departure point of her own "twice-behaved" performance of symbolically gendered transferences and exchanges.

Entré temblando a la gruta
 Misteriosa cuya puerta
 Cubre una mámpara hirsuta
 De cardos y de cicuta.
 Crucé temblando la incierta

Sombra de una galería
 En que acechar parecía
 La guadaña de la muerte.
 —El Miedo erguido blandía
 Como un triunfo mi alma fuerte—.

Un roce de terciopelo
 Siento en el rostro, en la mano.
 —Arañas tendiendo un velo—
 ¡A cada paso en el suelo
 Siento que aplasto un gusano!

A una vaga luz de plata,
 En cámara misteriosa,
 Mi fiera boca escarlata
 Besó la olímpica nata
 Del albo pie de la diosa!
 —Brillante como una estrella,

La diosa nubla su rara
Faz enigmática y bella,

Con densa gasa: sin ella
Dicen que el verla cegara.
Ebrio de ensueños, del hada,
—Es hada y diosa—y la helada
Luz de su mística estancia,
Alzo mi copa labrada
Y digo trémulo: Escancia!

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Un verde licor violento
Tras cuyos almos delirios
Acecha un diablo sangriento;
Otro color pensamiento
Con sueños a luz de cirios . . .

Y nobles zumos añejos
Con la fuerza de lo puro,
Vinos nuevos con reflejos
Imprevistos y los dejos
De un sumo néctar futuro.

Y gusté todos los vinos
De la maga, todos finos
Y —¡oh Dios! — de distintos modos,
Todos deliciosos, bellos!
La maga dijo: —Cuál de ellos? . . .
—Poned, un poco de todos!
(Agustini *El libro blanco (Frágil)* 50-52)

The great exuberance, delight and hope, which Jade notes in Agustini's poetry, is just as much an elemental twist on the depletion anxiety present in the *modernista* and symbolist lyric tradition as her ambiguous gender identity in "El poeta y la diosa." Although Jade's interpretation of the poem is largely within the dialogic interplay between the poetess and Darío as a reconfiguration of the "images of a female source of inspiration (diosa/hada/maga) who fills a sculpted goblet with desired drink" (47), my focus is on the marked

androgynous nature of the encounter that permits Agustini to not only stage the recurrent scene of inspiration, seduction, and intoxication but also theatricalizes a set pattern of behavior (e.g. drinking and poetic creation) resulting in a confluence of gendered subjectivities that had been kept separate by the ideological manipulations of female sexuality.

As Tina Escaja notes, “El poeta y la diosa” presents a grammatical gender inversion from what she views as the feminine voice of Agustini and the masculine poet subject of the poem’s title. Aside from the title, the poem exhibits such grammatical gender disagreements at moments when the lyric subject experiences inspiration/intoxication of the goddess/muse (“ebrio de ensueños, del hada”) and in exchanging words with said feminine figure (“y digo trémulo: Escancia!”) (26, 30). According to Escaja, “la inversión de género facilita el intercambio entre una entidad divina mujer y un yo humano que apunta al supuesto universalismo del género masculino (‘el poeta’)” (46). She declares that such appropriations by Agustini of opposite gender roles amount to a “travestismo poético” that both seeks to legitimate her usurpation of masculine privilege and provoke a revision of conventional approaches to gender (ibid). Escaja’s focus is on the way that dramatization of ritual in the poem, which she interprets as associated with pagan tradition, creates an aesthetics of initiation that reveals the masquerading nature of the designations of male and feminine.

In this poem, the ritual of initiation of the androgynous lyric subject commences with his/her’s entrance into the grotto of the goddess. Jade explains how Agustini conflates the anxieties of sexual debut and poetic initiation by writing that “the trembling poet enters the “hairy grotto, brushed by hymen-like spider webs and smashing worms” as he/she proceeds and encounters the goddess (49). This conjures the extreme rendering of the demonization of women by “gender ideologues” of the period such as Remy de Gourmont, who argued that “[e]very woman. . . contained within herself the destructive potential of the woman-vampire, the sexual woman, the woman of death, who had allowed the animal inside her womb to roam free and become a devouring *vagina dentata*” (Dijkstra, “Evil Sisters” 64). In contrast to the horror of entrapment, the trepidation and cautious tone of the lyric subject ceases upon entering the goddess’s chamber and radically transforms into erotic excitation. The discourse of fragility that informs *El libro blanco (Frágil)* is set against the gothic

violence of “arañas tendiendo un velo” and crushed worms as the lyric subject advances into the innermost recesses of the goddess’s lair. By a faint aura of silver shone from the shrouded visage of the goddess, the lyric subject’s fierce red mouth takes to worshipping the goddess’s pale feet. His/Her’s “fera boca escarlata” connotes not only a vampiric image of thirst but crosses gendered subjectivities as the lyric subject grammatically refers his/her present as masculine with “ebrio” and “digo trémulo.”

Whereas the moment of veneration hints at femininity by revealing the thirsty vampire and/or starved mouth of the anorexic, when the ritualized encounter veers into consumption and intoxication not only does the lyric subject morph and conform to masculine designation, but also the goddess transforms dually into fairy and goddess as she offers the glass and rare wines. From this point the fragility and anxiety of the first verses vanishes and delirious indulgence ensues. Among the rare spirits the goddess decants is absinthe as “un verde licor violento” whose “almos delirios” hide “un diablo sangriento”—the Janus countenance of the goddess of the Ideal. Yet, the prospect of violence does not provoke horror in the lyric subject, as we saw in Nájera and Baudelaire’s poems—instead, it piques the lyric subject’s excitement. Rather than the dissipation found at the end of Nájera’s “Para un menú,” Agustini’s poem does not trail off into alienation or the elegiac melancholy of “El hada verde” but foments strength and vigor as poetic (and sexual) communion with the fairy/goddess turned “maga” takes place.

The aura of the goddess extends to the liquors she offers, exhibiting what Carrick claims is the “strange power of attraction exerted by commodities being frequently described in metaphors derived from religious and artistic tradition” (111). The prestige and value of “nobles zumos añejos” is coupled with the desirability of the new and novel in the “vinos nuevos con reflejos / imprevistos.” Whereas the masculine lyric subject of “Para un menú” puts a bit of love into “las novias pasadas” that are now empty glasses from which he drank the nectar of such romantic exploits, “El poeta y la diosa” finds the androgynous lyric subject leaving the drink and glass full of “un sumo néctar futuro.” Rather than simply taking leave of the despoiled glass as in “Para un menú,” Agustini transforms the sign of woman into a symbolic vessel that will not be possessed, controlled, nor drained by the prevailing male order of values. The replenishment of the glass’s

nectar as well as the proliferation of sexual innuendo associated with the lyric subject's delight in consuming "todos los vinos / . . . de distintos modos, / todos deliciosos, bellos. . ." reverses the misogynistic scientific logic that sought to separate and ordinate genders. In place of feverish delirium and death of the Green Fairy/muse found in "El hada verde," the final incarnation of poetic inspiration in "El poeta y la diosa," the "maga" that connotes not only magic and enchantment but also genius, is allowed to speak and asks "¿Cuál de ellos?. . ." producing an exclamatory request for "—Poned, un poco de todos." It is in these final verses that Agustini partially undermines the fetishistic attraction of woman and liquor as commodities by subverting the required distance and inapproachability necessary to create their auras. Woman and commodity are not distant but present on the literary stage that Agustini creates in the poem. These, however, faithful to *modernismo's* explicit discourse of art for art's sake sustain the "magical" properties of both woman and drink.

The lasting resonance of Agustini's place in the *modernista* canon are a product of the erotics that transformed iconic symbols into encounters of intimacy that sought to overturn gendered subordination. These poetic transformations mirrored in part the metamorphosis of her own identity, a conscious construction that involved among other things photography and theatre, evidencing what Bruña Bragado has denoted as "[la] capacidad camaleónica de Agustini" (74). These reworkings of gender, its posturing and theatricality, collapse further the patriarchal order, precisely by adopting aspects of the dandy, which had already made plastic the masculine/feminine dichotomy.

Resonant with the period's *mal du siècle*, Agustini's gendered consumption echoes Nájera's and other *modernista* poets' anguish over their particular insertion into the symbolic *ancien* and material industrial regimes of European enunciation. Yet, as Bruña Bragado notes, the combination of *melancolía* and dandy gestures in Agustini's poetry illustrates "la dificultad para una mujer alcanzar una identidad artística y, al mismo tiempo, se conecta con estrategia de sentido (poder) encaminadas a alcanzar un significado fuerte y un lugar en el canon" (49). Agustini's multifaceted self-representation reimaged the tropes that bound her to the domestic realm through her deployment of the rebellion, insolence and posturing of the dandy. As a poetess prodigy, she exploited the infantilizing title of "La nena"—that

endearing yet patronizing appellation use by her family and Rubén Darío, her surrogate father/lover figure. Breaking from the constricting “formulas of femininity,” Agustini breaks with the strangulating institution of marriage and casts off her corset, as she resists the void of the anorexic with the later fullness of her body and the pursuit of abundance and communion, even within the discursive scarcity of seminal and commodity economies.

In sum, mapping woman and drink in Nájera’s and Agustini’s poems and turn of the century visual culture yields insights into the cultural arena from which these poets took their lead. Behind their visions of the Green Fairy, male poets confronted the entrance of the new woman in the public sphere as figments of the private sphere in the virginal and deathbed-bound bride and its diametrical opposite composite of prostitute and vampire, like that painted by Félicien Rops in his “Absinthe Drinker” (Fig. 4). The figures of absinthe drinker, vampire, and woman came into semiotic contact with the Romantic tenets of beauty and imaginative freedom to give rise to repackaged image of femininity that conformed to male fantasy and horror alike. The genius of Agustini’s poetics is that, by deploying these tropes without distancing, she creates the image of a poetic speaker who is able to fill and be her own glass.

Appendix



Figure 1. Albert Maignan, "La muse verte," from 1895.
Image in the Public Domain.



Figure 2. Privat Livemont, "Absinthe Robette," 1896.
Image in the Public Domain.



Figure 3. Albert-Henri Gantner, “An evil man, representing medicine and religion (?), gloats over the death of the freedom of the individual in Switzerland to consume absinthe, represented as a green woman stabbed by a cross,” 1910. Image courtesy of Wellcome Library



Figure 4. Félicien Rops, “La buveuse d’absinthe,” 1877. Image courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Notes

1. A recent account of absinthe's synesthetic qualities is the following: "my own impression is that I am breathing sounds and hearing colours, that scents produce a sensation of lightness or of weight, roughness or smoothness, as if I were touching them with my fingers" (Absinthe Fever).

2. The *louche* ritual of preparation involves adding iced water that alters the drink's color into a light milky green, pouring the drink into a fancy glass, and pouring chilled water over a cube of sugar placed on a highly ornate perforated absinthe spoon that resembled a knife or dagger, which would lie over the brim of the glass. Both the image of absinthe paraphernalia and the poster of the product demonstrate that Art Nouveau's organic and fanciful stylization supports the imaginary around absinthe culture and its commercial promotion.

3. The various anti-absinthe posters, which emerged around the prohibition of the drink between 1910 and 1915, reflected the campaign as one that sought to reestablish masculine power dynamics. Albert-Henri Gantner's 1910 poster illustrates a nosferatu-like religious man gloating over the corpse of the Green Fairy, in a critique of restrictions on individual freedom. However, in his 1914 French revision of the poster, Gantner replaces the sallow and wicked figure with the then-French president, Raymond Poincaré, who victoriously tramples over the mortally wounded Green Fairy. Absinthe, which had been used during the Algerian Wars in the 1840s as a fever preventive and a defense against dysentery, devolved into an emblem of national and masculine degeneracy in the positivistic social reforms of the French Republic as it called to arms its male citizenry to the fronts of the Great War ("Historical Papers"). This shift in representation highlights how absinthe prohibition and the figure of the Green Fairy were mobilized in the service of national strength and prowess.

4. The poem's titular subject of poison points to absinthe, as the following verses illustrate in its reference to the poison's green color. "—None of which equals the poison / welling up in your eyes / that show me my poor soul reversed . . . / My dreams throng to drink / at those green, distorting pools" (11-15).

5. Jose M. Martínez and Priscilla Pearsall both speak to Nájera's French proclivities as manifesting a rejection of Spanish tropes and cultural markers.

6. Silvia Molloy's reading of Agustini's "El cisne" was the first critical intervention into what Agustini's poem possesses clear markers of confluence with Darío's "Leda," namely the image of the swan, which she draws on and transforms (turning the swan's beak into lips) into sexual partner/poet. Molloy states that Agustini "da voz a un erotismo femenino que en Darío se pierde, se desperdicia, por carecer de palabra. . .El erotismo en Agustini

necesita decirse, inscribirse, no como queja de vencida que se pierde en el viento sino como triunfante —y temible—placer” (66). As such, Agustini’s images of the seduction of the powerful *modernista* male lyric subject are the basis of *El libro blanco (Frágil)*, evident in her adaptation of Darío’s “La sed” in “El poeta y la diosa.”

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