

# Letras Hispanas

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**TITLE:** *The Adulteress on the Spanish Stage: Gender and Modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic Drama*

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Tracie Amend's new critical tome, *The Adulteress on the Spanish Stage: Gender and Modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romantic Drama*, artfully explores how a pervasive female archetype of Spanish theater, the unfaithful woman, is shaped by socio-historical forces. Founding her study in relevant critical perspectives, such as theories surrounding Romanticism's development, the history of theatrical techniques and set design, and changing opinions on women, the author provides a comprehensive overview of the adulteress' role in Romantic Spanish drama during the nineteenth century. For Amend, this female figure served as a focal point for the negotiation of gender roles, national identity, and modernity during a crucial transitional time. To support her assertions, the study presupposes that nineteenth-century Spanish drama was heavily influenced by Romanticism, even before and after the more traditionally-recognized Romantic period in the 1830s and 1840s. While Amend's definition of this literary current seems broad, she is clearly aware of her potential dissenters, such as Philip Silver, and she demonstrates through meaningful examples that Spanish drama is, perhaps, more directly linked to a "Romantic" spirit than many literary genres. Moreover, Amend's skillful usage of theories developed by critics such as David Gies, Jo Labanyi, and Bridget Aldaraca enables her to tie the negotiation of modernity to changing views on women as they play out on stage. In its totality, this chronologically-organized critical text treats works by fourteen different

authors, but it also touches on other important literary influences in Spain and throughout Europe.

In the study's preface and introduction, Amend details the aforementioned critical models and grounds early perceptions of the adulteress in Spanish Golden Age honor negotiations surrounding concepts such as *limpieza de sangre* and *la mancha que limpia*, which preserved morality through Christian purity and honor duels exhibited in Calderonian-era Baroque works (9). In Amend's view, the structural idea of the "erotic triangle," where disputes of infidelity emerge between three figures during a play's performance, creates dramatic tension that places the body of the accused adulteress at center stage, imbuing her role with codified significance through the perceptions of readers and audience members (12). By focusing in on this tension and symbolism from literary, historical, and sociopolitical angles, Amend argues that we can better understand the meanings and "motivations behind the use of the adulteress" (14). This particular theoretical approach to Romantic theatre is novel, and Amend's analysis offers a significant contribution in the way that it links these theatrical representations of sexual transgressions to larger social and political questions of the nineteenth century.

Chapter one, "Modern Spain and Romantic Theater," traces the history of nineteenth-century drama, provides Amend's broad definition of Romanticism, and discusses the Sublime aesthetic as a theatrical

tool (29). Here, Amend argues that the punishment of the adulteress, who did not necessarily have to be guilty of adultery to be contaminated in the public's opinion, elucidates how nineteenth century plays often reiterated Baroque interpretations of honor and fears of "blood contamination" (39). Social control over women was manifested through such connections and the condemnation of female transgressors. In the second chapter, "The Delirious Adulteress," Amend explores plays from 1800-1810 using this framework, including texts by María Rosa de Gálvez and Manuel José Quintana that she links through the emotional upheaval of their wayward female characters (40). The author convincingly describes how the adulteress' turmoil is reflective of fears of Spain's decline, which are resolved through the deaths of the women to restore order in an act of nostalgia for Golden Ages Theater.

Amend considers how dramaturgical trends developed further under the influence of Romantic ideologies associated with Isabel II's ascension to the throne in the third chapter, "The Contaminating Adulteress" (77). This portion covers the zenith of Romantic tragedies from 1811-1839 using compositions by playwrights such as Ángel de Saavedra and Mariano José de Larra. In Amend's analysis, the death of disloyal female characters permitted a cathartic theater experience for spectators afraid of changing gender roles. The fourth chapter, titled "The Adulteress as Wayward Daughter," continues investigating perceptions of gender in their historical context as Isabel II comes of age in works by Eugenio Hartzenbusch and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (105). Amend contends that the adulteress figure embodies anxieties about changing family structure and corruption of the Spanish state through the queen's hypothetical marital matches, an argument that makes sense given the varied reactions to the queen's marriage in the popular press.

Chapter five, called "The Adulteress as Isabel's Handmaiden," surveys the *alta comedia* (131). The shifting political landscape between 1856 and 1869 appears in the period's theater, which Amend claims questions Isabel's authority, even while aspects of modern gender roles slip into dramatic works. The juxtaposition of the self-sacrificing *ángel del hogar* with the adulteress is another prominent trope that the author purports highlights contrasting views of the queen and of women's roles. Finally, "The Modern Bourgeois Adulteress," the sixth chapter, follows Neo-romantic theatre from 1870-1895 (156). In this section, Amend demonstrates how Spanish women's newfound association with consumerism recasts the adulteress as a bourgeois society lady. The author reasons that a more modern, self-conscious view of gender materializes, as not all plays end in spilled blood in the *fin de siècle* era.

The volume's epilogue and conclusion extend the study of the adulteress into the twentieth century with the Generation of '98, but Amend postulates that Romantic theatre tropes are finally outmoded with the dawn of Avant Garde techniques. In its totality, this critical work convincingly demonstrates with textual and historical support how the representation of the adulteress during various stages of "Romantic" theater can be read as emblematic of gender negotiations and fears of modernity in nineteenth-century Spain. Tracie Amend's study of the adulteress thus offers an original and thoughtful look at Spanish drama and gender roles in a period of transition. By utilizing a thematic lens, Amend connects dramaturgical practices from a significant corpus of plays to provide scholars and theater lovers with a new schema for organizing and interpreting Romantic drama in this valuable contribution to the discipline.