

## INTRODUCTION

# Gender, Memory, Culture, and History in the Spanish Literary Market

In 1984–5 sociologists Ross and Holmberg conducted an oral history of interpersonal memory with sixty married couples in Canada, which led them to the starkly gendered conclusion that women's memories are more vivid and detailed than those of their male partners, that both sexes are happy to acknowledge this fact, and that 'women tend to be the interpersonal historians in our culture' (1990: 141). I mention their conclusions briefly here for the way they highlight an overarching concern in this book insofar as issues of gender, memory, identity, reception, culture, and history are concerned. With regard to women's memories, Neubamer and Heyer-Ryan propose, rather more cautiously, that:

Even if we assume that remembering is not biologically determined, we can assume that memory is influenced by the particular social, cultural and historical conditions in which individuals find themselves. And since men and women generally assume different social and cultural roles, their way of remembering should also differ. (2000: 6)

Historically, it seems that rather than being biologically linked, women's memory of the past, vivid or otherwise, has more to do to their responsibility for nurturing the family, bringing up children, and organizing family social life (Kidder, Fagan, and Cohn 1981). Jansen further argues that women's memory has no biological link to the female sex, but it is determined by their traditionally marginalized position in society and by the way that the socially conditioned maternal role has been passed down from one generation to the next. This traditionally marginalized position, she argues, has also made women highly receptive listeners who are particularly well placed to pass on, 'stories of oppression and repression unknown to men' (Jansen 2000: 37). For Jansen, the memories of women and similar

groups, regarded as socially inferior, function like the ‘undercurrents of a river within the dominant collective memory’ (2000: 37).

It is not my intention here to attempt to prove or disprove the connections these writers make between gender and memory, fascinating though they are. What interests me is the ongoing need to examine women’s writing for traces of a ‘matrilineal’ literary and publishing history that might challenge the dominant ‘patrilinear’ canon (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 51). Instead, I will compare and contrast three writers, each of whom represents a different generation, and who might well be considered the most high-profile women publishing in Spain today. The writers I have selected for close analysis are Ana María Matute (1926–2014), Rosa Montero (1952–), and Lucía Etxebarria (1966–), all of whom are high profile, publish enormously popular novels, and enjoy ongoing literary success in Spain. In terms of their memories, of course, Matute and Montero have far more extensive memories of the way the publishing industry in Spain has changed over the last half century than does Etxebarria. However, I am particularly interested in the role played by historical context in their understanding of where they are located within Spanish cultural history, and in their response to questions of sex- and gender-difference and writing.

Ana María Matute is widely considered a key figure in the field of Spanish postwar narrative. Her prestige and the recognition she has achieved are illustrated by the numerous literary prizes she has received (including the Premio Planeta, the Premio Nadal, and the Medalla de Oro al Mérito de las Bellas Artes). Her first novel, *Primera memoria* [First Memory] (1960), is regarded as one of the leading *novelas de formación de la posguerra* [female *Bildungsroman* in postwar Spain] (Riddel 1992: 281–7). Its commercial success, and its ongoing relevance to post-dictatorship Spain, can be traced to the fact that it ran through four editions between 1979 and 1984 alone. Despite the prevailing censorship at the time of their original publication, Matute’s postwar novels raise important political, social, and ethical questions about Spanish postwar society and the role of women within it. Continued publication of her work, not only during the regime, but in the post-Transition period, indicates the market that still exists in Spain for contemporary fiction that recounts the past from a

female perspective. Matute is now an extremely well-known public figure and a crucial member of the contemporary Spanish cultural world. Her work was certainly appreciated during the Franco regime, but since the Transition to democracy, and particularly since the mid-1990s, she has come to occupy an important role in the Spanish cultural establishment, becoming, in 1998, only the third woman ever to be elected to the Spanish Royal Academy (RAE).<sup>1</sup>

Rosa Montero's work, testimonial in its approach, addresses topics little explored in Spanish literature prior to the Transition to democracy, including abortion, divorce, sex discrimination in the workplace, and single motherhood.<sup>2</sup> Her first novel, *Crónica del desamor* [Chronicle of Enmity] (1979), was a pioneering account of the experience of a group of largely middle-class female friends working and bringing up their children in the immediate Transition years. Montero wrote a new prologue for most recent edition (2009), in which she thanks her readers for their ongoing enthusiasm. The protagonists of *Crónica del desamor* reject the Francoist ideal of femininity, but at the same time they find themselves concerned, if not slightly sceptical, about their own uncertain future. Montero has published regularly since *Crónica del desamor*, and her work continues to be well received by readers and critics alike. She was the first woman journalist to receive the *Manuel del Arco* prize in 1978, going on to receive other awards for her journalism (the Premio Nacional de Periodismo, 1980) and for her fiction (I Premio Primavera de Narrativa, 1997). Like Matute, she enjoys a high public profile, in part due to her frequent contributions to *El País* since 1976.

- 1 Carmen Conde was the first woman, elected in 1978, and there have been eleven female members in total. In 2018 there were eight: Carmen Iglesias, Margarita Salas, Soledad Puértolas, Inés Fernández-Ordóñez, Carme Riera, Aurora Egido, Clara Janés, and Paz Battaner.
- 2 Divorce in Spain became legal in 1981. Abortion was decriminalized in 1985, but only in cases of rape, or when the health of the child or mother was at risk. In the summer of 2012, Justice Minister Alberto Ruiz Gallardón proposed changes to existing laws, including implementing a requirement for parental permission in cases where 16- and 17-year-olds want to end pregnancies, and making it harder for women to abort fetuses with physical deformities.

Matute and Montero are both recognizable public figures with official websites devoted to their work and their lives.<sup>3</sup> However, the third novelist this book examines is the one whose personal and professional life has been most clearly mediated by the new virtual era. Lucía Etxebarria is a member of the so-called 'Generation X', a group of writers famous for their unconventional and postmodern narrative styles, and for their complex appearance within and, some might argue, their conscious manipulation of their own position within the Spanish cultural establishment. Jo Labanyi affirms that Etxebarria

has cultivated a *risque* image attuned to youth culture (sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll) while exploring different models of femininity – including bisexuality and lesbianism in *Beatrice and the Heavenly Bodies* (*Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, 1998). She has been criticized for playing the market and admired for brazenly exposing its workings. (Labanyi 2010: 120)

The writers of this generation use blogs and websites that allow them to establish a more accessible relationship with their readers, and, on hers, Etxebarria acknowledges – more openly than either of her older contemporaries, Matute or Montero – that she has an overt political and feminist agenda. She states that one of the aims of her work is to raise awareness of the fact that, despite the legal equality of sexes in twenty-first-century Spain, full equality has not been achieved in practice: 'I think that social and committed literature is gendered because today, unfortunately, living as a man is not the same as living as a woman'.<sup>4</sup> The success of her novels suggests Etxebarria has excelled in providing a feminist portrait of the so-called Generation X. In addition to the high sales figures and the prestigious prizes she has been awarded (including the Premio Planeta 2004, and the Premio Primavera de Novela 2001), she is famous for the controversy that has surrounded her public persona since the beginning of her literary career. Indeed, as is often now the case with young writers, the visual

3 See <<http://www.clubcultura.com/clubliteratura/clubescritores/matute/bio.htm>>; <<http://www.clubcultura.com/clubliteratura/clubescritores/montero/>>, and <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Luc%C3%ADa-Etxebarria/149885159988>>.

4 <<http://www.lucia-etxebarria.com/>>, now closed.

publicity that surrounds her (including book covers and the photographs illustrating interviews with her and articles about her) aims to capitalize on and reproduce this high-profile public persona. Etxebarria's first novel, *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas* [Love, Curiosity, Prozac, and Doubts] (1996) sold over 100,000 copies in under a year. The story of Ana, Rosa, and Cristina Gaena, three sisters who despite sharing a strict, conservative upbringing end up pursuing totally different paths in life, was a literary success that turned Etxebarria into an overnight star and prompted a film adaptation by Miguel Santemas.

This book examines the way these three important women writers respond to the question of women's writing and the changing status of their own work within the Spanish literary establishment, as well as the tightly gender-bound marketing of their literary production – whether they wish their work to be marketed in this way or not. I examine their work and lives in the context of the socio-political background of the Franco regime, the Transition to democracy and contemporary Spain, these being the three stages Colmeiro has described as the 'particular cultural moments in contemporary Spain that have shaped the construction of memory and collective identity: the post-Civil War dictatorship, the democratic Transition, and the post-Transition process of European integration and globalization' (2011: 24). My interest lies in examining the relationship of these writers to these three 'cultural moments' and, more precisely, the way each has addressed contemporary issues concerning the status of Spanish women in their work, in relation to the Spanish literary canon, and, perhaps more controversially, the way each responds to the label 'Spanish woman writer'.

'Women's writing' has been a controversial subject of academic debate for many decades, and it could be argued that my decision to focus solely on women is retrogressive. Indeed, two of the women I examine here (Matute and Montero) are understandably reluctant to countenance the label 'women's writing', being wary of studies, like this one, focusing on women's writing to the exclusion of men's. Nonetheless I have chosen to direct my attention selectively in order to extend the debate on 'women's writing', originally publicized widely by critics like Toril Moi (1997), and more recently, and with particular regard to Spain, by Laura Freixas (2000) and Christine Henseler (2003a and 2003b). Influenced by photographs,

newspaper articles, critical reviews, websites, and the different degrees and ways in which these authors participate in the promotion of their works, my research examines the changing public perception and representation of these writers over the forty or fifty years in which each of these highly successful women writers has published their major work.<sup>5</sup>

Chapter 1 begins by addressing the question of ‘women’s writing’ directly. This chapter focuses on the question whether writing by women should be considered separately from that of men, opening with a summary of the response to this question outside Spain since the 1970s, with close reference to Moi’s study of the history of feminist literary theory. I then move, in the second half of the chapter, to consider the response of women in Spain to ‘women’s writing’. Chapter 2 subsequently contextualizes this question, with closer examination of the way Spanish women writers are marketed in Spain. My aim here is to illustrate just how tightly gender-bound the marketing of women writers remains, whether the women concerned wish their work to be marketed in this way or not. This chapter focuses on the representation of Spanish women writers within the wider press and uses their representation within the literary magazine *Qué Leer* as a case study.

I have taken, as my point of departure, Laura Freixa’s pioneering study *Literatura y mujeres* [Literature and Women] (2000), commended by Joan Torres-Pou for the way it ‘analyses the creation and diffusion of female literature in Spain, evaluates the extent of the woman’s role in the Spanish literary world and exposes the misogyny hiding behind the news of a supposedly female protagonism’ (Torres-Pou 2001: 235). Freixas has identified a number of trends in the literary industry that are associated with Spanish women writers in the twentieth century as well as providing an impressive array of much-needed data contradicting the oft-trumpeted claim that women writers have nothing to be concerned about.<sup>6</sup> Noting

5 Unless otherwise stated, all translations into English of author quotations and critical reviews are mine.

6 According to the FNAC ranking, only forty of the eighty-six best-selling books in 2018 were written by women. See <<https://www.fnac.es/n710/Libros-mas-vendidos?PageIndex=3&sl>>.

that the greater the popularity achieved by a female writer, the more disparaging the critical reaction, Freixas aims to:

[r]evis[e] the history of female literary creation by emphasising the reasons for keeping women away from literature and the current revisionist trend that seeks to recuperate and reevaluate those texts that, due to different reasons, had been traditionally excluded from the canon. (2001: 235)

Freixas' work has been particularly important also for bringing feminist critics and theorists, such as Gilbert and Gubar, Kristeva, Showalter, and Cixous, to the attention of Spanish readers, who have tended to remain marginalized from theoretical and, in particular, from feminist approaches to literary criticism. For that very reason, my own study will focus less on feminist debate outside Spain, in order to give precedence to the views of writers publishing within Spain.

Moving to Chapter 3, and the second of the pioneering academic studies of Spanish writers mentioned above (Henseler 2003a and 2003b), this chapter focuses on the construction of the literary *personae* of Matute, Montero, and Extebarria. My concern here is not with their literary output, but with the development of their public persona; that is, with the reception of their work, their status and interaction with the wider public via interviews, television appearances, and, increasingly, via their presence on the internet. Henseler's ground-breaking study (2003a) argues that Spanish Generation X writers have the potential to subvert the literary system by embracing the increasing commercialism of the literary market to promote their own works.<sup>7</sup> Like Freixas, Henseler remarks that, although the changing demands of literary marketing affect male and female writers alike, it is women who, while they may resist traditional sexually discriminatory tactics, now enjoy high levels of reception and visibility. This represents the, as yet, little-analysed aspect of contemporary publishing world that I have

7 Henseler's study includes a collection of short writings by a number of women authors with the purpose of establishing the degree to which authors actually 'change their positions and their production in light of the (visual) forces of the publishing industry' (2003a: 127); however, she does not directly address, in her work, the question of the label 'women's writing' *per se*.

selected as my point of departure for a closer analysis of the relationship between the gender of these writers and the rapidly changing publishing industry in which they work. Henseler analyses five texts by contemporary women writers: Esther Tusquets' *El amor es un juego solitario* [Love is a Solitary Game] (1979), Lourdes Ortiz's *Urraca* (1982), Cristina Peri Rossi's *Solitario de amor* [Solitaire of Love] (1988), Almudena Grandes' *Las edades de Lulú* [The Ages of Lulu] (1989), and Paloma Díaz-Mas' *El sueño de Venecia* [The Dream of Venice] (1992), while a sixth section focuses on Lucía Etxebarria. Henseler considers these texts a bridge between marketing and visual culture. Her contention is that all the novels mentioned above use the female body as an instrument of subversion and, at the same time, as a vehicle for sales, establishing a link between this commodification of women and the role of the mass media in the creation of contemporary female texts. She praises Etxebarria's use of her own (often sexualized) image to promote her novels as an embodiment and recuperation of the commercial appropriation of the female body that here works in Etxebarria's favour to undermine the cultural signifiers that more normally relegate the female body to the status of fetishized commodity.

Not wishing to disregard this very positive interpretation, my own study goes back further in time to allow for a comparison between the public marketing and reception of these three writers over different generations in Spain. It is my view that, although it may be very helpful for Henseler to focus on some of the more positive outlets for female authors, they often remain caught in a double bind, according to which their appearances (and I am thinking of the particular case of Etxebarria here) may in fact undermine, or at least complicate her self-proclaimed feminist stance, especially insofar as this concerns her denunciation of the media tendency to objectify the female body and the persistence of this trend well into the twenty-first century. My reading of the public reception of Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria in Chapters 2 and 3 also owes a debt to Joe Moran's study of the growing importance of the 'star-author' (2000). According to Moran, celebrity, rather than being a stable phenomenon, is subject to continuous negotiation between marketability and cultural authority. Moran's theories of literary celebrity indicate that whereas Matute and Montero, major women novelists of earlier generations, were able to maintain a certain



distance between their personal and their public lives, for contemporary authors such as Etxebarria this line has become increasingly blurred, as they are expected to be both 'available' and highly visible. I posit that, far from offering a vehicle for subversion, as Henseler optimistically predicts, the negotiation of public appearances and the photo shoot has become another potential pitfall for women negotiating an increasingly commercialized and gender-biased 'virtual', or web-based, literary marketplace. In view of the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes dating back to the Franco regime vis-à-vis reception and marketing of these writers, not to mention the resurgence of a rather disturbing gender-bias that has accompanied the visual and textual marketing of women via the internet, I am also inspired by Hall's 'encoding-decoding' model of communication. This theory argues that meaning is encoded by the sender and decoded by the receiver, and that these meanings can be altered and decoded to represent something else. Given that senders encode their messages according to their ideals and views, and that receivers also decode these messages according to their ideals and views, miscommunication may occur (Hall 1993: 91). Each of these authors' construction of her public persona reflects a negotiated position in which the audience member, or receiver, is able to decode the sender's message within the context of the dominant cultural and societal views (Hall 1993: 102).

Chapter 4 analyses the response of Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria to the question of the existence (or not) of 'women's writing', presenting their voices on the question of the existence of a 'women's literature' over time. The first section of this chapter considers Matute as pre-dating the 'women's writing' label, positioning her as the product of a particular cultural, historical, and political background, in which the question of 'women's writing' was only beginning to surface. The second section focuses on Montero as a transitional figure in (Transition) Spain. Her case is more ambiguous, as she seems able, or at least consistently aspires, to establish a separation between her political ideas and her writing. Finally, the third part engages with Etxebarria as one of the main advocates of 'women's writing' in Spain today. Etxebarria's role as a woman writer entails a very conscious and marked position on issues such as feminism, the role of media in the construction of her persona, and shifts in the literary industry. Her

case is illustrative of the oppositional view, wherein the audience member is able to decode the message in the way it was intended to be decoded while imagining an unintended meaning within the message due to their own societal beliefs (Hall 1993: 103).

To conclude, bearing in mind the different attitudes of these women writers to feminism (a topic to which I shall return), and the difference between writing as a feminist act and writing that represents a female point of view (albeit one that may contribute to raising awareness about the conditions in which women live), in this book several questions recur. To what extent have these well-known writers cultivated a public persona and what role has this played in their wider reception within Spain? What is their view of 'women's writing'? And, finally how do these writers address changing social role models and social expectations of women?

As Matute's rather exceptional invitation to the Royal Academy aptly demonstrates, these writers continue to publish from within a cultural establishment that remains dominated by men. Each has become well known and has established a reputation for their work not only within Spain, but also internationally, as a result of the inclusion of their work on the reading lists of Hispanic Studies departments in universities outside Spain, and they have been the subjects of numerous academic books, articles, and research papers. However, the fact that women writers have, until recent decades, tended to be excluded from academic studies in Spain raises the immediate question of how we approach the notion 'women's writing'.