

The Reception and Marketing of Women Writers in Spain

All of us, it's obvious, read from our prejudices and nobody could make an interpretation based on nothing; however, the great potential of good literature consists largely in its ability to redefine those prejudices, shaping them so that we can read differently, by assimilating readings and, ultimately, building our understanding and sensitivity.

— SANZ (2003: 164)

There is a kind of novel, usually written by women, who speaks of bubbling emotions and lives in spaces where feelings are the only axis in which the story is based, [...] it does not pose big questions in their stories, nor does it reflect ideological positions, stand in deep thought, or build a narrative corpus with enough weight to hold and feed that complex world where emotions live.

— MONTEYS (1997)

This chapter examines, first, the critical responses to women's writing within the Spanish press and the wider academic community, and, secondly, marketing strategies, using the Spanish literary magazine *Qué Leer* as a case study. The first of the two quotations in the epigraph above illustrates a fact too often overlooked, which is that we are prone to an unconscious gender bias as readers, and that we each bring to our interpretation a different story and set of prejudices that produce (in the Barthesian sense) a different literary text. The second outlines one of the most persistent of those prejudices.

The Reception of Spanish Women Writers within the Literary Press and the Academy

In her seminal work *Literatura y Mujeres* [Literature and Women] (2000), the prominent Spanish novelist and scholar Laura Freixas provides some interesting statistics with regard to the reception of women in the Spanish literary market: 70 per cent of the Spanish equivalent to the UK's Arts and Humanities BA degrees are awarded to women, and yet only 20 per cent of all books published are written by women; 10 per cent of literary prizes in Spain are awarded to women, and only 6 per cent of the Cervantes prizes have gone to women.¹ Freixas also notes that, in 1999, only 129 female writers had published novels with the main Spanish publishing houses (Alfaguara, Anagrama, Destino, Planeta, Plaza y Janés, Seix Barral, and Tusquets), the overall proportion of women to men being 24 per cent (2000: 35–6). She also notes that, conversely, the majority of readers are women (2000: 39). This point is confirmed by the sociologist Enrique Gil Calvo, who concluded on the basis of reading polls carried out by the Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs in 1978, 1985, and 1990, that in Spain the number of women readers is greater, both in absolute and in relative terms, than the number of male readers (1993: 120).

Despite the fact that women publish fewer books and receive fewer literary awards than men – which is both a product and an illustration of an unconscious bias – both the literary market and mainstream literary criticism continue to assume that, as women-authored literature tends to give precedence to female protagonists, it focuses on women's issues and appeals only to a female readership. This could be explained by the fact that if – as suggested by Sanz in the first epigraph above and as proposed by reader-response theory – the meaning of a literary text is produced as a result of a dynamic relationship between writer and reader, no text has

1 These figures were given by Freixas in 2011 during her contribution to an excellent *Nostramo* episode ('Esther Tusquets. Autoras. Joan Brossa') in which Esther Tusquets, Laura Freixas, and María Ángeles Cabré discussed the state of writing by women in Spain; see Tusquets 2011.

a single meaning that can be discovered on one close reading, or by investigating the author's intentions; its meaning is the product of successive readerly engagements. As Jonathan Culler explains:

An interpretation of the work can be a story of that encounter, with its ups and downs: various conventions and expectations are brought into play, connections are posited, and expectations defeated or confirmed. To interpret a work is to tell a story of reading. (1997: 59–60)

According to reader-response theory, every reader will tell a different story about a given text, and if a range of factors can influence what theorists have called the reader's 'horizon of expectations' (see Jauss (1982) and Iser (1974)), it would be naïve to assume that sex and gender do not affect these 'horizons'. Culler suggests that reader-oriented criticism can be applied to

[r]everse the usual situation in which the perspective of a male critic is assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as a case of special pleading and an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mold. (1982: 55)

Annette Kolodny also suggests that reading is a learned activity, along with other interpretive strategies in any society. As such, it is 'sex-coded and gender-inflected' (cited in Culler 1982: 51). If it is the consensus of a given society that 'male' is the equivalent to 'universal', we will be programmed to assume that when the protagonist of a particular story is male, the feelings, events, and conflicts experienced by this character are universal, and that it is possible for both male and female readers to identify with and to relate to these. On the other hand, it would seem that whenever a story has a female protagonist, the adventures, thoughts, and experiences of this character are assumed to be pertinent only to females.

Freixas' study exposes similar prejudices, for instance that the increasing number of women writers is diminishing the quality of literature (2000: 48) or that women sell more books than men (2000: 33–4). These are also commonplace in Spanish literary criticism, and may translate, consciously or unconsciously, into negative allusions to women authors' sex and gender in reviews. Another factor which is key in this bias is that, as Freixas explains, while in most Anglophone countries, research on women's writing has an important presence in public opinion, in Spain it is rarely heard outside

the confines of universities. As a result, in Spain renowned literary critics may make statements in prestigious and widely read newspapers such as *El País* that would be considered sexist elsewhere, but that in this context are presented as if they were a serious contribution to ongoing academic debate. In 1998, Vicente Verdú warned of the danger of 'all that badly written literature whose alibi is that it has been written by or for women [...], [a]s if being a woman was a good enough excuse for writing badly' (1998: 86–7). It is as if the critic fears the popularity of such literature might spread from female to male authors who 'have already signed up to write that kind of literature after realizing that they already have an assured readership' (Roma 1998: 86–7). Likewise, in 2000 Javier Vizoso noted that there is indeed an essentially feminine literature, which has different features and is distinguishable from the common characteristics of a 'possible' sexless literature (Vizoso 2000, n.pag.), and this view that there is a feminine and a neutral, or 'asexual', literature is symptomatic of the unconscious assumption that literature written by women is gendered, while literature written by men is not.

Freixas offers these quotations as examples of the circulation within literary criticism of a number of persistently male chauvinist ideas; however, turning to the reception of women writers within the Spanish press and academic community more widely, she paradoxically identifies the chief trends associated with Spanish women writers at the turn of the twenty-first century as: greater media visibility and greater female readership, a concurrent desire on the part of publishing houses and other institutions to attract women consumers, the coexistence of integrating and segregating policies in the publishing world, the small body of sometimes inaccessible academic research on women's writing, and a lack of female members in the most prestigious literary institutions (2000: 29, 80–2, 23, 38–9).

Indeed, views such as that of Verdú quoted above may be exacerbated by the points Freixas highlights: women's writing in Spain tends to be segregated for the purposes of marketing, and there is a lack of academic criticism written by women. The segregating approach to women writers, which is the absence of or inclusion of very few women in anthologies, publications, or conferences about literature in general, produces a movement that paradoxically risks compounding this segregation by countering

it with women-only collections and events. It is interesting that, while the existence of a distinctive gender difference in literature is still in doubt, attempts such as these to make women writers visible by grouping them into a given category tend to suggest an understanding of women's writing as a phenomenon with common characteristics.

Of interest, and perhaps what could be seen as threatening to the traditionally male-dominated literary market, is the major change that has occurred since academic criticism focusing on Spanish women writers began to develop as a discipline, albeit outside Spain, from the mid-1980s onwards (for example, Brown 1991 and Ciplijauskaitė 1988); as a consequence of their greater visibility and wider readership, publishing houses and literary institutions are now more keen to attract women (Freixas 2000: 39). This could be linked to the fact that, according to writer Clara Obligado, one of the female authors cited in Henseler (2003b: 131–3), the destiny of a book is largely sealed before it arrives in bookshops. Hence, although each author may have a certain say in the way their book will be presented, allowing for a small margin of error, publishing houses generally know whether the book will sell or not. This could depend on the investment in promotional material, on the popularity of the author, and/or on the commercial iconography employed, an iconography that is sharply marked by gender, as noted above. Parallel to this trend in the field of publishing houses, references to women authors' sex and gender are relatively common in the field of literary criticism, and often made in a negative light.

Literary magazines' co-opting of the portrayal of authors as a means of promoting certain ideals is not new, as illustrated by Joe Moran in his article 'The Author as a Brand Name: American Literary Figures and the *Time* Cover Story' (Moran 1995). Moran focused on the decade of the 1960s and on the American magazine's introduction of authors as cover-story subjects. Through interviews, commentary, and photographs, the magazine offered a portrayal of its authors as 'apparently ordinary, representative figures' and sought to appropriate them 'as the expression of a collective national mood' (Moran 1995: 354). Moran offers different examples such as the portrayals of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and John Cheever, which responded to the *Time*'s critics and journalists' understanding of and intention to present these authors as 'non-literary

“men’s men” (Moran 1995: 353). Thus, the magazine was careful to focus on their hobbies, lifestyles, personalities, personal opinions, and worries, but it also made an effort to downplay non-normative qualities such as the homosexuality of Tennessee Williams and James Baldwin, with the aim of highlighting ‘their exemplary status as members of the [...] Protestant, newly exurban bourgeoisie of upstate New York and New England – an archetypal *Time* readership (and a prosperous audience for advertisers) that the magazine presented as typically American, which ultimately helped the purpose of celebrating the traditional lifestyle of American readers’ (Moran 1995: 354).

Perhaps with the purpose of maintaining the ideal of a male-dominated literary marketplace, in the current Spanish arena there seem to be plenty of cases where journalists, reviewers, and literary critics have more or less unconsciously implied that whereas the creation of inspiring, encouraging male characters is rarely introduced as evidence to question the literary value of a text, the writing of stimulating, unusual female characters is all too often assumed to detract from the potential literary value of a novel by a woman writer on the grounds that the fiction has been co-opted to fulfil some kind of political agenda concerning the ‘emancipation’ of women.

The following example shows the different ways in which unnecessary reference to a woman’s gender contributes to the portrayal of a biased and less than accurate picture of the situation of women writers:

Espido Freire, a 25-year-old Basque writer, wins the Planeta prize with a women’s tale. As predicted, the 48th Planeta Awards has been taken over by women writers. (*El País* 1999, n.pag.)

This eye-catching headline refers to the 1999 Planeta prize that was awarded to Freire’s novel *Irlanda* [Ireland]. The definition of the novel as *una historia de mujeres* [a women’s tale] suggests that Freire is a female writer and the novel’s main characters are female, and therefore the book is for women readers. The protagonists of *Irlanda* are indeed two female cousins, and the plot centres around their mixed feelings about one another and their rivalrous relationship. However, the story also includes a number of prominent male characters, and there is no reason why the depiction of this complex relationship between two women should not be as universally applicable

as a fictionalized account of a relationship between two male protagonists. On the contrary, it is difficult to imagine any headline announcing that a male author had won a literary prize with a 'men's tale' about the complex relationship between two men, and that his book was intended primarily for male readers.

Interesting also is the use of *tomada* [taken]: 'as predicted, the 48th Planeta Awards have been *taken over* by women writers', which in Spanish is generally used in the context of a war or an avalanche. The word *tomada* implies an illegitimate or metaphorically violent attack on the traditional order and supremacy – in numerical terms – by women writers. Each year a Planeta first prize is awarded to one primary winner and a second prize to a runner-up. It is interesting and exceptional that both prizes in that year were awarded to a woman writer: Espido Freire and Nativel Preciado. This should be interpreted, metaphorically, as a *female* takeover, or an insurrection.

In the case of certain interviews, it is the question itself that entails an implicit disdain for any features in the text that might give it away as female-authored. The following question was part of the interview with Belén Gopegui in *El Mundo*'s 'Encuentros digitales' series from 2001:

When I read any of your books, I am unable to tell whether it has been written by a woman or a man, which does not happen with the rest of women writers. In fact, I get the feeling that I am reading a book written by a man. Is intelligence a male quality? (*El Mundo* 2001, n.pag.)

It seems that the initial remark on the supposed gender neutrality of Gopegui's writing is meant as a compliment, which is only logical if, as the question goes on to suggest, intelligence is understood as a male quality whereas femaleness is most associated with emotion, intuition, and sensitivity. Gopegui's answer is, not surprisingly, ambivalent:

I sometimes read men's books and I get the impression that they have been written by women, that is, they reproduce feminine clichés that sell well. Being intelligent is a rare quality, at least nowadays. It is a universal quality, but it dies with lack of use. (*Ibid.*)

It is also interesting to examine the critical response in 2001 of a well-known Spanish critic, Sanz Villanueva, to the theme of fame in Etxebarria's *De*

todo lo visible y lo invisible [Of Everything Visible and Invisible], for its identification of the author with her female characters:

The famous director is set against the minority writer, but although this conflict emphasizes their relationship, their love story only has a relative importance. It is rather a pretext on the part of the author to show how she makes a distinction between two different types of creator: the winner with the audience against the writer applauded by a competent reviewer. The many paragraphs dedicated to this are catchy and pitiful, for they ooze a sad personal grudge.

Rather than with the novel, these interpolations have to do with Etxebarria herself, with her frustration at not achieving this recognition, which despite her claims of contempt for it, makes her suffer [...]. What the author does is to fix things before they break, because it does not take a genius to understand that she is arrogantly forecasting *De todo lo visible y lo invisible*'s future. But one does notice a somewhat childish tantrum: suck it up (all of you – Great Literature authors, it is understood), because I am famous, I appear on TV and you are only celebrated in cultural magazines. (Sanz Villanueva 2001)

This critique of *De todo lo visible y lo invisible* is a pertinent illustration of the tendency to conflate the life of the female author with her fiction. These comments about Etxebarria may or may not be accurate, but they would not generally be regarded as literary criticism. Since no quotation from Etxebarria is included in the article, it may be assumed that the allegation that she uses her protagonists to express her 'sad personal grudge' is speculation, or even perhaps a form of projection on the part of Villanueva. Indeed, the facts that Villanueva has the arrogance to assume that he has access to Etxebarria's thoughts and that the terms he uses in expressing these thoughts are deliberately belittling are out of order.

Elsewhere, Ayala-Dip's review of Etxebarria's *Un milagro en equilibrio* [A Miracle in Equilibrium] in 2004 accuses its author of using the unclear, from-mother-to-daughter emotional format of the novel with the sole purpose of venting her social and political opinions:

Because for her [Etxebarria], what matters above all is to express and show her disagreement with the world. But the reader may wonder, what is going on here? Is this a mock novel/diary/letter? What if it is all of that at the same time, what does it have to do with all that venting? [...] The novel never takes flight; it never exceeds the level of emotional bickering. (Ayala-Dip 2004)

Similarly, in an interview by Piña in 2010, with Carmen Gurruchaga, cited below, not only is it assumed that the creation of a strong and independent female character indicates an ulterior motive on the part of the author, but what is also taken for granted is that the protagonist is an alter ego of the author herself. However, Gurruchaga's subsequent reply denies this ('Lola is not me; she is many women'): 'It is unavoidable to think that the author wanted to create the character of Lola, a veteran journalist, confident, independent and tirelessly hard-working, by taking herself as a model' (cited in Piña 2010a).

These reviews are all representative of the critical tendency to assume that 'women's writing' is more concerned with personal politics than with literature. Although they are not representative of all literary criticism in Spain, they do however highlight an ongoing and often uncontested tendency to consider that what has been written by women is inferior and has relevance primarily for women readers. As noted by Freixas, the lack of research on women's writing in Spain results in the assertion that 'women writers do not tend to articulate theoretical contributions and the world of literature keeps disseminating unfounded judgements' (Potok-Nycz 2003: 7).

Another factor in this knee-jerk reaction against women and women writers may be the label 'feminist'. Freixas is quite clear about what are for her the negative aspects of feminist criticism:

There is no doubt that in Anglophone countries *Women's Studies* have the regrettable consequence of isolating women's literature by bringing it closer to historical, sociological, or political fields and distancing it from literature *per se*. (2000: 80)

Freixas highlights the fact that, in Spain, academic research on women's literature seldom reaches the general public (Freixas 2000: 39). With reference to a Spanish reading public, research emerging from Women's Studies is based on the Anglophone tradition and tends to be published in English. It would therefore be logical to expect that the majority of academics specializing in Spanish women authors are Anglo-American, or Spaniards working at Anglophone institutions (Freixas 2000: 81). Women writers' participation in Spanish literary institutions parallels this lack of academic studies on their works. With the exception of some notable authors such

as Ana María Matute, women writers are rarely represented in the most traditional and prestigious institutions. Academic research on women writers does, however, resist the notion of ‘women’s literature’ as a purely commercial category, and helps to bring the debate closer to students and specialist readers. Freixas’s point about the lack of female members in the most prestigious Spanish literary institutions is also relevant to this situation: in 2018 there were eight female members out of the total forty-six members of the RAE (Real Academia Española), two female members in the permanent commission of the ASALE (Asociación de Academias de la Lengua Española),² and there are currently only eighteen female directors out of a total of the fifty-nine Cervantes centres that exist outside Spain.

Having studied and worked at various American and British universities, I have a different view. Academic research on women writers does resist the notion of ‘women’s literature’ as a purely commercial category and helps to bring the debate closer to students and specialist readers. I would argue that, taking into account findings based on reader-response theory that shows the meaning of any text is based on the relationship between the reader and the author, there is a need for more women critics and reviewers to focus primarily on writing by women to ensure their presence within both academic and public debate.

Taught modules on ‘Spanish Women’s Writing’, classified as a separate subject from ‘Spanish Literature’, are still common in Anglophone universities, but the focus is not necessarily separatist or feminist. While there is a danger of ghettoization, the aim of this measure – a measure that I believe should be temporary – seems to be to familiarize students with the debate surrounding the existence of ‘women’s literature’ in Spain and to introduce them to works of women authors that until relatively recently had received little attention from the academic world. In the United States, to cite two modules that deal with writing by Spanish women as simply

- 2 The ASALE [Association of the Academies of Spanish Language]. The permanent commission currently comprises President Darío Villanueva, General Secretary Francisco Javier Pérez, Treasurer Aurora Egido, and rotating members Jorge Ernesto Lemus Sandoval, José Rodríguez Rodríguez, and Pablo Adrián Cavallero. For more information see <<http://www.asale.org>>.

literature, Drury University and Indiana College offer one such undergraduate course each. Three credits, SPAN313: 'These Are Not Sweet Girls: Hispanic Women's Literature', taught at Drury, investigates issues of power, space, and archetypes in the literature written by Hispanic women and it covers the period up to and including the twenty-first century. Similarly, S470: 'Women and Hispanic Literature' is a three-credit undergraduate module taught at the Indiana University School of Liberal Arts at Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis. Focusing on a selection of poetry, autobiography, short stories, essays, and novels, and covering different genres and time periods from the Middle Ages to modern times, the module examines the representation of women in a series of literary works from Spain and Latin America. Literary topics explored in this course include image (portrayal and self-representation), characterization, and voice, as well as gender-oriented narrative techniques and linguistic and stylistic codes.

Similarly, in the UK, the focus of modules on women writers is progressively shifting from a feminist perspective to a wider range of theories and angles. For instance, the University of Durham provides final-year students with the option of a module titled 'Representing Women: Sex and Power in Colonial Latin America'. The module studies the portrayal of women's subjectivity and aspirations in literature and other kinds of cultural production by both male and female writers and artists, and deals with questions of self-representation and institutional intellectual collaboration on the part of women intellectuals before the nineteenth century, but the fact that it incorporates artists of both sexes denotes a wish for integration rather than ghettoization. A similar example can be found in the University of Bristol's Department of Spanish, Portuguese, and Latin American Studies. The aim of the module 'Women's Writing in Post-War Spain' is to provide students with an introduction to several of Spain's most important postwar women writers. The focus of this unit is a literary one, and a close reading of each text set is carried out with the aim of examining the key themes that each writer explores in her fiction.

Within the Spanish arena that is our focus here, it is the case that on the syllabi of the literature modules taught at most Spanish universities, where Spanish literature by men is regarded as universal and as the

norm, women authors are generally absent or have only very small representation in general literature modules and are only present in specific female literature modules. For example, the degree in *Filología Hispánica* [Hispanic philology] available at the Universidad de Granada offers a general module titled 'La novela española a partir de Cervantes' [The Spanish Novel from Cervantes Onwards]. In spite of this all-inclusive title, the module includes just two women (Emilia Pardo Bazán and Rosa Chacel) out of a total of over thirty authors. However, that same university teaches a specific course called 'La mujer en la literatura española' [The Woman in Spanish Literature], which contributes to the reinforcement of the idea that literature written by women is different.³ The same situation is repeated in the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, where students at the Departamento de Filología Española II study the module 'La mujer en la literatura española'.⁴ By contrast, there is no such module as 'El hombre en la literatura española' [The Man in Spanish literature], or 'Introducción a la literatura masculina' [Introduction to Men's Literature].

Marketing 'Women Writers' in Spain

As women authors become commercial icons, their once marginalized status increases their promotional visibility. (Henseler 2003a: 16)

This comment from Henseler succinctly outlines the paradox that this chapter examines, which is that although to a greater or lesser extent all writers are obliged to conform to the expectations, the demands, and the publishing iconography of the literary market, this iconography is marked for gender in a way that is particularly complex for women. This section examines the role of marketing in the dissemination and reception of women's writing

3 See <<http://litespa.ugr.es/pages/docencia>> (accessed 29 June 2010).

4 See <<http://www.ucm.es/info/literat/Web/Departamento.php?tipo=Asignaturas&orden=2>> (accessed 29 June 2010).

by using as a case study an in-depth analysis of the representation of female authors in the publication *Qué Leer*.

Tsuchiya notes that in Spain, perhaps because their life experiences parallel the increasingly promotional demands of the book market, '[i]t is no surprise [...] that the 1980s and 90s, which gave rise to a new generation of readers raised in a consumer society, coincided with a boom of young writers, as the concepts of "lo nuevo" (novelty) and "lo joven" (youth) became commodified as objects of consumption' (2002a: 239). Because the problem of gender identity has been a central preoccupation for many female authors of the post-Franco period, an ability to respond to socio-cultural changes has been shown by the generation born in the 1960s and 1970s – both men and women (Tsuchiya 2002b: 77). Marta Rivera de la Cruz chose to contribute personally to the promotion of her novel *La vida después* [The Life After]. With this in mind, a book trailer was uploaded to YouTube showing a considerable number of anonymous participants answering the question: 'Can men and women be friends?'⁵ The same question, which is central to the novel's plot, was posted on the author's Twitter account for the general public to answer and discuss. For these writers, the need to comply with the ever-pressing demands to promote one's novels in different media, to embark on seemingly endless tours, and to work on one's media projection is unavoidable. The notion that it might be possible to be a successful writer without conforming to the demands of the market is not even questioned.

Many factors are at stake in questioning the existence of 'women's literature', but what makes the label immediately controversial is that it is used for only one of the two sexes. It could be argued that the label provides better publicity and more opportunity for the dissemination of informative press about women writers, or, on the contrary, that it also perpetuates a particular kind of discrimination against female authors that is based solely on the biological prerogative of their sex. There are good reasons to adopt one or both of these views, and Henseler is not wrong in her subliminal reference to a double-edged sword. The label makes women writers more

5 See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ori1-POtY8>>.

visible and more accessible to the wider public. This encourages interest from publishing houses and literary institutions, and as a result the construction of women writers as an attractive commodity for the purposes of marketing. On the other hand, it also encourages negative politics of segregation: women writers find themselves appearing in women-only collections. Even now, in the twenty-first century, women writers are often excluded from universally themed anthologies and collections.

Moran (2000: 350) affirms that ‘the wave of mergers and buyouts within the publishing industry since the 1960s and the subsequent formation of multimedia conglomerates have certainly precipitated more vigorous and sophisticated attempts to sell books, often by promoting the personalities of their authors’, and in this sense the critic Ricardo Senabre (2000) has noted that the boom in women writers is not only about difference, but also about marketability. Likewise, the writer Rebeca Rus (2012) points out that it is not necessary to be a feminist to write *literatura femenina* [women’s literature] but nevertheless she agrees with Senabre that the labelling of ‘women’s writing’ is very closely linked to marketability: ‘This is certainly a controversial issue, and my perspective as an advertising and marketing professional is that the label [...] is nothing but a marketing tool. Publishers find it easier to sell a type of novel once it has been labelled’.⁶ This view gestures towards a central paradox in any attempt to write about women writers and one of the reasons why the label remains an uncomfortable one for women. It becomes particularly ill-fitting when scrutinized in the context of the increasingly important role of marketing strategies for the creation of literary canons. Although it may be impossible to decide whether there is in fact any difference in the way men and women write, there is certainly a quantifiable difference in the way they are marketed that is under consideration here.

Freixas’s research focuses on the 1990s and includes sources taken from numerous literary conferences, anthologies, reviews, newspaper articles, and polls published in Spain during this period (Freixas 2005). The trends she identifies are intimately linked to the incorporation of women writers

6 Author’s email interview with Rus, 14 August 2012.

into the literary market from the early 1980s onwards and are ultimately tied in with the question of the existence of 'women's literature'. It may well be impossible to define substantively the difference between writing by men and writing by women, as critics like Kristeva have suggested, which is further confirmed by the reluctance of many women writers to concede its existence. However, what is clear is that whether or not it exists, writing by women is certainly marketed as if it did. Publishers, interviewers, critics, journalists, and even cultural-event planners frequently place primary importance on the gender of the female writer.

Freixas opens her discussion by noting that as a result of marketing strategies contemporary women writers are highly visible and accessible. Their various media appearances may even create the illusion that they dominate and are supported by the literary market (2000: 38). Freixas confirms the high commodity value of women writers to publishing houses and other institutions interested in recruiting and marketing to women. The 'demand' that Freixas highlights has led to, and is in turn fed by, the predominance of a particular kind of marketing: glossy photographs of women writers accompany literary articles in prestigious magazines such as *Qué Leer* and *Época*. The text and discussion that accompany this kind of marketing, particularly on popular television programmes, often includes highly personal questions.⁷ However, the greater media visibility granted to women is double-edged, for it also creates the false impression that women have conquered the literary market, and this may be a factor in some of the hostile responses to women's writing mentioned above.

Montero (2012) in her interview in *El camino de las palabras* [The Path of Words] argues that the promotional demands of the literary industry affect women writers and male writers alike and in a similar way.⁸ Sensing

7 In her role as editor of *Lo que los hombres no saben. El sexo contado por las mujeres* (2008), Lucía Etxebarria was interviewed by Marta Robles as part of the book launch. The interview, broadcast on *Telemadrid* on 17 March 2008, soon left the literary arena to move onto much more intimate questions Complete interview on <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgX1aORFios>> [accessed 5 July 2010].

8 Author's conversation with Montero as part of her talk in Instituto Cervantes London on 26 January 2012.

that Montero's statement might cloud the very different nature of the promotional demands placed on male and female writers, I have been prompted to test this theory against a case study of 147 interviews with male and female writers in issues of the popular publishing journal, *Qué Leer*, from 2010 to 2012. *Qué Leer* is aimed at a general reading public, rather than at the academic community, and for this reason it is a good indication of the marketing strategies that both male and female authors face. It is one of seventy magazines published by MC Ediciones, one of Europe's most important publishing houses, and it boasts the highest number of readers of all book magazines distributed in Spain, as measured by EGM (Estudio General de Medios) and OJD (Oficina de Justificación de la Difusión), two trustworthy indicators of the success enjoyed by publications. On its website, *Qué Leer* attributes this success to its rigorous yet accessible and stimulating style:

Its good acceptance among the public arises from a fundamental idea: if reading is one of the most exciting, imaginative and dreamy life experiences ... why is information about books cumbersome, serious or boring? QUÉ LEER seeks to report the news of the month, the events of the publishing world and the universe of writers with strict rigour and topicality, but also with a casual style and the ultimate goal of spreading the fascination with reading. (<<http://www.que-leer.com/revista-que-leer>>)

Presumably in the interests of stimulating said 'fascinación por la lectura' [fascination with reading], each interview in the issues studied was accompanied by a glossy photo of the author, regardless of sex. Renowned photographer Susan Sontag (who is also a prestigious author, teacher, film-maker, and activist), states that '[i]n teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notion of what is worth looking at and what we have the right to observe' (Sontag 1979: 3). In this sense, *Qué Leer* readers enjoy the opportunity to observe their favourite authors in casual, non-professional settings. Interestingly, following the trend initiated by, among others, *Time* magazine, *Qué Leer*'s captioned photographs focus on a single, emblematic quality of the author portrayed. Hence, the subject is identified with a main characteristic that according to Moran owes much to 'the culture of advertising, and specifically

its techniques of product differentiation' (2000: 358). As Susan Sontag maintains, if photographs tend to be treated as more genuine and truthful than information in prose (1979: 6), readers would have the illusion that these photographs could depict the real personality behind the writer's public persona.

However, what is striking is the difference in the *mise en scène* of the portraits of the female writers that we will observe, who were framed in a far less neutral poses and with quite different demeanours from those of the male writers. For example, while *Qué Leer* tends to frame female writers at home, the tendency with male writers such as Alberto Olmos and Boris Izaguirre (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2) is to portray them in close-up, framing them in a more professional and impersonal way.

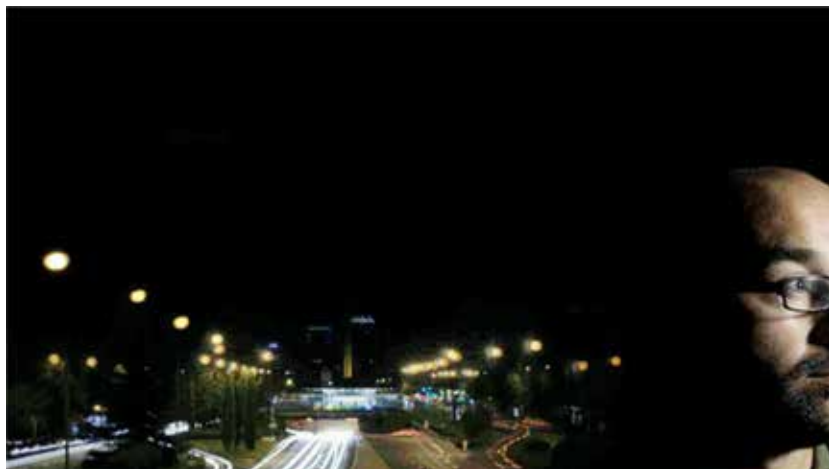


Figure 2.1 Photograph taken for Álex Gil's interview (2011) with Alberto Olmo in *Qué Leer* 167. Photograph: Asís G. Ayerbe. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.



Figure 2.2 Antonio Baños's interview with Boris Izaguirre (2011) is accompanied by this photograph in *Qué Leer* 168. Photograph: Diana Hernández. Reproduced with permission from *Qué Leer*.

The interview with Boris Izaguirre in *Qué Leer* was accompanied by a photograph taken in London, where the writer owns a house. What is particularly interesting about this portrait of Izaguirre as a serious career writer about town is how little it corresponds to his career trajectory and professional background. Born in Caracas in 1965, Izaguirre is a Venezuelan-Spanish screenwriter, journalist, and writer. He moved to Spain as the popular scriptwriter of a series of Venezuelan telenovelas [soap operas], such as *Rubí* [Ruby] and *La dama de Rosa* [The Lady in Pink], where he continued writing scripts and started participating in TV shows. Izaguirre is considered one of Spain's most important media personalities, particularly as a result of his role as co-host in the highly popular late-night TV show *Crónicas Marcianas*. From 1999 to 2005, his polemical appearances and provocative behaviour in this programme, in which he became notorious for stripping off his clothing, turned him into a media phenomenon.⁹ By 2018 Izaguirre had published eight novels and received a *Planeta Finalista* award for *Villa Diamante* [Diamond Villa] (2007). Notwithstanding the popularity of his novels, in Spain Izaguirre is more famous for his persona as a provocative showman than as a writer, and for a Spanish audience the portrait of the serious writer provided in *Qué Leer*, seems slightly incongruously removed from the image of Boris Izaguirre that has secured his reputation and fuelled his successful media career. This serious framing of the showman becomes particularly ironic when considered in direct contrast to the frivolous framing of far more serious female writers like Montero and Grandes.

As can be seen in Figures 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5, women writers are framed in a personal instead of a professional setting, presenting them as friendly, accessible, and, perhaps most tellingly, at home: Rosa Montero barefoot, strokes a cat; Almudena Grandes plays (again) with a cat in a cosy domestic setting; while Maruja Torres (catless) strikes a rather camp, self-mocking pose for the camera.

9 'Boris se desnuda para Chenoa', *YouTube*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOQJvOfT7JE>>.



Figure 2.3 Picture accompanying Antonio Baños' interview with Maruja Torres (2011) in *Qué Leer* 164. Photograph: Mario Krmpotic. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.

Journalist and novelist Maruja Torres has had a high profile in Spain for decades. She is respected for her diverse but stable career and her frequently controversial opinions. Her wit and satirical sense of humour are the trademarks of her writing. If the portrait itself gestures obliquely towards this aspect of her writing, the text that accompanies it contains not a trace:

Maruja Torres takes the photographer and me to the Borne neighbourhood so that we can portray her and make her pose with joy. It is rare to find a happy writer [...] Promotions allow her 'to feel taken care of and noticed,' she confesses.



Figure 2.4 Image of Rosa Montero included in Begoña Piña's interview with her in *Qué Leer* 164. Photograph: Asís G. Ayerbe. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.

The familiar, cosy portrait of Rosa Montero with her cat accompanies an interview in which the author often diverges from the main topic, her novel *Lágrimas sobre la lluvia* [Tears in the Rain], to discuss her personal life, her friends, and, most strikingly, the painful death of her husband, Pablo Lizcano, from cancer, an experience that renders the domestic cosiness of the photograph somewhat incongruous.



Figure 2.5 Photograph to accompany Inés García-Albi's interview with Almudena Grandes in *Qué Leer* 157. Photograph: Asís G. Ayerbe. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.

As stated in the accompanying interview, the photograph of Almudena Grandes was taken in the comfort of the writer's house, 'where this Madrid-born author shares her life with the poet Luis García Montero'. The interview soon focuses far more on this intimate setting than on discussion of Grandes' novel, *Inés y la alegría* [Inés and Joy]. As well as making several explicit references to her husband and family life, the interviewer remarks on Grandes' skills as a hostess and cook:

The García Montero Grandes family is at home, expecting the arrival of several friends coming to watch the first game of the World Cup. They like entertaining. The house is ample, the TV is big and Almudena loves rolling up her sleeves and standing over the stove to feed the whole troop of family and friends.

This reads like a parody of *Hello!* magazine, so it is not surprising that references to the writer's physical appearance follow: 'dressed in white-striped grey jeans, a black top and homespun Crocs'. And yet the photograph we see shows Grandes wearing a much more feminine and formal blue dress; perhaps to complete an article composed of clichés, it was felt that more formal attire was needed to establish an equally clichéd parallel between the author and her latest protagonist:

The deep voice accompanies the feeling that the novelist is a woman of character, a real take-charge kind of woman [...]. While I follow her down the corridor, it occurs to me that Inés, the heroine of her novel, is also one of this kind of women; lively women, who are not afraid to get their hands dirty, who are Jacks of all trades, who have definite opinions and ideals, who are fighters, who protect their families, who are like a mother hen, who are passionate about things. (García-Albi 2010)

From this brief sample, it is clear that photographs of women writers are predominantly less serious, less professional, and more personal than those of their male peers. Their image is also more commonly and conveniently utilized, perhaps designed and prepared, as an advertising tool for literary events and the promotion of novels. While advertising is of course the primary purpose of almost all interviews and reviews, images of men tend to advertise their own work, whereas images of women are used additionally as part of the iconography of an event. A striking example of this tendency is provided by the photo (Figure 2.6) which accompanied an article in *El*

Cultural (2011, n.pag.) titled 'La Semana Gótica y Espido Freire descubren la parte oscura de los cuentos de hadas' [Gothic Week and Espido Freire discover the dark side of fairy tales].



Figure 2.6 Espido Freire advertising La Semana Gótica [Gothic Week] in *El Cultural* (2011). Photograph: Alan Cueto for La Semana Gótica Madrid, October 2011. Reproduced with permission from *El Cultural*.

La Semana Gótica is an annual, multidisciplinary celebration that incorporates fashion, literary, cinematic events with the common denominator of a Gothic theme. In 2011 the event took place from 21 October to 30 October in Madrid's Museo Romántico. The picture shows writer Espido Freire sporting a rather Gothic look; indeed her exceptionally long dark hair, pale creamy skin, and melancholic expression make her the perfect advertising image for such an event.

With the purpose of establishing whether men are linked to their works in a similar fashion, the photographs that accompanied the 159 interviews with men in *Qué Leer* were also examined, covering the period from the magazine's inception (4 February 2009) to its 27 July 2012 edition. *Qué Leer* features both national and international authors and artists, but since my focus here is on Spain, this selection exclusively covers Spanish writers. I found that a total of sixty-two Spanish male writers and twenty-three Spanish women writers had been interviewed over this period. In spite of the higher number of male authors, only two of the interviews of male authors were accompanied by a photograph in which the writer was presented as part of the plot he had created. These authors were the late Francisco Ibáñez and Manel Loureiro. In the case of Ibáñez, a picture of 'Mortadelo y Filemón', the comic characters he created, had been superimposed on the portrait of Ibáñez that accompanied Iturbe's interview with the author (*Qué Leer* 165 2011: 60–3). In the photograph that accompanies the interview with Loureiro, the author of the *Apocalipsis Z(ombi)* trilogy is portrayed wearing zombie make-up in a cemetery (*Qué Leer* 167 2011: 74–5). Not one of the male authors was portrayed in a cosy way, nor even in a mildly unprofessional manner. For example, although Jordi Esteva was photographed in the forest leading to his home and accompanied by his dog, his demeanour and expression were much more serious, and the natural setting is justified by the fact that the interview centres on his exotic novel *Socotra. La isla de los genios* [Socotra: The Land of Djinnns] (2011), which has been compared to a travel book (see Figure 2.7).



Figure 2.7 Photograph accompanying Xavier Armendariz' interview with Jordi Esteve in *Qué Leer* 169. Photograph: Xavier Armendariz. Reproduced with permission from *Qué Leer*.

Equally neutral is Isaac Rosa's pose for the photo accompanying an interview to promote his novel *La mano invisible* [The Invisible Hand] (2011). Taken in a busy street, the photo portrays the writer posing in a natural yet confident manner (see Figure 2.8).



Figure 2.8 Photograph of Isaac Rosa to illustrate Antonio Lozano's interview with him in *Qué Leer* 168. Photograph: Asís G. Ayerbe. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.

Conversely, the number of women writers who had either been dressed up as an event advertising their own characters or photographed in an overtly friendly, non-professional way was nine. In addition to Etxebarria, Grandes, Torres, and Montero, whose images are reproduced in this chapter, they are

Alicia Giménez Barlett, Mercedes Salisachs, Esther García Llovet, Milagros Frías, and Cristina Fallarás. The difference in numbers is considerable when one takes into account that this means that in Spain's most widely read book magazine, only around three per cent of men but almost forty per cent of women writers have their own appearance commodified as a commercial icon for the promotion of their writing. In other words, contemporary marketing techniques mimics, and compounds, the tendency noted earlier within traditional literary criticism to conflate the work and the sex of the writer in a way that risks limiting its scope and its appeal to that of women's issues.

In *Mythologies*, originally published in French in 1957, Barthes' questioning of the meanings of cultural artefacts and practices that surround us in our everyday lives seems applicable to the use of women writers' portraits as iconographic elements. Barthes claims that the supposed naturalness, innocence, and neutrality of cultural objects, gestures and practices should be challenged, for underneath their particular utilitarian function lies the imposition of a certain ideological message. For every object, a series of secondary meanings or connotations can be uncovered. In his essay 'Iconographie de l'abbé Pierre' Barthes analyses the attire of the priest, with an emphasis on his haircut:

The Abbé Pierre's haircut, obviously devised so as to reach a neutral equilibrium between short hair (an indispensable convention if one does not want to be noticed) and unkempt hair (a state suitable to express contempt for other conventions), thus becomes the capillary archetype of saintliness: the saint is first and foremost a being without formal context; the idea of fashion is antipathetic to the idea of sainthood. But at this point things get more complicated – unknown to the Abbé, one hopes – because here as everywhere else, neutrality ends up by functioning as the sign of neutrality, and if you really wished to go unnoticed, you would be back where you started. The 'zero' haircut, then, is quite simply the label of Franciscanism; first conceived negatively so as not to contradict the appearance of sainthood, it quickly becomes a superlative mode of signification, it *dresses up* the Abbé as Saint Francis. (Barthes 1991: 47)

Rather than simply claiming that this is the product of the priest's conscious manipulation of his public image, what Barthes argues, more importantly, is that no detail is exempt from meaning or from possible interpretation, and a similar approach could be taken to the media commodification of the image, the contemporary iconography, of the female and male writer.

Henseler notes that, as a result of their promotional visibility, women authors have become commercial icons despite their numerical inferiority in the literary market (Henseler 2003a: 16–17) and although Henseler’s study dates back to 2003, the use of women authors as commercial icons is perpetuated in the pictures and promotional campaigns accompanying women authors’ latest novels in *Qué Leer*.



Figure 2.9 Philipp Engel’s interview with Lucía Etxebarria (*Qué Leer* [151]), following the publication of *Lo verdadero es un momento de lo falso*. Photograph: Marta Calvo. Reproduced with permission from the photographer.



Figure 2.10 Photograph accompanying Sabina Friedjulsén’s article on Espido Freire’s ‘La princesa que vino del frío’ (*Qué Leer* 162). Photograph: Paco Arzúa. Reproduced with permission from *Qué Leer*.

Figure 2.9 illustrates Philipp Engel’s interview with Lucía Etxebarria following the publication of *Lo verdadero es un momento de lo falso* [Truth is Naught but a Moment of Falsehood]; interview and picture were published in *Qué Leer* in February 2010. Figure 2.10 is Paco Arzúa’s photograph to illustrate Sabina Friedjulsén’s article on Espido Freire, ‘La princesa que vino del frío’ [The Princess Who Came From The Cold], published in *Qué Leer* in May 2011.

These photos demonstrate that a common ploy for marketing the woman author as commercial icon is to blur the boundary between her

persona and her characters. In this way, through a particular pose, attire, and mise-en-scène, Figures 2.9 and 2.10 place the female author in the middle of her own plot and give readers the illusion of an identification between the writer and the fiction. The first photo corresponds to an interview that Etxebarria gave as part of the promotion of *Lo verdadero es un momento de lo falso*. The protagonists of this novel are the three members of an alternative rock band, and the photo appropriately presents Lucía Etxebarria in a rock-star attire, ready to play drums against the black background of a rock stage. Very different, although equally (in)appropriate, is the second photo, which shows Espido Freire dressed up as a Nordic princess. This picture accompanies an article on the publication of her novel *La flor del Norte* [The Flower of the North], which is the story of the Norwegian princess Kristina.

Following Barthes' claim that the alleged neutrality of cultural artefacts and practices should be questioned, this analysis of the pictures above challenges the supposed innocence of contemporary iconography of the female and male writer to conclude that although both sexes are commodified for marketing, the women are consistently more likely to be represented either as domesticated and at home or as an event that is conflated, crudely, with the subject matter of their work.

Paradox and Prejudice

This chapter opened by proposing that, as a result of our own set of prejudices and unconscious gender bias, all readers may interpret a text in a different way. By examining a selection of critical responses to works by women authors within the wider academic community and, above all, in the Spanish press, I have been able to establish some of the most common and persistent of these prejudices. Amongst these predominate: a tendency to underrate writing by women and assume that its content is more personal than literary or political; an assumption that writing by women gives priority to female protagonists, whose identity becomes conflated with that

of the writer; that writing by women addresses women's issues that are primarily of interest to women readers, rather than to the general public. At the same time, there appears to exist a paradoxical fear that women sell more books than men, and that the rise of women's writing is somehow threatening to literature in general. These prejudices tend to recur in the form of negative allusions to women authors' sex and gender in reviews and interviews. While this is not always the case, the interviews and reviews analysed here certainly do highlight an ongoing and rarely contested tendency to patronize the work of women writers in a negative way.

Such prejudices are not confined to written reviews and interviews. They are also perpetuated in the promotional illustrations in *Qué Leer*, and accordingly the second part of this chapter has concluded that the role of marketing in the dissemination and reception of women's writing and the visual iconography employed is marked for gender in a way that is potentially more complex for women authors than for their male peers, because it is inherently more personal. The next chapter examines the response of Matute, Montero, and Etxebarria to the complex question of how best to negotiate their own public appearances in an increasingly commercialized and virtual literary market and to explore the way in which they respond to the role played by gender in their own public (re)construction.

