

Jrade, Cathy L. *Delmira Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest*. Pp. 288. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. US \$45.00. ISBN: 978-0300167740.

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As one of the most well-known Uruguayan poets of the twentieth century and the only recognized female member of the Latin American *modernista* movement, Delmira Agustini (1886-1914) has received substantial critical attention throughout the twentieth century and beyond. While her early readers tended either to extol her as an innocent young girl prone to mystical visions or vilify her blatant eroticism, more recently critics have interpreted her life and work as a highly deliberate performance allowing her to assert her creativity and insist on inhabiting a room of her own.

Now, Cathy L. Jrade – who is one of the foremost scholars of *modernismo* – has breathed new life into discussions of this perplexing poet's work. *Delmira Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest* is essential reading for any scholar of *fin-de-siecle* Latin American literature and for anyone else interested in engaging with this subversive and iconoclastic poet. Familiarity with Agustini's work is equally fruitful for any scholar of popular romance interested in exploring the well-known cultural stereotype of the "passionate Latin American". As Jrade shows, Agustini and her fellow *modernistas* effectively embody this stereotype and transform it into a means of resisting the bourgeois social structures of the early twentieth century.

Despite the book's provocative title, Jrade's study gives little attention to "vampiric conquest" as we normally encounter it in popular culture. Instead, Jrade focuses on Agustini's conquest of one of her primary literary precursors, the Nicaraguan *modernista* poet Rubén Darío. Jrade argues that Agustini – who corresponded with Darío and met him personally on one occasion – is highly influenced by his poetics:

He is this imposing figure, this erotically charged image of artistic supremacy and sexual discourse, and the human face given to the modernista movement. As Agustini's work matures (toward the end of the tragically short seven-year period in which she wrote her best work), Darío recedes and turns into a vague, ghostlike figure who haunts her poetic imagination. At times she

relegates him to the past, to winter, and to a rigid iciness... At other times, her struggle with his imposing presence turns into a sadomasochistic vision of erotic entanglement in which she alternately injures or is injured (4).

Jrade organizes her study of Agustini's work around this relationship with Darío, analyzing much of it in terms of a dialogue with the older poet in his many incarnations. Thus, while the "sexual seduction" that Jade speaks of might refer to the eroticism that pervades all of Agustini's work, it can also be viewed as the sexually charged relationship between the two poets. And, while Agustini does explore vampirism in her poetic work, the "vampiric conquest" can be seen as her desire to feast on the richness of Darío's poetics while boldly transforming them into something completely her own.

Organized in five chapters, Jade's study begins with an examination of "Agustini and her world." After briefly outlining the author's biography, Jade offers us an overview of the political changes occurring in Uruguay under the progressive President José Batlle y Ordóñez, whose administration saw labour reforms and the beginnings of the Uruguayan feminist movement. She then discusses the general cultural trends sweeping Latin America at the time, particularly that of European positivism. According to Jade, August Comte's philosophy, with its emphasis on science and reason at the expense of intuition and imagination, proved problematic for the *modernistas*:

Torn between the reigning faith in science and an enduring fascination with intangible realities, modernistas, like their European, British and Anglo-American contemporaries, often sought answers that went beyond secular realities. By the same token, however, most were incapable of returning to the unquestioning faith of their ancestors. Their art revealed their ambivalent longing for the ease, elegance and increasing Europeanization of the bourgeoisie and ruling elites at the same time that they, for the most part, cast themselves in the tradition of the great romantic poets who saw themselves as outsiders and social critics (20).

Situating Agustini within this context of rapid social change and ambivalence over values, Jade draws particular attention to the challenges facing a woman writer at the time; despite the burgeoning feminist movement and the family support that Agustini enjoyed as a writer, she worked under a huge amount of social pressure and, as many critics have observed, had to don elaborate masks in order to live out her chosen vocation. She also observes that the writers of the predominantly male *modernista* movement – including Darío – invoke familiar metaphors of women as passive, quiet, marginalized figures. As the youngest member of the movement, Agustini engages with Darío's work but refuses to be intimidated or limited by it.

In the following four chapters, Jade carefully and insightfully analyzes each of Agustini's four poetic collections: *El libro blanco (Frágil)* (*The white book (Fragile)*), *Cantos de la mañana (Songs of the morning)*, *Los cálices vacíos (The empty chalices)* and *Los astros del abismo (The stars of the abyss)*. While Jade's painstaking close readings of the poems reveal many insights for interpreting the texts, the poet's complicated relationship with Darío and the challenges she faces as a woman writer form the backbone of the analysis.

Examining Jrade's work as a whole, the most consistent feature is the immense love and admiration that she expresses toward her subject without sacrificing intellectual incisiveness and rigor; indeed, it is as if Jrade has become infected by the passion of Agustini's writing and seeks to convey that passion to her readers, be they expert scholars of Agustini or complete newcomers to the poet's work. This passion is most evident in Jrade's sensitive translations of the original texts into English, her thorough and comprehensive engagement with the existing body of Agustini scholarship, and the poetic quality of her own critical writing, which is engaging and easily accessible. An example of this beautifully written analysis can be seen in Jrade's discussion of "*Las alas*" (The wings), a poem from *Cantos de la mañana* in which the speaker imagines being given a set of perfect, angelic wings, only to awaken and find them melting from her shoulders. Jrade initially relates Agustini's poetic quest to Darío's in his poem "Sonatina", in which the speaker imagines himself as a heroic knight on a winged horse. While the wings, for both poets, signify transcendence, Jrade is quick to point out that in Agustini's case the adversity in the poem suggests pain and suffering rather than triumph only – thus pointing to the limitations that Agustini encountered as a woman writer, challenges that Darío does not have to face. When Agustini's poetic speaker seeks the promise of a reaching a transcendent realm on these shining wings, Jrade interprets the ascension thus:

In this passage, Agustini expresses the most fundamental of modernista aspirations, namely, to provide a transcendental vision that breaks with the predominant positivistic ideology of the day. The materialism, pragmatism, and utilitarianism that informed daily activity are implicitly contrasted with a search for ultimate truths. Her focus is on what others cannot see. Her perspective reflects a dynamism and an eroticism that become all-consuming ("ardiente, devorante y único"). Equally significant is the way Agustini appropriates the sexual metaphors of creation previously used by male authors and makes them female and birdlike as well. She has the power to incubate a "beyond," that is, to hatch a vision that elevates her above the here and now. This semantic shift and the foregrounding of wings and flight hint at the emergence of a new swan of modernista verse, one that embraces women writers (114).

The sheer beauty of Jrade's prose radiates through the text, making this work an appropriate companion to Agustini's own passionate linguistic artistry.

While Jrade's focus on intertextuality and the literary relationship between Darío and Agustini provides a solid organizing principle for the study, I am inclined to question if this focus is perhaps too narrow for a book which is definitively the first comprehensive, book-length investigation of Agustini published in English. Jrade has argued that Darío stands out as the epitome of the *modernista* movement, and his relationship to Agustini – personal as well as literary – is certainly significant to her work. Nevertheless, I am curious as to the ways this examination might look different were Jrade to expand the dialogue and invite other interlocutors to the table; for example fellow Uruguayan *modernista* writers Julio Herrera y Reissig and Jorge Enrique Rodó. Perhaps a broadened study would have lost its focus; indeed, other books have been published on the Uruguayan "Generation of 1900" and Jrade's own *Modernismo, Modernity, and the Development of Spanish American*

Literature (University of Texas Press, 1998) offers a much broader overview of *modernismo* as a whole. At times I found Jade's repeated returns to Darío to be somewhat limiting in the way that they steer my own interpretation of Agustini's poetry. After reading the book for the first time, I was left with a desire to know more about Agustini's relationships with other *modernistas* and perhaps other literary precursors in French, Spanish and Latin American literature.

Meanwhile, I would also raise some questions about Jade's focus on gender. Of course, it is practically impossible for any critic of Agustini to discuss her work seriously without taking gender into account. As Jade has revealed, for all its forward-thinking ambitions the *modernista* movement was highly male-dominated, as was the cultural realm of bourgeois Montevideo that Agustini inhabited. Publicly nicknamed "la nena" (the little girl), pressured to marry a man who did not share her literary inclinations, Agustini struggled to forge her identity as a woman writer. And so, when Jade interprets Agustini's "Las alas" as seeking an inclusive form of transcendence that creates a space for women writers, I do not doubt her interpretation. The same holds true of her brief discussion of "El cisne" (The swan), a poem from *Los cálices vacíos* that can indeed be interpreted as a vampiric conquest of Darío's writings on the same subject. However, at other times throughout the analysis I wonder whether the intense focus on gender serves to limit the scope of interpretation rather than to enhance it. An example of this concern can be seen in Jade's analysis of Agustini's "Elegías dulces" (Sweet elegies) in *Cantos de la mañana*. In the first of these two short, deeply mournful poems, the poetic speaker passionately cries out, "Almas hermanas mías, nunca miréis atrás" (Dear sister souls, never look back) (Line 8, quoted in Jade 89). Interpreting this powerful cry, Jade responds,

The famous "don't look back" is addressed to "almas hermanas mías." In this phrase Agustini cleverly draws upon the grammatical gender of "almas" to move the apostrophe to a female perspective, that is, to her sisters in poetry. While on first reading it seems to warn against Orpheus's tragic fate and the everlasting entombment of former lovers and previous voices, it actually exhorts her sisters not to repeat the same mistake made by Lot's wife. She urges them not to turn to the past for models of inspiration, which will confine them to a position of inferiority or, worse, turn them into a worthless pillar of salt (89).

While the interpretation of "almas hermanas mías" as referring to other woman poets is plausible and interesting, and the connection to the story of Lot's wife highly insightful, I cannot help but wonder if Jade's interpretation is a little too eager to direct our critical gaze toward one particular reading. What if we were to view the text in terms of Orpheus rather than Lot's Wife? What if the "almas hermanas mías" did indeed refer to Agustini's sisters in poetry, but also to something else? Of course, in a study as comprehensive as Jade's only a certain amount of space can be devoted to each particular poem, and a critic needs to make choices. But while I admire Jade's critical assertiveness, her exploration might be enhanced by a wider engagement with some alternative interpretations. However, I am confident that this highly focused yet comprehensive study will spark a widespread interest in Agustini and initiate a varied conversation in which many such alternative voices will be heard.

Overall, *Delmira Agustini, Sexual Seduction and Vampiric Conquest* is an insightful, engaging, and beautiful critical companion to this poet's work and essential reading for scholars of twentieth-century Latin American literature and women's writing. In terms of popular romance studies, Jrade's engagement with Agustini's eroticism – in the context of *modernismo* – provides insight into the later stereotypes of “the passionate Latin American” that have persisted to this day. For the *modernistas* who did much to advance this concept, it was a liberating way of asserting their cultural identity and distinguishing themselves from the imperialistic United States of America, which they saw as cold, avaricious, and a threat to their new nations' autonomy. As Jrade's discussion of *modernismo* reveals, passion in the *fin-de-siecle* context was not only an end in itself, but a means of resisting the cultural paradigm of Comtian positivism, which they saw embodied in the United States of America as well as in their own governments. In this way, Jrade's work complexifies the stereotype of “the Latin lover,” revealing it not to be a haphazard, North American-invented caricature of an imagined other, but a trope that these poets themselves consciously and strategically cultivated as a means of asserting a cultural identity. There is much calculation in this “passion.” As Jrade shows us, Agustini's embodiment of this passion is indeed a double resistance; not only to positivism and the threat of US imperialism, but also to the social restrictions imposed on women even within her literary movement and to the imposing, larger-than-life presence of Rubén Darío.