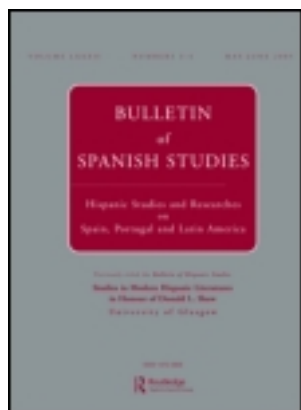


This article was downloaded by: [University of St Andrews]

On: 01 May 2013, At: 08:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Bulletin of Spanish Studies: Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbhs20>

Violets and Abolition: The Discourse on Slavery in Faustina Sáez de Melgar's Magazine La Violeta (Madrid, 1862-66)

Henriette Partzsch ^a

^a University of St Andrews

Published online: 28 Aug 2012.

To cite this article: Henriette Partzsch (2012): Violets and Abolition: The Discourse on Slavery in Faustina Sáez de Melgar's Magazine La Violeta (Madrid, 1862-66) , Bulletin of Spanish Studies: Hispanic Studies and Researches on Spain, Portugal and Latin America, 89:6, 859-875

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2012.712322>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

For full terms and conditions of use, see: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

esp. Part II. Intellectual property and access and license types, § 11. (c) Open Access Content

The use of Taylor & Francis Open articles and Taylor & Francis Open Select articles for commercial purposes is strictly prohibited.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Violets and Abolition: The Discourse on Slavery in Faustina Sáez de Melgar's Magazine *La Violeta* (Madrid, 1862–66)*

HENRIETTE PARTZSCH

University of St Andrews

With very few exceptions, mid nineteenth-century Spanish women writers have been identified as stout defenders of woman as the angel in the house, thus contributing to the dissemination of a bourgeois ideology of domesticity which vindicated separate and complementary spheres for the sexes.¹ Nevertheless, several of them were involved in the Spanish movement for the abolition of slavery, perhaps most notably Carolina Coronado, Concepción Arenal and Faustina Sáez de Melgar. This political stance is usually mentioned without further explanation, although there are some isolated studies of the issue, for instance Lisa Surwillo's sophisticated analysis of Carolina Coronado's 'poetic diplomacy' via personal connections and some judiciously placed public statements.² This situation raised my curiosity: how could nineteenth-century women writers take part in this humanitarian but in the end nevertheless political enterprise? Is this attitude just another manifestation of the well-known contradiction of preaching a domestic ideal in order to justify a position in the public space, however marginal and

* An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the annual conference of the Association of Hispanists of Great Britain and Ireland held at King's College London, April 2010.

1 See Lou Charnon-Deutsch, 'Nineteenth-Century Women Writers', in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. David T. Gies, corrected ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2009), 461–69. For very thorough and well-documented studies on mid-century women writers and domesticity, see Íñigo Sánchez Llama, *Galería de escritoras isabelinas: la prensa periódica entre 1833 y 1895* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2000) and Alda Blanco, *Escritoras virtuosas: narradoras de la domesticidad en la España isabelina* (Granada: Univ. de Granada, 2001).

2 Lisa Surwillo, 'Poetic Diplomacy: Carolina Coronado and the American Civil War', *Comparative American Studies*, 5:4 (2007), 409–22.

precarious this space might be?³ Or can their engagement teach us more about political culture in nineteenth-century Spain and the complex roles women attempted to play within it?

It is no coincidence that these questions arise in the context of the antislavery movement. Abolitionism was at the same time local and international; as a movement it was characterized by a remarkably high mobilization of women, who contributed to it substantially and over a considerable period of time.⁴ Furthermore, some developments of the abolitionist movement, especially in the United States,⁵ can be linked to a more general rise of feminist consciousness: women activists encountered all sorts of obstacles when trying to work towards a political reform of society, most notoriously perhaps when female delegates from the United States were not allowed to speak at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840.⁶ This situation contributed to their analysis of the condition of women, and some female activists used elements of the antislavery discourse on bondage to highlight their own lack of basic rights,⁷ a strategy which also lies at the heart of the best known nineteenth-century Hispanic text concerned with slavery and the situation of women, the novel *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.⁸ It is thus highly relevant to study how Spanish women writers positioned themselves in the context of abolitionism, an issue which confronted them with the delicate task of moving between international allegiances and nationalistic as well as domestic ideologies.

With this context in mind, I will focus on the discourse on abolition and slavery in one periodical publication, *La Violeta*. This magazine, mostly addressing a female public but also reaching out to male readers, appeared from the end of 1862 until the end of 1866, during the very years which saw the creation of the *Sociedad abolicionista española*.⁹ I have no information

3 See for instance María del Carmen Simón Palmer, 'Tácticas para publicar de las escritoras decimonónicas', in *Romper el espejo. La mujer y la transgresión de códigos en la literatura española: escritura, lectura, textos (1001–2000)*, ed. María José Porro Herrera (Córdoba: Univ. de Córdoba, 2001), 51–66.

4 Julie Roy Jeffrey, *The Great Silent Army of Abolitionism: Ordinary Women in the Antislavery Movement* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1998).

5 Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale U. P., 1989).

6 Kathryn Kish Sklar, '“Women Who Speak for an Entire Nation”: American and British Women at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, London, 1840', in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1994), 301–33.

7 Yellin, *Women and Sisters*, 42, 44.

8 For a recent critical discussion of this reading see Jerome C. Branche, *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2006), 140–55.

9 Christopher Schmidt-Nowara, 'The Colonial Public Sphere: The Making of the Spanish Abolitionist Society, 1861–1868', in his *Empire and Antislavery: Spain, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, 1833–1874* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 100–25. A standard

about the print run of the magazine, but the correspondence of *La Violeta* with its subscribers suggests that the magazine was read throughout Spain. Furthermore, the magazine had authorized booksellers in the overseas territories of Cuba and Puerto Rico, as well as in Argentina.

La Violeta was directed by an influential woman, Faustina Sáez de Melgar, whose name frequently appears in the context of the antislavery movement in Spain, as well as in the lists of established *escritoras isabelinas*.¹⁰ She was well connected, and apparently she knew how to use her and her husband's privileged access to influential people (her husband assumed legal responsibility for the magazine). According to Íñigo Sánchez Llama, their social networking was probably the main reason why *La Violeta* was declared 'libro de texto oficial' for 'las escuelas normales de meastras y las superiores de niñas' in 1864.¹¹ However, the political and social commitment of the magazine and its *directora propietaria* is far more complex and indeed surprising than the label of 'libro de texto oficial' and the dedication of the entire publication to Queen Isabel II might suggest. This becomes apparent if we do not limit our attention to selected articles on the condition of women, isolating them from the context of the publication, but take into account the polyphonic nature of periodical publications with their different voices and sections. This approach makes it possible to savour in issue 23 of *La Violeta* how a very serious meditation on God and the season of spring is immediately followed by the joyful call 'Vamos al templo de la moda', which opens the regular section on fashion,¹² or how a clearly neo-Catholic contribution on 'La fiesta de Santiago', with all the accustomed paraphernalia of 'Santiago, y cierra España', is counterbalanced in the following number by an ardent meditation on God as the supreme power before whom all religions in all countries are equal.

work on abolitionism is Arthur F. Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition of Slavery in Cuba, 1817–1886* (Austin; Univ. of Texas Press for the Institute of Latin American Studies, 1967). On the Spanish abolitionist society see also Paloma Arroyo Jiménez, 'La sociedad abolicionista española (1864–1886)', in *Esclavitud y derechos humanos: la lucha por la libertad del negro en el siglo XIX*, ed. Francisco de Solano and Agustín Guimerá (Madrid: CSIC, 1990), 169–81. For a discussion of the involvement of the influential periodical *La América* in the topic, see in the same volume Leoncio López-Ocón Cabrera, 'El movimiento abolicionista español a través de la revista *La América*', 205–43.

10 Sánchez Llama, *Galería de escritoras isabelinas*, 164–65. Apparently Sáez de Melgar corresponded with the abolitionist reformer Rafael María de Labra towards the end of her life; see María Dolores Domingo Acebrón, *Rafael María de Labra: Cuba, Puerto Rico, las Filipinas, Europa y Marruecos, en la España del sexenio democrático y la Restauración (1871–1918)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2006), 136, n. 418 (where Faustina becomes 'Faustino').

11 Sánchez Llama, *Galería de escritoras isabelinas*, 192–93. Although Sáez de Melgar states in 1871 that this privilege was almost immediately revoked, the label appears on the title page of *La Violeta* until its very last issue (año 4, núm. 209 [31 December 1866]).

12 Román Doldán y Fernández, 'La primavera' and Joaquina de Carnicero, 'Correo de señoritas', *La Violeta*, 23, 10 May 1863, pp. 3–6 and 6–7 respectively.

Its author openly states: ‘Si las formas de las religiones son contrarias, el fondo es el mismo’.¹³

It is precisely in this article where we find one of the first passing references to black slavery, used as an appropriate and immediately understandable example of misery and confinement: ‘[Sé q]ue [Dios] lo mismo bendice al indio que en aquellas llanuras y arenales le adora al salir el sol, que al negro deprimido y encerrado en la guarida que elige, para librarse de la odiosa esclavitud’.¹⁴ In the polyphonic space of *La Violeta*, the voice which couples slavery with the conventional qualification of ‘odiosa’ very often sets the tone. It belongs to Rogelia León from Granada, one of the most prolific contributors to the magazine as well as a highly esteemed friend of its *directora propietaria*.¹⁵ The reference is of course extremely brief, nothing more than the stereotypical evocation of a fugitive slave in hiding. However, the date of this issue of *La Violeta*, 2 August 1863, reveals that this reference is indeed a topical comment on an ongoing conflict of international importance: the American Civil War. By sympathetically highlighting the plight of the fugitive slave, Rogelia León puts herself firmly on the side of the North and Abraham Lincoln, the great abolitionist hero; what is more, the way in which she matter-of-factly uses the image shows that she expects her readership to share her views and sentiments in this important question of Spanish colonial and international politics. And indeed, although there are quite a few misogynistic voices in *La Violeta*, no expression of sympathy for the position of the slave-owners can be found.¹⁶

This underlying abolitionist conviction is translated into public action in December 1865. *La Violeta* (157, 3 December 1865) informs its readership that the female abolitionist associations of Birmingham, Newcastle, Edinburgh and London have written to the ‘señoras de Madrid’, urging them to join their efforts in the fight against slavery. We learn that, as a reaction, the recently founded (and of course male) Sociedad Abolicionista Española

13 Román Doldán y Fernández, ‘La fiesta de Santiago’, *La Violeta*, 34, 26 July 1863, pp. 5–8; and Rogelia León, ‘Dios’, *La Violeta*, 35, 2 August 1863, pp. 1–4.

14 León, ‘Dios’, 2. All quotations respect the original spelling, including use of accents.

15 See Faustina Sáez de Melgar, ‘La literatura en la mujer (continuación). I. Rogelia León’, *La Violeta*, 143, 27 August 1865, pp. 416–17; *La Violeta*, 144, 3 September 1865, pp. 425–29; and *La Violeta*, 145, 10 September 1865, p. 438.

16 A similar brief, condemnatory mention of slavery occurs for instance in María Josefa Zapata’s poem ‘El mundo ideal: delirio’ (*La Violeta*, 48, 1 November 1863, pp. 3–4). According to Inmaculada Jiménez Morell, Zapata was one of the principal editors of ‘la primera revista española plenamente feminista, *El nuevo pensil de Iberia*’ (Inmaculada Jiménez Morell, *La prensa femenina en España: desde sus orígenes a 1868* [Madrid: Ediciones de la Torre, 1992], 102). Sáez again uses her facility ‘para incorporar a su escritura temáticas candentes de inmediata actualidad contemporánea’, observed by Sánchez Llama (*Galería de escritoras isabelinas*, 294) when she publishes the short story ‘Un episodio de la guerra de los Estados- Unidos’, a free translation from the French written by herself (*La Violeta*, 59, 17 January 1864, pp. 3–6).

has announced its first public meeting in order to formalize the foundation of a Ladies' abolitionist society, similar to those in Great Britain. In its following number (*La Violeta*, 158, 10 December 1865), which appears on the very day of the event, *La Violeta* takes the rather unusual step of printing all four British letters, endorsed by an ardent statement of its regular contributor Leandro A. Herrero. The magazine thus follows the example of several political newspapers, such as *La Iberia* (2 December 1865) and *La Discusión* (6 December 1865), as well as the organ of the abolitionist society, *El Abolicionista*.¹⁷ Although the planned meeting is described in *La Violeta* in terms of its charitable purpose and is emphatically *not* linked to political partisanship, it is already evident that *La Violeta*'s enthusiastic endorsement of the endeavour moves the magazine into the vicinity of some decidedly anti-monarchical players—after all, *La Discusión* proudly presents itself as a *Diario Democrático*.¹⁸ The events will indeed show that female activism in such a controversial field is not easily re-defined as an appropriate form of non-political charity and compassion. That not everything went smoothly becomes clear when we look at the first issue published after the abolitionist meeting. The coverage of the event starts in the section 'Variedades' with the reproduction of a letter from the Secretary of the Abolitionist Society to the newspaper *La Correspondencia*,¹⁹ in which he tries to explain why the respectable names of several ladies from Madrid were mentioned during the meeting.²⁰ In the main part of the magazine, an unsigned first-hand

17 For *El Abolicionista*, see Schmidt-Nowara, *Empire and Antislavery*, 118.

18 For brief descriptions of the most relevant nineteenth-century periodicals, see María Cruz Seoane, *Historia del periodismo en España, II: el siglo XIX* (Madrid: Alianza, 1983). *La Discusión* is discussed on pp. 250–51. Cruz Seoane mentions its progressive radicalization; in 1864, under the direction of Pi y Margall, it became 'portavoz del sector socialista del partido democrático' (250). *La Iberia* is one of the most powerful voices of the progressive press: 'Mucho más agresivo era *La Iberia*, que en 1865, ya bajo la dirección de Sagasta, supera a *Las Novedades*. *La Iberia* es ahora el representante de la tradición más pura del progresismo' (257). This assertion is confirmed by this newspaper's critique of the mixed credentials of some of the participants in the Sociedad Abolicionista and the meeting; it is the only publication to discuss this aspect of the meeting.

19 *La Correspondencia* was at this time the most successful *periódico noticioso* (Cruz Seoane, *Historia del periodismo en España*, 244–48).

20 'Hé aquí justificada la razón por qué se pronunció en aquel acto solemne el respetable nombre de varias señoras de Madrid, que no podrán menos de ver en esta elección un tributo rendido á sus virtudes y talentos, por los que las creyeron dignas de representar en tan cristiano como honroso encargo, á sus hermanas las hijas todas de la noble y generosa España' (*La Violeta*, 159, 17 December 1865, n.p.). The first article in the main section, 'Estudios morales: Influencia de la mujer en la sociedad' by Isabel Poggi de Llorente, could be read as a more general albeit somewhat ambivalent justification of female engagement, although women's importance is primarily derived from her role as mother. Nevertheless, the last paragraph is rousing: 'Vosotras, hermosa mitad del género humano, sois la brújula que le guía. Haced que en los vuelos de los siglos brille luminoso vuestro nombre, y el mundo os cante alabanzas, porque vuestra influencia en la sociedad la regeneró de todas sus debilidades, y triunfante camina á la cumbre de su perfección' (*La Violeta*, 159, 17 December 1865, p. 602).

report of the meeting explicitly refuses to discuss the speeches because this would be inappropriate for a publication of its kind.²¹ However, it hints at controversy by mentioning that ‘si bien algunos de ellos entrenaron ciertas inconveniencias de mal efecto en aquel lugar y en aquel momento, en todos brilló una tendencia laudable que nos hace prescindir de lo demás’.²² Instead of entering into details, *La Violeta* reiterates its appeal to the female readership to join the movement, underlining the need for unity beyond political convictions in what is described as a fundamentally Christian task:

A la realizacion de esta empresa fecunda y generosa, deben concurrir todas las fuerzas sociales sin distincion de ninguna especie, considerándola independiente del espiritu de partido, perfectamente concorde con los principios de todas las escuelas políticas, en armonia con los más puros y saludables preceptos de la religion cristiana, sintesis de la moral divina y última palabra del Crucificado, que redimió con su sangre los pecados de los hombres, elevándolos á la categoría de libertos, y prometiéndoles á todos igualmente la posesion de la patria celestial.²³

The apparent need for justification and reassurance of the readership is understandable enough when we look at the wider press coverage of the event. Several reports remark on the unusually high turnout of ladies for a public meeting of this nature; according to *La Discusión*, ‘casi la mitad de la concurrencia’ was female.²⁴ For Benito Pérez Galdós, the female presence in the audience seems to have been the most remarkable aspect of the event. He writes in *La Nación* (17 December 1865) about the ‘auditorio femenino’ at the meeting: ‘Nuestros lectores se sorprenderán de que el bello sexo fuera admitido á una reunion política, contraviniendo las leyes de la costumbre, que siempre ha lanzado á la mujer de todo sitio destinado á la solucion de cuestiones graves’.²⁵ However, special circumstances made this departure from the apparently natural order of things not only convenient, to inform the Spanish women about the messages from England, but also quite manageable, once problems ‘como el de permanecer cubiertos los hombres

21 Sánchez Llama mentions this report in order to underline the limitations of Sáez de Melgar’s activism; however, he fails to put the report into the context of the broad support for abolitionism in the magazine (Sánchez Llama, *Galería de escritoras isabelinas*, 194). Nevertheless, he mentions ‘el importante activismo político de Faustina Sáez, visible en sus campañas de prensa de la década de 1860’ in his *Antología de la prensa periódica isabelina escrita por mujeres (1843–1894)* (Cádiz: Univ. de Cádiz, 2001), 137.

22 ‘Reunión abolicionista’, *La Violeta*, 159, 17 December 1865, p. 610. Juan de Molina, ‘secretario de la redacción’, was at that time responsible for all unsigned contributions.

23 *La Violeta*, 159, 17 December 1865, p. 610.

24 *La Discusión*, Tuesday, 12 December 1865, pp. 3–4.

25 *Los artículos de Galdós en ‘La Nación’*, ed. William H. Shoemaker (Madrid: *Ínsula*, 1972), 245.

ante el bello auditorio' had been resolved.²⁶ In the end, in Galdós' eyes their participation is plainly justified by woman's nature and the precedent of Harriet Beecher Stowe's beneficial influence on public opinion:

Por otra parte, la cuestion de humanidad que allí se trataba permitia la intervencion del sexo humanitario y compasivo por excelencia, tal vez por su debilidad material: y si esto no abonara la entrada en la reunion de las damas madrileñas, basta el recordar que una mujer ilustre ha jugado un gran papel en la causa de la esclavitud, y que esto da al sexo entero el derecho de interesarse en la misma causa, con la esperanza de que su intervencion no ha de ser infructuosa, como no lo fué ciertamente la de esa mujer que el mundo admira y la América bendice. Esta mujer se llama Enriqueta Beecher Stow.²⁷

The statement at the beginning of Galdós' argument, 'parece natural que la frivolidad femenina se encuentre fuera de su centro en reuniones de tal especie',²⁸ is thus revealed to be a provincial, backward assumption, disproved by the impact of women's protagonism in the abolitionist movement at an international level. Galdós clearly understood that the fight for the abolition of slavery and the question of the role of women in society had become entwined. After all, the meeting in Madrid was inspired by and clearly centred on women's activism: the British letters were read out and distributed to the audience, the names of the Spanish ladies elected to the *junta nominadora* were announced and the consent of the ladies to the rules of the association was gathered during the assembly. However, this public commitment of Spanish women was mediated, indeed acted out for them, by men. The list of speakers was all-male; all were members of the organizing Sociedad Abolicionista, and among them were such experienced journalists, politicians and academics as the Republican Emilio Castelar. He was already a *persona non grata* in 1865, following the publication of his famous article 'El rasgo' which criticized the queen and cost him his chair at the university.

Castelar seems to have been very conscious of the highly unusual situation at the abolitionist meeting. *La Época* describes how '[e]l señor Castelar, en medio de una salva de aplausos, empezó diciendo que sentia tener que hablar, principalmente porque se tenia miedo á si mismo, pero añadió que usaba la palabra por las señoras, exclusivamente por estas, toda vez que es un espectáculo nuevo su presencia en estas reuniones'.²⁹

26 *Los artículos de Galdós*, ed. Shoemaker, 245.

27 *Los artículos de Galdós*, ed. Shoemaker, 245.

28 *Los artículos de Galdós*, ed. Shoemaker, 245.

29 *La Época*, Monday, 11 December 1865, p. 3 (quoting *La Correspondencia* and *Las Noticias*). Cruz Seoane characterizes this publication as 'aristocrático' and points out that it was only available as subscription (*Historia del periodismo*, 258).

According to some newspapers several speakers opted for a gallant style, indulging in compliments towards the ‘fair sex’, a rather unusual situation which apparently led to risqué jokes about celibacy by the priest and abolitionist Tristán Medina.³⁰ All these elements show that the event was indeed unique and that most of the participating male professionals of the public sphere were not quite sure how to handle it.

This uneasiness was picked up by the right-wing press of the day, in an especially insidious manner by the absolutist periodical *La Esperanza*.³¹ Its report warns the readers of the enterprise from its very first line by stating that ‘[l]a democracia y tambien el socialismo exhibieronse el domingo en el teatro de Variedades’;³² later the text uses gender norms to discourage women’s participation in the abolitionist initiative: the journalist manages to patronize to a maximum the female participants of the meeting by reminding its readership at the same time of their dependent legal status and of their undignified treatment at the hands of the abolitionists:

Y ya que hablamos de las señoras que concurrieron, duélenos que las comprometiesen á mostrarse conformes con las bases de la Sociedad. ¿Qué habian de hacer sino responder afirmativamente, sobre todo habiéndoselas dicho, sin duda por equivocacion, que la señora duquesa de la Torre lo habia hecho, lo cual está desmentido? Ciertamente que la consideracion de que sus padres, sus esposos ó sus hermanos podian desaprobador su respuesta debió tenerse en cuenta por la Sociedad abolicionista española. En lo demas, condújose galantemente con ellas, floreándolas con la insistencia de un cadete de infanteria, y repartiéndolas dulces en abundancia.³³

In their similarity to children, easily bribed with sweets, women are clearly incapable of exerting rational agency: according to *La Esperanza* they are *made* to assent by the unscrupulous people who pull the strings. At the same time it is suggested that middle- and upper-class women endanger their own social status by taking part in an event that exposes them to comments deemed inappropriate. Once they have entered the public sphere to associate themselves with people who might not belong to their own class, they put their own status and reputation at risk.

The reference to the duquesa de la Torre and the public use of her name to make the meeting more acceptable addresses this delicate issue;

30 Galdós takes a positive view of the attempt to recognize the presence of women: ‘[T]odo salió á pedir de boca, oyéndose de vez en cuando de los labios de un orador mas de una frase destinada á la femenina concurrencia’ (*Los artículos de Galdós*, ed. Shoemaker, 245).

31 *La Esperanza* had absolutist, and particularly *carlista* tendencies (Cruz Seoane, *Historia del periodismo*, 210–12, 253–55).

32 *La Esperanza*, Tuesday, 12 December 1865, p. 1.

33 *La Esperanza*, Tuesday, 12 December 1865, p. 2.

in addition it sheds some light on the rather cryptic justification published by the Secretary of the abolitionist society after the event. Antonia Domínguez de Serrano, duquesa de la Torre y condesa de San Antonio, came from a Cuban family which owned several *ingenios*.³⁴ She married the powerful general Francisco Serrano y Domínguez, governor of Cuba between 1859 and 1862 and a major force on the Spanish political and military stage. The general was well aware of the conflicting designs international powers had on Cuba. In his view, only fundamental reforms such as the implementation of efficient measures to end the Cuban slave trade could prevent the loss of Spain's most important colony by averting forced emancipation, but the Spanish government was afraid that the proposed changes would upset the Cuban landowners and thus provoke the crisis over slavery it wished to avoid by all means.³⁵ Serrano's resolute stance against the Cuban slave trade converted him into a reformer; however, he took this position in order to preserve slavery in Cuba in the long run and later joined the Liga Ultramarina, which lobbied for the interests of the slave-owners.³⁶

Winning Serrano's wife as a supporter of the women's antislavery initiative would undoubtedly have been a great asset for its respectability and influence in society and politics. The duchess would have been well known even to provincial readers of *La Violeta*; she makes frequent appearances in its section on the elegant and aristocratic assemblies of Madrid. Several women writers, for instance Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda and Pilar Sinués de Marco, dedicated works to her.³⁷ However, the attempt to involve her backfired spectacularly when in a note in the conservative press she distanced herself from the initiative in no uncertain terms:

La señora duquesa de la Torre, que es agena por completo á la política; que no se ocupa para nada en estos asuntos; que no tiene la pretension de influir en esas cuestiones humanitarias cuya resolucion es ageno á su

34 José Antonio Piqueras and Enric Sebastià, *Agiotistas, negreros y partisanos: dialéctica social en visperas de la Revolución Gloriosa* (Valencia: Edicions Alfons el Magnànim, Institució Valenciana d'Estudis i Investigació, 1991), 252–53.

35 David Murray, *Odious Commerce: Britain, Spain and the Abolition of the Cuban Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2002 [1st ed. 1980]), 310–11.

36 Corwin, *Spain and the Abolition*, 287; Piqueras and Sebastià, *Agiotistas, negreros y partisanos*, 255.

37 Pilar Sinués de Marco, *El lazo de flores: novela original* (Madrid: Imprenta Española, 1862). In 1861, Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda dedicated her novel *El artista barquero* to the duchess (Brígida M. Pastor, *Fashioning Feminism in Cuba and Beyond: The Prose of Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda* [New York: Peter Lang, 2003], 154–56). The Cuban author also wrote poems dedicated to the duchess and the duke: 'En el nacimiento de la querida primogénita de los duques de la Torre, condes de San Antonio' and 'Serenata de Cuba, en la noche que precede al día de mi bella y querida amiga la Exca. Sra. duquesa de la Torre, condesa de San Antonio' (Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, *Obras literarias I: Poesías líricas* [Madrid: M. Rivadeneyra, 1869], 347–53 and 360–65).

sexo, no ha firmado adhesion alguna, ni ha autorizado á nadie para que haga uso de su nombre en el sentido que lo hizo el señor Segovia, ni por supuesto, en ningun otro que se roce con asuntos como el que motiva esta rectificacion.³⁸

This note is an impressive reminder of what is at stake: our steadfast defenders of woman as the angel in the house grouped around Sáez de Melgar find themselves, by comparison with the duchess, branded as unfeminine women meddling in radical politics. What is even worse is that the enterprise, according to *La España*, plays into the hands of the mercantile English. To add insult to injury, the audience, not excluding our distinguished ladies, is referred to in the same newspaper as ‘la populacheria’.³⁹ Political conflict is thus translated into questions of gender and class; in the case of colonial politics and especially abolitionism, race would become the third category in a complex web of hierarchies, projections and substitutions of terms.⁴⁰

It is a credit to the team of *La Violeta* that they did not allow themselves to be bullied into more ‘appropriate’ behaviour but firmly stood by their convictions. Apparently quite a few women shared their views and joined the society, if we can believe the brief but triumphant note published under the heading ‘Negrófilas’ in the next issue of the magazine. The patronizing and racist tone in the second part of the note towards the men and women who are to be liberated is, incidentally, quite typical of *La Violeta*’s abolitionist attitude (this is dealt with in further detail below):

Un considerable número de señoras se ha adherido á la sociedad abolicionista, y cada dia son más las que, motivadas por un sentimiento tan cristiano como generoso, se propone influir en la familia y en la sociedad, para que desaparezca la esclavitud. La sociedad de señoras abolicionistas cuenta ya con lo más distinguido de nuestra corte.

38 *La España*, quoting *El Eco del País*, Tuesday, 12 December 1865, p. 4. *La España* was a well-established player, considered ‘ultramoderado’ and indeed close to the publications with absolutist tendencies (Cruz Seoane, *Historia del periodismo*, 258).

39 *La España*, Wednesday, 13 November 1865, p. 2. The report quotes *El Pabellón Nacional*.

40 Schmidt-Nowara explains how the category of race shaped the fears and hopes generated by the idea of abolitionism from above: ‘[Metropolitan] abolitionists envisioned freed slaves as partners in a new Spanish colonial system, but decidedly subordinate ones. They typically represented whites and blacks as living in peaceful harmony, a displacement of their own ideal vision of metropolitan class relations onto the colonies—a vision also shaped by their conception of putative racial characteristics. They believed that as a *race*, Africans were best suited to be a free working *class*’ (*Empire and Antislavery*, 121; emphasis in the original). This belief in a stable, paternalistic society contrasted with the fear of ‘race war or miscegenation’, a threat that even in the eyes of Cuban reformers converted slavery into ‘a necessary evil for the foreseeable future’ (*Empire and Antislavery*, 121).

No tienen malas madrinas los negritos; y como ellas se empeñen, la esclavitud pasará á la categoría de hecho histórico.⁴¹

At this juncture it is again the passionate voice of Rogelia León who takes over in *La Violeta*, explaining her (and the magazine's) commitment in an impressive piece with the programmatic title 'Á las piadosas señoras de todos los países que trabajan con ardor por la emancipacion de los esclavos'.⁴² It is indeed a call for action and resistance, addressed to an international sisterhood, unified in the fight for a common cause and determined to break down the gendered boundaries which the men try to impose:

¡Queridas hermanas! ¡Amigas mias! ¡Mujeres de corazon compasivo y alma grande! ¡No desmayeis en el benemérito propósito que os habeis impuesto! ¡No os arredre la opresion ni el sarcasmo con que el hombre mira siempre á la mujer que se lanza en empresas grandes, ni os hagan retroceder de manera alguna el circulo reducido en que quieren encerrar vuestras ideas aquellos que no comprenden que mujer fué la libertadora de Wetulia.⁴³

Through her use of the grand style of nineteenth-century oratory, León converts the pages of *La Violeta* into another meeting place attended by the (perhaps only half-imagined) community of its mainly female readership, where middle-class and upper-class women can rise to speak for themselves instead of applauding male ventriloquists. Her choice of style fits her argument. She presents the Spanish abolitionist ladies as national heroines who take their place in an international fight against evil, in the mould of the biblical Judith or, closer to home, Agustina de Aragón. By citing two of her own poems published in 1857 in which she expresses her sympathy for the victims of slavery in general and the fate of the black Cuban poet Plácido in particular, León proves that her interest in the question of slavery dates from much earlier.⁴⁴ This pre-history demonstrates that the abolitionist initiative is not simply manipulated by foreigners, and it thus adds to her authority in this matter, an authority she claims is natural to all women. It is precisely their dutiful roles as mothers, wives and daughters which allow them to empathize with the suffering and the oppression of the slaves. They are 'mujeres de corazon compasivo y de alma grande' and thus called upon to speak out against the horrendous crime of slavery—beyond the petty

41 'Negrófilas', *La Violeta*, 160, 24 December 1865, n.p.

42 Rogelia León, 'Á las piadosas señoras de todos los países que trabajan con ardor por la emancipacion de los esclavos', *La Violeta*, 160, 24 December 1865, 615–18.

43 León, 'Á las piadosas señoras', 615.

44 She reproduces 'Cancion del esclavo' (which uses a quotation from Harriet Beecher Stowe as an epigraph) and mentions 'El negro Plácido', both published in her ambitious collection of poetry *Auras de la Alhambra* (Granada: Imprenta y Librería de D. José María Zamora, 1857), 205–10 and 129–34, respectively.

calculations of ‘ese mundo egoista é interesado’.⁴⁵ León’s strategy of embracing the ideology and discourse of domesticity in order to authorize her action in the public sphere is not unusual for an *escritora isabelina*, as Alda Blanco for instance has shown, but she certainly pushes the boundaries by explicitly vindicating women as a necessary and active force for social change who must be reckoned with.⁴⁶

These ideas about female activism can be related to the broader framework of thought presented three months later in the two-part essay ‘La ley de la perfectabilidad’, signed by another regular contributor to the magazine, Leandro A. Herrero. The author criticizes the contradictions which accompany universal moral claims made by specific groups, be they nations or schools of thought. His main example is the British effort to enforce the abolition of slavery, taking the moral high ground without noticing the shocking class distinctions at home and the gruesome exploitation in the Empire overseas.⁴⁷ The implicit and potentially equalising comparison of different kinds of dependence or lack of freedom and the discussion of the degrees of misery they involve is a point often made by the slave-owners. However, Herrero gives his argument a different twist, of extreme importance for the justification of female activism in *La Violeta*: he comes to the conclusion that the true progress of mankind is not based on intelligence and partial interests but on the discerning power of the soul and the continuous strengthening of morality.⁴⁸ This claim converts our angels in the house and guardians of morality into the very vanguard of social development. They are the experts on purity and virtue, and—precisely as mothers, sisters and wives—they clearly understand what contributes to the greater good, while men are more easily blinded by passions and partial interests. Thus, it becomes understandable why the women around Sáez de Melgar present their own commitment as almost by definition not political: their fight against slavery is presented as a logical consequence of their supposedly natural gender identity, not as the adherence to the ideas of a political party.⁴⁹

Despite the conflictive nature of the issue, *La Violeta* would continue its support for abolitionism almost until its demise in December 1866, most

45 León, ‘Piadosas senoras’, 617.

46 ‘Despite sharing many of the tenets of “traditionalist” domesticity, the liberal version of domestic discourse opened up the public sphere to women—albeit tenuously—by linking the public/private spheres through what was possibly the pivotal figure of this cultural construction: the mother’ (Alda Blanco, ‘The Moral Imperative for Women Writers’, *Indiana Journal of Hispanic Literature*, 2:1 [1993], 91–110 [p. 92]).

47 Leandro A. Herrero, ‘Estudios morales: la ley de la perfectibilidad’, *La Violeta*, 168, 24 February 1866, pp. 49–51. See especially p. 50.

48 Leandro A. Herrero, ‘Estudios morales: la ley de la perfectibilidad’ [conclusion], *La Violeta*, 169, 28 February 1866, pp. 57–59.

49 The team of *La Violeta* fails to see that they generalize their class interest in the process.

notably in its coverage of a poetry competition organized by the Sociedad Abolicionista Española. It publishes the call for poems (*La Violeta* 176, 24 April 1866), announces the winners—the first prize was awarded to the great reformer Concepción Arenal (*La Violeta* 182, 8 June 1866)—and reports on the award ceremony (*La Violeta* 183, 16 June 1866), an event that attracted much attention in the general press. Although the report in *La Violeta* seems to be based on the coverage in *La Correspondencia* from Monday, 11 June 1866, the embellishment of the text is highly interesting. Predictably, it elaborates on the large number of women in the audience mentioned in *La Correspondencia*, but it also significantly changes the description of a short intervention by several black people at the very end of the event. According to *La Correspondencia*, four young people ‘de diferentes colores’, male and female, had attended the ceremony in order to thank the abolitionist society for their efforts: ‘[Hi]cieron infinidad de referencias, cortesías y muestras de gratitud á la concurrencia, recibiendo de esta una lluvia de flores’. In the magazine, the scene becomes the following ‘cuadro tiernísimo’: ‘Cuatro negritos subieron al palco escénico, dos de cada sexo, los cuales á falta de voces con que expresar su reconocimiento por sus hermanos de color, lo manifestaron por medio de reverencias y cortesías’.⁵⁰ *La Violeta* constructs here an infantilized and homogenized image of black people, reducing them to recipients of its charitable efforts. It presents the ‘cuatro personas’ who, according to *La Correspondencia*, took the initiative to intervene in the widely publicized award ceremony, as bereft of intelligible speech, only able to express themselves through body language. Clearly, the ‘madrinas de los negritos’ cannot see black people as agents in the fight against slavery; they relegate them to the role of a moving *tableau vivant* that illustrates their own laudable activism. Unsurprisingly, there is no evidence of collaboration with black people to achieve their goals. In this context it should be pointed out that black abolitionist initiatives existed in Spain. In August 1865, ‘los descendientes de la raza africana que residen en Madrid’ write an open letter to express their gratitude to the Abolitionist Society; in this long document the men and women who sign the text protest ‘enérgicamente con toda la libertad que hoy nos concede España, patria de aquellos inolvidables religiosos redentores de cautivos, protestamos enérgicamente contra la esclavitud de nuestros hermanos en las islas de Cuba y Puerto-Rico’.⁵¹ The vindication of freedom is again taken up during the Revolution.⁵²

50 ‘Sociedad abolicionista’, *La Violeta*, 183, 16 June 1866, n.p.

51 The letter is reprinted in *El Lloyd Español*, 25 August 1865, p. 1.

52 *La Discusión* reports on 21 November 1868: ‘Los negros libres de Madrid han pedido la libertad de sus hermanos y antiguos compañeros de infortunio’. At this point, the abolitionist movement gains momentum, with meetings all over Spain and a new attempt at creating a Lady’s Society, this time with Carolina Coronado as its president.

The patronizing attitude chimes with the casual racism of *La Violeta*. Thus, in a portrait of the legendary Queen Egilona, the author assures readers that the queen's 'origen africano no impedía que en aquel cuerpo donde la belleza había impreso todos sus atractivos, se encerrasen también todas las virtudes'.⁵³ A short note addressed 'A los negritos' reports on a new skin-whitener, which changes 'la más negra tez en un bello color verde aceituna muy agradable á la vista'.⁵⁴ It is evident that emancipation in the real world does not mean equality. Apparently, race can only be transcended—and of course only up to a certain point—in the moralizing realm of fiction, thanks to the equalizing powers of virtue, echoing the conviction that all souls have been redeemed by Christ and are equal in the eyes of God. This happens in the story 'El esclavo de oro' by Francisco de P. Entrala, published in *La Violeta* 181 and 182 (30 May 1866 and 8 June 1866): Ludovina, the daughter of a North-American planter, loves Beltrán, one of her father's slaves. Like Sab in the eponymous novel by Gómez de Avellaneda, Beltrán is a hero of an extraordinary and, as the narrator insists, atypical beauty. In the physical description of Beltrán we can clearly see how the author tries to solve what Karen Sánchez-Eppler has identified as a major problem in nineteenth-century antislavery writing: the depiction of 'a black body that can be instantly recognized not only as a loyal or a rebellious servant, but also as a hero'.⁵⁵

Beltrán no era el tipo del indigena. Sus facciones participaban de una hermosura que bien pudiéramos llamarla *salvaje*. No eran sus labios abultados, ni remangada y ancha su nariz, ni deprimida su frente, ni salientes los pómulos de su cara; sus labios, por el contrario, eran finos y encarnados; correcta su nariz, alta su frente y su caballera áspera, pero rizada y brillante; eran además grandes sus ojos, esbelta su cintura, y el color de su piel, negro y terso como la pulimentada superficie del ébano.⁵⁶

At great peril the couple meets regularly at night, until Beltrán can finally flee. Eight years later, he presents himself at Ludovina's new home

53 Joaquín Tomeo y Benedicto, 'Galería histórica XXIX: la reina Egilona', *La Violeta*, 178, 5 May 1866, pp. 129–30.

54 'A los negritos', *La Violeta*, 147, 24 September 1865, n.p.

55 Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1997 [1st ed. 1993]), 28.

56 Francisco de P. Entrala, 'El esclavo de Oro', *La Violeta*, 181, 159. The portrait of Beltrán shows the strategic choices that Sánchez-Eppler has identified in North-American antislavery writing: 'Making a black hero involves not only dyeing the traditional figure of the hero to a darker hue, but also separating blackness from the configuration of traits that in the bodily grammar of sentimental fiction signals revulsion. In replacing or omitting revolting features, both Green and Stowe remake the black body to mould the slave into a hero' (*Touching Liberty*, 30). She concludes: 'The problem of antislavery fiction is that the very effort to depict goodness in black involves the obliteration of blackness' (*Touching Liberty*, 31).

in Cuba. Now a gentleman and immensely rich, as well as apparently a slave-owner in his own right, he forces Ludovina's father to consent to the marriage.⁵⁷ Ludovina concludes: 'Era criolla y tu esclavo, dijo aquella; pero la virtud y el amor nos han nivelado en la tierra'.⁵⁸ Despite this moral lesson and the unusual depiction of a sensual relationship between a white upper-class woman and a black slave, the story reveals the contradictions which surrounded race and class in mid-nineteenth century society.

This finally leads us to consider the relation between the discourse on slavery and gender. *La Violeta* avoids the use of images of bondage to describe the situation of (Spanish) women, contrary to the very strong precedent in *Sab* and the discourse of some female abolitionist activists in the US. Apparently the magazine subscribes to the widely repeated idea that the advent of Christianity had already released women from their former enslavement at the hands of men, given that the first mission of Christianity was the emancipation of woman, 'porque la hacia crecer en dignidad á la sombra del Evangelio'.⁵⁹ The result is, in turn, the special, civilizing mission of woman:

Elevada, pues, por el Evangelio á un estado igual al hombre pudo espaciar su pensamiento adquiriendo una voluntad y una espontaneidad propias que la hicieron ver que su destino no estaba circunscrito á la vida interior del hogar, sino que tenia, mas allá de aquel humilde horizonte, su aspiracion, su gloria y su apoteosis.⁶⁰

On the few occasions when slavery appears explicitly linked to (Spanish) women in the magazine, the questions of class and an insufficient or inappropriate education are always brought to the fore, for instance in an article about 'Educacion de la mujer actual y su insuficiencia' by Leandro A. Herrero, where poor country-women are described as slaves to their absolute ignorance; those unhappy girls 'solo se casan para ser tratadas como bestias de carga, para gemir eternamente bajo la presion de un sistema torpe y brutal hasta el esceso'.⁶¹ The comparison between the condition of woman and slavery is thus never generalized, even in bold statements like the following, taken from the serialized novel *La media naranja* by Rogelia León: '—¡Yo nunca seré nada, decia! ¡La esclavitud! ¡Solo la esclavitud! ¡Ó torpe

57 Contrary to the beginning of the story, set in North America, the slaves in the Cuban setting are all but invisible. They contribute to the 'local colour', exactly like the numerous slaves who feature in stories and legends set in Al-Andalus and Arabic countries.

58 Entrala, 'El esclavo de oro', *La Violeta*, 182, 168.

59 Jacinto García Pérez, 'La mujer (II)', *La Violeta*, 117, 26 February 1865, pp. 101–02. It is significant that the author invokes the German philosophers Kant and Krause as authorities when he vindicates the education of women.

60 García Pérez, 'La mujer (II)', *La Violeta*, 117, 26 February 1865, p. 102.

61 Leandro A. Herrero, 'Estudios políticos y morales: educacion actual de la mujer y su insuficiencia', *La Violeta* 143, 27 August 1865, p. 410.

criatura deshonrada, ó mujer propia, sin derechos sociales! ...'.⁶² The character who utters this bitter assertion which uses the language of a feminist awakening of consciousness is the young servant Vicenta, educated by her masters almost like a young lady and thus alienated from her own sphere. Nevertheless, she soon realises that even the elderly gentleman who makes her a reluctant offer of marriage does not respect her as an equal but treats her as a subaltern. Vicenta will find a fulfilled life by marrying the gardener against the wishes of the family, freeing herself from her novelesque illusions about rank and refined appearances. Once reconciled with her own class, there seems to be no further need for reflections on the social rights of women: social harmony has re-established itself.

The link between enslavement and the condition of woman is thus firmly situated in a (pagan) past, although even in the nineteenth century there remains much to be done to enable Spanish Catholic women to fulfil their divine mission in society. Nevertheless, the link between slaves and women seems to linger like an uneasy memory that can be used to motivate abolitionist activism. As Emilia Mijares de Real reminds her readers in the *Cancionero del esclavo*, the publication that brings together the best contributions to the abolitionist poetry competition: 'Las mujeres tambien fueron esclavas', carefully avoiding, however, the inclusive use of the first person plural of the verb.⁶³

The commitment to abolitionism and the discourse on slavery in *La Violeta* is a fascinating testimony on how the group around Faustina Sáez de Melgar developed and tested their own model of women's activism. Their writing and activities are an early example of Enríquez de Salamanca's claim that 'Spanish bourgeois culture detected in the epitome of the maternal model, the domestic angel, a kind of rationality which made her inclusion in the political system logically unavoidable'.⁶⁴ Perhaps we should add that this occurs in a political and legal system where the often invoked division between private and public sphere was far from clear-cut.⁶⁵ However, the reactions they encountered when they applied their model of compassionate

62 Rogelia León, 'La media naranja (continuacion)', *La Violeta*, 101, 6 November 1864, p. 7.

63 Emilia Mijares de Real, 'A la abolicion de la esclavitud', in *El cancionero del esclavo: coleccion de poesias laureadas y recomendadas por el jurado en el certamen convocado por la sociedad abolicionista española* (Madrid: Publicaciones Populares de la Sociedad Abolicionista Española, Calle del Soldado, núm. 4, 1866), 197. As a matter of course, *La Violeta* repeatedly drew the attention of its readers to this valuable contribution to abolitionism.

64 Cristina Enríquez de Salamanca, 'The Question of the Political Subject in Nineteenth-Century Domestic Discourse', in *Spain Today: Essays on Literature, Culture, Society*, ed. José Colmeira *et al.* (Hanover: Dept of Spanish and Portuguese, Dartmouth College, 1995), 103–12 (pp. 104–05).

65 See María Cruz Romeo Mateo, 'Destinos de mujer: esfera pública y políticos liberales', in *Historia de las mujeres en España y América Latina III: Del siglo XIX a los umbrales del XX*, dir. Isabel Morant (Madrid: Cátedra, 2006), 61–83.

intervention to the political minefield of slavery clearly show that other members of Spanish society were not willing to view their behaviour on their own terms, that is as a stringent consequence of their feminine role. Instead, it was rather perceived as an attempt to engage in party politics, thus posing a threat to established gender norms—a reminder of the uneasy position women occupied in mid nineteenth-century Spain.