

González Cruz, María Isabel (ed). *Discursos e Identidades en la Ficción Romántica: Visiones Anglófonas de Madeira y Canarias / Discourses and Identities in Romance Fiction: Anglophone Visions from Madeira and the Canaries*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022. Pp. 408. UK £ 69 (hardback) £ 76 (E-book) £ 42 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-64889-088-8.

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The literary convention that construes and represents the south of Europe as a reverse signifier to British civilization—a constellation of unique characteristics at the opposite spectrum of its values and ethos—can be characterized as a discursive formation running parallel to the European discourse on the Orient. Both traditions rest on dichotomizing discursive patterns relying on a taxonomy of places perceived and described as modern/traditional, rational/magical, historical/timeless. Despite the significance and endurance of such a discursive formation, few scholarly works have set themselves the goal of analysing the imaginings of Southern Europe in popular and literary fiction across genres (e.g., McAllister, Pérez-Gil, Pierini).

For this reason, this collective volume edited by María-Isabel González-Cruz, is a study of import not only to the field of (popular) Romance Studies, but to literary criticism *tout court*. Published in a bilingual edition—in Spanish and English—and comprised of eight chapters that explore a corpus of romance novels published in English and set mostly in the Canary Islands—and to a lesser extent in the Portuguese island of Madeira—the volume might be mistakenly assumed to keep its focus narrow. In truth, despite its circumscribed geographical scope, it opens a window on the Anglophone literary construction of Southern Europe as a space in partial discontinuity with the modern and the postmodern worlds, a setting particularly appropriate for intercultural encounters and love stories that incorporate a component of time-travelling, of going back in time to reconnect with an allegedly simpler dimension of traditional ideals and values. As such, the study, by shedding light on recurring descriptive patterns and discursive tropes employed in recreating the Canarian archipelago, brings to the surface meaningful assumptions and ideologically grounded views on the cultures and peoples of Southern Europe in general and islanders specifically.

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González-Cruz's introduction, which includes an informative outline of the history of British presence in the archipelago, illustrates the basic formula showcased by a significant number of novels set on the islands: a British heroine, over the course of a holiday, encounters a Spanish man or an Englishman with familial ties to the exotic archipelago. The ensuing relationship evolves along a trajectory initially fraught with misunderstandings mainly caused by cultural and linguistic distance.

However, before diving into dissecting and discussing issues of identity and otherness, the study opens with an article introducing the scholarly domain of Anglophone Popular Romance Studies. Immaculada Pérez-Casal delineates the history of the genre taking a broad approach not exclusively directed to a specialized readership. María del Mar Pérez-Gil concretely introduces the reader to the topic of representations of Madeiran culture in Anglophone romance novels. Her theoretical approach draws on orientalist discourses to illustrate Anglophone imaginings of Madeira "as a site of otherness and backwardness" (247). The paradisiac setting, characterized by clear waters and exotic vegetation, serves as the backdrop for reiterated affirmations of the normativity and superiority of the Northern European subject in opposition to the (Southern European) other. So it happens that the supposedly 'light' and 'escapist' romance genre becomes a context which, making embedded ethnocentric hierarchies visible, makes possible detecting and observing some of the most enduring tropes of the postcolonial Anglophone literary imagination. Within this framework, heroines epitomize honesty and moral strength—the superior values of England—while the other becomes an instantiation of the noble savage: "irascible, libidinous, violent and irrational" (253).

Aline Bazenga focuses on the sociocultural and linguistic landscapes of romance novels set in Madeira, portrayed as "a space that facilitates personal transformation and the finding of love" (259). Bazenga illustrates the Anglocentric vision that appropriates the island, generating discourses pivoting on the dialectic encounter between the (normative) visitor and the native (other). Bazenga concludes that popular romances "contribute to the dissemination of a stereotyped image of Madeira" (274) as a garden island awaiting to be conquered by Anglo-American heroines.

María Jesús Vera-Cazorla successfully illustrates how an Anglocentric perspective frequently singles out a series of local traits—natural as well as cultural—perceived in opposition to British normativity and civilization. The clever and engaging approach Vera-Cazorla adopts is the in-depth analysis of a series of symbols that represent the archipelago (Mount Teide, the Dragon tree, the Carnival...) and frequently appear in romances, adding credibility and texture to the cultural context. The local culture hero and heroine experience together constitutes an exotic background against which the well-established gender-organizing frame which sees the (British) heroine as young, innocent, and morally righteous, and the (Spanish) hero as a "dark and sensual alpha male whose behaviour borders on the bullying" (276) is played out.

If most scholars choose to remark upon the established formula which sees the Spanish hero as embodying a particularly authoritarian—and often latently violent—kind of masculinity in need to be counteracted by the heroine's sweetness of temper and feelings, María del Pilar González-de la Rosa focuses on a sample of Harlequin short contemporaries to illustrate how the Canarian context enhances the already consolidated perception of Spanish traditionalism and backwardness by adding a further layer of prejudice and

conservative insularity to the context within which the heroine challenges hegemonic masculinity.

Collectively considered, all romances analysed in the volume cover a timespan ranging from the late 1950s to the beginning of the current century. María Teresa Ramos-García chooses to focus on two Gothic romances written at the beginning of the 1970s by little-known Swedish author Louise Bergstrom. Ramos-García observes that Bergstrom's texts—replete with ethnocentric assumptions, miscegenation fears, and connecting ethnicity to morality—make particularly visible a taxonomy of values related to race. Bergstrom displays an “obsession with genetic phenotype” (325) which explicitly associates fairer features with a noble and heroic nature. Consequently, in Bergstrom's romances, the focus is not on the encounter with otherness: “the island [...] is more of an exotic but neutral space for the transatlantic relationship between the very light-skinned characters [Swedish heroine/Danish hero] to meet and develop their international love story” (323). The only Spanish character is a ‘troublemaker’ (325), a shady Latin lover “lacking the purity of thought, the education, and the work ethic of the Scandinavians” (329).

Ramos-García concludes that Bergstrom's texts appear to be invested in “preserving whiteness” (331). Drawing on Jayashree Kamblé, Ramos-García argues that Bergstrom's texts reiterate a hierarchical discourse on races “in which whiteness lies on one end of the spectrum representing beauty, the eternal soul, sexual control, and economic striving, and darkness on the other, suggesting ugliness, a corrupt body, sexual dissolution, and lethargy” (Kamblé 2014: 134).

The two essays closing the volume are based on sociolinguistic textual analysis. In the first, Susana de los Heros, by analysing “the discourse about Lanzarote that emerges from the English characters and the narrator's point of view” (334), sheds light on the language ideologies embedded within a suspense-romance novel from the 1960s, illustrating an instance of the exoticization of Spanish language and the Canarian landscape, perceived as foreign also because of its proximity to Africa. The last chapter highlights the numerous perspectives from which the textual analysis of romance fiction might be undertaken. González-Cruz, in closing the volume she curated, proposes a cluster of different approaches to reading romance: the sociological approach, but also, for instance, approaches from the standpoint of travel literature—a genre with which the romance shares recognized affinities. She also engages with methods derived from Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, and Applied Linguistics.

The volume ends with an appendix devoted to teaching activities based on the themes treated in the essays. The field of Popular Romance Studies is particularly attentive towards didactic issues, chiefly because scholars, seeking to further establish the discipline within academic institutions that still largely neglect its value and significance, have adopted a self-reflexive perspective towards their own work. It is therefore not only commendable, but also auspicious to come across a substantial scholarly work concretely reaching out to students by making its contents approachable and available to them.

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