Gossiping And Hysterical Manolo Infante: Traditional Gender Role Crossing As Political Metaphor In Galdós's La Incógnita

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Published by: [American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese](https://www.aatssp.org)
Gossiping and Hysterical Manolo Infante: Traditional Gender Role Crossing as Political Metaphor in Galdós’s *La incógnita*

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Abstract: When Galdós wrote *La incógnita* in 1888 and 1889, he no longer viewed the middle class as an effective force in Restoration politics. In this novel, Galdós critiques Spanish politics through a discourse of gender inflections related to a middle-class politician. Gossip and hysteria, commonly associated with women during the nineteenth century, are assigned to the protagonist Manolo Infante. His crossing the divide between masculine and feminine characteristics reflects the problems that Galdós believed were impeding the nation’s progress. Infante’s unsuccessful attempts to disguise gossip as truth and to mask his mental disorder foreground the appearance versus reality dichotomy that often surfaces in Galdós’s novels. He thus subtly reveals the illusory nature of the purportedly democratic Spanish political system which, in reality, riddled with corruption and self-interest.

Key Words: bourgeoisie, gender, gossip, hysteria, *La incógnita*, Pérez Galdós (Benito), politics

When Galdós began writing *La incógnita* in 1888, he had already served nearly three years as a representative in the Spanish Cortes. Although he, like other politicians, won his seat through fraudulent elections, it did not deter him from voicing his objection to the corruption and political abuses committed by the nation’s leaders. Galdós initially held out hope for a middle-class solution to Spain’s political modernization, but by the time he wrote *La incógnita* he no longer viewed the bourgeoisie as an effective or viable force in the modernization effort. In this novel, he critiques Spanish politics through a discourse of gender inflections related to a middle-class politician. Gossip and hysteria, commonly associated with women during the nineteenth century, are assigned to the bachelor protagonist Manolo Infante. His crossing the divide between masculine and feminine characteristics reflects the problems that Galdós believed were impeding the nation’s progress. Infante’s unsuccessful attempts to disguise gossip as truth and to mask his mental disorder foreground the appearance versus reality dichotomy that often surfaces in Galdós’s novels. He thus subtly reveals the illusory nature of the purportedly democratic Spanish political system which was, in reality, riddled with corruption and self-interest.

While Galdós proposed a Krausist solution for Spain’s political ills in his 1882 novel *El amigo Manso*, he viewed the national situation with a greater degree of pessimism after observing first-hand the inner workings of government as a representative in the Cortes. H. Chonan Berkowitz notes that Galdós’s tolerance for the weaknesses of Spanish democracy quickly disappeared when the writer saw the abuses committed by government officials (211). Galdós was not alone in his concern for the nation’s future. Although the revolution in 1868 brought relative stability to the country, the disturbances created by society’s marginalized groups, mainly the urban workers, led to fears of national disintegration if some type of intervention did not occur.

Significantly, *La incógnita* is framed by political themes. The first chapter focuses on the anarchist ideas of Don Carlos Cisneros, while the last describes the frustration and anger of Orbajosa’s residents because their parliamentary representative, Manolo Infante, has, in effect,
dodged his responsibilities. Galdós employs gender as the basis for his allegory on national politics. Infante is a political metaphor, and his crossing between traditional masculine and feminine traits exposes the illusory nature of Spanish politics. Infante’s propensity to gossip, an act which blurs the divide between reality and lies, underscores the false nature of the Spanish parliamentary system. Paralleling the Spanish political system which claimed to be self-regulating and democratic, but in reality was ruled by self-interest rather than laws, Infante pretends to be a typical, bourgeois politician while he progressively surrenders to a lack of self-control. By highlighting Infante’s attempt to mask his mental instability while he progressively worsens, Galdós points out that parliamentary government is ineffective in Spain because democracy is a sham. Even more, Infante’s shift in gender characteristics metaphorically illustrates that there is a wide gap between politics on paper and politics in reality. Both gossip and hysteria are developed within the novel’s epistolary structure, a typically feminine mode of narration, to further underscore Infante’s deviation from gender norms. Significantly, this is the first time that Galdós used the epistolary mode in a novel.

Manolo Infante, the narrator of *La incógnita*, records his experiences during the short time he has spent in Madrid. He is an aspiring lawmaker from Orbajosa, the reactionary provincial town where Pepe Rey meets his death in *Doña Perfecta*. Over a three-month period, the politician writes a series of forty-one letters to his author-friend Don Equis X, an exile from the capital who is now living in rural Orbajosa. Infante’s letters to Equis trace his growing obsession with his married cousin, Augusta Cisneros, and his quest to discover whether or not the object of his desire is an honorable wife. Suspicions about his cousin increase when Federico Viera, a close friend of Infante and a possible lover of Augusta, is found dead. As Infante struggles to discover the details of Viera’s death or suicide and, most importantly, his cousin’s role in the tragedy, a whirlwind of gossip sweeps through middle-class Madrid. Every commentator on the subject offers his or her own version of the events surrounding the crime and Augusta’s possible involvement in it. Towards the end of the novel, Augusta reveals to an unstable Infante that she has not been honorable, but that she will never again be an unfaithful wife. The politician has resolved half of the enigma; he knows that Augusta has not been a model wife, but he has been unsuccessful in discovering her lover’s identity.

Infante likewise fails to solve the murder of his friend. In one of his last letters to Equis, the failed politician indicates his plan to return to Orbajosa to escape the pressures of city life and to recuperate from his mental and emotional trials. The novel’s final and only letter written by Equis to Infante relates the metamorphosis of his friend’s letters while stored in a box of garlic and other vegetables into a “novela en cinco jornadas” (251). *La incógnita* ends with a preview of Galdós’s next novel, or “novela dialogada,” *Realidad*, which, unlike Infante’s superficial vision of the events, completes the story with a “descripción interna del asunto” (*La incógnita* 251).

Most scholarship addressing this novel centers on the work’s formal aspects, notably its metafictional elements. Other studies focus on the text’s critique of nineteenth-century Spanish society, emphasizing the appearance versus reality dichotomy that informs the novel. Few studies, however, explore the relationship between *La incógnita* and Restoration politics despite the novel’s overt political subthemes. More recent analyses approach the work from a gender perspective. For example, John Sinnigen addresses the issue of homosexuality. He argues that there is a homosexual component to the masculine sentiments in this novel and cites as an example Infante’s arousal due to his description of the bachelor Malibrán with his “cariz de guerrero afeminado” (173). He also maintains that Augusta is not the real love object of Infante; the process of idealization initiated by Infante begins with her but, in effect, leads to her husband (173).

Although studies on *La incógnita* have noted the protagonist’s mental instability, his hysterical personality has not been the focus of any study of the novel. Roberto Sánchez notes that Infante “padece una inestabilidad emocional que le hace poco sensato y lo priva de razonar con lógica” (547). Infante has been compared to the “narrators of abnormal psychology” often found in twentieth-century novels because he writes in a state of extreme agitation (Sayers 85).
Gender Role Crossing in La incógnita

However, his instability has not been explored as a gender characteristic or in relation to the novel’s linkage of gender and national politics.

In La incógnita, Infante and other male characters gossip, a practice commonly attributed to women in the nineteenth century. Infante and his colleagues’ confused gender characteristics allude to the equally problematic political system. On the outside, it purports to be authentic; however, a closer examination reveals that, like gossip, it borders on fiction. While in Congress, Joaquin Pez speaks with Infante about Viera’s death: “Tengo un gran dato, amigo Infante, que arroja mucha luz. Me ha dicho el marido de la sobrina de la nuera del forense … ya ve usted que el conducto no puede ser mejor … me ha dicho que, comiendo ayer el forense en casa del hermano de la cuñada de su primo, dijo esto: ‘la herida del costado es de homicidio; la de la frente de suicidio’” (219). Infante replies that to prove the truthfulness of this information, one would need to “recorrer ese laberíntico rosario de la nuera del hermano del tío de la sobrina” and that, in the end, “al llegar al forense, resulta que el buen señor no ha dicho esta boca es mía” (219). Although Infante initially refutes Pez’s claims, he also gossips, like every other visitor to Tomás and Augusta’s tertulias. He, however, attempts to mask his gossip as a literary invention. In a letter to Equis, Infante writes: “[T]engo que contarte algo muy importante; y como vivimos en plena atmósfera novelesca, porque cada quisque, con motivo de este suceso, inventa, zurce y enjaretá argumentos más o menos aceptables, se me ha pegado algo del amaneramiento artístico, y aspiro a excitar en ti el interés de lector…” (201). Although Infante pokes fun at his acquaintances for their incessant gossiping, he, likewise, relates his own version of the tragic events and the enigma surrounding Augusta under the guise of creating art. Infante believes that his theory of Viera’s death is legitimate, and, in the act of recording it, attempts to authenticate it, thus privileging his version over any other. Gossip, as Patricia Meyer Spacks notes, becomes more authoritative when written down; it is stabilized and not open to further elaboration (14). Nevertheless, Infante’s participation in the circle of gossipers, rather than providing him with an authoritative voice, marks his crossing from stereotypical masculine behavior to feminine comportment.

For centuries, gossip has been linked to women. In her book-length study on gossip, Spacks traces the etymology of the word. Originally, “gossip” existed only as a noun in English, and referred to a god-parent of either sex. In the eighteenth century the word acquired more of its contemporary negative connotation and was first associated with women: “One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in” (26). It was not until the early nineteenth century that “gossip” denoted an action rather than a type of person (26). Although the Spanish equivalent chisme is not gender-specific, its synonym comadreo, from comadre, indeed refers to a female gossiper (Vernon 211). According to Spacks, several factors account for the stereotypical identification of gossip with women throughout history. First, Eve’s unwise speaking and listening brought sin into the world. Second, women’s propensity to gossip is due to their weak minds. Finally, women take part in idle talk because they lack good education and worthwhile activities to occupy their time (41). Even in La incógnita gossip is tied to women. When Cisneros complains because his daughter is the subject of Madrid’s gossip circles, he argues that “la opinión […] esa gran charlatana, merece ser tratada como la última de las mujerzuelas” (205).

Although nearly all of Infante’s acquaintances gossip at one time or another, the novel emphasizes that the male characters engage in story-telling more than the women. During Augusta’s last conversation with Infante, she asserts that women can keep secrets better than men (246). In one of Infante’s letters to Equis, he notes that there are six or seven different versions of the story regarding Viera’s death circulating in the casino, a typically all-male space, suggesting that Galdós aims his criticism not only at politicians, but at society in general. Significantly, the only character that does not gossip is la Peri, the prostitute who was also Viera’s lover. After she accepts Cisnero’s offer to lie to the judge to preserve Augusta’s reputation in exchange for a tapestry, la Peri retracts her promise because she refuses to stain her dead lover’s honor (227). Ironically, the prostitute, whom one expects to be immoral, shows more nobility of character than the bourgeois characters who ignore the strict moral and ethical code that supposedly sets them
off from both the lower and upper classes.

Gossip in *La incógnita* also challenges the notion of the separation of spheres into masculine/public and feminine/private. According to Spacks, gossip circulates and ponders facts of private experience. Blurring the boundaries between the personal and the widely known, it implicitly challenges the separation of realms (“home” as opposed to what lies outside it) assumed in modern times. Gossip interprets public facts in private terms: the senator will not run for re-election because his wife will abandon him if he does. It also gives private detail general meaning: the young woman’s drinking problem exemplifies the strain on women trying to do everything at once (262).

In *La incógnita*, Infante’s obsession with the “truth” consumes him. After relating how he spent the previous night in conjecture again with Pez, he describes himself as oblivious to recent events in Congress: “El cual anda ahora tan sin brújula, que no sabe por dónde va, ni se entera de lo que ocurre en las filas parlamentarias. ¿Querrás creer que estos días ha votado el buen Infante no sé cuántas leyes, y ha dicho sí o no en multitud de resoluciones, sin tener conciencia clara de sus actos legislativos?” (220). If masculinity was measured by success in the public sphere during the nineteenth century, then Infante’s ineffectiveness as a legislator, along with his preoccupation with the “private” (Augusta’s private life and the private sphere), render him less of a man than his successful peers. Infante contends that his version of the events is authentic, yet, in reality, he fashions an explanation that relates on conjecture and, therefore, contains the same kinds of fictional elements as the other characters’ versions. Gossip in *La incógnita* portrays nineteenth-century middle-class Spain in disarray. Bourgeois society depended on a strict demarcation between male and female characteristics and spheres, and gossip in this novel underscores the fissures in this social system that placed gender at its core—all of the men in Infante’s circle gossip. The male characters’ gossiping likewise is intimately bound up with their troubled politics. While the diputados pretend to represent the nation, they are more concerned with the rumors circulating in Madrid, as Infante’s failure in the Cortes (due in part to his gossiping) shows. The political system functions under the guise of authenticity yet, like gossip, it is more closely aligned with fiction.

In addition to gossip, Infante’s growing mental instability and his final breakdown further highlight his move away from established gender norms. During the second half of the nineteenth century, information on hysteria was widely circulated in Spain. When Galdós wrote *La incógnita* in the late 1880s, interest in the affliction had grown due to nearly two decades of weekly lectures on the disease by clinician Jean-Marie Charcot in France and the 1882 publication in Spanish of his book *Lecciones sobre enfermedades del sistema nervioso* (Jagoe, et al. 341). Before Charcot’s famous lectures, experts designated hysteria as an illness affecting only women. From the ancient Egyptian period until the seventeenth century, hysteria was viewed as a uterine disorder (Beizer 3), and its symptoms were the physical manifestation of sexual insatisfaction (Jagoe, et al. 340). During the ensuing hundred years, theories arose that identified a neurological basis for the condition, yet these hypotheses were discarded as the uterine theory gained prominence once again. By the second half of the nineteenth century, at least six different theories circulated on the causes of hysteria, ranging from the uterine to the neurological hypotheses and including theories that combined the two viewpoints (Jagoe, et al. 340–41). Despite the disagreement regarding hysteria’s causes, it was commonly agreed that hysteria was a female disease. During the course of his lectures, Charcot advanced the hypothesis that men could suffer from the illness as well, yet in practice, the connection between women and hysteria remained strong, notably in Spain, even after the clinician’s observation (Aldaraca 404; Jagoe, et al. 342).

Although hysterics often displayed physical symptoms, the illness was most commonly characterized by an exaggeration of inherently female traits. Therefore, the male hyster was labeled effeminate since his affliction caused him to display what were regarded as typical female characteristics (Aldaraca 408). One Spanish doctor, Joaquín Martínez y Valverde, included the following symptoms in his description of the female hysteri:
The French physician Pierre Janet added *abulia*, or a loss of will, to this list of symptoms, noting that the hysterical often loses interest in work (Jagoe, et. al. 118). Following Charcot, he also maintained that hysteria was more a manner of feeling or reacting rather than a disease (508) and that the onset of an attack was usually preceded by an obsession with or the persistence of an idea or thought (496). Indeed, Infante does not display any overt physical symptoms associated with hysteria, yet this does not seem rather out of the ordinary since hysteria was characterized more by moral, and not physical, symptoms, as Janet concludes (Jagoe, et al. 527). On the other hand, Infante does exhibit many of the symptoms described by Dr. Martínez y Valverde which underscore his gender transgression.

Infante first introduces the notion of mental instability when he compares his attraction to Augusta to a mental disorder. The newcomer to Madrid quickly becomes obsessed with recreating Augusta as an image of perfection while simultaneously realizing that a perfect Augusta would not enter into a sexual relationship with him. This inner conflict, he notes, “viene a ser como una enfermedad que me ha cogido de súbito,” and he likewise claims that his idealized image of Augusta “me entró como podría entramme un dolor neurálgico” (72, 73). George Sand believed that hysteria was “caused by the desire for an impossible something” (Goldstein 150). Her assertion seems borne out in the connection Infante establishes between mental illness and his obsession with Augusta. If, at first, Infante stops short of admitting that he suffers from a nervous condition, his actions reveal what he is unwilling to acknowledge. Soon he is unable to focus on politics because he is always nervous. Infante, like the hysterical whom both Martínez y Valverde and Janet describe, loses any desire to work. At one point, he is so agitated that he is unable to study the speech he will deliver in Congress. Later, he complains that he is “un simple número, una energía mecánica, inconsciente; voy con la masa, a donde la masa va” (220). Infante attends the parliamentary sessions, but he is oblivious to what takes place around him because his nervousness has clouded his powers of observation.

In addition to Infante’s inability to work, his constant vacillation between idolizing Augusta and despising her is typical of the hysteric’s behavior. At one point, he writes to Equis: “Aquí tienes a tu amigo hecho un ojeroso romántico, idealizando el objeto de su pasión, y remontándose, con ella en brazos, a los espacios infinitos; viéndola reflejada en sí mismo, con todos los atributos de sobrenatural hermosura, y adornada de las cualidades más excelsas” (130). He then remembers that he had earlier erased her from “la plantilla de sérifines terrestres,” but he now hurries to “inscribirla en ella con letras muy gordas: ¡Es un ángel!” (130–31). Throughout the novel, Infante shifts between loving Augusta and hating her. As he continually fluctuates between fantasy and reality, the obsessed lover loses his grip on reality and even hears voices in his head. Infante attributes his as-yet-unfounded claim that Augusta may have a lover to a revelation. He writes that he was awakened by someone or something with the idea: “Me aluciné hasta el punto de creer que alguien estaba allí, y de sentir el calor de una cara junto a la mia. Encendí la luz; temblando, revolví mis miradas por la alcofa. Excusó decirte que no había alma viviente” (142). Infante’s desire to be Augusta’s lover brought on his illness; now his suspicions about Augusta’s infidelity and his quest to discover her lover occasion even greater instability.

In the remainder of the novel, Infante edges towards a complete breakdown. He describes to Equis his “trastornos graves” (131), the “gran barullo en su mente” (150), moments of disorientation and deliriousness, and insomnia. Eventually, he falls apart in Augusta’s presence and finally admits that he is ill. Since Viera’s death, he has publicly played the role of the detective who detaches himself emotionally from the circumstances of the case he works to solve. Now he describes his “agitación insana” and a “momento de exaltación,” and he admits: “estoy enfermo, yo no sé lo que me pasa.... Estoy fuera de mi” (248). Finally, due to his extremely fragile state, he...
is unable to recognize his own handwriting on the manuscript that Equis sends him. His hysterical condition, brought on by his obsession with Augusta, has caused him to disregard his political responsibilities and has provoked hatred in the very people he was elected to represent. Infante’s attempt to delude the residents of Orbajosa while serving in the Cortes foregrounds the appearance versus reality dichotomy that characterized Spanish politics. Indeed, La incógnita’s emphasis on gossip and hysteria critiques the government’s hypocrisy. Infante and his acquaintances’ gossiping does more than simply blur gender divisions; gossip necessarily situates itself in a marginal position with respect to the appearance/reality polarity. While gossip attests to community, as Spacks notes (258), in La incógnita it speaks for a bourgeois community that emphasizes appearances as the prime aspect of a person’s identity. Infante prefers to think of himself as an artist rather than a gossip. Thus what he pretends to be conflicts with what he actually is, for he, like the other characters, is guilty of gossiping. As a political metaphor, the gossiping politician sheds light on the political system that purported to be democratic while, in reality, it served only the bourgeoisie’s interests. Even more, Galdós extends his criticism to include not only the political system, but bourgeois society as well. Indeed, all of Infante’s male acquaintances gossip under the guise of presenting the truth. Just as the politicians’ gossiping underscores the contrast between appearances and reality, the gossiping that occurs in the casino and the evening tertulias highlights the false nature of middle-class society in general.

Galdós employed gossip in La incógnita to critique Spain’s troubled political and social situation. Yet Infante’s mental instability does more than reveal problems with the current system; it represents Galdós’s loss of optimism for the Spanish future. In the nineteenth century, individual nervous disorders often functioned in narratives as symbols of social problems. In the introduction to his study on the nervous body in the nineteenth-century English novel, Peter Logan asserts that maladies of the nervous system were class-specific. For example, the middle-class nervous body was often the result of year-round urban residency or the speculator’s reaction to the stock market (1). Because nervous conditions were closely related to the social milieu of the bourgeoisie, writers naturally chose to criticize society through the nervous body (2).

Janet Beizer offers a similar interpretation of the hysterical body. She maintains that the hysterical is connected to a moment of crisis related to the razing of political and social structures and, more significantly, the demolishing of a symbolic system. The body of the hysteric—mobile, capricious, convulsive—is both metaphor and myth of an epoch: emblem of whirling chaos and cathartic channeling of it. Fashioned in the image of the times, the hysteric offers surface glitter and inner disarray. Fastened onto the hysteric’s almost totemic form is the anxiety of an age. (8–9)

As a metaphor for the Spanish political system, Infante’s progressive disease offers a very bleak vision of the future. His hysterical condition, a disorder of the interior, indicates that the problems of Spanish politics are endemic. Indeed, there is no hope for Infante. If he stays in Madrid, he will certainly degenerate further. Yet fleeing to Orbajosa is no longer an option for the disgraced politician; awaiting him in the pueblo are “la justa cólera de los ciudadanos” and his own “vergüenza y humillación” (254).

In addition to Galdós’s use of a character who displays characteristics associated with women at the time he wrote La incógnita, his choice of an epistolary mode also contributes to his critique of Spanish politics. Several scholars have studied this work as the writer’s experiment with alternative narrative techniques. While I agree that this novel addresses the issue of artistic creation, the weight of the novel’s political commentary suggests that Galdós adopted the epistolary mode to underscore his political critique and to highlight the dichotomy between appearances and reality in the Spanish political system. At the same time, Galdós’s choice of a novel of letters foregrounds the gender issues that serve as political metaphors.

Epistolary novels have traditionally been linked to women. According to Hazel Gold, the letter novel was uncommon in Spain because writers viewed the genre as feminine. She explains
that writers of epistolary novels tended to be women and, at the same time, these works often had female protagonists with plots focused on passionate love (135). Additional themes of epistolary novels included love, honor, virtue, and seduction (136). In _La incógnita_, Galdós adheres to these stereotypes of the epistolary novel, yet his protagonist is a male who compares himself to Hercules (44).

Equis’s role as the receiver of letters also contributes to Infante’s confused gender characteristics. Scholars studying _La incógnita_ often concentrate on the identity of Equis. Roberto Sánchez and Pedro Ortiz-Armengol, for example, argue that Equis, who prepares the manuscript that will be titled _Realidad_, is actually Galdós. Gonzalo Sobejano, however, claims that Infante and Equis are the same person with different purposes; Infante is the author-witness and Equis the author-judge (92–93). Maryann Weber, echoing Sobejano’s interpretation, asserts that “the closeness of the relationship between narrator and narratee seems to support the psychoanalytic explanation which envisions the person for whom a text is written as existing within the psyche of the writer but composed of elements from outside the self” (58). She continues that “Equis is the internal image of the person for whom Infante puts his words onto paper” (58). Finally, Akiko Tsuchiya maintains that Equis is “largely a product of Infante’s creation [who] emerges as a character in his own right” (342).

As a product of Infante’s creation, then, Equis is the politician’s double. Throughout Europe in the 1880’s, the double had become a popular motif in literature. Before this time, doubles had indeed appeared in literature—in Dostoevsky’s _The Double_, Dickens’s _The Tale of Two Cities_, and Shelley’s _Frankenstein—but they become increasingly common in the 1880s, as works such as Stevenson’s _The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde_ or even Nietzsche’s _Ecce Homo_ show (Kane 3). In the introduction to his study on masculinity, Michael Kane proposes several possible meanings for the double in literature. The double often manifests itself through schizophrenia or a splitting of the ego as a result of a crisis of identity. It also serves as an outlet for male fantasies of appropriating the feminine trait of birth-giving. Likewise, the double can be construed as evidence of narcissistic or even homosexual tendencies (3).

While it would be possible to argue that Infante exhibits all of the characteristics outlined by Kane, I posit that the doubling of Infante’s personality indicates a crisis of identity and, symbolically, of national identity. Infante constructs in Equis a persona to disguise his debilitated self. Throughout the novel, the politician has relied on Equis for guidance and for assistance in interpreting events as they unfold in Madrid. As Sobejano notes, Infante is the witness to the events, and Equis is the judge responsible for separating what is true from what is false. Nevertheless, the reader is only privy to Equis’s thoughts through Infante. Yet, by the end of the novel, even Equis is incapable of resolving the final “incógnita.” When Infante asks him how he produced the work’s sequel, _Realidad_, Equis responds:

> Pues verás, hijo mío, qué fenómeno tan fácilmente comprensible para un sabio perspicuo, como lo eres tú, formado en la escuela de la Peri y de otras filósofas peri... patéticas. Atiende bien. Guardada yo tu correspondencia [...] en un arca donde suelo meter para que no me los roben estos pillos, los ajos de la última cosecha. Guardo también cebollas, alguna calabaza, sartas de guindillas, simiente de anís y otros productos de este prolífico suelo. Ya ves que tus cartas estaban en buena compañía. Yo les había puesto un rotulito que decía _La Incógnita_. (253)

Evidently, Equis, or Infante, is unable to provide an adequate answer to the appearance of this _novela dialogada_. The illogical and unbelievable answer that Equis/Infante gives for the novel’s creation is evidence of Infante’s final breakdown. If, at one time, he was able to display rational thoughts through his alter-ego Equis, he now is completely devoid of reason and logic. Whereas Equis once was an effective disguise for his hysteria-induced instability, Infante can no longer camouflage his illness.

In his last letter, Infante refers to his correspondence as “la cara exterior,” “la superficie,” “la verdad aparente,” while Equis has produced in _Realidad_ “la cara interna,” “la descripción interior del asunto” that hid “la verdad profunda” (251–52). For Linda Willem, Infante’s terminology is
meaningful because it points to the fundamental difference in narrative presentation between these two novels. *La incógnita* can only present the outward appearance of things because of the limited first-person perspective of the narrator. In contrast, the omniscient orientation of *Realidad* allows it to reveal the characters’ inner thoughts concealed behind what is visible. (185)

Infante aligns himself with *La incógnita* and Equis with *Realidad*, but, as the same person, Infante also becomes closely attached to a “realidad.” In *La incógnita*, Infante incorporates into himself both the outer appearance through Equis and, through himself, the inner “realidad” of the Spanish circumstance. As outward appearances falter, the novel metaphorically exposes the reality of the Spanish situation that the political structure attempted to cover, an undemocratic system riddled with corruption, individualism, and favors. As I noted above, *La incógnita* expresses Galdós’s disappointment with and pessimism towards the middle class in its efforts to modernize Spain. Just as Infante never uncovers the *incógnitas* surrounding Augusta’s infidelity and Viera’s death, *La incógnita* suggests that, in the hands of the bourgeoisie, there is no solution for Spain’s problems.

NOTES

1 Throughout this essay I emphasize that the protagonist Infante, as well as other male characters, deviate from prescribed social roles related to gender. Thus, when I refer to “gender role crossing,” I do not propose that the male characters adopt a female persona but rather that their comportment is more appropriate to women in the context of nineteenth-century Spain. Their tendency to gossip and Infante’s hysterical personality would have been considered feminine when Galdós wrote his novel. Vernon, in contrast, views gossip in this work as a practice appropriated by men to exercise power in society (212).

2 By the time Galdós wrote *La incógnita*, Spain had a noticeable anarchist presence. The political organization of the working classes and the liberalization of the press between 1868 and 1874 allowed anarchist ideas to travel throughout Spain; anarchist ideas spread at the cafés and casinos commonly associated with worker groups. At the same time, anarchists became more involved in literary endeavors. Between 1885 and 1900, two dozen anarchist journals and newspapers circulated throughout the country, attesting to the group’s active presence in Spanish life (Esenwein 125). Although anarchists went into hiding during the first years of the Restoration, during the 1880s they engaged in increasingly violent actions, not only in Spain, but in several European countries. For example, in 1878 and 1879, unsuccessful assassination attempts were directed towards Alfonso XII in Spain (Sieburth 28–29). While anarchism was not influential within the government, the anarchist movement’s growing prominence was a cause of concern for the stability of the nation.

3 In July of 1887 a crime was committed that madrileños called “El crimen de la calle del Fuencarral.” An older widow was killed in her home, and all of Madrid speculated on the identity of her murderer. Viera’s death and the subsequent gossip are clear references to this crime. For a study on Galdós’s experiment with factual events as a source for his fiction, see Ovadia de Benardete.

4 Although *La incógnita* and *Realidad*, published later in 1889, are referred to as two complementary parts of a whole, Galdós’s fascination with literary genres reveals itself once again in 1892, when the drama *Realidad* was first staged. After focusing on the same story in an epistolary novel first and later a novel in dialogue, Galdós further explores the constraints and possibilities of genre as he recasts the novels’ events in dramatic form.

5 Charcot may have been responsible for a renewed interest in male hysteria, but the hypothesis was already circulating at the beginning of the century. This debate focused on whether men could suffer from hysteria or just exhibit hysteria-like symptoms (Goldstein 158).

6 Ortiz-Armengol proposes that Equis and Galdós are the same based on a finding by Julián Ávila Arellano, who discovered that Galdós, like Equis, had a small trunk in his vacation home in Santander in which he stored manuscripts and agricultural products. The author often created characters with traits similar to those of his acquaintances, although it was uncommon for him to establish an exact likeness between fictional characters and people that he knew. In addition to the similarity between Equis and Galdós that Ortiz-Armengol addresses, Infante and Galdós share several characteristics. For example, both were bachelors who became politicians through fraudulent elections and were afraid to speak in front of their peers in the Cortes.

Works Cited


Gender Role Crossing in La incógnita


