

Homosexuality on Display in 1920s Spain: The Hermaphrodite, Eccentricity, and Álvaro Retana

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For centuries, homosexuals have been viewed as freaks of nature. As one of those “mistakes,” the erotic novelist Álvaro Retana (1890–1970) made a rather remarkable writing career out of what he sometimes called his eccentricity and sometimes his monstrosity.¹ He turned his persona and his fiction into an extravagant, ironic display while performing the role of showman, a part that some of his characters also assumed, in highly popular fictions such as *Las “locas” de postín* (1919), *El octavo pecado capital* (1921), *Mi alma desnuda* (1923), and *Flor del mal* (1924). He was a kind of literary charlatan, not because he was a fraud or con artist but because, like the outside talker, or barker, in sideshows, he knew how to talk up his subject matter in front of an audience, as anyone who loves to chatter, any *charlatán*, or showman, learns to do. Retana controlled the display of himself as oddity by being at once the creator and the created in his writing. He would not, however, have considered himself a freak, because the term was not part of Hispanic culture until very recently, and then only as an import (Arnedo 74, 90; Antebi 13). On the other hand, related terms such as *monster* were readily available to him, as was *eccentric*, which appears to be part of a similar constellation of qualifiers of uniqueness, singularity, and anomaly. In using such qualifiers, especially the monstrous, he appears to embrace a status seen today as unwanted and undesirable, but as I argue here, the aesthetics of oddness he fashions reveals even as it occludes an early twentieth-century homosexual subculture in Spain that was far more visible than previously thought (see Mira; Cleminson and Vázquez García, “*Los Invisibles*”). Retana’s work also allows us to consider qualities and aspects that, to my knowledge, have been largely overlooked in a period marked by great social, cultural, and political change and fluidity: a renewed and modern sense of the marvelous, as reenvisioned through the ambiguous forms of the

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monstrous and the eccentric, a sense of the marvelous we may only have glimpsed in other writers and artists of pre-Civil War Spain.

Retana's self-image as monster or eccentric can be traced back to the romantic artist's envisaging "the monstrous as a metaphor for the *unique*" and art as "a monstrous progeny," of which Mary Shelley's creature in *Frankenstein* is an archetype (Huet 10, 161; author's emphasis). Fin de siècle literary decadence further sexualized the monstrous with tropes of ambiguity. Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) immediately comes to mind for its representation of gender confusion and cross-dressing reversals. A self-confessed admirer of decadent literature, Retana links monstrous uniqueness to the symbolic doubled figure of the hermaphrodite, a classic figure of monstrosity in early modern treatises on monsters and later medical textbooks, which takes on new life when reimagined narratively as forms of the bisexual and the ambiguous. The novelist tended to use terms such as *ambiguous* and *androgynous* rather than *hermaphrodite*, but the exhibition of the doubled self draws on the tradition of the hermaphrodite as a display and a form of entertainment. In so doing, he recalls the associations that were made between the hermaphrodite and homosexuality in medicine and society, associations that expressed uncertainty and confusion over sexual identity and blurred gender roles (see Cleminson, "El libro *Homosexualidad*" 975–76).

Like homosexuals, monsters were freaks of nature; both were seen as something unnatural, against nature, yet withal produced in the natural world. In time, this awkward positioning allowed an opening for gays to argue in favor of homosexuality as part of nature, as André Gide wrote, following Goethe, that it was "natural, that it resides in nature, even if it proceeds against nature" (91). An analogous turn took place in the perception of monstrosity when human monsters were demythologized in the eighteenth century, removed from the world of the marvelous, and brought into the realm of science and thus to some degree naturalized (see Vázquez and Cleminson, "El destierro de lo maravilloso"; Flores de la Flor 84–85). The nineteenth-century pathologizing of homosexuality and human monstrosity retained an underlying moral posture, but paradoxically also attempted to rationalize both. It is worth thinking of them as interrelated, conjoined in more ways than one, especially in the rhetoric of literary decadence of the late nineteenth century. Decadentism continued in the enormously popular phenomenon of the erotic novel, of which Retana is a prime example in the early twentieth century. Like the equally flamboyant gay writer Antonio de Hoyos y Vinent, he was especially drawn to the double-sided figure of the hermaphrodite, as imaginatively construed through bisexuality and the seeming transformation of men into women and women into men. Indeed, I would argue that Retana brought back the marvelous through the sexual fantasies he provided to readers who avidly devoured his fictions.

In sideshows, the half-man/half-woman sex attraction played off the duality of the hermaphrodite by presenting one side of the body as masculine, the other as feminine.² As with the classification of homosexuality, which was divided into congenital and acquired, human oddities were either born or made (Ellis 82–83; Bogdan 8). The lines between the congenital and the acquired, however, were often blurry, in the opinion of Havelock Ellis, perhaps the most influential of the fin de siècle sexologists in Spain and elsewhere (Zubiaurre 45). Ellis thought both sexes were “latently hermaphrodite,” suggesting that there was “a general undefined homosexuality” in addition to what was then called sexual inversion (80, 83). He also observed that “the bisexual group is found to introduce uncertainty and doubt” (88). Likewise, part of the allure of the hermaphrodite as oddity relies on uncertainty, on not knowing what it is, or whether we are seeing a true freak of nature or a marvelous fraud. Many half-woman/half-man entertainers were actually female impersonators.

Retana was intimately familiar with the world of female impersonators, who were known as *transformistas*, a term emphasizing the appearance of sexual transformation, however illusory. He was not simply a writer but also a composer of *cuplés*, a set and costume designer, and confidant to several women *artistes* who performed in the music halls and cabarets of pre-Civil War Spain. As a songwriter, he provided material to one of the most popular cross-dressers, Egmont de Bries (Asensio Marsal), who also appears in his novel, *Las “locas” de postín*. An imitator of female music hall stars, he generates great enthusiasm among the “representantes del sexo indeciso, por lo que hay . . . de ambiguo y propagador” in his artistic efforts (*Las “locas”* 111) (representatives of the indecisive sex, for what there is . . . of the ambiguous and propagating effect). Thus, his performance art serves “la causa del tercer sexo” (112) (the cause of the third sex). While some female impersonators were heterosexual (such as Barry Humphries’s incomparable comic Dame Edna), many were gay. What Retana celebrated, others saw as perverse.

El Caballero Audaz (José María Carretero) punishes his heterosexual *transformista* protagonist in *La pena de no ser hombre* (1924) when the public continues to think he is homosexual even after killing his wife and her lover: “La Vida tiene su norma inflexible. . . . Él, invirtiendo los términos de la Naturaleza, apareció como mujer, cuando era hombre. . . . Imitó, remedó, trastrocó su condición viril en femenina, y como si ello fuera un ultraje a los sagrados fueros de la Naturaleza, la Vida se vengaba de la mixtificación condenándole a soportar su engaño, a seguir siendo mujer, cuando era hombre” (61–62) (Life has its inflexible norms. . . . Inverting the terms of Nature, he appeared as a woman, when he was a man. . . . He imitated, copied, transformed his virile condition into a feminine one, and considering that an insult to the sacred laws of Nature, Life took its revenge on the fraud, condemning him to endure his own deceit, to continue being a woman, when he was a man).

Carretero's angst-ridden *transformista* explicitly brings out the divided self that resides in the metaphorical, latent figure of the hermaphrodite, whether dressed in drag or not. Retana is much more lighthearted and playful (though awareness of the difficulties that homosexuals experienced in this period can certainly be detected beneath the surface). Unattached to the vanguard, he nonetheless wears the same mask that García Lorca displays, but with this singular difference: he slips it on and off. The doubled nature of sexual identity—a figurative half-man/half-woman—in his work allows him at once to declare and deny that he's gay, to impersonate what he says he is (or his characters claim to be). Thus, for example, his "eccentricity," which identified him as an outsider, as equivocal, also made him fascinating, if not necessarily transparent, to his readers (see Valis, "Celebrity, Sex").

Whether Retana drew on the tradition of the sideshow as well as the drag spectacles of his day I have not been able to ascertain, but it would not be surprising. There is a long tradition of human monsters as entertainment, recalled in Velázquez's paintings of the dwarves who occupied a complicated place in the royal court of the Hapsburgs (Ravenscroft; González Echevarría 102–3; Moreno Villa). As in other parts of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe and the Americas, in Spain there were circuses, fairs, anatomical museums and collections, both traveling and permanent, where human anomalies, natural and fraudulent, were shown. Exhibits of oddities, including racial and ethnographic displays of colonial peoples at parks and zoos, were announced in the newspapers and could be viewed at the Circo Hipódromo, Circo Colón, and Circo Price or Dr. Velasco's Museo Anatómico y Universal de Curiosidades (now the Museo Nacional de Antropología) in Madrid or in one of some twenty anatomical collections and museums documented in Barcelona between 1849 and 1938 (Sánchez Gómez; Agulló y Cobo 4: 116, 428 and 5: 160; Almagro San Martín 215–16, 233; March 34). In 1859, Adolfo de Castro meticulously described the pathological specimens of the anatomical cabinet in the Facultad de Medicina of Cádiz, including a "modelo de monstruosidad" (89) (model of monstrosity). P. T. Barnum initially called his world-famous enterprise the Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan and Hippodrome. The line between dime museums and the more high-minded anthropological and ethnographic collections was not as clear-cut as it might appear today (see Adams 30–31, 39, 50).

Circus acts and spectacles, which Enrique Sepúlveda in 1886 called "grandes atracciones" (great attractions) and "debuts monstruos" (213) (monster debuts), appealed to a broad swath of the population. The same observer noted that the celebrated impresario Felipe Ducazcal promoted all kinds of spectacles, from operettas (*zarzuelas*) to magic plays, from acrobats and clowns to wild animal tamers and "fenómenos" (408) (monsters or freaks). Melchor de Almagro San Martín marveled how the Spanish aristocracy re-

mained enthusiastic about the circus as late as 1900, long after their peers in France and Britain had apparently lost interest (167–68). The aristocratic closeted protagonist of Hernández-Catá's *El ángel de Sodoma* (1927) is aroused sexually at a circus (16–19), while the equally closeted Nobel Prize winner Jacinto Benavente, a close friend of Retana, was a circus impresario in his youth (Sánchez Estevan 38).

Another friend, Hoyos y Vinent, directly linked the sideshow to a display of sexual nonconformity. The prologue to his collection of novellas, *El secreto de la ruleta* (1919), begins with these words: “Yo las he hallado muchas veces en la feria del mundo—esa feria donde, Dios, como un Barnu[m] omnipotente se ha complacido en reunir todos los monstruos y todas las deformidades—y la sonrisa que iba a ser irónica se ha hecho tan triste que más ha sido mueca conmisericordiosa” (7) (I have often found them at the world's fair—that fair where God, like an omnipotent Barnum, has delighted in gathering together all the monsters and all the deformities—and the smile that was to be ironic has turned so sad that it's more like a grimace of pity). He goes on to describe these creatures “con sus cuerpos que se mantenían inverosímiles, gracias a los masajes y a los corsés, bajo los encajes, las sedas, las pieles y las perlas, con sus rostros pintados, maquillados, estucados. . . . Hacían entradas sensacionales, flirteaban como *locas*” (7; author's emphasis) (with their bodies impossibly maintained, thanks to massages and corsets, beneath the lace, silk, furs, and pearls, with their painted faces, made up and powdered. . . . They made sensational appearances, flirting like *queens*). If Hoyos's allusion to *locas*, code for fags, hasn't tipped off the reader, his conclusion makes it clear that he is speaking of cross-dressers when one of them begins to recount an experience at a drag ball (“un bal travesti”) (9).

Hoyos's transvestites are not, strictly speaking, hermaphrodites, but they are expressive of that diffuse cultivation of the ambiguous and the impersonated that we see in Retana's fiction, of what is male but also female, of what is performance but also real when the mask is dropped and they are “ellas de verdad” (9) (truly themselves)—whatever that might be. That these transvestites belong to the same world as the hermaphrodite is suggested in an earlier text of Hoyos, “Hermafrodita,” from the collection *El pecado y la noche* (1913). At an upper-class social gathering set in the nineteenth century, one of the *habitués* enralls the prudish Doña Recareda with the myth of the double-sexed Hermaphrodites. Mythology is seen as full of youth and vitality, but then the conversation veers toward more scandalous subjects, and another character begins to talk about “fenómenos de transformación, raros caprichos de la Naturaleza; descubría monstruos horribles, casos de locura. . . . [I]ban y venían en raras zarabandas seres absurdos, criaturas híbridas, que se contorsionaban saliendo de lo grotesco para entrar en los linderos de lo doloroso” (monstrous transformations, bizarre caprices of Nature; he revealed horrible

monsters, cases of madness. . . . [T]hey came and went strangely turmoiled, these absurd beings, hybrid creatures that contorted themselves, emerging from the grotesque only to cross over into the painful). Doña Recareda, endowed with a mannish voice and features, is terribly flustered and rushes out into the street, where she is taken for a man in women's clothing. Harassed and about to be arrested, she has a (comic) epiphany in Madrid's Plaza Mayor, realizing that she too is "uno de aquellos seres ambiguos, insexuados, híbridos, de la fábula" (one of those fabled ambiguous beings, unsexed and hybrid), and, eyes flashing, declares herself the reencarnation of Hermafrodita. Removed from the privacy of an aristocratic soirée, she has also become a public spectacle.

Clearly, the marvelous has not been completely expelled here. As an early attempt to naturalize monstrous creatures such as the hermaphrodite by linking them to reproduction and minutely describing them, Ambroise Paré's influential *Monsters and Marvels* (1573) nonetheless insists that "there are divine things, hidden, and to be wondered at, in monsters—principally in those that occur completely against nature" (73). "On Hermaphrodites or Androgynes" comes early in the treatise, as the sixth section, immediately followed by "Memorable Stories about Women Who Have Degenerated into Men," thus linking the double-sexed with sexual metamorphosis (unsurprising, given the influence of the Ovidian myth). Defining *monstro*/monster, Covarrubias (1611) confines himself to the physical deformities of human monstrosities, as "contra la regla y orden natural" (812) (against the natural order and rule). In the entry for *ermaphrodito*/hermaphrodite, he first summarizes the myth, then gives a morphology, alluding to Pliny's belief in hermaphrodites as a distinct race (530–31; see also his *Emblemas morales*, Centuria II, Emblema 64). Mateo Alemán (1599) cites the case of the monster of Ravenna, whose two sexes signified "sodomía y bestial bruteza" (1: 71) (sodomy and bestial brutishness), a reminder of the long-standing association between hermaphroditism and sodomy (bearing in mind the then broad applicability of this latter term) (Moreno Mengibar and Vázquez García 95; also Paré 6–7; Fiedler 24–25).

For Antonio de Fuentelapeña (1676), the hermaphrodite is neither "perfecto hombre, ni perfecta muger" (165) (perfect man, nor perfect woman). While a monster, it is to be distinguished from the sex that is called "neutro" (neuter), considered even more monstrous (181). A monster, he says, is nothing less than a "pecado de naturaleza" (167) (sin of nature), though elsewhere he suggests that monsters no doubt consider so-called normal people equally monstrous (141). In a book filled with as many invisible creatures such as ghosts, imps, and other spirits, or *duendes*, as visible ones, Fuentelapeña also stresses the divine presence illuminating such prodigious entities (80). Nearly a century later, the 1780 *Diccionario de la lengua castellana* of the Real Academia Española continues calling the hermaphrodite a monstrosity

and somewhat elliptically notes that the term “por extension se dice de otras cosas” (524) (by extension is said of other things).

By the nineteenth century, there was considerable skepticism as to whether true hermaphroditism existed, with apparent or pseudo-hermaphroditism clouding the picture.³ The physician Pedro Felipe Monlau (1853) denied it, saying, “Lo que hay, en fin, son algunas monstruosidades; lo que hay son muchos vicios de conformacion que simulan con mas ó menos verdad la amalgama de los dos sexos en un solo individuo” (140) (What we have, at any rate, are a number of monstrosities; what we have are many anomalies that simulate, convincingly or not, the amalgam of both sexes in one individual). With startling bluntness, he calls them *maricas* (fags) and *marimachos* (butches) (140). His use of the term *vicios de conformación* echoes the prevailing view of monstrosity as an anomaly, which was deemed either congenital or acquired, as Antonio Ballano wrote in 1823 (3: 879).⁴ Ballano also divided *vicios de conformación* into deformities and monstrosities, though the difference between them was only one of degree (3: 879). In contrast, Antonio Santos (1852), who was a veterinarian but argued the applicability of anomalies to animals and humans, thought nearly all *vicios de conformación* were congenital, including hermaphroditism (338, 340). He was vociferous in insisting that monstrosities, which he saw as the most serious of anomalies or *vicios de conformación*, had nothing to do with the marvelous or divine (347).

In a series of late nineteenth-century aphoristic fragments, José de Letamendi considered hermaphroditism as atavistic; all “erotic aberrations,” in his view, proceeded from the inherent hermaphroditic condition of human beings, from what he called “los restos hermafroditicos militantes” (119, 120) (militant hermaphroditic vestiges). Associating homosexuality with hermaphroditism, he maintained that “toda unión entre individuos de un mismo sexo se reduce á simulacro de hermafrodisimo incompleto” (119) (all unions between individuals of the same sex are reduced to a simulacrum of an incomplete hermaphroditism). In this way, he approximates the notion of psychic hermaphroditism, as opposed to anatomical hermaphroditism (see Cleminson and Vázquez García, “*Los Invisibles*” 52). In 1912, Max Bembo divided hermaphroditism into physical (very rare), psychic (seen in geniuses), and sexual hermaphroditism (known as bisexualism) (70). Later, Martín de Lucenay equated psychic hermaphroditism with “bisexualidad moral” (moral bisexuality) and Marañón’s “estados intersexuales” (intersexual states) (13), an indication of the inconsistency, confusion, and uncertainty over how to define the undefinable (see also San de Velilla 132). The same could be said of the taxonomies of monsters, particularly germane in the case of hermaphrodites, in the effort to medicalize what once was folklore and fantasy (see Angell).

So, in the very period that encompasses the decadent and erotic flowering of all kinds of imaginative aberrations, from Rachilde to Jean Lorrain, Oscar Wilde to Aubrey Beardsley, Hoyos y Vinent to Álvaro Retana, science attempts to pin down this strange, once-marvelous creature in classifications, both verbal and visual, that are meant to demythify. As Leslie Fiedler observes, however, the aura of the older mythology clings to the word itself, even if the taxonomies and the photographs are entirely devoid of previous mystery.⁵ Yet in truth, medicine has merely refocused its attention on the very elements that make hermaphroditism and all such variations monstrously prodigious: the atavistic and the psychic as new forms of the marvelous. One could even argue that the intricate, detailed taxonomies flourish like luxuriant vegetation nearly as wildly as the creatures in any erotic or decadent fiction of the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. Moreover, there is as much display in some of these taxonomies as in the extravagant presentation of the double-sexed in literature, the arts, and the actual spectacles of monstrosities. The “hermaphroditism of the soul” anticipated in psychic hermaphroditism, or in the aphoristic musings of a Letamendi, would be mapped onto the figure of the homosexual, paradoxically making him visible (see Foucault, *History* 43). Thus, hermaphroditism “remained as a ‘ghost category’ in the construction of sexual inversion and homosexuality,” as Cleminson and Vázquez García observe (*Hermaphroditism* 3). Iterations of homosexuality as a form of hermaphroditism, with vaguely Platonic resonances—the Uranian, the third sex—characterize the period.

That same “hermaphroditism of the soul” appears allegorized in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 depiction of Dorian Gray’s “monstrous soul-life” (254), the portrait as the aesthetic display of a secretly divided soul who believes himself “tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead.” This familial atavism is extended to his “ancestors in literature” as well (165, 167). Among these ancestors is Théophile Gautier’s poem “Contralto” (1852), which Dorian recalls with the phrase “monstre charmant” (190) (charming monster), an allusion to the hermaphrodite sculpture that is the subject of the poem. The figure of the hermaphrodite is central to Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*, described as “deux sexes distincts en un unique monstre” (189) (two different sexes in a unique monster). The exhibitionist nature of Rachilde’s text and characters, which Maurice Barrès in his prologue calls the “spectacle d’une rare perversité” (viii) (spectacle of a rare perversity), is apparent. Ironically, despite Wilde’s own extroverted personality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* occludes the unnameable monster of sex at the heart of the novel, working against one of the suggested etymological meanings of monster, as derived from the Latin *monstrare*: to show, to display. On the other hand, the word as currently derived from *monere*, to warn, points to monsters as signs, prophecies of catastrophe (see Huet 6), a meaning that Dorian’s portrait embodies.

The built-in signifiers of the term *monster* suggest why the monstrous is inherently a spectacle, as display and sign, but is it representable? This same question has occurred to Roberto González Echevarría in his insightful analysis of Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (1635), in which monstrosity offers a key to baroque aesthetics and, by extension, to art as "monstrous by nature" (96, 102, 113; see also Valis, "Ángel Guerra" 32–33). As he observes, the monster appears to make a "mockery of mimesis" (107). Monstrosity does not conform to what we expect in nature, despite what Diderot (1769) (and others) claimed: "L'homme n'est qu'un effet commun—le monstre qu'un effet rare; tous les deux également naturels, également dans l'ordre universel et general. . . . Et qu'est-ce qu'il y a d'étonnant à cela? . . . [T]ous les êtres circulent les uns dans les autres, par conséquent toutes les espèces. . . . [T]out est en un flux perpétuel" (269) (Man is nothing but a common effect—the monster but a rare effect; both [are] equally natural, equally within the universal, general order of things. . . . And what is astonishing about that? . . . [A]ll beings circulate within each other, and consequently all species. . . . [E]verything is in a perpetual flux). Diderot's own words belie his point: if everything is in a perpetual flux, how is monstrosity, already observed as a "rare effect," captured (never mind the natural)? That which astonishes does so because it is a rare effect, something that defies expectations and norms.

According to Antonio Santos, both popular usage and etymology indicate that the word can be applied only to the most serious of anomalies, to those that produce "*entes mas ó menos amorfos, mas ó menos viables*" (344; author's emphasis) (*entities more or less amorphous, more or less viable*). The monstrous lacks a definable shape. Similarly, the hermaphrodite is deemed ambiguous, hybrid, unsexed, as Hoyos (and many others) observed, and is thus troubling because it upsets expectations of what a "true sex" is (see Foucault, Introduction vii). Significantly, it is hard to represent. The restrictions in making visible such things as hermaphroditism and homosexuality are not simply social, cultural, and even legal, especially in this period, but more profound, striking at the heart of the matter, at that formlessness that threatens the boundaries between the human and the not-human. Despite all the taxonomies, hermaphroditism, and by extension homosexuality, could not be delimited—hence their perceived monstrousness. Psychic hermaphroditism pointed to an inner monster in perpetual flux, as Dorian Gray's ever-changing, dissolving portrait signifies.⁶ The difficulties in representation are conveyed in the secrecy, the invisibility, with which the portrait becomes wrapped.

At the same time, only the artifice of art enables Wilde and his readers to frame the picture's boundless horror, to put it on display. I have dwelled on Wilde's novel because, along with Rachilde and other decadent writers, he offered a model of monstrosity that Álvaro Retana clearly found attractive, a model of uniqueness, inherited from romanticism, as I noted earlier, but also

a model of dissolvent yet proliferating ambiguity. This same indeterminate ambiguity in some ways could be said to threaten that very uniqueness, just as the trope of monstrosity enhances originality as a thing against nature.

In Retana's day, Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, a key figure of the intellectual world in the pre-Civil War period, is illustrative of the contemporary obsession for the hybrid and the ambiguous, especially in its sexual manifestations. While his memoirs contain antigay comments, his book *Ética y estética de los sexos* (1921) speaks of a "principio de inversión en el excesivo amor al sexo contrario" (principle of inversion in the excessive love for the opposite sex) and of the "anhelo de una experiencia inversa" (172) (yearning for an inverse experience). Gregorio Marañón would popularize an idea that was already much disseminated by the 1920s, that of the "'otro sexo' que nos acompaña" (168) (other sex that accompanies us). The phantom of the other sex was in the blood, not the imagination, he said in 1926 (169). By contrast, Cansinos describes something that above all inhabits the imagination: "como una larva, el híbrido se introduce en los sueños de los seres normales" (171) (like a larva, or a specter, the hybrid is introduced into the dreams of normal human beings). In this indeterminate zone of sex exists the hybrid, "la turba ambigua de los andróginos y los hermafroditas" (128, 167) (the ambiguous throng of bisexuals and hermaphrodites). Here, he says, "el monstruo es una interpretación nueva, un anhelo de liberación y de originalidad" (129) (the monster is a new interpretation, a desire for liberation and originality). While he seems ambivalent about the normality or abnormality of the beings he describes, he is also entranced with their possibilities, describing them in Promethean, heroic terms (71, 130, 131). They are aware of their transgression and what the essayist considers their tragic condition, but "al mismo tiempo en sus rostros, atónitos del maravilloso hallazgo, expresan el júbilo estático y quieto de su reconciliación con la íntima verdad. Porque lo que en ello parece monstruoso es su verdad" (129) (at the same time in their faces, astonished at their marvelous discovery, they express the ecstatic, serene joy of being at peace with the intimate truth. Because what seems monstrous in all this is their truth). Cansinos embraces the monstrous by returning it to the territory of the marvelous and the unique.

It appears that Cansinos is speaking of two different things at the same time: of the hybrid as an inescapable part of our imaginary and the hybrid as a concrete phenomenon in the real world. The confusion over the metaphorical and the real is never resolved, but then, neither is it resolved in the writings of Álvaro Retana, who was familiar with *Ética y estética de los sexos* (Fortuny, *Ola verde* 118).⁷ Cansinos's remarks remind us that Retana's use of the monstrous has a long Spanish pedigree, especially notable in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (González Echevarría 100–101). Forms of the hybrid appear, for example, in the plays of Calderón, as González Echevarría

observes (81–113). In *La vida es sueño*, Rosaura calls herself “monstruo de una especie y otra” (93) (a monster of two appearances), and in *El monstruo de los jardines* (1667?), a character describes himself as a “monstruo, pues, de dos especies, / tu dama de día, y de noche / tu galán” (n.p.) (a monster, then, in two images / am I: your lady by day and by night / your suitor [trans. González Echevarría]). Edwin Morby observes that Lope de Vega sometimes uses *hermaphrodite* to mean belonging first to one sex, then to another, rather than being endowed with two sexes (in Vega, *La Dorotea* 247, 333n144; also *Entrambasaguas* 279–80).

In other words, there are probably far more metaphorical hermaphrodites present in literature than anatomical ones. Moreover, the looseness with which the term is used suggests that writers not only understood the phenomenon as metaphorical but also found its hybrid instability engaging and full of social, psychological, and sexual implications to express the indeterminate, the ambiguous, and the impossible to define. Thus, in 1835 Larra disapproves of an anomaly he calls the *mujer-calavera*, or female roué, whose (uncharacteristic) boldness unsexes her, making her more of a man. “Es la confusión de los sexos,” he concludes, “el único hermafrodita de la naturaleza” (345–46) (It’s the confusion of the sexes, nature’s only hermaphrodite). Manuel Bretón de los Herreros satirized the proliferation of geniuses in 1839, saying, “El uno es *genio* varón, / El otro es *genio* mujer, / Y presumo que los hay / *Hermafroditas* también” (281; author’s emphasis [1884 ed.]) (One is a male *genius* / The other, a female *genius* / And I presume there are / *Hermaphrodites* as well). Pedro de Alarcón (1875) sardonically calls the cross-dressers of Carnival “hermaphrodites” (11). In Leopoldo Alas’s 1891 novel, *Su único hijo*, Bonifacio Reyes, described as somewhat feline but not effeminate, thinks of the ministrations and massages he performs on his capricious, demanding wife as belonging not to the “aptitudes naturales de un hermafrodita beato o cominero, sino la romántica exageración de un amor quijotesco” (71) (natural aptitudes of an overly pious or fussy hermaphrodite, but the romantic exaggeration of a quixotic love). One of the most fascinating comments on the subject appears in a letter from the poet Salvador Rueda to Leopoldo Alas (internally dated July 1900), in which he describes his astonished reaction to the decadent-symbolist D’Annunzio’s *Il trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*) (1894). Having originally imagined the writer as “un ser enfermizo, afeminado, complicado, sin altura, sin vigor, sin sexo artístico, o con sexo intermedio, en fin, un hermafrodita estético” (Rubio Jiménez and Deaño Gamallo 94) (a sickly, effeminate, complicated creature, unelevated, weak, lacking an artistic sex, or with an intermediate sex—in short, an aesthetic hermaphrodite), he now sees him as quite a guy (*un tiazó*), “dentro del cual hay una mujer, un hombre, un niño, un psicólogo, un poeta, un *creador de idioma moderno*” and much more (94; author’s emphasis) (in whom there is a woman, a man, a child, a psychologist,

a poet, a *creator of a modern idiom*). It is hard to take Bretón's satiric allusion seriously, or Alarcón's for that matter. Ironies aside, both Larra and Alas are less interested in a strictly anatomical hermaphroditism than in a slippery, ever-changing hermaphroditism of the soul or, in Rueda's case, a hermaphroditism of aesthetics, but which is still related to the soul.

Retana is no different here, though the strategy he employs takes him in another direction. His writing and his persona become fused, and the apparently frivolous manner in which he appears to identify himself and a number of his characters as metaphorically and monstrously double-sexed turns his fictions into doubled readings as well. Sexual ambiguity is flaunted as a kind of eccentricity that allows the writer to claim and deny at the same time who he is, or how his characters should be identified and read. The human monsters on view serve not as warnings (*monere*) but as displays (*monstrare*), and moral posturings, notwithstanding some ambivalence, are nearly always deflated by irony and humor. Thus, in Artemio Precioso's prologue to *Flor del mal*, Retana says the Princess Raffalovitch likes to show him off: "La espero un poco teatralmente porque a ella la divierten mis excentricidades, y después de merendar me llevará en su 'auto' a exhibirme en la Castellana como un monstruo fantástico" (4) (I await her somewhat theatrically, because my eccentricities amuse her, and after five o'clock tea she will drive me around in her automobile, exhibiting me on la Castellana like some fantastic creature or monster).

This self-aggrandizement (of which he was an expert) cleverly offsets negative connotations of the monstrous by associating it with the eccentric and the fantastic. For Gloria Fortuny, one of the novelist's fans in the text, Retana, who appears as a principal character in *Flor del mal*, is "el más adorable de los monstruos" (33) (the most adorable of monsters). But Gloria's own "monstruosidades deliciosas" (52; also 64) (delicious monstrosities) pressure Retana and another male character, Rafaelito, into a fake homosexual relationship, none of which prevents the novelist from considering Rafaelito the perfect gay lover or falling for Gloria. If Retana is an exhibit for the princess, he in turn delights in exhibiting himself publicly with Gloria ("exhibirme públicamente") (43). The entire novella is an exhibition, in private and in public venues such as the theater, Carnival, banquets, taxis, and automobile rides, of role-playing, of assuming a bisexual identity, or what Max Bembo called *sexual hermaphroditism*.

The use of the words *eccentric* and *eccentricity* is of particular interest. An astronomical and mathematical term meaning not concentric or not central (Gr. *ekkentros* [out of the center] = *ek* "out" + *kention* "center"), *excéntrico* is registered in the nineteenth century as a Gallicism (*excentrique*), taken from the English, signifying "extravagance," "caprice," and "originality" in 1855 (Baralt 229–30; also in Zerolo [1895]), while Onions says it is from

the French (299; also *Online Etymology Dictionary*).⁸ Baralt retains the older ridiculing sense of “original” as extravagant and even monstrous (398; also Babbit 187). (*Exhibirse*, in the sense of to show oneself in public, is also considered Frenchified [Baralt 231–32], with connotations linking it to *eccentric* [*ek* = out] and *extravagant* [*extra* = outside of]). In another meaning stressing display and the performative, *eccentric* is also said of a circus artist who does “ejercicios originales o extraños” (*Diccionario de la lengua española* [1927] 909) (original or strange exercises).

As far as I can tell, under the entry for *excentricidad*, the 1925 *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* is the first to list, after the initial definition of “rareza o extravagancia de carácter” (oddity or extravagance of character), a secondary one that says “dicho o hecho raro, anormal” (a peculiar, abnormal saying or act). In the 1927 edition, the term *anormal* was removed from the secondary definition. It was back for the 1936 and 1939 editions; gone again in 1950. In 1956, *anormal* was back! And it remains as of the 2001 edition. This apparent struggle over one word—*anormal*—suggests some disagreement over the meaning of *excentricidad*. Its initial association with eccentricity in 1925 situates this particular connotation in the same period as the heyday of the erotic novel in Spain. *Anormal* itself first appears in a Spanish dictionary in the mid-nineteenth century, it seems, as does *normal*, around the same time as the non-astronomical or non-mathematical use of *excéntrico*.⁹ Baralt views it as similar to *anómalo* (anomalous), which as we have seen elsewhere, is associated with monstrosity (44–45). By 1925, “abnormal” is widely linked to homosexuality, bisexuality, and other kinds of sexualities considered deviant.

How are *excéntrico* and *excentricidad* used in Spanish literature and other written sources? One of Bretón de los Herreros’s dubious geniuses in the satire “El genio—Los genios” is described as an “excéntrico doncel” (282) (eccentric youth). In 1839, the poet used the inapt “reumático” (rheumatic), but by 1851 he had replaced it with this more telling word.¹⁰ Ramón de Mesonero Romanos referred to the bohemian artist figure as eccentric (1851) (“Contrastes” 498) and, in his memoirs (1881), to Goya, the romantic writers of El Parnasillo, and even political parties (*Memorias* 1: 100, 223, 240; 2: 56). Ramón de Campoamor (1875) called the poet Heine eccentric in a piece on originality and plagiarism (245). In 1886, Alas humorously suggested that severity on the part of the critic might be seen as eccentricity, or as something quixotic, given the uncritical tendency to lavish praise even on mediocrities (*Un viaje* 9). In 1866, the physician Pedro Mata associated the term with abnormality in a case of homicidal monomania (1: 264). None of these references implies anything sexually abnormal about being eccentric, but a brief allusion in Luis Coloma’s *Pequeñeces* (1891) hints at it when he describes a young woman’s “*allure* varonil y decidida” (20; au-

thor's emphasis) (manly and determined allure), along with her "excéntricas genialidades" (20) (eccentric genius).

Both the eccentric and the abnormal, which are sometimes seen as synonymous, represent a deviation (Gregory 83; also Foucault, *Abnormal* 72–73, and Schreck). The abnormal diverges from the normal. A word much associated with the English, especially in the nineteenth century, eccentricity is a "deviation from a centre," as James Kendall observed in 1859 in his humorous defense of the character trait (27). In the same year, John Stuart Mill also defended eccentricity as nonconformity, an antidote to the tyranny of opinion, abundant "where strength of character has abounded" and "proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage" of a society (*On Liberty* 83). One is reminded of Cansinos's monster as a new interpretation, a "desire for liberation and originality." The eccentric was closely attached to the aesthetic realm, especially to genius. It was widely applied, however, not only to all kinds of outsize, quirky personalities but to oddities, including the physically deformed, as well (Gregory 84; "Biographie des excentriques," attributed to Baudelaire [1850]; Brix). Thus, people looked at eccentrics with a certain ambivalence, and still do.

As a deviation that was at the same time considered part of the normal, eccentricity could be accepted and even admired (Gregory 83). By the early twentieth century, homosexuals had been heavily medicalized as pathological specimens in the museum of human oddities. A counternarrative emerged in writers such as Gide and Edward Carpenter who highlighted eccentricity as genius in historical homosexual figures (Cleminson, "El libro *Homosexualidad*" 971). Alberto Nin Frías took a similar tack in *Alexis* and *Homosexualismo creador* (as the title illustrates), ambivalently likening the image of homosexuality to a coin: on one side, "anomalía, aberración, perversión, y sobre cuyo reverso es posible asimismo otear la excelsitud y la diafanidad divinas de la grandeza humana" (*Alexis* 189) (anomaly, aberration, perversion, and on the other side, it is equally possible to make out the divine sublimeness and transparency of human greatness). Nature abhors the absence of variation, he argues, but humans tend to flatten differences, such as the "excentricidad," or eccentricity, that homosexuality displays, observing that "la perla es el producto de una enfermedad" (189) (the pearl is the product of a disease).

The aesthetic oddness of eccentricity, perhaps even its diseased underbelly as Nin Frías seems to suggest, has a double-sidedness here, revealed in the coin's two faces and the bivalvular source of beauty, the pearl. Eccentricity is, in this sense, possessed of a kind of psychic hermaphroditism, or the hermaphroditism of aesthetics that Salvador Rueda discerned in D'Annunzio. Cansinos-Asséns said androgynes and hermaphrodites "antes pertenecen a la estética que a la biología" (*Ética y estética* 134) (belong more to aesthetics than to biology), but represent real desires.¹¹ He also observed that andro-

gynes and hermaphrodites have “una realidad decorativa” (134) (a decorative reality). We have already seen that genius is linked to eccentricity but also to psychic hermaphroditism (Bembo 37). This “decorative” element can be seen as attached to both. In Álvaro Retana’s novella *La hora del pecado* (1923), the sexually ambiguous sensation-seeker Lolina possesses a seductive attractiveness described as “eccentric” (51). She permits all sexual practices so long as they are aesthetically justified (“una razón estética”) and occur in an “ambiente decorativo, excéntrico y lujoso” (67) (a decorative, eccentric, and luxurious setting). Like Cansinos’s hermaphrodites and androgynes, the eccentric is demonstrably visible, or decorative. In other words, eccentricity is a form of display.

The aestheticizing of aberration is a constant in Retana’s work. In *Mi alma desnuda*, eccentricity has two faces: the elegant and the grotesque, though both are deviations from the norm. Both are hybrid, sharing in the monstrous. The negative counterpart is exemplified by an over-the-hill dress designer and dancer, whose physical appearance and attire resemble an “excéntrico musical” (113) (musical eccentric) and whose mind is “enfermo de excentricidad” (115) (diseased with eccentricity). Identified as “that hybrid” (“aquel híbrido”) (114), the effeminate, aging queen embarrasses his guests by dancing in front of them. “Estos degenerados son los que desacreditan el Vicio,” says the aristocratic and bisexual bohemian Santiago Vilar. “Estos tipos debiéramos matarlos, no por su perversión sexual, sino porque son grotescos. Las aberraciones elegantes y decorativas, discretamente disimuladas, merecen el respeto de la gente porque no ponen en la vida una nota ridícula” (115) (These degenerates are the ones discrediting Vice. We ought to knock off these types, not for their sexual perversion, but because they’re grotesque. Elegant and decorative aberrations, discreetly disguised, deserve our respect because they don’t make things look ridiculous). In *La hora del pecado*, Lolina rejects the grotesque for similar reasons (67).

By contrast, Vilar claims, it is not heterosexuality but bisexuality that is the counternarrative to the “inversión cómica y anticuada de estos supervivientes de Sodoma que viven esclavos de la burla que les jugó la Naturaleza” (115) (comic and antiquated inversion of these survivors of Sodom who live as slaves of the joke Nature has played on them). Heterosexuality, he says, is mere normality. “La perfección está en las personas que hacemos ‘a pluma y a pelo.’ La sensibilidad erótica más refinada es la de quienes pueden vibrar indistintamente con uno y otro sexo. Podría darles a ustedes una conferencia interesantísima sobre el tema, apoyándome en textos de Medicina legal; pero temo escandalizar a Retana, que de algún tiempo a esta parte se expresa como un ángel” (116) (Perfection lies in those of us who bat for both sides. The most refined erotic sensibility is that which makes us vibrate interchangeably [or indistinctly] with one or the other sex. I could give you a really inter-

esting lecture on the subject, backed up by textbooks of forensic medicine, but I fear I might scandalize Retana, who has been behaving like an angel for some time now). Vilar's reference to the medical literature on bisexuality reminds us that in this period the lines drawn between male and female were increasingly blurred and uncertain. As Cleminson and Vázquez García note, the "concern about hermaphroditism" from the late nineteenth century to the start of the Civil War can be seen "as a symptom of the crumbling frontiers of the genders" (*Hermaphroditism* 230). The use of the word "indistintamente" also points in the same direction.

The perspective in these passages is a bit complicated and filled with irony, reflecting a certain ambivalence and perhaps a changing perception of the fairy's visibility, such as George Chauncey has documented for New York between 1890 and 1940 (13, 358). Chauncey also observes, "At the turn of the century, however, *bisexual* referred to individuals who combined the physical and/or psychic attributes of both men and women. A bisexual was not *attracted* to both males and females; a bisexual *was* both male and female" (49). The bisexual as both male and female is embodied in the figure of the hermaphrodite, whether manifested physically and/or psychically. Retana, however, defies Chauncey's clear-cut distinction, not only in his work but his life. A somewhat effeminate-looking man, he had affairs with both men and women. *Mi alma desnuda* is the most autobiographical of his books, though one can never take his presentation of self *prima facie*. The novel centers on the equal attraction that Retana, the first-person narrator-character, feels for a pair of twins, Tito and Graciela, his "boyfriend" and his "girlfriend." The twinning effect of this attraction, however, suggests projection as well, the two sides of the narrator himself.

The author as character describes himself as "un monstruo bello y joven, un atrayente abismo" (195) (a young, beautiful monster, a seductive abyss) who possesses a kind of aura, which I have elsewhere explored in its relation to celebrity (Valis, "Celebrity, Sex"). He disguises his identity to the twins in hopes of escaping his reputation and presenting himself as he really is ("mostrarme tal cual soy") (196). But even he admits such frankness is impossible, seeing himself metaphorically as a Salomé of the seven veils dancing on the world's stage (209). No one is permitted to see him as he truly is, as the veils remain. There is a certain irony in recalling the mocked fairy figure of the dancing dress designer, who duplicates, through parody, Retana's own dancing figure, with its Wildean homoeroticism and psychic hermaphroditism. (Cansinos-Asséns [1919] called Wilde's monstrous Salomé androgynous and an "efébica danzarina" [*Salomé* 46] [ephebic dancer].) These erotic displays are enhanced with the introduction of Don Juan Ambiguo, a bisexual parody of the classic Don Juan Tenorio, into the text.¹² He is described as a "víctima de la moderna literatura decadente" (victim of modern decadent lit-

erature), suffering from “el veneno del pecado decorativo” (80) (the poison of the decorative sin). While it is not clear to me what particular sin this is, the reappearance of the word “decorativo” in this context is noteworthy and can be linked to the extroverted figure of the Wildean dandy. In similar fashion to Don Juan Ambiguo, the narrator is also “envenenado de literatura y de excentricidad” (54) (poisoned by literature and eccentricity). Moreover, in his youth he reveals “el germen de la excentricidad y la poca vergüenza” (41) (the seeds of eccentricity and shamelessness). Tito, in turn, considers himself “algo excéntrico” (14) (somewhat eccentric) and much influenced by the same kind of literature, including Retana’s own novels.

Mi alma desnuda is a vehicle for the novelist’s deceptive and singular display of self, for his eccentricity and monstrosity, which is projected over nearly the entire cast of characters. Like Santiago Vilar, when he finds other transgressions banal, he dedicates himself to the ultimate monstrosity: himself (83). This same exhibitionism appears in *El octavo pecado capital* in the polymorphously perverse character of Baby, who is similarly described as monstrous and eccentric. She possesses, for example, an “aire de excentricidad inédita” (36) (an air of original eccentricity). A “mujer excéntrica” (47; also 41, 49) (eccentric woman), she plays at being a man and wears the mask of a “personaje equívoco,” a “tipo amoral o excéntrico, vestido en una forma aparatosa y poco digna” (74) (ambiguous personage; an amoral or eccentric type, dressed in a flamboyant and inappropriate fashion). Declaring herself a monster (49, 61), she gives her newest lover the classic books of aberration—Wilde, Lorrain, Sacher Masoch, Barbey d’Aurevilly—to corrupt him. Baby is a walking textbook of decadent literature.

Her first appearance is as a classic Pierrot figure during the upside-down world of Carnival, in which her confusing, ambiguous gender attracts and repels the other protagonist, Enrique Salazar. The traditional commedia dell’arte figure lent itself to an androgynous representation in this period, though at the same time it also suggested an underlying homosexual reading, to the extent androgyny and hermaphroditism are veiled figures of homosexuality. Dalí’s “Pierrot Playing the Guitar” (1925) (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía) contains the shadow of Lorca in it, while the Granadine poet drew a series of such figures, including a priapic Pierrot (ca. 1932–36) (Hernández 207). The figure occupies center stage in one of his earliest writings, “Pierrot. Poema íntimo” (1918), in which “una virgen exótica y lejana y un hombre muscular y acerado danzan en mí” (4: 833) (an exotic, distant virgin and a muscular, strapping man dance inside me). Raised as a boy, Retana’s Baby continues to use the masculine forms of grammar for herself, even after she reveals her feminine sex to Salazar, though on occasion she slips and turns to the feminine, suggesting a certain instability and slipperiness between what she thinks she is and what she

plays at being. She seems poised between genders and sexual identities, in flux rather than identifiable.

The equivocal costume of the Pierrot is only one of several clothing changes that display one sex while pointing to flimsily disguised signs of the other one. As in *Mi alma desnuda*, the decorative is an exhibitionist device that occludes even as it reveals. When Baby puts on a transparent Greek tunic, Salazar says she looks like a *marica*, or fag, and an “invertido, envenenado de literatura y demasiado vicioso” (71) (an invert, poisoned by literature and much too vicious) because at this point he now thinks she is a man. Metaphorically, Baby appears to transform herself from one sex to another and back again, while retaining both. Even after he finally realizes her presumed true sex, it hardly matters because she continues to refer to herself in masculine terms, insisting on the double nature of her identity, an identity that is always on display but never resolved, thus calling into question Salazar’s own identity as well. Her ultimate costume is the cloak of literature she wears in an unending performance of decadent monstrosity.

In the second part of the novel, which opens with a section called “El ‘Monstruo,’” (The ‘monster’), the narrator observes that sometimes “la Naturaleza parece deleitarse en la creación de monstruos terrestres o marinos” (115) (Nature appears to delight in the creation of monsters, on land and at sea) to terrorize ordinary mortals. Baby, he continues, is one of these terrifying monsters, “tan horrendo y magnífico como los tiburones o las hienas” (115) (as horrendous and magnificent as sharks and hyenas), which reminds us that the marvelous in an earlier period also meant terrifying and horrifying (Ravenscroft 28). Moreover, she lives “*in mente* una doble existencia fabulosa y pintoresca” (116) (*in her mind* a fabulous and strange existence). Salazar likens Baby’s strange figure to that of “una criatura extraordinaria, al parecer fugada de los jardines mitológicos” (86; also 108) (an extraordinary creature, having seemingly leaped out of some mythological garden). Subsequently he says to himself: “Felizmente, Baby es una mujer; no estamos ya en tiempo de Adonis y Hermafrodita, que desaparecieron para siempre, y nunca un hombre podrá adquirir semejantes grados de belleza” (126) (Happily, Baby is a woman; we are no longer in the time of Adonis and Hermaphrodites, who have disappeared forever; a man could never possess such heights of beauty). Salazar, however, is mistaken. The world of myth may have disappeared, but another monster has taken its place: the monster of sex. Retana shrewdly exploited the sexual fantasies of his readers in the creation of the hermaphroditic Baby, who is as much a human oddity as any sideshow creature, real or feigned, put on display for public amusement. The marvelous as entertainment has not disappeared. It has simply been transformed.

The ultimate exhibitions of spectacular, double-sided ambiguity are Retana’s presentation of “El apio maravilloso” (The marvelous fag), meaning the

transformista Egmont de Bries, and the parade of flaming gays in *Las "locas" de postín*. Feigning outrage, the novelist claims in a mock prologue that he has nothing to do with the "aventuras equívocas" and "monstruosas aberraciones" of his characters (32) (equivocal adventures; monstrous aberrations). He has merely documented the codes, manners, and feminine-inflected speech of these "seudohombres" (pseudo-men), members of the third sex, whose unfortunate vices are the very opposite of that normality to which the writer and his readers belong (34–35). What follows completely and comically undermines the prologue, even parodying the image of monstrosity when a character proposes the project of a monster-sized urinal ("urinario monstruo"), big enough for six hundred people, to be installed near the Plaza de Toros as a gift to the state (120).¹³

Like *Flor del mal*, this novel is an exhibition-text, here demonstrating the visibility of a homosexual subculture in pre-Civil War Spain. Investigators such as Bembo, Bernaldo de Quirós, and Llanas Aguilaniedo had already begun to document that reality, descriptively and taxonomically. Indeed, Retana parodies their efforts in a very funny passage in which he classifies the various *locas*, or gays, attending a performance of the cross-dresser Egmont de Bries, as though they were specimens on display, such as the "*locas por convicción*," "*locas profesionales*," "*locas en entredicho*," "*locas escandalosas*," "*locas vergonzantes*," "*locas románticas*," and several others, including the "*locas en germen*" and "el inevitable grupo de *anfíbios*" (113; author's emphasis) (*locas* out of conviction; professional *locas*; suspected *locas*; scandalous *locas*; embarrassed *locas*; romantic *locas*; embryonic *locas*; the inevitable troop of *amphibians* [bisexuals]).

As a well-known imitator of female music hall entertainers, Egmont de Bries is given star treatment in Retana's novel, with his performance described in some detail, part of which includes the customary back-and-forth banter between the *transformista* and his audience (Fortuny, "Nacimiento, esplendor" 25).¹⁴ Spectators of sideshows also habitually laughed, jeered, and hurled insults, but the freaks often gave as good as they got (Adams 12–13). In *Las "locas" de postín*, Egmont de Bries is the target of name-calling, mostly anti-gay slurs, some of which, however, is taken as a joke. To the charge of being gay—*mariposa*, *goloso*, *apio*—he replies with a witticism: "¡Ay, qué cursis! ¡Ya no se dice apio! ¡Se dice vidrio!" (124) (How utterly tacky! Nobody says *apio* [lit. celery] anymore! You say *vidrio* [lit. glass!]).¹⁵ Even though in real life the performer denied he was gay, it didn't matter (Mira, *De Sodoma a Chueca* 150). Audiences saw female impersonators as homosexuals. Retana does nothing to persuade them otherwise, but at the same time he makes it clear that he does not share the spectators' insults. More importantly, he does not dispel the ambiguities surrounding Egmont de Bries or the ambivalence with which some characters perceive him (127). The character remains equal-

ly impersonator and impersonated, to such a degree that we rarely get past his performance or the mask that the novelist affixes to nearly all of his characters, including his alter ego.

Retana's humor and the constant note of frivolity, it could be argued, make light of the presence of homophobia; conversely, it could also be said Retana uses the comic as an effective weapon for disarming hostility, just as Egmont de Bries does during his performance. In this sense, the narrative perspective of *Las "locas" de postín* internalizes the equivocal point of view and status of eccentric figures like the very *locas* and the *transformista* he puts on display, just as he exhibits himself as a fantastic monster, creating an aesthetics of oddness as spectacular and unique as the fabled hermaphrodite.¹⁶

Notes

1. I echo here a line from the film *The Haunting* (1963), when Julie Harris's character pointedly refers to Claire Bloom's Theo, a veiled lesbian, as "one of nature's mistakes," a remark indicative of the persistence of this long-standing perception. The renewed critical interest in Álvaro Retana has been as remarkable as his career. See, for example, Villena; Mira; Vernet Pons; Zubiaurre; Coste; and Zamostny. My thanks to Veronica Mayer and Diego del Río Arrillaga for their help in locating some of the sources used in this project.
2. The documentary "Freaks: The Sideshow Cinema," an extra feature of the DVD for *Freaks*, discusses this popular attraction, focusing on the historical figure Josephine-Joseph. See also Fiedler 178–94; and Adams 96–97, 124–26. In sixteenth-century English, *freak* is a "sudden turn of mind" or "capricious notion"; by the nineteenth century, it refers to a "monstrous individual" or "strange or abnormal individual," as in "freak of nature" (*lusus naturae*) (1847) (*Online Etymology Dictionary*; Onions 375). The terms *monstruo*, *engendro*, *ente*, or *fenómeno* appear in Spanish.
3. For a helpful overview of the changing medico-legal understanding of hermaphroditism, especially in Spain, see Cleminson and Vázquez García, *Hermaphroditism, Medical Science and Sexual Identity* 1–28. In eighteenth-century Spain, some questioned the authenticity of hermaphrodites, but cases continued to be reported in the press (Flores de la Flor 97–98); see San de Velilla 125–35 for a twentieth-century example of the continuing interest in hermaphroditism, especially false hermaphroditism.
4. *Vicio* can be either a physical or a moral defect, though Covarrubias (1611) lists only the moral definition (1004). By the early nineteenth century, we have gone from Fuentelapeña's seventeenth-century "pecado de naturaleza" to a "vicio de conformación" (which does not mean, however, that the earlier meaning had disappeared).
5. See Fiedler 192–94, esp. the 1942 photograph of hermaphrodite subjects, now classified as intersex; and for a contemporary taxonomic and visual example, Bernaldo de

- Quirós and Llanas Aguilaniedo (1901) 248–63, 267.
6. The nineteenth-century French case of the conflicted hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin also suggests “a form of monstrosity within the self” (Webb 159). Pedro Mata describes this case in the fourth edition of his *Tratado de medicina y cirugía legal* (1866) (1: 474–75). It’s worth reiterating that baroque forms of the monstrous should be distinguished from this later notion of a constant dissolving, psychic flux of monstrosity, anticipated by Diderot and manifested from the romantics on (see González Echevarría 254n20).
 7. He did not, however, think highly of Cansinos-Asséns’s narrative talents (Fortuny, *Ola verde* 119–21). Retana possessed a large library, including books by Havelock Ellis, Freud, Nin Frías (*Homosexualismo creador*), Colette, Verlaine, Lorrain, and Cocteau (Pérez Sanz and Bru Ripoll, 2098–99). He parodied Marañón’s theories of sexuality in *A Sodoma en tren botijo* (1933) (202–03).
 8. Space does not allow me to consider how the widespread eighteenth-century use of the word *capricho* might have served a purpose partly related to the later appearance of *excentricidad* (see Ilie; and Dowling).
 9. In English, the mid-seventeenth-century term *eccentric* meaning odd or irregular antedates the early nineteenth-century medical use of the term *abnormal* (*Online Etymology Dictionary*; Onions 299; Gregory 83).
 10. The poem first appeared in the *Revista de Madrid*, 2nd Series, Vol. 1 (1839): 255–60; then in *Obras. Poesías* (Madrid: Imprenta Nacional, 1851), *Obras escogidas*. Vol. 2 (Paris: Baudry, Librería Europea, 1853), and *Obras* 1884, from which I am citing.
 11. Richard Cleminson links both Retana and Cansinos-Asséns (Ética y estética) to a literary-artistic bohemia marked by sexual dissidence and ambiguity (“La antorcha extinguida” 58).
 12. The same passage on Don Juan Ambiguo also appears in *El veneno de la aventura* (1924) (72–75), as does the phrase *a pluma y a pelo*, though the remarks here are in response to the presence of a third-rate *transformista* who mangles his female imitation and not an aging fairy in the shape of a dress designer (65–66). Retana was not above recycling material from one text to another.
 13. There is clearly an understanding here that readers were aware of the specific geography of the gay world; see Bembo 48–49.
 14. During the Franco regime, without any fanfare, Retana managed to slip an entire section of *transformistas* into his book on female entertainers, *Historia del arte frívolo* (1964) (136–40).
 15. In another project, *Lorca after Life* (book in progress), I pursue Retana’s litany of slang words for homosexual (*Las “locas”* 56, 124, 126) and its possible relation to Lorca’s complex use of the same in “Oda a Walt Whitman.”
 16. For another view of eccentricity as a non-Spanish stereotyping of the perceived marginality and extravagance of Spain, see Ayala 22–23.

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