

Performing the Closet in Clarín's *La Regenta*

Mehl Allan Penrose

In *La Regenta* (1884-1885), the best-known and arguably the best work written by Leopoldo Alas or Clarín, gender expression and sexuality that diverge from societal convention pervade the novel, as many scholars have rightly pointed out.¹ Indeed, the plot revolves around a love triangle between Ana, Fermín and Álvaro, all of whom are involved in sexually transgressive relations. Within this milieu fraught with heterosexual illicitness, characters who exhibit queer gender and sexual expression are silenced, made ambiguous, or revealed as one-dimensional figures by the narrator. Their queerness is for the most part not recognized or acknowledged by other characters. The narrator frequently mobilizes tropes of decadence and perversion in this novel, only then to hide away details regarding the non-normative characters that would enlighten the reader regarding their stories. In employing such a narrative voice, Leopoldo Alas adheres to literary convention by avoiding details that might have been considered distasteful to the Restoration reading public's standards of decency.² Hence narrative silences in the novel also eschew scenes of normative sexuality and privacy, as the scene at the end of Chapter 28 between Álvaro and Ana reveals. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to narrative silences as indicative of Clarín's effort to criticize a hypocritical bourgeois paradigm in which Spaniards exhibited normative behavioral standards in public but not necessarily in private.

Foucault has posited that textual silence, including those things a person does not say as well as what one is forbidden to name, is less the absolute edge of discourse and more an element that operates parallel to the things said as part of a comprehensive rhetorical strategy (27). That which an author declines to say or is forbidden to name is, occasionally, oriented to the queer. Although the notion of queerness is elusive, I deploy it in this study in the tradition of queer theorists such as David Halperin, Annamarie Jagose, and Rictor Norton as well as in the writing of Hispanists who interrogate gender and sexual non-conformism in Spanish-language literary and cultural discourse such as Matthew Stroud, Gregory S. Hutcheson, and Oscar Montero. It denotes non-heteronormativity in anatomical sex, gender expression, erotic desire, sexual activity, and gender/sexual identification. It encompasses much more than homosexuality, gayness, lesbianism, bisexuality, or transgenderism.³ According to Noreen Giffney, queerness resides in the "slips, silences and unfinished thoughts" of text or speech; "unpicking the latent content becomes as important a task as understanding that which is stated directly"

(7). That will be our task as we analyze *La Regenta*. There are many “silences” and “unfinished thoughts” in this novel that, along with the narrator’s stated observations and characters’ thoughts and speech, allow us to perceive a pervasive queerness woven throughout the plotline.⁴ Queerness often resides not in what a character thinks, does, or says, but in what s/he does not think, do, or say. This lack and these silences work to configure a closet in which non-normative characters are carefully silenced and their homoerotic desire made invisible to other characters, and in which they normally remain throughout the work.

Eve Sedgwick has argued that “closetedness” is a “performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (*Epistemology* 3). The closet, she states, is “that curious space that is both internal and marginal to the culture: centrally representative of its motivating passions and contradictions, even while marginalized by its orthodoxies” (56). Although the closet is an Anglo cultural and critical concept, it is useful for analytical purposes in referring to characters who are not conscious of their gender/sexual non-normativity. Sedgwick’s theory of the closet and the making of unstable gender and sexual categories will serve to frame my argument about the queer figures in Leopoldo Alas’s masterpiece. The characters in *La Regenta* who were in some aspect non-normative in their gender representations or in their sexuality are often presented by the narrator in ways that do not allow the reader to fully grasp the feelings or intentionality of the characters. By utilizing the term “closet,” I mean that the characters are not perceived as gender or sexual deviants by the other characters (however so they might be by the narrator or the reader).

One of the central concerns of this paper is how the metaphorical closet functions to develop queer characters in such a way as to suggest a fear of latent perversity in Restoration Spanish society at large. My argument in this study is that the metaphor of the closet, which is both internal and external to life in *Vetusta*, both central to it and marginal at the same time, functions to underscore how incoherent and confounded the notions were regarding non-normative gender and sexuality in Spain at the beginning of the Restoration. To put it in Sedgwick’s terms, the closet and its powerful secrets made non-normative gender and sexuality an underlying component of the *Vetusta* social fabric; yet the acknowledged, public economy of heteronormativity kept it marginal in order to enable the Catholic, bourgeois patriarchy to keep up its appearances. Hence performance of/in the closet can be understood to connote gender expressions that are “*fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 185; original emphasis). These “fabrications” entail, according to Butler, a gendered body—and I would argue a sexual body as well—that “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.” In other words, the reiterative public performance of a heteronormative, mythical ideal of gender and sexuality by queer characters allows them to function according to society’s norms by masking their true selves and desires.

The presence of homoerotic desire in the novel indicates Clarín’s consciousness concerning the complexity of human sexual nature in general.⁵ The text is layered

densely with rich linguistic nuances and irony, especially those which relays the narrator's or characters' perspectives regarding masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. While the so-called perversity and sexual anomalies depicted in the novel are a critique of bourgeois-dominant Restoration ideologies and hypocritical values, they are also an affirmation of those same ideologies and values. In other words, the narrator reiterates terminology and concepts about sexually non-normative characters employed by Restoration Spanish society, including the idea of a *perversión de instintos naturales*, the womanish boy/man or *marica*, and the association of the *marica* with prostitution and a lack of basic hygiene.

Several scholars have interrogated the notion of gender deviance and non-normative sexuality in *La Regenta*. In *The Decadent Vision in Leopoldo Alas*, Noël Valis problematizes the sexuality and gender expression of several characters as she characterizes the novel as a portrait of pervasive malevolence and decadence in Spanish Restoration society. In *Gender and Modernization in the Spanish Realist Novel*, Jo Labanyi argues that the novel depicts a society in which “normal” and “natural” can no longer be defined (219). Akiko Tsuchiya, in her monograph *Marginal Subjects: Gender and Deviance in Fin-de-Siècle Spain*, mentions Fermín de Pas and Celedonio as “representations of deviant or otherwise conflicted masculinities” (23). Cristina Mathews describes Víctor Quintanar as hovering on the border between the homosocial and homosexual, and Celedonio as a “sexual deviant” (following Valis); she argues that Alas “pathologizes homosexual desire” and supports the bourgeoisie’s move toward its ideal of the nuclear family (77-8). Michael Nimetz refers to Celedonio as a “homosexual” and Obdulia as having an “abeyant lesbianism” (244-45). I agree with the general notion expressed in the aforementioned scholars’ writings of what Alas considered the pervasive decadence and deviance in the novel. Alongside the generalized concept of decay exists a stifling and pernicious suppression of self-expression. Almost every major character is not permitted by social or novelistic convention (i.e., the narrator) to manifest his/her desires in a free fashion. This suppression takes the form of the closet, whereby characters live a private-public split in which their desires are only expressed in intimate and/or solitary situations. I posit in the queer theoretical tradition that much that is not narrated—that which the reader has to imagine—is just as important as what is narrated about these characters. This silence is the performance of the closet and within the closet as queer characters negotiate dichotomized gender and heteronormative economies which do not permit them to openly express aspects of themselves that function to work against those economies. Below, I interrogate some of the non-normative characters who perform the closet.⁶

Celedonio is the young acolyte whose queer presence opens and closes the novel. He is presented as a perverse person by the narrator, who suggests that he will have same-sex desires in the future. From the very beginning, as evidenced by the narrator’s words, Celedonio is presented as a child who does not conform to gendered and sexual norms, contrary to Michael Nimetz’s statement that Celedonio is a “homosexual” only by the end of the novel (245). Indeed, the term “homosexual” applied to Celedonio is perhaps not the most appropriate in this particular context. Firstly, the concept “homosexual” connotes a person with a permanent, psychic condition and a conscious state of being a

sexual minority. This condition does not apply to Celedonio, a pubescent boy who does not seem to be aware of his unconventional nature. Secondly, the use of such a notion to classify a fixed condition was far from agreed upon in late nineteenth-century Spain. “Homosexual” is a term that was rarely employed in Spain at that time.⁷ Such a concept existed in northern Europe then (especially in Great Britain, the German Empire, Austria, and The Netherlands), but it was not fully developed in Spain until the early 1920s (Cleminson, “The Significance” and “Male Inverts”). As one example of the state of thinking in Spain about non-normative sexuality, one of the most popular, although not authoritative, books in Spain on sexology published on the eve of the Restoration, *Los peligros del amor, de la lujuria y del libertinaje* (1874) by Amancio Peratoner, refers to males who engage in same-sex eroticism as *pederastas*, an epithet that retained residual connotations of ancient Greek and Roman constructions of man-boy love and moral nuances of the sodomite. The term indicated those who were not necessarily aware of themselves as distinct sexual beings. Cleminson argues that various competing terms and ideas about homosexuality and gender deviance were extant at the end of the nineteenth century; a hodgepodge of new terms of reference describing “homosexuality as some form of mental disorder” existed alongside those that explained it in traditional terms as sodomy and immoral sexual activity. While in the U.S. and Great Britain homosexuality was framed by doctors and their patients as a condition rather than as specific behaviors beginning in the 1880s, in Spain this did not happen until some 40 years later (Cleminson, “The Significance” 417, 420). The fixation of the Spanish intelligentsia during the last third of the nineteenth century concerned gender inversions rather than sexual anomalies (Cleminson and Vázquez García 42). Indeed, an “invert” in Spain referred to someone who had characteristics of the opposite sex and who perhaps engaged in same-sex sexual activity, but was distinguished from a “homosexual” even well into the twentieth century (Cleminson, “Male Inverts” 265). Spanish Restoration society referred to people like Celedonio either as a *marica* (the popular usage) or as an *invertido* (a more clinical term), both of which connoted gender inversion by which the defining marker of non-normativity is that of an opposite-sex soul trapped in one’s body.⁸ Even though various theories about so-called gender-sexual deviants abounded (see Cleminson, “The Significance” 417; and Cleminson and Vázquez García, especially Chapter 2), many learned Spanish professionals in the second half of the nineteenth century did not see people like the acolyte as individuals with a distinct identity such as homosexuals, but simply as misguided souls who had been “inverted” from their proper gender roles and who as part of their deviance participated in homosexual behavior.⁹ Hence, it is speculative and anachronistic to label him as such. The narrator does not utilize any of these epithets, choosing instead to describe Celedonio as if he were a woman: “Así como en las mujeres de su edad se anuncian por asomos de contornos turgentes las elegantes líneas del sexo, en el acólito sin órdenes se podía adivinar futura y próxima perversión de instintos naturales provocada ya por aberraciones de una educación torcida” (100-101).¹⁰ Thus, Celedonio has an ambiguous gender (Sinclair, *Dislocations* 73). Along with this gender ambiguity and inversion, the narrator inserts a titillating prognostication of an impending sexual aberration in the young man. The words *perversión de instintos naturales* are important in understanding the narrator’s viewpoint on what he considers perverted sexuality in the acolyte. In the second half of the nineteenth century, psychiatrists developed new theories on the balance between the

will and involuntary instincts in a person, emphasizing that sexual psychopathologies could exist if someone allowed instinct to conquer will. This *perversión de instintos naturales* was part of a medico-psychiatric apparatus that blended several different new theories and old concepts together, such as what was then still commonly called sodomy, to explain sexuality that deviated from the norm (Cleminson and Vázquez García 43-50). Sodomy was first applied by Christian theologians to refer to any sexual act that was not considered procreative and, therefore, purposeful and moral; for several centuries, it did not exclusively connote male same-sex sexual relations (Jordan 125-35, Cleminson and Vázquez García 7). Around the middle of the nineteenth century, legal and medical texts in Spain still referred to sodomy in the same manner (Cleminson, “The Significance” 418). As Cristian Berco has shown, sodomy was long associated with homosexuality in Spain (118). Furthermore, effeminacy was conflated with sodomy and homosexuality in Spanish moralist thought for centuries (Berco 118, Perry 123-23). Effeminacy in literary texts may have been understood to have associations with sodomitical practices in characters or real people (Haidt 67).

Therefore, we have a three-way connection in *La Regenta* between sodomy, inversion, and the *marica*. Clarín mobilizes the parallel tropes of effeminacy and sodomy in order to show what he perceived as the perversion of modern Spain to his reading public. One of the obsessions of the Realist-Naturalist movement was to demonstrate the repercussions of decadence, natural determinism, and perverted natural instincts, which all of the characters in this study exhibit. Alas’s moralist rhetorical strategies are very similar to those of satirists and moralists from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who also employed effeminacy and sodomy as discursive maneuvers to critique purported Spanish decadence and to evoke laughter and derision in their readers, all the while guiding them to take seriously the perceived threat to normative masculinity and sexuality (Penrose 17). Thus Celedonio was the newly minted “invert” or “pervert” whom forensic doctors and psychiatrists were obsessively attempting to document and describe. By hinting at Celedonio’s innate, feminine character and his future sexual proclivities, but leaving much to our imagination via ellipsis—for example, we never know if Celedonio acts upon his perversions or even if he merely longs for other males—the narrator demonstrates how the closet is closing in on the acolyte perhaps even before the boy knows what *perversión de instintos naturales* means or, indeed, what erotic feelings convey to him. By having the closet built around him, as it were, society ensures that the boy’s desires and, if acted upon, his sexual activities will always remain shameful and unclean. This is the image projected by the narrator about the acolyte, although the boy himself is virtually silenced and never invested with enough agency to be able to prove or disprove what the narrator is stating about him.

Although the narrative voice’s negative description of Celedonio seems straightforward, we are still left scratching our heads about why the narrator views Celedonio as a boy with a *perversión de instintos naturales*. What does the narrator know that we do not? Is the narrator simply reading Celedonio’s bodily and linguistic cues as effeminate and therefore belonging to a person sexually attracted to members of the same sex? And what precisely does the narrator mean when he refers to aberrations in Celedonio’s *educación torcida*?¹¹ Why is it “twisted”? The word *torcido* appears in a number of contexts in *La*

Regenta, including references to El Magistral—“iba con las mejillas encendidas, los ojos humildes, la cabeza un poco torcida, según costumbre, recto el airoso cuerpo, majestuoso y rítmico el paso, flotante el ampuloso manteo, sin la sombra de una mancha”—in Chapter XI (I, 423) and “las calles torcidas de la Encimada” in Chapter XIV (I, 531). In each case, it appears that the narrator is expressing a critique of two fundamental sectors of Spanish society: the Church (more on this later) and the aristocracy. Encimada was the traditional neighborhood of the nobility, now hosting trash that blows in the wind (I, 93) and “palacios viejos y arruinados” (I, 107). Images of decadence, filth, and twistedness serve as metaphors for these two segments of Restoration society that were losing ground in a new, more secular society in which the bourgeoisie was quickly accumulating social, economic, and political capital.

The omniscient narrator in *La Regenta* leaves out the explicit details of the description of Celedonio’s perverted education in the name of good taste, although the boy’s description as having impending perversions probes the topic of gender-sexual transgressions more than that of Clarín’s contemporaries, who employed omniscient narrators who had “pudor” (Lissorgues 42) and who considered it in poor taste to depict sexually uncommon characters (Valis, *The Decadent* 30-31). In the narrator’s continued description of Celedonio, he comments that the acolyte “se movía y gesticulaba como hembra desfachatada, sirena de cuartel” when he wanted to imitate Anacleto, a clergyman (I, 101). The image that is presented of the altar attendant is one of exaggeration, flamboyance, and saucy brashness. This was noted by Palomo, the lay employee of the church, but he dared not report the boy to his superiors so as to maintain his problem-free tenure there. Palomo’s observation of Celedonio’s effeminate behavior is the only one by another character on which the narrator remarks. No one else seems to notice or care. Only twelve or thirteen, according to the narrator, Celedonio is unaware that a closet is being framed around his burgeoning pubescent body, and that he will be trapped in it while he leads a double life marked by a private perversion of natural instincts, or so the narrator predicts, and a public appearance of holiness and sexual abstention, or so the Church would mandate for him.

In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick points out that in pre-twentieth-century Western culture, the educated classes associated the erotic end of the homosocial spectrum with childishness and powerlessness, rather than reacting to it with violence and rage as is so common nowadays (177). The narrator manifests this earlier conceptual approach to homoerotica as he scorns Celedonio’s gendered and sexual alterity, and as he shapes the boy’s image as an infantile creature who grotesquely imitates his ecclesiastical superiors. This mimicking of the clergymen likens Celedonio to a “meretriz de calleja” (I, 100), a clever trope on Clarín’s part that solders the boy’s image to that of a prostitute, further emasculates him, and puts into serious doubt his opposite-sex libidinous drive.

After the introductory scene in the bell tower, the narrator renders Celedonio invisible until the end of the novel, at which point he is described as “el acólito afeminado, alto y escuálido, con la sotana corta y sucia” (II, 536). Once again, the narrator associates the acolyte’s effeminacy with his unclean physical presence. He reappears hovering over Ana Ozores’s unconscious body on the cathedral floor after she has had an overwhelmingly

negative encounter with her confessor, friend, and would-be paramour, Fermín: “Celedonio sintió un deseo miserable, una perversión de la perversión de su lascivia: y por gozar un placer extraño, o por probar si lo gozaba, inclinó el rostro asqueroso sobre el de la Regenta y le besó los labios” (II, 537). In effect, Celedonio’s absence spanning almost the entirety of the novel safely blots out any chance the reader has of witnessing any unauthorized behavior on his part. The narrator returns to the language employed in the opening scene, referring to Celedonio’s so-called perversion. Just as the narrator does not provide justification for or more information as to why one can guess at Celedonio’s future perversion, neither does he explain whether Celedonio has enjoyed the stolen kiss or not. The narrator cleverly presents Celedonio in such a way as to make the reader assume that he could not. For that reason, the acolyte’s kiss is a *deseo miserable, una perversión de la perversión de su lascivia* and a *placer extraño* (II, 537) marked by sexual and gender non-normativity. In other words, his “miserable desire” to kiss a woman goes against his deviant character, or so the narrator would have us believe. The boy wants to enjoy a *placer extraño*—strange, we imagine, because of his twisted character. However, he also wants to confirm if he would enjoy it. Hence, according to the narrator, Celedonio is not sure he will *not* enjoy it. The narrator does not satisfy the curiosity of the reader by explaining what a perversion of Celedonio’s perversion of his lasciviousness is or what a perversion entails if one perverts it. The narrator’s wording appears to imply a tortuous notion of what is perverted. The double negative meaning of perversion might hint at what the narrator considers a debauched act (i.e. Celedonio kissing Ana while she is unconscious) by a depraved boy. The trope of decadence in this passage could signal the degenerate passions and behavior of all Vetustans within a national milieu that is concurrently deviant and morally bankrupt. The ambiguity of desire presented in this passage further manifests the incoherent nature of sexuality presented in the novel. If Celedonio had not been invisible since the opening scene, maybe the reader would have a better understanding of him and of his sexuality. The boy’s surreptitious manner in approaching Ana is indicative of his closeted character, for his approach to sexuality is secretive and stealthy. If almost his entire novelistic existence has been shielded from the reader, why does the narrator mention him at the beginning and at the end of the story, key moments in any narration?¹² I argue that these crucial scenes are thusly situated because Celedonio is the most transgressive, monstrous character in the novel, and such positioning of the boy’s gender and sexual deviance serves to reinforce the irrationality, queerness, and twistedness of a deterministic human nature that is part of a degenerative, natural order, even as it is elided and closeted within the text. What we will not see regarding the acolyte, hints the narrator, is a future wretched life of a man of the church who commits sexual acts with members of his own sex all within the confines of a closet strengthened, and perhaps even condoned, by the Church. Thus, the trope of an effeminate, sexually unlawful figure represents one of the sharpest criticisms of the Catholic Church. His *educación torcida* at the hands of the institution is, the narrator proffers, instrumental to his perverted state.

The Church found itself competing with medical and psychiatric notions about sex in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. Doctors’ and psychiatrists’ usurpation of the confession as a means to extract information about sexuality and to pathologize it was combined with their religious views on its morality/immorality.¹³ In this context of

declining Church influence, there was a growing secularization of society, especially among the working class, as well as an increasing anti-clericalism (Carr 463-72). In spite of this liberalizing of society, or perhaps precisely because of it, the Church tended to show official disapproval of any expressions of gender, gender roles, and sexuality that it did not deem traditional and moral. Unofficial positions by individual clergymen varied, of course, but it is safe to say that the official line by individuals representing the Church was that non-normative behavior went against Catholic teachings. Valis questions whether critics make “dangerous assumptions” about reading repression into all things sexual and spiritual during the period under discussion (“Hysteria” 343). She raises a good point, for we only have to consider Fermín as an example of a Church official who really was not repressed sexually or spiritually; if he desired a woman (specifically, Juana, Teresina, and Petra—Ana was the exception), the narrator hints to us, he had sexual relations with her despite his status as a priest. The Church would welcome an effeminate boy like Celedonio with doubtful opposite-sex erotic pull into its community as long as he hid any uncommon desires he had. In other words, the Church offered a closeted space for sexually non-conforming youth like Celedonio among its male-only clerical ranks, who had the freedom to eschew heteronormative social pressures like matrimony or procreation. The tacit yet never expressed agreement was that a person like the acolyte must never act upon his sexual urges. The clergy presented in the novel seem to reflect Clarín’s opinion that the Church was not what it appeared to be. It was only as good as its individual members, and we see from characters like the Magistral just how dysfunctional and hypocritical it was.¹⁴

Víctor Quintanar is another character whose fate is determined in part by a closet that has held him captive for so long that he truly does not understand and is not conscious of his own amorous emotions toward other men. Víctor experiences his most intimate affective moments—his “vulnerability and passion,” in Harriet Turner’s words (76)—with Tomás Crespo (‘Frígilis’) and Álvaro Mesía, the Don Juan figure of the novel. He is depicted as an old-fashioned man’s man who does not understand modern society in which women play a more substantive, emancipated role relative to centuries past. It is for that reason that he feels such a strong connection to Golden Age plays, especially Calderón de la Barca’s works, which permit and even encourage intense emotional relationships between men (Mathews 75). Renaissance and Baroque dramatic works represent an expansive society that allowed for the exploration, development, and expression of homoerotic desire in the theatre, which often cast actors in gender-bending, cross-dressing, and sexually ambiguous roles (Saint-Saëns 38-39).¹⁵ Víctor constantly reads and quotes these plays and enjoys watching them when they are performed in Vetusta. He is enraptured by this honor-bound, suggestive world. As a once-amateur actor himself, the Regente is also drawn to the themes and staging of more contemporary plays. Through the use of free indirect discourse, the narrator relates Víctor’s feelings regarding the good-looking actor who portrays Don Juan Tenorio in the eponymous Romantic play by Zorrilla that the Ozoreses and several other characters watch in Chapter 16: “Don Víctor estaba enamorado de Perales” (II, 43-44). Although he does not appear to have felt love in the literal sense toward this actor, it does appear that he finds himself physically and emotionally attracted to certain men (Álvaro, Perales, and Frígilis), although he does not comprehend this attraction and is not conscious of it. It is curious that Víctor is so

drawn to this particular drama, whose protagonist has been described over time as an *afeminado* and sexually deviant character.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that Clarín embeds Zorrilla's play into the novelistic structure. He inserts the work into the plot to reinforce the notion that Álvaro, too, is a Don Juan type, and to foreshadow what will happen to Ana and Víctor. Like Ana, Víctor is fooled by Mesía, and like Don Juan's rival, Luis Mejía, he is killed in a duel. Though married to Ana, Víctor spends more time with and seems to cherish the moments he has with both Álvaro and Frígilis, thus forming triangular relationships between the two men and Ana based on competition and attraction.¹⁷

Víctor agrees to marry Ana because it accords with his Calderonian honor code and to keep up the appearance of a heteronormative, mature man of money and status. However, he swoons over Álvaro: "tardes enteras le tenía amarrado a su brazo, dando vueltas por las tablas temblonas del salón, parándose a cada pasaje interesante del relato o siempre que había una duda que consultar con el amigo" (II, 129). In intimate moments, Víctor "levantaba la cabeza para mirarle cara a cara" and he confesses secretly to his new friend that Frígilis is a "rutinario" and that "se sentía dominado por él" (II, 130), a situation that insinuates that of a lover playing one rival off of the other. Álvaro eventually gains the attention and affection of Víctor, but the latter thinks that he is truly interested in him. Víctor revels in the attention that he receives from both him and Frígilis, and refers to his warming relationship with Álvaro as an "infidelidad incipiente" (II, 130) to Frígilis. Víctor feels this way because Frígilis is such an intimate, old friend. Referring to Frígilis in Chapter 19, Víctor reveals to Álvaro "Yo le quiero más que un hermano" (II, 129). The narrator divulges to us that Frígilis has formed "a su querido Víctor" in his own image and likeness over the course of many years of intimate friendship, and that Víctor entered into "el poder dictatorial, aunque ilustrado, de Tomás Crespo, aquel pedazo de su corazón, a quien no sabía si quería tanto como a su Anita del alma" (II, 87). More than a friendship, their relationship befits that of a husband who imposes his will on his wife in order to dominate her. The old friends routinely sneak away at dawn to go hunting, despite Ana's misgivings about it, and Víctor truly seems to be happier in Frígilis's company than that of his wife.

In her invaluable article concerning this novel, Cristina Mathews argues that Víctor is perverse and links him to the new notion of the homosexual that emerged in the 1870s. Although I agree with Mathews that Víctor might be considered perverse by Restoration moral standards, he would most likely not have been labeled a homosexual as the concept still was not extant in Spain then, as I argue above about Celedonio for the same reasons. In discussing the theme of homosexuality in the novel, Mathews states that homosexuality "is also known as 'inversion'" (94). Gender inversion could have included homosexual behavior, but a person was not categorized as a homosexual—which focused on sexual object choice—if thought to be an invert (Cleminson, "The Significance" and "Male Inverts," and Cleminson and Vázquez García).

By all appearances, Víctor is a normative, traditional man. His wife is beautiful and a living example of "la perfecta casada" (I, 182). In fact, Ana is merely the commodity exchange that has always enhanced Víctor's image.¹⁸ He didn't marry her until he was a

bit older than 40 (II, 236), so it seems reasonable to assume that the marriage was, for him at least, a matter of cementing his honor and enhancing his prestige. He and Ana do not share the same bed, he does not want a child, and he is clearly not interested in her sexually, treating her as though she were his daughter: “Él se inclinó para besarle la frente, pero ella echándole los brazos al cuello y hacia atrás la cabeza, recibió en los labios el beso [...]. Si se quedaba con su mujer, adiós cacería... Y Frígilis era inexorable en esta materia” (I, 177). Ana desires a more intimate romantic relationship with her husband, but Víctor can only think of Frígilis and the hunt at that moment. Instead of obeying the wishes of his wife, who prohibits the hunt, the Regente bends to the will of his friend and is thrilled to do so. The hunt, one of the traditional male homosocial pastimes, offers Víctor a chance to escape the heteronormative expectations and duties required of him into a world closeted from others (including the reader). Ana’s hysteria and illness, as we see in the following chapters, are caused in part by her sexual deprivation by her own husband. And it is not only Ana in whom he finds little satisfaction sexually. Petra makes romantic overtures to him, but he is not interested. Hazel Gold describes Víctor’s “halfhearted attempts to seduce Petra” (61) and is right to emphasize that nothing sexual happens between Víctor and his maid.

Frígilis serves as a go-between for Ana and Víctor. It is he who arranges for them to meet and who guarantees Víctor’s good character and honorable intentions to the young Ana.¹⁹ He does so again at the end of the novel, when he moves into the Ozores house unbeknownst to Ana. He appropriates the role of domestic caretaker, one normally reserved for a female figure in the household. Frígilis earns his nickname, we learn from the narrator, because of his statement, “Somos frígiles” (I, 239), referring to his belief that people are “frágiles.” The narrator follows this piece of information with “[é]l mismo había sido frágil” (I, 239), referring to Frígilis. The narrator employs it on the scientist because “[h]abía creído demasiado en las leyes de la adaptación al medio” (I, 239). I read this to mean that Frígilis did not conform in many ways to his *Vetusta* environs and conventions, and perhaps it can be said that it included gender and sexuality. If it is true that Frígilis’s nickname indicates a “sexualidad anómala” because he is *frígido*, as Vila-Belda comments, I assert that like the plants that he grafts in order to make hybrids, Frígilis does not reproduce.²⁰ He is sterile and a confusion of sex like his creations, at least symbolically. He is sexually anomalous in the sense too that he does not have a girlfriend, fiancée, or wife, nor does he seem anxious to find one. Frígilis is a man whose only interest in sex seems to be the crossbreeding of plants. He creates hybrids, but he is hybrid himself by virtue of his dual role-playing. Like the psychic hermaphrodite or invert who was considered a hybrid monster removed from nature, Frígilis lives on the margins of *Vetusta* and of the plot, arranging heterosexual relations and marriages while abstaining from them himself.

If we consider Frígilis and Víctor in the light of the analyses of Richard von Krafft-Ebing, a predecessor of Freud and one of the most prominent European sexologists in the 1870s and 1880s who wrote the treatise *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), we might argue that there is at the very least a friendship that hides homoerotic feelings—a “romantic” friendship. Krafft-Ebing places not only homosociality but also gendered and sexual expressions into a wider European context that aids us in understanding the two men’s

relationship. The Austrian physician distinguished “mental hermaphroditism” or inversion from “pederasty” (by his definition, sodomy), and he defined homosexuality as an interruption in the normal development of an individual’s monosexual formation, in which s/he experiences sensations of his or her own sex, rather than “bisexual” or dual-sex sensations (280, 287). Thus, for him it was possible for a man or woman to be attracted to a member of the same sex without being a homosexual or sodomite. The preferred sexual act of the “invert,” he argued, was mutual masturbation, not anal sex (278). Although it is tempting to agree with Cristina Mathews that Víctor “lingers precariously on the unsafe border between the homosocial and the homosexual” (77), I would assert, as I have elsewhere, that it is not merely a question of a dichotomized gender-sexual system but instead that gender, sex, and sexuality were spread across a complex spectrum that Krafft-Ebing conceived of and which medical authorities in Spain applied to cases that they came across. As Krafft-Ebing posits, someone like Víctor was not necessarily a homosexual the way we conceive of the notion now. His homosocial world and relationships, especially his friendships with Álvaro and Frígilis, provided plenty of opportunities for desire and even sexual relations with other men while never being branded as a separate sexual being.

There is no evidence that a sexual act has occurred between Frígilis and Víctor or even that they are aware of any homoerotic feelings. However, the fact that Frígilis is a mature bachelor who expresses no interest in any of the female characters and that Víctor has married later in life but still spends most of his time with Frígilis, loves him more than a brother, considers his friendship with Álvaro an “infidelity” to Frígilis, has no sexual interest in his wife, and is “in love with” a stage actor, allows us to fill in the gaps of what is arguably a queer relationship. Since society would have strongly stigmatized an erotic relationship between them, they formed their “friendship” around the hunt, the act of killing animals by penetrating them with bullets or knives. The inadmissible act of penetrating one another is displaced onto the fatal penetration of an animal with the use of *escopetas*, phallic symbols to be sure. In Chapter III, we learn that the Regente routinely escapes from the house before dawn to engage in the “caza prohibida, a tales horas, por la Regenta” with Frígilis, whom he has dubbed his “Píldes cinegético,” Orestes’s faithful, inseparable hunting companion in Greek mythology (I, 177). Their secret, private, intimate activity is referred to numerous times in the novel and it is not lost on Víctor that his escapades represent a betrayal of his wife. He comments to Frígilis: “¡Pobrecita! ¡Cuán ajena estará, allá en su tranquilo sueño, de que su esposo la engaña y sale de casa dos horas antes de lo que ella piensa!...” Later, the narrator states that “Don Víctor, al llegar a la puerta del parque, volvió a mirar hacia el balcón, lleno de remordimientos” (I, 183). His closeted activity with Frígilis—the hunt—functions as a metaphor for his closeted erotic feelings first with his Píldes, and then later with his Juan Tenorio, Álvaro. His remorseful feelings about leaving Ana every morning are a testament to his sentiments regarding Frígilis.

In the descriptions of Víctor and in his conversations, there are a lot of silences. The narrator gives the reader no background information about why it is that the former judge married so late or why he chose a woman to whom he feels so little attraction, nor is the reader informed as to why he does not have adulterous relations with Petra, the maid who

is clearly eager to engage him, or what exactly happens on Víctor and Frígilis's hunting outings. These are details to which the reading public is not privy. These narrative silences might suggest, in part, Víctor's non-normative sexuality. He is so deep in the closet and has been for so long that he does not know what his feelings mean. In his mind, he is simply a very close friend to both Frígilis and Mesía. Mesía appears to be Víctor's *confidante*, but indeed he is merely using him in order to seduce Ana. Frígilis is also inarticulate and inexpressive, but it appears that he genuinely cares for Víctor.

Mathews has argued insightfully about the role of homosocial bonds in the novel. As is the case with Víctor and Frígilis, much of that homoerotic bonding forms what Mathews calls the "homoerotic subtext" of the novel (78). It can only be permitted to survive by Vetustan society if it remains closeted and unrecognized. This subtext is not hidden completely from the reader, whom the narrator partially apprises of the real or potential non-normativity extant in the plot. Víctor and Frígilis continue to play their socially approved roles, including Víctor's as the cuckolded husband who seeks revenge against his male rival and dies for it.

Sedgwick has argued that the "universalizing discourse of acts"—that all people can have all kinds of hetero- and homosexual experiences—and the "minoritizing discourse of persons"—that is, there are a limited number of people in society who identify as and who are queer—produces an incoherence in the gender and sexual economy. This incoherence continues, she maintains, because of normative society's strong need for a scapegoat against which to affirm and justify its own existence (*Epistemology* 83-86). Clarín creates these closeted queer characters to harshly criticize the Spanish bourgeoisie's restrictive values and hypocrisy regarding gender and sexuality, and to show a decadent society and natural order in a modern age. The narrator identifies these characters for the reader, but at the level of the plot they go undetected by other characters (except by Palomo upon observing Celedonio). Alas is expressing that he is fully cognizant of the complexities of human nature and, while society might be too, it refuses to acknowledge them. By closeting them, Clarín follows fictional convention of avoiding taboo representations such as homoerotic intimacy. At the same time, he reaffirms those bourgeois values by presenting non-normative characters as perverse, buffoon-like, dirty, and lascivious, and who undermine a classist, nationalist, heteronormative, patriarchal, and Catholic project in Spain from which many members of the bourgeoisie benefited. Such characters serve as scapegoats for the rapidly coalescing gender and sexual epistemologies that sought to maintain non-normativity at the margins. These characters were symptomatic, the novel seems to say, of everything that was decadent and perverse about Spain. They evoked the tensions and confusions surrounding the existence of multiple and often contradictory discourses on gender/sexual deviance in Restoration Spain. The result of such homoerotic portrayals is an incoherence and a contradiction surrounding just what makes a person "deviant." Is it the *educación torcida* of the Church? The bourgeois home? Is it heredity, with all its incumbent problems and disorders? Is it all three? Alas does not resolve this for us. He leaves such probing questions in the closet. The determinist model that theorized that entropy was always just up and around the curve meant that queerness was constantly present, a slow creep on society, and therefore had to be contained in order for society to function properly. These

characters reveal how intrinsic queerness was to late nineteenth-century Spanish culture. The closet and its potent secrecy rendered queerness part and parcel of society while the public expression of heteronormativity subordinated it to alterity in a moralist, bourgeois society obsessed with public image, evidenced in the declaration that Paula makes to her son: “no basta la virtud, es necesario saber aparentarla” (I, 416).

The novel commences and finishes with Celedonio not because, in Labanyi’s words, “it depicts a society where nothing is natural” (256), but rather precisely because it emphasizes a society which was starting to comprehend that that which was previously regarded as “contra natura” was, indeed, part of a chaotic, confused, decadent natural order. The perverted and queer, in the form of Celedonio and his kiss planted on Ana’s lips at the very end of the novel, are thrust away but not eliminated as Ana gains consciousness and remembers her tragic circumstances in a corrupt world. Celedonio, we can imagine, slips back into the shadows of the cathedral and back into the closet. The metaphorical structure that confined Celedonio’s, Víctor’s, and Frígilis’s *rareza*, their queerness, exists as an artificial construct developed and policed by a corrupt, hypocritical society in which all was not as it seemed.

University of Maryland

Notes

- ¹ Among others, Labanyi, Mathews, Nimetz, Sinclair, Tsuchiya, and Valis.
- ² Despite these attempts at discretion, *La Regenta* was condemned as a confrontational and immoral novel in Alas's contemporary Spain. For more on this polemic, see José María Martínez Cachero.
- ³ For more on the definition of queerness applied to early modern and modern Spanish literature and society, see Penrose (19-23) and Stroud (especially Chapter 1).
- ⁴ On the presence and functions of the novel's silences and ellipses, see Zamora Juárez, Nimetz, and Gilfoil. On non-verbal communication in the novel, see Turner. For more on the novel's digressions, see Gold. Both Sieburth and Rutherford (81) comment on the ironic posture of *La Regenta's* narrator regarding euphemisms and truncated talk.
- ⁵ Alas is, of course, not alone in this understanding among Realist-Naturalist writers. One only has to read, among others, Benito Pérez Galdós's novels; Emilia Pardo Bazán's novels *Los pazos de Ulloa* and *Memorias de un solterón* and her story "Sor Aparición"; Rosalía de Castro's *El caballero de las botas azules*; and Eduardo López Bago's *La prostituta* series of novels to see other examples of non-normative gender and sexual expression.
- ⁶ There are other examples of characters who evince gender and sexual non-normativity, such as Obdulia, who reacts erotically to seeing Ana's naked feet during the holy procession. However, these characters cannot be explored due to lack of space.
- ⁷ "Homosexual" was not in everyday use in Spain in both forensic-medical writings and in the popular domain in the nineteenth century. The terms *pederasta* and *invertido* were most prevalent among sexologists, the latter employed until the beginning of the twentieth century; *marica* and *bujarrón* were street slurs. See Cleminson and Vázquez García, especially Chapter 6, and Vázquez García, "El discurso" 157-8. It might be more accurate to refer to Celedonio as a case of latent homosexuality, as Valis does (*The Decadent* 30). She describes him in terms of potential behavior and avoids anachronistic notions.
- ⁸ Cleminson and Vázquez García have stated that *marica* is a traditional term denoting the "effeminate fairy" type who engaged in passive sexual relations with other men and who had parallels with the "invert" and "homosexual" in terms of his gender and sexuality (9-10).
- ⁹ See Cleminson ("The Significance" and "Male Inverts") for more information on the connotations of the invert and of the homosexual.
- ¹⁰ All citations are from Gonzalo Sobejano's 1981 edition.
- ¹¹ Like Nimetz, I translate *educación* as "education" and not "upbringing" here. Nimetz refers to Celedonio's theological and academic preparation in the Church seminary (251) which, because of his young age, bears more heavily on his formation and status in the novel than an upbringing in the home.
- ¹² Labanyi posits that the novel's initial and final scenes feature Celedonio because its emphasis concerns a society devoid of the "natural" (256).
- ¹³ See Foucault on the roles of the Church and medical practitioners in conjugal sexuality in the nineteenth century (23, 41, 67).
- ¹⁴ For more on the presence and influence of Catholicism and the Catholic Church in the novel, see Valis, "Hysteria" and her introduction to *Sacred Realism*.

¹⁵ There is a rich and brilliant body of scholarly work concerning this topic. See, for example, the rest of the essays in *Lesbianism and Homosexuality in Early Modern Spain*. Refer also to Donnell, Stroud, Cartagena Calderón, and Velasco.

¹⁶ For specific scholarship that explores the Don Juan figure as a gendered and sexual deviant, see Gregorio Marañón, Elizabeth Rhodes, and Sarah Wright. For more on the precise cultural and historical meaning of *afeminado*, which does not translate neatly to *effeminate*, see Penrose (37-38).

¹⁷ See Sedgwick (*Between Men*) and Girard for more on love triangles in literature. Mathews and Sinclair (*The Deceived Husband*) have applied Sedgwick's and Girard's theories to *La Regenta*. I concur with Mathews that whether he knows it or not, Víctor wants to have his rivals (78) instead of to be like them, as Sinclair posits (203).

¹⁸ I am referencing Gayle Rubin's terminology. She posits that in a patriarchy, women are always viewed and treated as exchangeable objects and thus become "traffic" of men.

¹⁹ This role is normally reserved for women, a point made by Sinclair, who maintains that he is engaged in "cross-behaving" (*The Deceived Husband* 209-10).

²⁰ Vila-Belda builds on Barry Ife's interpretation of Frigilis's name as both "frágiles" and "frígido" (15-16).

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