

Reynolds's News and Miscellany

HISTORY, LITERATURE, POETRY, AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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Juana Manso's *Mistérios del Plata* ("Mysteries of the River Plate") (1852)

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SUMMARY: Juana Manso's *Mistérios del Plata* (1852), first serialised in Rio de Janeiro, adapted the European "mysteries" tradition of Eugène Sue and G. W. M. Reynolds to the politics of the River Plate. This essay situates the novel within the upheavals following Latin American independence and the dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas, whose Federalist regime used propaganda, coercion, and the Mazorca secret police to suppress its Unitarian opponents. Manso structures this conflict melodramatically as a struggle between civilisation and barbarism. The cultivated exile Dr Avellaneda embodies liberal, educated Unitarianism, while Rosas's gaucho followers represent violence, ignorance, and manipulated loyalty. Yet Miguel's conversion from Rosas's servant to Avellaneda's rescuer demonstrates Manso's faith in education's civilising power. Although her vision carries pronounced class prejudice, the novel constitutes a political manifesto: like Sue's and Reynolds's fiction, it transforms popular melodrama into propaganda for reform, democracy, and national regeneration against tyranny in nineteenth-century Argentina.

INTRODUCTION

In 1898, F.A. Kirkpatrick, an essayist for the British *Cornhill Magazine* declared that,

'for extraordinary, incredible, diabolical wickedness, the name of [Juan Manuel de] Rosas has become a proverb in South America ... when the people of the River Plate speak of him, we seem to be hearing of some half-mad Ethiopian sultan, or hero of the Arabian Nights; a creature of other clay than ordinary men; a being half-devilish, half-divine, slavishly worshipped by all, capricious, vindictive, ruthless, slaying in the dark by some mysterious power his enemies, his refractory slaves, and even those who dreaded and hated in silence'.¹

¹ F.A. Kirkpatrick, 'Rosas', *Cornhill Magazine*, October (1898), 530.

Such a passage could have come straight out of a novel and, in fact, there was one novel, published decades before 1898, which indeed depicted Rosas as half-devilish and slavishly worshipped by all of his supporters. This novel was *Los Misterios del Plata* by Juana Manso de Noronha.

I recently had the pleasure of collaborating with my friend Luiz F.A. Guerra on writing an article on *Los Misterios del Plata*, originally published in 1852 in the Brazilian *Jornal das Senhoras* (the title in Brazil being *Os Mistérios del Plata*, a title which mixes both Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish).² As Luiz and I argued in that article, Manso's novel can be seen as a continuation of the mysteries novels written by Eugene Sue and George W.M. Reynolds. Sue's *Mysteres de Paris* (1842–43) and Reynolds's *Mysteries of London* (1844–48), are close contenders for the titles of biggest-selling novels of the nineteenth century and influenced a number of authors in several different countries. The present article provides the historical context behind, and highlights the key theme of Manso's novel: the struggle between civilisation and barbarism, backwardness and progress or, in terms which a nineteenth-century Argentine would have understood—Federalism versus Unitarianism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early nineteenth century, the French Revolution (1789–99) and the subsequent quarter century of war turned Europe—and indeed the world—upside down. The repercussions of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were felt even in Latin America as the rule of the old European empires crumbled and in their place new countries emerged.

Spain and Portugal were the dominant European powers in South America (with the Dutch and the French also controlling some territory on the northern part of the continent) but change was coming. Spain's hold on its American territories began to dissipate in 1796; having allied with the French against the British, the navy of the once-powerful Spanish nation—which had once fielded an armada against England in 1585—proved no match for Britain in an era when 'Britannia ruled the waves'. As a result, the number of Atlantic crossings by Spanish ships, and the revenue from the colonial trade these crossings brought to Spain, dropped to a record low.

When Spain switched sides and allied with Britain in 1807, the Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, was imprisoned by Napoleon and was forced to relinquish his claim to the throne of Spain and its empire. Napoleon's brother Joseph was then crowned as King of Spain but, as the colonies viewed Ferdinand VII as the only legitimate ruler and did not recognise Joseph's authority, the de facto or administrative independence of Spanish America had begun.³ The elites in the vast territories of Spanish America organised themselves into a *junta*, which, while it professed loyalty to Ferdinand VII, also came to recognise that they were no longer colonies. Together with their allies in the Spanish port of Cadiz—the main centre of resistance to the Napoleonic regime—a new liberal constitution was called for which would have, if fully implemented, included both Spanish and Spanish American representatives in its parliament.

Despite the constitution's would-be inclusion of representatives from Spanish America in its legislature, there were many who wanted to be fully independent from the Spanish nation (though not independent of the crown). These 'nativists' saw themselves as different to Europeans, and in the turmoil of the wars in Europe they seized the chance to press their case by force of arms. In what is now Mexico, for example, Miguel Hidalgo in 1810 led a revolt of creoles, indigenous, and black people against the authority of the Spanish legislature whom they saw as usurpers of Ferdinand VII's legitimate authority.

² Stephen Basdeo and Luiz Guerra, 'Juana Manso's *Mistérios del Plata* (1852) and a Global "Mysteries" Tradition', *Victorian Popular Fictions Journal*, 4:2 (2022), 121–35.

³ John Charles Chasteen, *Born in Blood and Fire: A Concise History of Latin America*, 4th edn (New York: Norton, 2016), 98.

‘LONG LIVE THE VIRGIN OF GUADELOUPE AND DEATH TO THE SPANIARDS!’ was the battle cry of Hidalgo’s forces. Town-dwelling descendants of Spanish people soon flocked to Hidalgo’s side. Soon all people in this colony simply began calling themselves ‘Americanos’. The rebels of Venezuela were even more daring. Denying the ‘rightful’ authority of Ferdinand VII, they established a short-lived republic, though royal authority was soon re-established here and held out for some time in Colombia and Chile as well.

In what is now Argentina, rebels had shelved any and oaths of loyalty to the Spanish king by 1809 and, after the successful defeat of Spanish forces which attempted to re-establish control, declared independence from Spain in May 1810. The Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata (containing parts of what is now both Argentina and Uruguay) was then declared a rogue state by the Ferdinand loyalists and the other Viceroyalties of Spanish America severed ties with it.

Of course, it is one thing to declare independence; actually governing a brand new country, building its institutions from scratch, and promoting national unity is a different kettle of fish. Ideological tensions among the Viceroyalty’s elites soon made themselves known. Two factions emerged: A Conservative faction (which sought to preserve largely intact the social structure of the viceroyalty) and a Liberal one (which was inspired by the ideals of the French revolution).⁴ Initially, the young republic of Buenos Aires, which quickly broke off from Montevideo, lacked a unifying vision. Despite the rise of some early eminent statesmen such as Bernadino Rivadavia (1780–1845), many of its politicians viewed politics only as a means of social advancement for the old colonial elite. Frustrated with the liberal and largely middle-class politicians were a class of men who, after independence, decided they could do a better job of running the country: this class was the *caudillos*.

THE RISE OF THE CAUDILLOS

Caudillos were men from the rural parts of the country, usually landowners who maintained a private army and who were able, using their private armies, to impose their political will on the cities. They promoted a strong nativist vision of the country in which all men (and men only) would allegedly be equal—be they black, white, mestizo, indigenous—as long as they swore unswerving loyalty to them. They were masters of propaganda, too, often insisting that their followers wear some kind of mark to identify themselves to one another and outsiders (with the result that common people found not wearing such identifying marks would be beaten up in the street).

One such caudillo in Argentina was Juan Manuel de Rosas, ‘The Restorer of Laws’, who was originally a rancher, with a private militia. He believed in the creation of a federal state, in which all parts of Argentina would be self-governing but with Buenos Aires as the capital. He was therefore a ‘Federalist’. His political opponents believed in creating a unitarian state and called themselves ‘Unitarians’ (and both terms will be essential for understanding Manso’s novel).

In Argentine politics, Liberals tended to favour Unitarianism and Conservatives generally favoured Federalism, though most caudillos, much like Rosas, would adopt any stance they wished as long as it served their political cause. It is not true to say that Rosas was a political Conservative, though he certainly affected a culturally conservative or nativist ‘look’ by dressing like a gaucho and making great public displays of loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church.

Having proved himself in battle against the British and the French and beaten back their attempted invasion in 1833, his ‘Restorers’ marched on Buenos Aires, deposed the governor, and claimed the city and fledgling country for himself and his followers. A sham election was then held which confirmed his position as ruler and he was installed as Governor of Buenos Aires on 7 March 1835 (the percentage of people who voted in his favour was

⁴ Klaus Gallo, *The Struggle for an Enlightened Republic: Buenos Aires and Rivadavia* (London: Institute for Latin American Studies, 2006), 4.

apparently 99.7%). He then consolidated his power over the populace by building what probably counts as the world's first totalitarian regime with the instrument of his oppressive secret police force: the feared Mazorca who would often kidnap Unitarians, make political prisoners of them, and subject them to torture including castration. When Domingo F. Sarmiento's *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants* was published in English in 1868, it was not without justification that a review of it in the *Examiner* described Argentine history until then as a history of 'woes' and 'scourges'.⁵

LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

The coups and various revolutions undertaken in Latin America were carried out by men. Just like in many European countries including Great Britain in the 1840s and 1850s, the question of women's rights was not given much public attention (and only received attention in Argentina when Eva Peron campaigned for it during the 1940s). After several of the former territories of the Spanish Empire won their independence, the progress of the extension of women's rights was limited. As John C. Chasteen writes, while South American independence aimed at providing rights for minorities and women,

Few Latin American women benefitted ... education for girls expanded with excruciating slowness, and domestic walls still hemmed in the lives of "decent" married women. Few, very few, were the women able to play leading roles in public life during the 1800s ... Today, we look back on them as pioneers. In their own time, most people thought them strange.⁶

Chasteen points to one women writer who broke the mould: Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda who left her life in Cuba, removed to Spain, and wrote novels and poetry.

Another name Chasteen might have chosen, among those writers who were pioneers for equality, could have been our that of Juana Manso. She was born in Buenos Aires in 1819 to middle-class parents and her father was Unitarian and active in politics. After the Restorers' Revolution and Rosas's initiation of a reign of terror, the family fled first to the United States and afterwards settled in the Empire of Brazil. It was in the safety of Rio de Janeiro, the capital of that liberal empire with its constitutional monarchy, that Manso began writing. It was in Rio de Janeiro, also, that she founded a pioneering weekly periodical which was devoted to the advancement of women's rights, education, as well as the discussion of political questions.

MISTÉRIOS DEL PLATA ("MYSTERIES OF THE RIVER PLATE") AND ITS POLITICAL CONTEXT

The first version of Manso's *Mistérios del Plata*, published in [Rio de Janeiro](#) in Brazilian [Portuguese](#) (though it is a Portuguese with many Spanish-isms) promised the reader that

It was not out of servile imitation of the *Mysteries of Paris*, and *London*, that I called this romance the "Mysterios del Plata." It was so called because I consider that the atrocities of the Rosas, and the sufferings of their victims, will be a mystery to future generations, despite all that has been written about them. More powerful than their enemies, the Rosas' salaried writers shout down

⁵ 'Life in the Argentine Republic', *Examiner*, 12 September 1868, 581.

⁶ Chasteen, 174.

their opponents; at other times the Rosas' agents purchase other writers' writings and destroy them.⁷

Thus she pays homage to the great masters of mysteries from Europe: Reynolds and Sue (there is also a passing reference to *Robert Macaire* in another issue of Manso's periodical, which perhaps reveals that she was acquainted with more than just Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*).⁸ Yet despite all that Rosas has done to Argentina, Manso declares that she still loved her country:

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We wrote this novel in the agonies of an extinguished patriotic love; a love that, when we were forced to suffer, dragged us to cosmopolitan indifference. Today we take care not to puncture the ulcerated wound that will leave us with our dissipated illusions and our crushed hopes; it is a wound that remains in the depths of our hearts, a final longing as lasting as our existence.⁹

It could have been much different; after the May Revolution, Unitarianism was in the ascendant and, under the guiding hands of luminaries such as Rivadavia—who acted as Ministro de Gobierno from 1821–24, then later as president—the new independent republic followed a liberal *pro-inglés* economic and social reform programme in an attempt to modernise the country and, importantly, open the country up to international trade by maintaining strong relations with Britain and France. Freedom of expression was guaranteed and movements were made towards the gradual abolition of slavery.¹⁰ Further adding to this positive national vision was strong support for the cultural sphere, in a period which witnessed the creation of a national museum, a national archive, the establishment of public libraries, and provisions for secondary school education. A forward-looking and progressive nation was being conceived—until Rosas arrived.

Once Rosas had consolidated his power and his dictatorial and Federalist vision for the country seemed secure, many Unitarians slipped into despondency. As the Unitarian [Esteban Echeverría](#) remarked

‘Our Revolution has left us only one result, one tradition and dogma: the sovereignty of the people, that is, Democracy (...) Today the masses have acquired a complete awareness of their force, and in their name Rosas has levelled everything, consecrating the most complete equality. Thus, it would be an absurd chimera to think of any other social arrangement than Democracy; it would be a sterile parody of the past. The only way to do something noble and worthy for our country is to labor for **the normal development of democratic institutions**, socially and individually’ (emphasis added).¹¹

Manso's country had slipped into totalitarianism. It might have been an enlightened republic—for such was the vision of the Unitarian Rivadavia for Argentina—but it was not to be. It was Manso's mission to expose the atrocities of Rosas's totalitarian regime, then, and also to pose wider questions about the issue of democracy versus dictatorship and civilization versus barbarism.

For many Argentinian Federalist during Rosas's days, however, it was not safe to stay in Rosas's country and ‘labour for democratic institutions’; it is during one such night time flight of refugees that Manso's novel opens,

⁷ Juana Manso, ‘Misterios del Plata’, *O Jornal das Senhores*, 1 January 1852, 6–7.

⁸ Juana Manso, ‘Os Reis’, *O Jornal das Senhoras*, 18 January 1852, 19.

⁹ Manso, ‘Misterios del Plata’, 6–7.

¹⁰ Gallo, 9.

¹¹ Esteban Echeverría, ‘Cartas a Don Pedro de Angelis’, cited in Eduardo Zimmerman, ‘Caudillos, democracy, and constitutionalism in mid nineteenth-century Argentina’, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 26 (2020), 189–206 (190).

depicting the Avellaneda (called Alsina in the Portuguese version) family attempting to board a boat from Montevideo (where Rosas's ally General Uribe rules) and sail up the River Plate to Corrientes, far beyond the dictator's reach. The country had slipped into barbarism; the family sought safety in civilisation.

Manso's novel, in keeping with the tradition established by Sue and Reynolds, is an example of social melodrama. This term, originally coined by the Victorian popular fiction critic Louis James, signifies the application of the dramatic concepts of melodrama—with its clear binaries of good and evil—to political and social questions. In the popular fiction of Reynolds and Sue,

The simplified morality of melodrama melded seamlessly with the social conflicts of a turbulent era, transforming the struggle between 'Evil' and 'Good' into that between 'Oppressor' and 'Oppressed', between the 'Rich' and the 'Poor'.¹²

THE GAUCHOS

In Manso's novel, as we stated above, the melodramatic struggle is a societal one between civilization and barbarism. The barbarism of Rosas is shown first through the uncouth, immoral, and violent manner that his regime and his henchmen operate. They are very prone to outburst of violent speech whenever the rule of their saviour Rosas is called into question: "DEATH TO THE UNITARIAN SAVAGES" is a phrase which frequently issues from the lips of many of Rosas's supporters during the novel. Many of Rosas henchmen are in fact gauchos. The gaucho (or *gaúcho* in Brazil) have traditionally been viewed very positively and very romantically, especially in Argentina. Lone cow herders who, in a manner like Rob Roy and his men in early modern Scotland, embodied a very rough yet noble and chivalrous masculinity in the nineteenth century.

Several novels in Argentina from the 1850s onwards formed a corpus of what has been termed by literary critics as 'the Gaucho novel'.¹³ Such sentiments shine through in one of Brazil's most famous nineteenth-century novels *O Gaúcho* by José de Alencar. British observers, too, noted the politeness and gallantry of the gauchos in the Rio de la Plata. In 1810, one traveller in the region noted

'The drivers and Gauchos whom we met, always moved the hats, with *vaya usted con Dios*: indeed they are habitually civil a polite, much more so than is usually found among the lower classes of an educated society in Europe'.¹⁴

Neither were the gauchos completely uncultured; many were poets who spread an oral tradition of poetry between each other as they wandered over the pampas visiting towns and villages.¹⁵ However, the gauchos of Manso's novel are not of the noble kind epitomised by Alencar. They have not embraced nineteenth-century civilization. They sleep under the stars and often with animals by their side. Their diet is simple and unrefined, consisting mostly of dried meat and alcohol. Their daily habits are, when compared to the urban-based Unitarians, then, very much behind-hand.

They are also a largely uneducated bunch which makes them easier for the tyrant Rosas to control. And to Rosas they are devoted: "That Rosas is a good friend of ours, Santiago! Stone me dead if us country folk haven't

¹² Louis James, 'Time, Politics, and the Symbolic Imagination in Reynolds's Social Melodrama', in *G.W.M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, ed. by Anne Humpherys and Louis James, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 179–99 (181).

¹³ Myron Ivor Lichtblau, 'Formation of the Gaucho Novel in Argentina', *Hispania*, 41: 3 (1958), 294–99 (294).

¹⁴ John Murray, 'Britain and Argentina in the Nineteenth Century', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 49: 196 (1960), 420–436 (426).

¹⁵ George W. Umphrey, 'The Gaucho Poetry of Argentina', *Hispania*, 1: 3 (1918), 144–56 (148).

been looked after well since he became governor'.¹⁶ While their outbursts of 'DEATH TO THE UNITARIANS' make them appear uncivilised and uncouth, they are controlled by Rosas to such an extent that they view all who oppose him as false Argentines for 'Unitarians aren't our neighbours because, from what people say, the pope excommunicated them ... [they] aren't Argentinians'.¹⁷

JUAN MANUEL DE ROSAS'S "SOCIALISM"

Manso's aim in representing the political conflict between Unitarians and Federalists was political, of course, and masks the fact that there was much class conflict at play. Rosas was widely seen as a man *for* the rural labouring classes—and he certainly made sure to court the favour of the poorer classes, and often dressed himself in traditional gaucho dress.¹⁸ His henchmen include not only gauchos but ex-slaves and mulattos as well.

Manso has a low opinion of these people and their poverty, and she mocks one of Rosas's favourite mulattos, named Párras, for having once been a labourer in a slaughterhouse and, even when elevated by Rosas into the ranks of the Mazorca, for going bare-footed. For this seeming friendliness towards the poorer classes, Rosas's enemies denounced him as a communist. The words of the Catholic Conservative Felix Frias are a case in point. In 1851, Frias denounced socialism as 'A plebeian philosophy of sensual arrogance ... the science of envy ... [but that] "take from the rich and give to the poor" is the favourite maxim of European socialists. Rosas has been doing this for a long time'.¹⁹

Despite Frias's remarks, Rosas was actually *opposed* to the spread of socialism and republican ideas—especially of the kind which had been pioneered by the French Republicans or 'Mountain Party' of 1848, among whom was the likes of Louis Blanc, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, and Eugene Sue, all of whom entered the French National Assembly as Red Republican and Socialist candidates.²⁰ Indeed, French political interference into the affairs of Montevideo, and attempted meddling in Argentine affairs, did little to endear French ideas to Rosas.²¹ For her part, Manso knew full well that there was nothing socialistic or communistic about Rosas and was more akin, at best, to the absolutists of the eighteenth century or, at worst, as the leader of a band of ruffians, or 'the ancient monarchs of the Middle Ages'.²²

ROSAS'S REIGN OF TERROR

Be that as it may, the gauchos' unquestioning loyalty to Rosas, and their uncritical acceptance of the dehumanisation of political opponents, means that they will execute his commands against the populace with unflinching brutality. It is their brutality which explains, in Manso's view, why most of the Argentine population quietly acquiesce to Rosas's rule. But the terror starts with public shame:

In Buenos Aires, everyone wears Rosas' symbol. The men wear it on their hatbands or buttonholes, the ladies as a ribbon in their hair. This symbol is a folded ribbon, bearing a portrait of the tyrant

¹⁶ Juana Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, Trans. Kathryn Phillips-Miles and Simon Deefholts (London: Clapton Press, 2023), 44.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ E.C. Fernau, *The Reign of Rosas* (London: Samuel Tinsley, 1877), 96.

¹⁹ David Rock, 'The European Revolutions in the Rio de la Plata', in *The European Revolutions of 1848 and the Americas*, ed. by Guy Thompson (London: Institute for Latin American Studies, 2002), 125–41 (139).

²⁰ Anon. 'The Mountain: or, The French Democratic Members', *Reynolds's Miscellany*, 24 February 1849, 514.

²¹ Rock, 134.

²² Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 87.

and the words “Federation or Death! Long Live the Restorer of Laws! Death to the Unitarian Savages!”²³

Rosas also keeps the population of Argentina permanently on edge and subjects them to spectacles. In the novel, Rosas’s henchmen wake the entire city in the middle of the night by ordering the churches to ring all their bells. His henchmen then enter people’s homes, half drunk, and shave off the beards of all the men they find inside because Rosas has ordered that moustaches only are a sign of loyalty. At other points in the novel does Rosas resort to tactics like this, all of which disorient the population, keeping them tired and compliant.

One point which Luiz Guerra and I made when we wrote our article on Manso’s novel was that, unlike European Mysteries novels, Manso’s novels lack those typical underworld scenes—Sue’s *Tapis Franc* tavern comes to mind here, for the novel opens with a scene just outside it, while many of Reynolds’s characters frequent the lowest pubs where many crimes are plotted.²⁴ However, reflecting on this point further, it is clear that Manso did not need to represent underworld scenes because in her novel, the worst degenerates of the underworld were the ruling class.

The brutal behaviour of Rosas, and the terrifying means through which his equally brutish henchmen, the gauchos and the Mazorca, enact a reign of terror over their perceived political enemies, stands in stark contrast to the noble, gallant, and stoic behaviour of the main character, Dr Avellaneda. Avellaneda and his family, who are captured by gauchos while attempting to flee up river, are taken ashore just outside of Buenos Aires. In an old and ruined church, the doctor and his family must await Rosas’s inevitable humiliating death. It is in these hours that the doctor’s civilised ways comes through.

Despite the hardships which the family endure, they remain well-dressed at all times. The doctor still wears his suit, and his wife and son are likewise smartly presented, in European clothing. Many of the prints which accompanied Manso’s periodical, in fact, showcase the best of new fashions from Paris and London. Civilisation, in Manso’s and indeed her likeminded contemporaries, was European. The contrast between the well-dressed and respectably clothed Avellaneda family and the rough, often dirty gauchos is plain for all to see, for Manso frequently uses the poor state of the gauchos’ and mulattos’ clothing to delineate their bad morals and criminality.

Indeed, Avellaneda has led the respectable life of a middle-class lawyer. Every aspect of his facial features bespeaks nobility and intelligence:

‘He was a tall, thin, pale man. His calm, noble features were like a window into a noble but troubled soul, battling against life’s storms. His masculine face was darkened by a fine black beard. His broad and balding forehead was indicative of a distinguished intelligence and noble spirit; his well-proportioned aquiline nose, his chatterbox mouth and his dark eyes ... revealed a fluent orator, a tireless man of letters who has spent the best days of his youth deep in study, and possibly the politician who fought to give his fatherland laws and a constitution’.²⁵

Indeed, there is a world of difference between Avellaneda and those of a lower social station. During his exile in Uruguay, he did briefly think of resigning from the life of an intellectual patriot and becoming a fisherman. Yet this would simply have been a waste of great talent for ‘it was impossible for him, a man accustomed to scholarly

²³ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 84.

²⁴ See also Stephen Basdeo, ‘That’s Business’: Organised Crime in G.W.M. Reynolds’ *The Mysteries of London* (1844-48)’, *Law, Crime and History*, 8: 1 (2019), 54–75

²⁵ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 28.

debate and highly intellectual work' and join the ranks of manual labourers or even lead a life of leisure and inactivity.²⁶

In fact, Manso exerts herself in bolstering the intellectual credentials of her principal protagonists. Several Argentine progressive and middle-class intellectuals from the 1830s onwards (all of whom, to a man, were Unitarians), who had been literally shut out from the political process and their influence on national affairs replaced with the likes of gauchos, responded, in their writings, with a message of intellectual snobbery. They, the intellectuals, were the ones who had a right to rule, so they said.²⁷ To rule was not the lot of half-literate peasants.

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THE UNITARIANS' CIVILISING MISSION

Manso and her fellow intellectuals' attitudes may appear to us to be somewhat snobby today, but Avellaneda's unsuitability to a life of manual labour does not make him insensitive to the poor. As a true Christian, he counsels his son to

Be generous to all men and share what you have with others according to their needs. Study law, but not in order to become rich, and only defend those who you recognise in your heart as just. Don't stint in giving money to the poor, but not to the extent you harm yourself ... The defence of minors and the slave is the finest possible occupation; aspire to it and make sure that you carry it out, and you will truly be a support for the weak.²⁸

What was needed, then, was for the intellectuals of Argentine society to guide it towards a bright future and, in the process, eliminate the undesirable elements that plague it. The masses must, therefore, be educated. They must be civilised.

Dr Avellaneda achieves this partially with the character of Miguel. The reader initially meets Miguel when he is serving as one of Rosas's gaucho henchmen. The doctor's noble bearing, his reasoned arguments in favour of democracy and Unitarianism, make Miguel question his hitherto simple outlook on life:

Miguel was clearly intelligent despite being uneducated ... before he had met the exile he had sincerely believed him to be an enemy of the state, a criminal, but listening to the advice that Avellaneda had given son, and his noble words in the face of his accusers ... this was the first time that the language of civilization and humanity had reached his ears.²⁹

Manso could not be more obvious about the point she wished to make. Civilisation is Unitarianism. If only Rosas did not keep the gauchos under his thumb and in a state of perpetual bigoted ignorance, perhaps there might be hope for the Argentine nation yet. Other writers who shared Manso's Unitarian ideology went much further and called for the complete eradication of 'backward' gaucho culture and with it the commercial cultivation of the

²⁶ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 32.

²⁷ Rita Terezinha Schmidt, 'Misterios del Plata: (Dis)figuring History to Forge a Space for a Woman's Agency', in *Perspectives on the Rise of the Brazilian Novel*, ed. by Sandra Guardini Vasconcelos and Ana Cláudia Suriana da Silva (Manchester University Press, 2020), 26–45 (29).

²⁸ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 59.

²⁹ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 74.

pampas over which they roamed.³⁰ Such was the argument contained within the 1845 work of a future Argentinian president, the aforementioned Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, in his *Facunda*.

Miguel's conversion to the cause of Unitarianism-Civilisationism bears fruit when he decides that he, once an agent of Rosas's barbarism, will help the Avellaneda family to escape from Rosas's henchmen's clutches. Luckily, once the doctor, his wife, and son escape with Miguel's help, the family do not have far to go—a power struggle has erupted in Uruguay between General Oribe, whose power is waning, and General Fructoso Rivera's revolutionary party. It is safe, therefore, for the family to return to Montevideo in Uruguay, which they do.

We noted previously that to do manual labour was beneath the good doctor and his family. This applies to his labours in the service of his country as well. When he is safely back in Uruguay, he

Applies his brilliant mind to the heroic defence erected by the last redoubt of civilization in the River Plate region. Highly thought of and respected by everyone, Doctor Avellaneda is the most charismatic of the Argentine exiles.³¹

The manual labourers in the cause of ousting Rosas are men like Miguel, who returns to Argentina to participate in the armed struggle against the tyrant. Yet Miguel's is not a happy ending, for he dies on the battlefield at the Battle of Quebracho Herrado in 1840. It is left to the intellectuals like Avellaneda to carry on the struggle against Rosas, albeit in a more subtle way, through propagandising for the cause of Unitarianism—much as Manso herself was doing in publishing *O Jornal das Senhoras*.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to explore in Manso's novel which went through several versions in Portuguese and Spanish. Several critics heretofore have commented upon the novel's feminist ideology. Another line of inquiry might be the use of gothic tropes, for Manso was fond of having ruined churches as a backdrop and making use of thunder and lightning and darkness. This article has largely focused on the novels' intellectual and political ideology, however. The novel was a political manifesto. It remains to say that all nineteenth-century *Mysteries* novels were, to a greater or lesser extent, political propaganda. Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* sought to make the case for a programme of economic and social reform which would uplift the masses. As Sue converted to socialism and wrote *Mysteries of the People* (1848–56), his history of a proletarian family across the centuries was essentially a Red Republican call to arms. Reynolds's *Mysteries of London*, initially starting out as a radical, anti-establishment novel, soon espoused the Chartist cause in the second series. Manso's novel was also a political propaganda for the Unitarian programme.

It would, however, take outside intervention to finally bring Rosas's bloodthirsty regime to an end. As Rosas sought to encroach on Uruguayan (now free of Rosas's influence) and Brazilian territory in the late 1840s, a coalition against Argentina ensued. Led by the powerful Empire of Brazil under the command of [Dom Pedro II](#), and faced with growing discontent within Buenos Aires, Rosas was ousted. He fled to Britain where he spent the remainder of his days in exile.

³⁰ Deborah Schwartz-Kates, 'Alberto Ginastera, Argentine Cultural Construction, and the *Gauchos* Tradition', *The Musical Quarterly*, 86: 2 (2002), 248–81 (250)

³¹ Manso, *Mistérios del Plata*, 170.