



FAMILY AFFAIRS: INCEST IN JORGE ISAACS'S *MARÍA*

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Since its publication in 1867, *María* has enjoyed near-constant popularity throughout Latin America; indeed, it has never been out of print. Donald McGrady claims that “*María* [is] the widest-read novel in Hispanic America,” having appeared in close to 140 editions in its first hundred years (139). Its popularity has been accompanied by critical attention focusing on topics ranging from the narrative structure, the character of *María*, and the role of Romanticism to patriarchy and nationalism in the novel’s social structure. Of these, several critics have commented on the triangle formed by the narrator, Efraín, his father, and *María* herself. Yet one aspect of the novel has not been addressed in detail. That is the relationship between *María* and the father, a relationship that may provoke deeply disturbing implications for the careful reader. In this essay I will argue that a father-daughter relationship with incestuous overtones, whether realized or potential, results in the failure of *María* and Efraín’s possible relationship and in the eventual destruction of the family unit. In this reading, it is the father’s incestuous approaches toward *María*, not, as some critics have argued, *María*’s love for Efraín, that cause her hysterical illness and eventually kill her.

Conditions are ripe in the household for the development of an incestuous relationship between the father and *María*. Although *María* is not the father’s biological daughter, she does fulfill the role of a daughter within the household; while *María* is Efraín’s second cousin by blood, she has been raised since the age of three as his sister and as the daughter of Efraín’s mother and father. As Efraín comments, “Pocos eran entonces los que conociendo nues-

tra familia, pudiesen sospechar que María no era hija de mis padres” (13). Not only does María occupy the position of a daughter, but she does so in an exceptionally conventional—even overly so—patriarchal family. The women who might have protected her are absent, either literally or figuratively. Her biological mother, of course, is dead, and her adoptive mother accedes to her husband’s wishes in almost all regards, either unable or unwilling to challenge him openly. When the adoptive mother does go against the father’s desires, she does so secretly. Tellingly, when she conspires with her son, Efraín, against her husband, Efraín’s father, it is to thwart the father’s plans to prevent Efraín from declaring his love to María and from eventually marrying her, which would result in removing María from the father’s possessive reach, as we shall see.

Efraín’s father exerts a degree of control over his family unusual even by nineteenth-century standards. As many critics have commented, *María* depicts a rigidly patriarchal family structure. The father dominates the family and exercises a remarkable control over his wife and children; his decisions are unquestioned, even when they cause Efraín and María great unhappiness. Both Efraín and María are unfailingly obedient. At the same time, the father is a respected member of the community, commanding the respect and loyalty of his tenants and of the other landowners in the valley.

The father’s dominance has repercussions not just for the personal relationships in the family, but for the family’s economic circumstances as well. As Sylvia Molloy avers, underlying the novel’s seemingly innocent plot of love lost is the story of a patriarchal control whose ultimate result is the loss not just of love but of paradise, the family home. Molloy notes, “Se observa en la conducta paterna presente . . . la intolerancia absoluta de la pérdida, la necesidad de controlarlo todo. Una férrea economía paterna—autoritaria, despótica—rige los destinos familiares y más precisamente el destino del hijo” (48). Similarly, Rodolfo Borello sees the father as the embodied representative of social control: “El padre no es solamente la autoridad; encarna, además, los intereses de la familia, la voluntad de Dios, el Destino. Por tanto la Moral (familiar y social), la seguridad económica y el Deber Ser, la Ley” (71). The fact that Efraín never names his father, calling him only “mi padre,” further emphasizes his paternal authority through the continual association with his familial role and with the patriarchal system he represents. Likewise, the family home in Cauca is an isolated hacienda from which the women rarely if ever depart, until their final removal at the end of the book; they remain in the house and under the father’s control. Finally, the father is a

respected and powerful landowner who can call upon his network of friends to ensure his son's safe journey from Cauca to London and back; he dominates his social circle as well as his immediate family.

Throughout the novel, the father consistently limits his son's access to and interactions with María, exerting his control over his (adopted) daughter and his (biological) son. Indeed, this dynamic is established in the novel's opening scene, when the father enacts his initial expulsion of Efraín from the family hacienda, tellingly named "El Paraíso" and associated not just with his home but with María's presence and love. As Efraín narrates, "María esperó humildemente su turno, y balbuciendo su despedida, juntó su mejilla sonrosada a la mía, helada por la primera sensación de dolor. . . . Pocos momentos después seguí a mi padre, que ocultaba el rostro a mis miradas" (4). The fact that the father hides his face from Efraín's enquiring gaze suggests that he is concealing something from his son, and the fact that this sentence immediately follows the scene in which Efraín bids farewell to María further implies that what the father is concealing is related in some way to the emotional and sexual connection between Efraín and María.

It could be argued that the father wishes to keep Efraín and María apart because they have been raised as brother and sister, and because they are cousins by blood. Yet the potentially amorous relationship between them is never an issue in the novel. María and Efraín do not refer to one another as brother and sister (quite different from Efraín's frequent characterizations of Emma as "mi hermana"), nor do other characters discuss their relationship in that way. The incestuous nature of a relationship between cousins is potentially more problematic; again, however, that issue simply never appears in the novel. As Doris Sommer comments, "el tabú del incesto no entra en juego aquí" ("El mal de *María*" 452). Characters such as Efraín's mother and his friend Carlos take for granted Efraín's amorous interest in María. Moreover, while marriage between first cousins was contentious enough to require a special dispensation from church authorities in nineteenth-century Colombia (Rodríguez 55–56), María and Efraín are only second cousins; her biological father, Solomón, was the cousin of Efraín's father. Only marriage between first cousins ("primos hermanos") is singled out as potentially too close in degree. In short, there are no apparent external barriers to the relationship between Efraín and María, other than the father himself.

The father's attitude toward and treatment of both María and Efraín may be read as further evidence of his potentially incestuous desire. Even before Efraín and María have explicitly acknowledged their love, the father often

appears suspicious and controlling. For example, Efraín flees the scene when his father sees him doing nothing more than staring at María, “notando que [María] se avergonzaba de la involuntaria fijeza de mis miradas, y encontrándome examinado por una de mi padre (más temible cuando cierta sonrisa pasajera vagaba en sus labios), salí del salón” (11). In a vivid demonstration of the father’s power, his knowing, sly glance forces Efraín to leave the room, while Efraín’s glance has only made María blush shyly. Moreover, when Efraín leaves the room, he leaves María with his father, just as, we might surmise, the father desires. He literally gives ground to his father’s wishes, abandoning María to his father without a word of protest. Moreover, when the father finally acknowledges the attraction between Efraín and María, he does so in order to warn Efraín away from María, using her illness as the excuse: “emociones intensas, nuevas para ella, son las que . . . han hecho aparecer los síntomas de la enfermedad: es decir que tu amor y el suyo necesitan precauciones” (27). These precautions in effect repress the expression of love and desire, while bolstering the father’s control of his children’s sentiments and actions. Tellingly, the father then adds, “la promesa de ser su esposo . . . haría vuestro trato más íntimo, que es precisamente lo que se trata de evitar” (28). Here Isaacs draws attention to the fact that intimacy—be it emotional or sexual or both—between María and Efraín is to be avoided, and by putting these words into the father’s mouth, he makes the father the figure dominating their interactions.

One might argue that Isaacs depicts the father simply as wishing to keep Efraín in a childlike state, an eternal adolescent, and indeed some of the father’s behaviors, including his refusal to allow Efraín to make his own decisions about his future, would support that reading. The representation of other paternal actions and attitudes, however, can be read as indicating that the father wishes for his son’s sexual maturation as long as that developing sexuality is not focused on María. Early in the novel, after Efraín and María have had a misunderstanding, Efraín spends dinner speaking “con entusiasmo de las mujeres hermosas de Bogotá. . . . Mi padre se complacía oyéndome” (17). The father is clearly pleased to hear Efraín speaking with desire of other women; he only intervenes when Efraín directs that desire toward María. So it is not that the father wishes to keep Efraín from expressing his sexuality in general; rather, he wishes to divert Efraín’s sexual attentions from María in particular, prompting the question of why he would want to do so.

It is true, of course, that the father arranges with Efraín that the two lovers will marry one day. But this marriage is to take place at an unspecified date

far in the future, and comes with a series of conditions to be enforced by the father, including this warning: “Debes saber también mi opinión sobre tu matrimonio con ella, si su enfermedad persistiere después de tu regreso a este país . . . pues vamos pronto a separarnos por algunos años: como padre tuyo y de María, no sería de mi aprobación ese enlace” (28). More telling is the father’s explanation that María possesses a significant dowry: “Salomón . . . consiguió formar un capital de alguna consideración, el cual está en mi poder destinado a servir de dote a su hija. Mas si ella muere antes de casarse, debe pasar aquél a manos de su abuela materna” (28). Given that a pivotal event later in the novel is the loss of the family’s fortune, causing their eventual eviction from Cauca/Paradise, it would be logical for the father to encourage the prompt marriage of María to Efraín so that the family could recoup its losses. While a profitable marriage is a traditional method for ensuring financial stability, however, the father, who is responsible for his family’s continued survival, never proposes this solution; instead, he insists that the family’s economic well-being depends on Efraín’s early departure for medical training in London. If this action seems to go against what we know of the father, who is so preoccupied with his finances that he falls into a psychosomatic illness when he learns of his financial ruin, it may, however, signify that the father has his own reasons for keeping María unmarried and at home, even when that action threatens the rest of the family’s future.

Throughout the novel the father’s presence and watchfulness serve even more overtly to impede potential moments of love and affection between the two youths. When María falls ill with her first “ataque nervioso,” Efraín rushes to her bedroom, only to find his father there before him, guarding María in her bed: “Me acerqué desconcertado a su lecho. A los pies de éste se hallaba sentado mi padre: fijó en mí una de sus miradas intensas, y volviéndola después sobre María, parecía quererme hacer una reconvención al mostrármela” (21). The fact that the father is already present not just in María’s bedroom but at her bedside implies an uncomfortably close relationship, underscored by the way he warns away his son with a glare, as he had done earlier as well. In this way the father signals his possession of María, a possession textually marked as implicitly sexual given that this exchange literally takes place over her prone body.

During the remainder of the novel, the father manipulates María’s illness to keep Efraín away from her. The explanation the father advances—that strong emotions bring on María’s hysterical attacks—is clearly false, given the pattern of María’s illness. She falls ill when she is separated from Efraín,

and recuperates when she is with him; if the father's reasoning were correct, one would expect María to suffer attacks when Efraín is present in the house and to return to good health when he is gone. But her very first attack occurs when Efraín has been riding on the mountain all day, and, as we know, his prolonged absence at the end of the novel results in her death. It would seem clear that María's good health depends upon her speedy marriage to Efraín, which would eliminate the suspense of waiting that seems to bring on her hysterical episodes, and in fact other characters in the novel recognize this. Efraín himself points out to his mother, speaking of the father's edict that he not declare his love to María: "¿Podré yo seguir guardando esa conducta que él [el padre] exige, sin ocasionar a María penas que le harían mayor daño que confesárselo todo?" (63). The father's demands appear irrational even to the other characters, showing that he is not behaving within the novel's parameters of logic. The most compelling explanation for the father's illogical behavior is that he is motivated by illicit sexual desire, which overrides almost all other concerns, including his adopted daughter's literal, physical survival as well as his family's economic survival.¹

That María's illness is linked to the father's sexual interest in her is supported by María's own anxiety and nervousness around him. He frequently makes suggestive remarks and advances to her. When the father and Efraín are about to depart on a journey to inspect some of their properties, María prepares a basket of food for them. When the father attempts to lighten their load by removing some of the food,

María, alarmándose, le observó:

—Es que esto no puede quedarse.

—¿Por qué, mi hija?

—Porque son las pastas que más les gustan y . . . porque las he hecho yo.

—¿Y también son para mí?—le preguntó mi padre por lo bajo.

—¿Pues no están ya acomodadas?

—Digo que . . .

—Ahora vuelvo—interrumpió ella. . . . (87)

1. John Rosenberg also points out the father's "possible duplicity," adding that the father "intentionally prevents the marriage of the two lovers" and that he "manipulates the circumstances surrounding María's illness to his advantage" (13). Rosenberg concludes that the father's assertion of authority results in his control over the text that Efraín produces, as Rosenberg advances the theory that the father is the editor of Efraín's memoir.

What seems to be a normal conversation is betrayed once more by the father's flirtatious comment. María has already said that the food was for "them," for both men, but the father insists on specifying that it is also for him in particular. The fact that he makes this comment "por lo bajo," or surreptitiously, implies that he has something to hide by asking it. María's attempts to avoid answering his question, even to the point of interrupting him, something she does nowhere else in the novel, further indicate her discomfort with the tenor the conversation has taken. If the food represents María's caring and affection, the father's effort to remove Efraín as a possible recipient of her offering signals once more his desire to possess María completely and totally.

Immediately prior to another father-son trip, the father singles out María for a special farewell: "Detúvose de nuevo mi padre delante de María . . . y le dijo en voz baja, poniéndole una mano sobre la cabeza y tratando inútilmente de conseguir que lo mirara: 'Es convenido que estarás muy guapa y muy juiciosa; ¿no es verdad, mi señora?' " (141). Here he speaks to her in low, intimate tones, caresses her head and attempts to make her look at him. He has already given each child, including María, a kiss on the forehead; María is the only one who receives additional words of farewell. The father compliments her and calls her "mi señora," a playful term of endearment with serious undertones, implying that María, not his wife, is his "lady." It might be argued that his attitude toward María is simply an expression of paternal affection, not only here but throughout the novel. However, the only child with whom the father interacts in this very tactile, often flirtatious and suggestive way is María; he does not share similar intimacies with his (biological) daughter Emma, for example, who is close to María in age. Calling María "mi señora" also draws attention to María's potential to replace the mother. María serves as a surrogate mother to the younger children in the family, particularly to Juan, taking care of him, soothing him, and playing games with him. Various scenes show Efraín watching fondly as María tends to Juan's needs, thus occupying the role that Juan's mother should herself fulfill. When the father addresses María as "mi señora," he underscores her ability to be not just *a* wife, but to be *his* "wife" in every sense of the word.

A crucial scene that illustrates the dynamics among the father, María, and Efraín, and that brings to the foreground the sexual tensions underpinning the interactions among these characters occurs when María cuts the father's hair while Efraín takes dictation. In this scene, not only does the father demonstrate his control over both adolescents as they serve him, but he also

reveals his own desire for María. The scene begins when the father orders María to cut his hair. She enters, visibly nervous (“algo pálida” [80]), made more so by the father’s interrogation of her: “no te parece que tengo mucho pelo?” He then says slyly, “‘fueron tan negros y abundantes como otros que yo conozco.’ María soltó los que tenía en ese momento en la mano” (80). The comparison, clearly, is with Efraín; the father recalls his own youthful vigor and, implicitly, sexual energy, and overtly presents himself as a rival to his son. María recognizes this implication, given that she stops touching the father’s hair as soon as he makes the comparison. The scene concludes with an openly flirtatious moment:

Cuando María se inclinó a sacudir los recortes de cabellos que habían caído sobre el cuello de mi padre, la rosa que ella llevaba en una de las trenzas le cayó a él a los pies. Iba ella a alzarla, pero mi padre la había tomado ya. María volvió a ocupar su puesto tras de la silla, y él le dijo después de verse en el espejo detenidamente:

—Yo te la pondré ahora donde estaba, para recompensarte lo bien que los has hecho—y acercándose a ella, agregó, colocando la flor con tanta gracia como lo hubiera podido Emma—: todavía se me puede tener envidia.

Detuvo a María, que se mostraba deseosa de retirarse por temor de lo que él pudiera añadir, besóle la frente y le dijo en voz baja:

—Hoy no será como ayer; acabaremos temprano. (81)

By enacting this seductive, flirtatious scene in front of his son, the father further asserts his control over his family, as John Rosenberg and Raymond Williams have both noted. As Rosenberg indicates, “The haircut scene, acted out in Efraín’s presence as if challenging him, suggests the reification of the father’s ‘yo’ at the expense of his son’s” (15). Rosenberg also points out that María has access to surprisingly intimate knowledge about the father, including his habit of bathing in “agua de Colonia.” While Rosenberg alludes to the idea that Efraín and his father are rivals for María, the focus of his analysis falls on the ways in which the father exerts control in ways that are not necessarily sexual, and he uses the scene to prove his argument that the father is the editor of Efraín’s text. In contrast to Rosenberg, Williams comments explicitly on the scene’s sexual connotations; his reading, however, views María as a substitute for the mother, which means that he views the father’s intervention as an attempt to thwart a displaced Oedipal desire. Thus, he

argues, the father attempts to separate Efraín and María because María is a stand-in for the mother, and Efraín's desire for her is incestuous. For Williams, "[t]he father not only diverts or appropriates any incestuous contact with the two mother figures, but also blatantly flaunts his sexual prowess before the helpless son" (353)—but somehow manages to do so without demonstrating any real sexual desire for María herself, because any desire for María is really only a desire for the mother. Williams's interpretation of the scene as purely Oedipal in nature precludes the other incestuous possibilities that one might more easily see in a more straightforward reading, such as, of course, the possible father-daughter incest. Not only does Williams's Oedipal vision overlook the possible father-daughter incest, it also obscures the potential brother-sister incest between Efraín and María.²

Although Rosenberg and Williams focus on the dynamics of the relationship between Efraín and his father that this scene reveals, María also plays a vital part in that relationship, and in the haircut scene in particular. She is clearly frightened, almost terrified, throughout the haircut. The traditional reading sees her fear as her maidenly modesty at the thought that the father might tease her about her relationship with Efraín. Her reaction is so strong, however, and the father's comments so blatantly sexual, that a more convincing reading of the episode demonstrates that it provides some of the strongest evidence for father-daughter incest in the novel. The father forces María into close physical contact with him against her will, restraining her when she wishes to leave, echoing the way in which he insinuates himself into her life—and, as we have seen, her bedroom—replacing Efraín whenever, and wherever, possible. He caresses her hair and places the rose, a flower that represents romantic or sexual love, in her braid in a lover's gesture, saying, "todavía se me puede tener envidia" (81). There is only one possible recipient of this comment—not María, but Efraín. The only reason Efraín would have to be envious of his father's relationship with María would be if that relationship were sexual, or quasi-sexual. María reacts with anxiety, with "temor de lo que pudiera añadir"; perhaps she fears an even more overtly sexual comment, not simply what Williams calls "symbolically a direct sexual affront" (353). Finally, when the father tells her that "acabaremos temprano," the

2. Gustavo Faverón Patriau discusses the dynamic of brother-sister incest and its relationship to the tensions centering on María's Jewish birth. While Faveron Patriau's analysis of the role of Judaism and Jewishness in the novel is quite helpful, as I pointed out earlier, fraternal incest is decidedly not an issue in *María*.

“we” of the verb is not clear. One might assume that he is saying that he and Efraín will finish their tasks early, so that Efraín and María will have more time together. But it is much more likely, given that the father is embracing and kissing her as he speaks, that he is telling her that he will “finish” with her early as opposed to late. This implies that sometimes the father does “finish” with her late, providing yet another sexual innuendo in a scene already laden with them.³ In these ways, the haircut scene communicates the family dynamics that indicate, if not a physically consummated incestuous relationship between the father and María, at the very least one in which the father’s control of María contains marked sexual implications.

As the haircut episode demonstrates, Efraín is unusually passive. Indeed, throughout the novel he is obedient, meek, and restrained, inordinately so for his age (nineteen when the novel begins), particularly when viewed in contrast to his extremely forceful, overbearing father. Yet in other ways, Efraín displays a surprising initiative and activity. Specifically, he is extremely interested in the sensuality exhibited by many of the young women in the novel. Gustavo Mejía has commented, “El énfasis que Efraín coloca en la pureza e inocencia de su amor se muestra en su real ambigüedad cuando notamos la hipersensualidad del narrador, quien siempre tiene el ojo atento a descubrir las pequeñas desnudeces de María; y no sólo las de ella, sino de cuanta mujer se pone al alcance de su mirada” (xv). In fact, Efraín’s attempts to initiate physical contact with María border on the obsessive. For example, when he and María are walking in the garden, “mi brazo oprimió suavemente el suyo, *desnudo* de la muselina y encajes de la manga” (84, my emphasis); this is just one of many incidents that involve his efforts to initiate physical contact with her. Elsewhere he persuades María to give him one of her handkerchiefs: “María no comprendía que ese pañuelo perfumado era un tesoro para una de mis noches. Después se negó casi siempre a concederme tal bien” (79). The description of the handkerchief as “a treasure for one of my nights” strongly suggests a masturbatory aid, a fetishistic substitute for María herself; we should note, too, that María balks at continuing the practice when she realizes the potential uses of the handkerchief.

Like Efraín, María herself is not the innocent she sometimes appears to be. Isaacs depicts her as sexually modest and endowed with a highly developed sense of shame, much stronger than that of her adopted sister Emma. When

3. Rosenberg also mentions this possible interpretation.

Efraín sees Emma and María barefoot in the garden, “sin volverse hacia mí, [María] cayó de rodillas para ocultarme sus pies, desatóse del talle el pañolón, y cubriéndose con él los hombros, fingía jugar con las flores” (7). Some critics, such as Donald McGrady, view María’s modesty as a technique of flirtation:

an early critic [Mariano Pelliza] of the novel was quick to see in María’s action evidence of “refinements of feminine coquetry . . . the alarmed modesty is more peculiar to a flirt than to an innocent girl in whose ideas do not exist the awakened slyness of the cities.” Much is to be said in favor of this view; any observer is aware that often women call attention to their charms by feigning to hide them. (123)

To be modest, paradoxically, demonstrates a heightened sexual awareness; one must first learn what nudity means before one can understand chaste behavior. Throughout the novel Efraín alternates between emphasizing María’s chastity and her sensuality, and in many cases her virginal modesty is in itself a source of sexual arousal for him. But if María has learned that showing her naked flesh is likely to incite male desire, from whom did she learn this? Who, in other words, “awakened” her, to use Pelliza’s term above? María is far more modest in this regard than her adoptive sister Emma, or than the lower-class women who populate the novel, suggesting that she did not acquire this knowledge from her female peers. Since Emma does not demonstrate a similar modesty, it is also highly unlikely that the mother is instructing her daughters in this (literal) cover-up. Nor could she have learned this from Efraín, who has been back in the house for less than twenty-four hours when the scene cited above takes place. The only candidate left, then, for the transmission of modesty—and by extension sexual knowledge—is the father.

Turning now to the connection between María’s mysterious illness and what may be read as an incestuous or quasi-incestuous relationship between her and the father, we see first that María’s illness is consistently represented as “nervous” or hysterical in nature. As I have previously asserted, an incestuous relationship—whether potential or actualized—between the father and María may serve to explain her hysterical illness, and her hysteria may be read in turn as her response to the incestuous attacks she confronts. Any mention of hysteria coupled with incest must necessarily invoke Sigmund Freud and his (in)famous study of Dora, whose assertion that she had been

sexually assaulted by her father's friend was first accepted by Freud at face value and then reconceived as a hysterical fantasy. Freud's problematic relationship with Dora and his change of heart about her truthfulness and the origins of her hysteria have been extensively explored elsewhere; what I want to do here is explore further the potential link between incest and hysteria first suggested by Freud.⁴ The intention is not to psychoanalyze Isaacs's characters; such a gesture is both anachronistic and unproductive. As Peter Brooks warns, "[T]he reference to psychoanalysis has traditionally been used to close rather than to open the argument, and the text" (22). But Brooks also points out the useful connections between psychoanalysis as an interpretive strategy and literary analysis, affirming that, in human sexual development, "human desire emerges subject to the 'laws' dictated by the castration complex and the Oedipal triangle—emerges, that is, as desire inhabited by loss and prohibition, which means that it is channeled by rules, including those of language, and subject to forms, including narrative plots" (25). In his view, readings that balance literary and psychoanalytic criticism as equal partners in the interpretive work, given their interdependence, are the ones most likely to "enhance an understanding of human subjects as situated at the intersection of several fictions created by and for them" (26). Brooks concludes by reminding his readers that "the psychoanalytic intertext obliges the critic to make a transit through a systematic discourse elaborated to describe the dynamics of psychic process" (43). More specifically connecting the two modes of reading, he points out, "in the transference situation of hearing or reading, as in the analytic transference, the work of the reader is not only to grasp the story as much as possible, but to judge its relation to the narrative discourse that conveys it, seeking to understand not only what the narrative appears to say but also what it appears to intend" (61). In this regard a psychoanalytical approach to *María* may thus reconstruct a plot of incest from the recurring signs of María's hysteria.

Several critics have commented on the ways that María makes use of her illness in order to protest her situation and her treatment. Most helpfully, Doris Sommer discusses María's hysteria and the two prevailing views in nineteenth-century medicine for treating hysteria—abstinence and (appropriate, heterosexual, matrimonial) sexual activity. Of these, the former is pre-

4. There is, of course, extensive bibliography on Freud and his case study of Dora. See, for example, Bernheimer and Kahane, and Decker, among others.

scribed for María in the form of her separation from Efraín, a “prescription” advanced most notably by the father, in the face of those who would have prescribed the latter. Sommer also suggests that María’s hysteria might be a manifestation of her anger toward the father:

For overly sensitive María . . . there is something unspeakable about her apparently loving and docile relationship to Don Jorge; and it may produce the intense self-hatred and punishing masochism that Dr. Mayn diagnosed as epileptic attacks. After all, Jorge had separated her from Efraín more than once. She senses that this separation, meant first to insure [*sic*] his education and only secondarily to prevent her emotional distress, has cost her life. (*Foundational Fictions* 196–97)

Sommer does not, however, elaborate on the “unspeakable” nature of María’s relationship with the father. Sommer’s use of the word *unspeakable* is telling in more than one way; not only does it describe what she acknowledges is a deeply problematic relationship between the two characters, but it also underscores the critical silence about the father-daughter relationship that has prevailed to date—a silence by critics that is in turn critically important. The possibility of father-daughter incest seems, in fact, to have been literally, and literarily, unspeakable. Although critics such as Sommer, Rosenberg, and Williams have noted that there is something deeply troubling in the novel’s depiction of the father-daughter dynamic, they then leave that troubling, troublesome aspect untouched and unexplained. One might, indeed, see in the fact that the critics do not explore the potential for reading father-daughter incest in the novel the expression of an anxiety similar to that which silences María herself in the text, allowing her only to express herself symptomatically, through her illness.

María’s psychosomatic illness allows her to express her emotions in a way that would otherwise be unacceptable, given her gender and youth.⁵ Not only that, but her hysteria functions as a means by which she can register her protest about her treatment by the male characters. In a society, such as that of mid-nineteenth-century rural Colombia, in which women are typically silenced, unable to express their wishes or to protest their treatment by men,

5. Similarly, María Inés Lagos-Pope points out that “la enfermedad de María es una forma de rebeldía que no se expresa con palabras sino que asume una forma somática que acaba arrastrándola a la muerte” (19).

and in which their bodies are subject to male desires on multiple levels, illness is one of the few available means for women to assert control over their bodies. Speaking of the ways in which women are repressed and oppressed in *María*, Viviana Díaz-Balsera has commented, “La mujer acepta la abolición total de su voluntad y de su voz, y se entrega a los quehaceres de la reproducción cuando la ocasión finalmente llega. En este sentido, las mujeres del padre de Efraín pagan su alquiler reconociendo públicamente sólo los deseos de aquél” (43). But there are moments of protest in the text; as I have mentioned, the mother conspires with Efraín to help him make his love known to María, against the father’s orders and “desires,” and María resists being handed over to “los quehaceres de la reproducción” by the ultimate rebellion, death.

Illness provides the female characters with a subversive means to wrest control of their bodies and their destinies away from the men who otherwise dominate them. When María is ill, she is apparently safe from the father’s advances, as she is cared for and watched over by her female relatives, whose presence in her bedroom may serve as a deterrent to the father. María’s hysteria may also, of course, constitute a bodily protest at the father’s transgressions. Indeed, her illness is itself highly suggestive of the father’s illicit desire. In his explorations of the nature of hysteria in “Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria,” Freud writes,

Every hysterical symptom involves the participation of *both* sides. It cannot occur without the presence of a certain degree of *somatic compliance* offered by some normal or pathological process. . . . And it cannot occur more than once—and the capacity for repeating itself is one of the characteristics of a hysterical symptom—unless it has a *psychical* significance, a *meaning*. (cited in Gay 193)

María’s symptoms are never described in detail, most likely because her attacks take place during the absences of the narrator. The mere fact of their repetition, as Freud insists, means that these episodes have a significance beyond that of mere illness in literary as well as psychoanalytic terms; they are somatic and textual manifestations of María’s mental or emotional disturbance. The hysterical episodes always lead to her lying in bed, semiconscious. María’s unconscious, completely passive, bed-ridden pose echoes her vulnerability to the father’s advances. Yet if she is unconscious, at least, she cannot be held responsible for what he does. Her attacks render her physi-

cally passive, apparently unable to resist male sexual advances, but paradoxically they also are the vehicle by which she fends off those advances; her very passivity, as Isaacs depicts it, protects her.

In this regard, *María's* illness is clearly connected to her passivity, not only reflecting but augmenting it. As Charles Bernheimer has explained, writing of nineteenth-century England:

Since a woman was supposed to be fragile, her falling ill and being confined to the sickbed . . . was therefore acceptable as an affirmative sign of her femininity, although indeed the action could be interpreted as signifying just the opposite, a rejection of femininity as illness and a hatred of the patriarchy that defined it as such. (6)

Sickness could thus be deployed strategically in order to carve out a space of resistance, as I argue is the case in *María*. The heroine's hysterical symptoms both manifest the abuse she fears and protect her from it.

As we know, *María's* illness eventually leads to her death. During the description of *María's* final days and during Efraín's agonized, bereft tour of his family's former home in Cauca, Isaacs, narrating through Efraín's retrospective gaze, makes it explicit that *María's* death results from the father's desire to separate her from Efraín. After Efraín has been in London for a year, he receives a visitor from Colombia, who tells him to come home, saying of *María*, "ella vivirá si usted llega a tiempo" (168). It is generally recognized by the other characters, then, that *María's* illness is due to her separation from Efraín, despite the father's insistence that her hysteria stems from her proximity to Efraín. *María's* own final letter to Efraín states, "Al fin me consienten que te confiese la verdad: hace un año que me mata hora por hora esta enfermedad de que la dicha me curó por unos días. Si no hubieran interrumpido esa felicidad, yo habría vivido para ti" (168). *María* does not specify who "consents" now to allow her to tell the truth, and who "interrupted" her former happiness, but the reader can fill in the blanks; it was the father, who spent the earlier portions of the novel similarly imposing his control over *María* and Efraín's relationship.

The father's letter informs Efraín that the doctors have determined that *María's* only hope for survival is the return of Efraín; "ante esa necesidad mi padre no vaciló; ordenábame regresar con la mayor precipitud posible, y se disculpaba por no haberlo dispuesto así antes" (169). The implication is that the father knew earlier that Efraín's return would save *María*, but did no-

thing, presumably ensuring his own sexual control over her, even when, as we have seen, her marriage to Efraín would not only save her life but would ensure the financial survival of the entire family.

If María's hysteria is momentarily empowering, then, giving her a way to protest her treatment by the father and to protect herself from his advances under the guise of illness, it is not, to put it mildly, an effective long-term strategy. Death may be the ultimate escape, and María herself the long-suffering, martyred heroine who accepts her imminent demise peacefully, but it is still death. Just as María's efforts to protect herself fail, the father's efforts to protect his family fail. Both, indeed, are the result of self-sabotage: María cannot control the course of her hysterical illness and falls victim to it, while the father's incestuous desires for María, coupled with the failed financial ventures that were meant to assure his family's economic success, lead instead to the ruin of the family. Rodolfo Borello has asserted that the novel's central conflict is that of love versus familial responsibility, saying that "las oposiciones encarnadas en personajes concretos, corresponden a María y el padre, a María y la familia, los intereses de la familia" (76). But I would argue that the father destroys the family on multiple levels rather than preserving it, and that the father's interests are opposed to those of the family, not synonymous with them. By asserting his control over María's sexuality and preventing her marriage to Efraín, the father causes her death, loses the dowry that would have saved his family from financial ruin and, it is implied, indirectly causes the death of his son Efraín as well. Ultimately, what has been typically seen as the archetypal romantic, and Romantic, novel of Spanish America is instead—or also—a treatise about the failure of patriarchal power.

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