

# The Perfect Slave



Federico de Castro

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Different writers have approached the topic of the mechanical woman in diverse ways in modern times, long before post-humanism conferred new cultural life upon it. Among them, E. T. A. Hofmann (1776-1822) illustrated the fantastic approach in “The Sandman” (“Der Sandman,” 1816) by portraying a mechanical doll whose appearance threatens to delete the boundaries between natural beings and artificial creations, thus ominously threatening the very idea of personality and free will. In contrast, Auguste Villiers de l’Isle Adam (1838-1899) embraced in *Tomorrow’s Eve* (*L’Ève future*, 1886) the novelty or Suvinian *novum* of an artificial woman endowed with sentience as an embodiment of the perfect body and mind so elusive in women (and men) of flesh and blood, a perfection attained through science and technology. Between both works, a virtually unknown but significant Spanish tale shows that a high fantasy approach can also be taken. Its author, Federico de Castro (1834-1903) was one of the leading figures of the Krausist school in his native Seville, where he directed a *Monthly Journal of Philosophy, Literature and Science* (*Revista Mensual de Filosofía, Literatura y Ciencia*). And it was in this journal that “La esclava perfecta” (translated below as “The Perfect Slave”) was first published in 1872 (vol. IV, p. 412-413). Castro later

collected this story in 1877 in *Flores de invierno* (‘Winter Flowers’),<sup>1</sup> an anthology of essays and narratives, both original and rewritten from popular sources.

Krausism was perhaps the most influential current of thought in Spain in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where it moved beyond the philosophical doctrines of its German founder Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781-1832). Spanish intellectuals understood and promoted it rather as an encompassing way of thinking and researching, and even of ethically living. They combined thus a deeply felt non-confessional spirituality and a clear overture to modern sciences and their methods, especially in the fields of pedagogy (including popularisation of science) and folklore studies, for which Federico de Castro is an important pioneer in the Andalusian region. Spanish Krausists were also notorious universalists, promoting a better knowledge in their country not only of foreign European and Western cultures, but also of the Eastern ones, although usually without the

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<sup>1</sup> The following translation is based on this final edition: Federico de Castro, “La esclava perfecta,” *Flores de invierno*, Sevilla: José G. Fernández, 1877, p. 89-93. We warmly thank Jonathan Deroo for his revising the English text of the translation and the introductory note.



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orientalist bias more common in other countries that, unlike Spain, had colonial interests in the Orient.<sup>2</sup>

Spanish orientalism often focused on the country's own medieval history of Al-Andalus until the demise of the Granada kingdom in 1492. More exotic venues were also used in contemporary Spanish literature. One of 19<sup>th</sup> century legendary narratives that has attained canonical status is "The Leader of the Red Hands" ("El caudillo de las manos rojas," 1858) by Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870), which retells a Hindu mythic legend in ornate prose similar to that of later writers from the Spanish Aesthetic Movement. Federico de Castro followed Bécquer's style of writing in "The Perfect Slave," which also reads, unlike the rest of his narratives, as a piece having been written with the imagistic and rhetorically rich style typical of decadent writers of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Castro was, however, more original than Bécquer regarding the setting of his story: "The Perfect Slave" is set in an Oriental-appearing kingdom that is not intended as a conventional fairy-tale venue. Given the existence of mechanical female lovers and other automatons as central features in several stories from pre-Muslim India and its area of cultural influence (for instance, the Tocharian tale of the painter and the mechanical maiden), Castro's story has a certain resemblance with that

old Indian tradition of narratives with mechanical characters.

His story, however, is set in a fully imaginary kingdom. The latter has no name and it is ruled by an also nameless and all-powerful monarch called the 'Sun Prince,' who is endowed with semi-divine features such as a luminous front that has to be covered by nine veils so as not to dazzle his royal subjects. The narrative begins by his ordering his nine ministers to seek the perfect woman among the daughters of gods and men. This allusion to divine offspring on earth suggests that the fictional universe of this story has no place in any historical period of our primary world. On the contrary, it is a full secondary world with naturally accepted supernatural features and having a legendary-looking setting, as well as possible magical features (for instance, nine often appears as a kind of magical number). Castro's is, therefore, a fictional world typical of high fantasy, long before this genre of literature became common in the anglosphere, and it can probably even be considered one of the first of its kind in Hispanic literatures. Its significance is not only archaeological, though.

Apart from the beauty of its language and the perfect structure of its narrative structure, where ellipsis is adroitly used, "The Perfect Slave" is not only an outstanding piece of literary fantasy. It also conveys a message that can be read as a debunking of the widespread male wish to have a female partner that is both extremely beautiful and fully submissive, a wish that underpins the very concept of the gynoid in the above-mentioned Villiers de l'Isle Adam's novel. In Castro's tale, the king soon discovers that a true woman of flesh and blood always has her own will but that his 'perfect slave' cannot bring him happiness. An automaton

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<sup>2</sup> The Philippines were still a part of the old and decaying Spanish empire but they were always seen as an extension of Spanish colonies in the Americas. Moreover, unlike India, China or the Muslim world, the Philippines lacked a pre-existing civilisation strong enough to resist effectively the thorough religious and cultural westernization successfully undertaken by the Spanish.



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devoid of free will cannot be but mortally boring even for a godlike patriarchal despot. Since “The Perfect Slave” is a high fantasy story and not a didactic tract, this message is rather suggested than explicitly put forward. It reveals, however, that Castro was also a true Spanish Krausist for his promotion of women’s dignity and agency. “The Perfect Slave” is, therefore, a tale that seems written for current readers rather than for those of Castro’s time both regarding its meaning and its genre. This is why it

probably deserves recognition not only for its feminism and its veiled criticism of divinised monarchy, but also as an early classic of international high fantasy. It is also perhaps as thought-provoking and artistically satisfying as the better known works on the same topic by Hoffmann and Villiers de l’Isle Adam on the same topic in their respective macro-modes of non-mimetic fiction, namely fantastic and science fiction. Castro’s high fantasy should be added to this list.

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### I

Behind the nine veils keeping him from the eyes of men, the *Sun Prince* sits upon his golden throne.

None has seen his sovereign countenance and none ever will.

Should any be fool enough to dare lift the veils, even before being dazzled and felled by the fire torrents springing from *the mountain of light* which shines upon the regal brow, the nine cutlasses of the nine guardians who guard day and night would cleave their neck, severing head from shoulders.

Though hidden by the nine veils, there are nine prostrated viziers waiting ceaselessly for the slightest indication of his will, nine couriers on swift horses ever ready to bear his will to the nine regions of the empire, nine times nine hundred warriors ready to execute it in his court and nine times ninety thousand to enforce it in all the land.

Now the veil stirs... the nine viziers listen shuddering, the couriers crack their whips and spur their steeds on their flanks, the guards shake their shiny weapons of gemstones inlaid, the squadrons stand in formation, the unerring arrowheads surface above the battlements of castles carried by nine hundred elephants...

What does the *son of the Sun* want? Which city's ramparts must yield to his war machines? What life must perish by the blades of his swords?

Tremble not: the prince's words do not command destruction and death.

The lion is chagrined because of his loneliness and longs for a companion.

He told them:

"Go, travel throughout the seven climes and find me *the most beautiful of*

*the beautiful* among the daughters of the Gods, among the daughters of the kings, among the daughters of men."

Nine eunuchs already left, each carrying enough gold to purchase nine empires.

Beware, oh, you beautiful ones, it will avail you not to try to deceive the keen eye of the eunuchs. Fathers, husbands, brothers, it will avail you not to lock the pearl among the beautiful in abyssal deeps or to guard her behind ramparts teeming with soldiers. Gold and the prince's warriors will take her away from you.

### II

Why is this woman crying? She seems the living image of despaired beauty.

Why does the prince's veil shake furiously?

He says:

"Bring me *the wisest of the wise*."

A venerable old man bends and bury his wrinkled brow on the floor and, noticing the woman in so doing, is about to unwittingly utter "No other...more beautiful!"

The axe is hanging over his head, but then the prince speaks:

"As beautiful as this one, yet without volition!"

The old man answers thus:

"Sir, you shall be obeyed."

### III

Why is the prince of the nine veils dying of love, languishing in boredom?

He has the most beautiful of the beautiful by his side. A lake does not



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reflect more accurately the hues of the sky than her will reflects his will.

Why is he dying of love? Why is the prince of the nine veils languishing in

boredom?

Why, the most beautiful of the beautiful, the perfect slave is not a woman but an automaton!