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The Story Not Told: Sex and Marriage in Pardo Bazán’s “Los cirineos” and “La argolla”

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Abstract: This article examines how narrative strategies of indirection employed in “Los cirineos” and “La argolla” engage the reader’s ethical participation in examining and questioning societal norms concerning sex and marriage. In “Los cirineos,” the opposition between the moral and the immoral is broken down by the presence of what Shlomith Rimmon Kenan has called “doubly-directed clues,” resulting in mutually exclusive readings of the text that exemplify C. Namwali Serpell’s concept of oscillating narration. In “La argolla,” the sexual content of a proposition is suggested rather than stated due to what Robyn Warhol has defined as its “disnarrated” nature, but it is revealed through what Gerald Prince has called “disnarrated” statements of negative possibility. In addition, the ultimate triumph of honor over dishonor in these short stories, the reader is obligated to mentally construct what is left untold, and in the process, is encouraged to explore beyond the limits of society’s fixed standards.

Keywords: ambiguity/ambigüedad, C. Namwali Serpell, disnarrated, Emilia Pardo Bazán, ethics/la ética, Gerald Prince, oscillation/oscilación, Robyn Warhol, Slomith Rimmon Kenan, unnarratable

After nearly a century of critical neglect, Emilia Pardo Bazán’s short stories have experienced an explosion of interest by scholars over the past two decades. Among the many fine studies that have been published as a result, several have brought to light the sophisticated narrative strategies used by Pardo Bazán in these deceptively brief fictions. Maryellen Bieder has explored the subtleties of narrative plotting, Joyce Tolliver has examined the intricacies of narrative voice, Susan McKenna has studied the narrative structures of beginnings and ends, and Susan Walter has focused on the interrelationship between narrative frames and their embedded stories. My study seeks to further expand this body of work on narrative technique by demonstrating how Pardo Bazán’s interrogation of social strictures pertaining to sex and marriage in “Los cirineos” and “La argolla” is achieved through narrative strategies of indirection that constitute a silent form of communication with the reader.

Like the famous optical illusion of the duck and the rabbit, where the viewer can see both images, but only one at a time, Pardo Bazán’s 1903 short story “Los cirineos” contains mutually exclusive parallel stories. On the one hand, it tells of the selfless friendship between two married couples who, as the title suggests, help each other to bear the cross that each must endure: the rich couple’s unhappy marriage and the poor couple’s economic hardship. On the other hand, it is a tale of self-interested financial exploitation and infidelity. This duality places the reader in a difficult position because one reading of the events requires a suppression of the literary competence that is normally used to interpret textual clues, while the other reading requires an over-reading of those clues that is not fully justified by the other elements in the text. The reader is left with the task of constantly shifting between these two different readings, each of which negates the other.

“Los cirineos” opens with the narrator telling us about the twenty-five-year-old Romana, who was married off against her will to Laureano, a rich and elderly business associate of her
father. Trapped in a loveless marriage, friendless, and lacking any distraction from the monotony of her life, Romana becomes melancholy, and her husband responds by becoming irritable and sullen. Eventually, Romana’s health begins to fail, and she is sent to a sanatorium, where she meets a vibrant young woman, Ignacia, who is serving as a companion and caretaker to her ill sister. The two women become friends, and Romana is quickly restored to good health. They collaborate on a variety of activities designed to cheer up the patients, with Ignacia planning them, and Romana covering the costs. Ignacia ultimately must leave the sanatorium when her sister’s condition worsens and she is sent home to eventually die in her own bed. Saddened by the idea of losing her friend, Romana also decides to leave and travels with her in the second-class train compartment that is all that Ignacia can afford as the wife of a civil servant with a very modest income. Since both women live in Madrid, Romana frequently visits Ignacia, always bringing gifts of clothing, food, and toys for her three children, thereby satisfying to a small extent her own frustrated maternal yearnings.

One day when Ignacia comments on how lucky Romana is to have a rich husband and no money problems, Romana says, “Pues mira: yo . . . te trocaba la suerte. . . . Y ya que te gusta el marido viejo..., te lo traspasaba, cediéndote tú, por supuesto, al joven...” (Pardo Bazán 3: 79). The narrator then tells us: “Fué dicha esta enormidad como se dicen las frases humorísticas más gordas cuando hay confianza y ternura; las dos amigas rieron a carcajadas y se besaron. Es de advertir que por entonces ninguna de las dos conocía al marido de la otra” (3: 79). This is the pivotal point in the story that allows for the two mutually exclusive readings to arise. In the first reading, Romana’s statement was indeed said in jest and intended to be forgotten, while in the second reading, it was said on purpose and intended to be taken seriously. The remainder of the events of the story evolve in such a way as to support both possibilities.

In the first reading, the story continues with Ignacia meeting Romana’s husband on the street one day. Her light-hearted manner of teasing the old man about his curmudgeonly ways results in her being invited to dinner. Although Laureano had originally been against his wife’s friendship with a woman of a lower social standing, he soon is won over by Ignacia’s vibrancy and she becomes a regular visitor. Ignacia’s good spirits are contagious, and the old man starts to provide amusements for all of them to enjoy, such as box seats at the theater and outings in the new coach that he buys. Laureano and Romana begin to dress more elegantly and to eat gourmet meals. Romana is delighted with Laureano’s new philosophy of living life to its fullest.

Meanwhile, Ignacia’s husband, Miguel, is introduced to Romana when he returns home after a two-month trip. He shows her samples of his hobby, photography, in which he engages on a limited basis because of the expense involved. He offers to take Romana’s picture the next day, and Ignacia suggests the Retiro Park as a good setting. Ignacia stays home with the children, and while Miguel is photographing Romana, they talk about their past, with Miguel confiding that he had married Ignacia on the rebound after being rejected by another woman he had loved deeply. This secret confession forges a bond between Romana and Miguel that complements the one that she has with Ignacia. As a result, she willingly accepts Ignacia’s offer of having Miguel accompany her on further outings.

Ignacia’s sister eventually dies of tuberculosis, and the young couple moves to better lodgings. Thanks to a winning lottery ticket, Ignacia also treats herself to some expensive new clothes. Over time, Romana, Laureano, Ignacia, and Miguel become close friends, spending much time in each other’s company. By the next summer, they even plan to vacation together. When Romana suggests in private to Laureano that they choose an economical vacation spot because the cost of taking a family of five to Santander or San Sebastián may be beyond Ignacia and Miguel’s budget, Laureano responds by saying, “¿Qué importa? . . . Los ayudaremos...; al fin, nosotros no tenemos hijos..., ni esperanzas...” (3: 83). Hearing this, “Romana se turbó, bajó los ojos y murmuró, sobando el lindo broche de ‘estrás’ de su cinturón grana,” and says,
“¿Quién sabe?,” thereby suggesting that she is pregnant (3: 83). As the couple happily embraces, the narrator states that they felt “libres un instante del peso de la cruz” (3: 83).

This last line, of course, refers to Simon of Cyrene’s carrying of Jesus’s cross on the road to the crucifixion, and the term cirineo in popular speech has come to mean a helper. As such, it echoes the story’s title and reinforces the reading of the relationship between the four characters as supportive and disinterested. Ignacia and Miguel are the cirineos who have transformed Romana and Laureano’s marriage into a happy and loving one by teaching them how to enjoy life. Similarly, Romana and Laureano have been the cirineos who have lifted the crushing economic burden off of the shoulders of Ignacia and Miguel.

But what if the story’s title is to be read ironically, revealing self-interested motives to seemingly disinterested actions? In this second reading, Romana uses her money to buy Ignacia’s friendship, first at the sanitarium by sponsoring Ignacia’s planned activities, and then back in Madrid with her constant stream of gifts for her children. Romana’s suggestion that the two women switch spouses is a calculated ploy to break out of her dreary and confining life. Ignacia, in turn, takes full advantage of Romana’s permission to seduce her rich husband. She purposely arranges to meet him on the street one day and immediately begins flirting with him. Laureano is charmed by Ignacia, begins to take care of his appearance whenever she visits, and hires a new chef because Ignacia dislikes the plain food served by the previous cook. All the while, Romana encourages Ignacia’s flirtatious relationship with Laureano and often gets what she wants from her husband by asking Ignacia to use her influence over him.

Ignacia upholds her end of the bargain not only by seducing Laureano, but also by paving the way for Romana to have an affair with Miguel. Soon after introducing Romana to her husband, Ignacia tells him to show her his photo albums, thereby placing Miguel and Romana in such close physical proximity to each other that their heads practically touch. She then vetoes her husband’s suggestion that he photograph Romana on a busy public street in front of a church or store, and instead, she ensures a more intimate setting by telling him to meet Romana in a secluded part of the Retiro Park at an early morning hour. On the day of the photography session, Ignacia arranges for Romana and Miguel to be alone by using a last-minute excuse about having to stay home because of some minor injury experienced by her youngest child. She also encourages further unaccompanied meetings between Miguel and Romana.

The death of Ignacia’s sister provides Ignacia with the opportunity to secretly see Laureano without the prying eyes of an adult who might have disapproved of their relationship, and Laureano pays for Ignacia’s move to better lodgings in order to have a more agreeable love nest in which to carry on the affair. Ignacia’s new clothes are bought by Laureano, and Romana signals her knowledge that the seduction of Laureano has taken place through her jubilant excitement for herself rather than necessities for her family.

Meanwhile, Ignacia and Miguel enjoy Laureano’s open-handed generosity: eating his fine food, using his theater box, sitting in his elegant coach, and even traveling at his expense. Romana, in turn, also reaps the benefits of a more interesting life with her husband and has used Miguel to significantly increase her chances of becoming pregnant. In this reading of the events, Romana and Ignacia have secretly and ingeniously orchestrated a double adultery to give each other what they wanted: freedom from economic hardship for Ignacia; motherhood and escape from a monotonous marriage that was not of her making for Romana. Like the Roman soldiers who enlisted the aid of Simon of Cyrene, Romana enlisted Ignacia’s help, and both women used their husbands to carry out their plan. Once again, we have two sets of cirineos, but in this case, the motivations of all four characters are far from disinterested.

In formulating these two mutually exclusive readings, the reader is constantly required to alternate between the two possibilities while being aware of the inadequacy of each. At every juncture, the situations suggest one interpretation, but the wording or silences in the text support
another, and vice versa. “Doubly-directed clues” is the term used by Shlomith Rimmon to define “scenes, conversations, or verbal expressions which are open to a double interpretation, supporting simultaneously the two alternatives” in texts, such as Henry James’s Turn of the Screw, that present two contradictory hypotheses (53).

In “Los cirineos,” this double-directedness begins with Romana’s statement about exchanging husbands. The narrator only comments on the manner in which the statement was made, mentioning that it was said “como se dicen las frases humorísticas más gordas” (Pardo Bazán 3: 79). The narrator does not tell the reader if this manner is a reflection of the statement actually being a joke intended by Romana to be taken as such, or if it is a lighthearted presentation of a serious offer being indirectly communicated to Ignacia. Similarly, the narrator does not tell the reader if the women are responding to the statement with laughter and kisses because the joke was outlandishly funny, or if this response represents a tacit understanding and agreement between the women to follow through with the offer. It is left to the reader to decide, and that task is complicated by the total absence of representations of the thoughts of the two women, not only in this scene, but throughout the remainder of the story. Without access to their minds, the reader can only speculate about Romana’s motivations for making the statement and Ignacia’s comprehension of what it meant.

Double-directedness continues in the next scene where Ignacia stops Laureano on the Calle de Alcalá to talk with him. Does this first meeting between them occur by chance or is it by design? The reader’s suspicions are aroused by the timing of the event being so close to Romana’s statement, and also by the fact that it is Ignacia who initiates the contact. But, the possibility of this being a chance encounter also is plausible because it takes place on one of Madrid’s busiest streets. Nowhere does Ignacia say whether or not she had planned to cross paths with Laureano, and no representations of her thoughts are provided that could either confirm the reader’s suspicions or lay them to rest. Furthermore, the narrator does not comment one way or another about how this meeting came to be, leaving the reader once again to decide based on speculations about motivations.

In subsequent scenes, Ignacia does give reasons for her actions, but the reader is not sure if she is telling the truth. For example, her excuse for not accompanying Romana and Miguel for their photography session is credible because small children are prone to getting bumps and bruises. But why does Ignacia not ask Miguel to reschedule the session for when she could be present? After all, the Retiro was known at the time to be a place for romantic liaisons, and Ignacia’s absence provides a suspicious degree of opportunity for the beginning of an affair between her husband and best friend. The narrator neither affirms nor denies the veracity of Ignacia’s excuse, and there are no representations of her thoughts to reveal her motivations. The same is true of Ignacia’s explanation about the origin of the money for the fine mourning clothes she buys. A sudden windfall could be attributable to winning the lottery, and it is possible that Ignacia decided to pamper herself after having cared for her sister throughout her long illness. But that decision seems outlandishly selfish given the financial straits of her family, and the invention of a winning lottery ticket could be an easy way to cover up money that comes from an illicit source.

Double-directedness also is achieved in “Los cirineos” through the ambiguous use of narrative voice. For example, during the scene where Miguel speaks of his past romances to Romana while in the Retiro, the text states, “Aquello no era ofender a Romana, pues no era cortejarla” (3: 82). However, when read within the context of the paragraph in which it is found, it is unclear if that sentence is attributable to the narrator, and therefore is a reliable statement of fact, or if the sentence conveys Miguel’s words in free indirect speech, and thus, is a slickly stated line intended to win Romana’s confidence and sympathy as a strategy for seducing her. In the latter case, Miguel is unaware of the pact between the women, but he willingly takes advantage of his moment alone with Romana to establish an emotional intimacy between them that can serve as
a basis for further intimacies of a sexual nature, thereby conforming to Ignacia’s description of him as “de la piel de Barrabás” as he acts just as she had expected (3: 82).

In each of these scenes, gaps are created that must be filled in order to validate one reading or the other. But the text does not provide the evidence necessary to fill those gaps. Due to the silences of the narrator, the lack of access to the women’s thoughts, and the ambiguous use of narrative voice, the reader must either overfill those gaps with nonconfirmed speculations in order to read this as a story of adultery and lies, or must ignore those aspects of the text that seem suspicious in order to read it as a heartwarming story about the transforming friendship shared by two couples.

What, then, does Pardo Bazán achieve through this subtle balance between the readings? In her recent study of James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, C. Namwali Serpell proposes that texts with mutually exclusive interpretations “proffer a skepticism about the possibility of fixed meaning or true revelation” (232). Using the term “oscillation” to describe the continual back and forth movement from one possibility to the other required of the reader, Serpell states:

> Just as an oscillating thing will blur in our vision, the uncertainty produced by mutual exclusion begins to occlude opposition. A thing cannot oscillate without at least two points but the oscillation between them serves to undermine the fixity and opposition of those points. Their contrapuntal distinction gives way to a blurring conflation that converts their difference into a vibrating potentiality. The oscillating movement of uncertainty exceeds and reconfigures the mutually exclusive structure that produces it. (232)

I would suggest that the narrative strategy of oscillation in “Los cirineos” contributes to Pardo Bazán’s subtle and nonintrusive exploration of ethical issues related to adultery. She presents the reader with a moral story of two couples selflessly aiding each other and an immoral story of mutual exploitation and infidelity. As with the optical illusion, both possibilities are contained on the page, with the reader switching between the two. But between each shift, a moment exists when the text is neither one nor the other; the story it tells is neither moral nor immoral. It is in this moment of blurred conflation that the reader is free to ponder the fixed standards of morality each reading contains. Questions arise for the reader during these moments of “vibrating potentiality” that take a broader view of the matter. What, for example, is the morality involved in adulterous relationships that are of benefit to all parties involved? And, what is the morality involved in aid that is not disinterested, whereby helping others one helps oneself? If all four parties are happier at the end of the story than they were at the beginning, why is one reading moral and the other immoral? Pardo Bazán does not offer answers to these questions, but her oscillating narrative provides the reader with the opportunity to form them and others like them.

Oscillating narration is not the only form of double-directedness that Pardo Bazán has used in her short stories to encourage the reader’s skepticism concerning nineteenth-century Spanish society’s fixed standards on sex and marriage, as evidenced by “La argolla,” which was published in the year previous to “Los cirineos.” “La argolla” is about a beautiful but impoverished young woman, Leocadia, who works as a ladies companion for the daughters of a business magnate named Ribelles. Her job places her in constant contact with the opulent lifestyle of her employers, which contrasts sharply with her own economic situation. While they live in a mansion with an enormous mirror over the velvet-carpeted staircase, she lives in a small interior room of a boarding house with bars on her window and a view of the concrete patio below. The Ribelles sisters and their social equals have elegant clothing and jewelry, while she must wear shoes in need of repair and soiled castoff clothes that she embellishes with ribbons and embroidery to make them appear new. She is consumed with envy and vows to someday live the life of luxury, which is in her sight but beyond her reach. Her opportunity arises unexpectedly when Ribelles’s brother Gaspar, “solterón más rico aú,” approaches her
one day after she has completed her duties of escorting his nieces home (Pardo Bazán 2: 406). Having just returned from one of his frequent business trips abroad and finding Leocadia alone, Gaspar “la detuvo, y sin preámbulo la dijo... lo que advinía el lector” (2: 406).

This statement is an example of “the unnarratable,” a term coined by Gerald Prince to refer to material that for a variety of reasons is left unstated in any given text because it “cannot be narrated or is not worth narrating” (28). Robyn Warhol recently has refined and expanded Prince’s global category into four separately named subcategories, among which is “the antinarratable” (224–25). This form of the unnarratable pertains to material that should not be told because it transgresses social conventions or taboos. Thus, “lo que advinía el lector” suggests rather than states the antinarratable content of Gaspar’s sexual proposition. But what is antinarratable in any given text does get communicated indirectly to the reader, and, as Warhol notes, this often is achieved through the use of another technique identified by Prince, “the disnarrated,” which comprises events and possibilities that remain unrealized but “are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text” (30). Whereas the antinarratable pertains to what was, is, or will be, but is unmentionable, the disnarrated can be used to reveal the unmentionable by stating what was not, is not, or will not be.

Such is the case in “La argolla” where the unmentionable sexual nature of the future relationship between Leocadia and Gaspar is disclosed while Leocadia is musing about the luxurious fabrics and furs “como galas de novia” that she soon will be given (Pardo Bazán 2: 406). Suddenly a shiver goes up her spine as she reminds herself that “[e]lla no era novia. Las novias no lo son por las galas, ni por las joyas, ni siquiera por el amor... Son novias por otra razón. ¿Leocadia no sería novia jamás!” (2: 406; emphasis original). Conveyed in free indirect thought, Leocadia’s mental statements highlight the word novia to juxtapose the disnarrated, which comprises events and possibilities that remain unrealized but “are nonetheless referred to by the narrative text” (30). Whereas the antinarratable pertains to what was, is, or will be, but is unmentionable, the disnarrated can be used to reveal the unmentionable by stating what was not, is not, or will not be.

As Leocadia’s thoughts—rendered in free indirect style—turn to Gaspar, she now tries to define his status in relationship to her, coming to the conclusion that he will be her future “dueño” (2: 406). The concept of ownership conveyed in this word resonates with the title of the story due to the plural meanings of the word argolla. Since an argolla is both an “[a]ro, manilla o brazalete que se llevaba como adorno” and an “[a]ro grueso, generalmente de hierro, que, afirmado debidamente, sirve para amarre o de asidero,” Pardo Bazán can use the same word to refer to both the bracelet that Leocadia has received from Gaspar and the shackle that in ancient times was worn by slaves (1: 202). As Leocadia mentally makes a comparison between her bejeweled argolla and the “argolla de esclava” that she remembers from her readings, she at first sees her argolla as representing a liberation from the drudgery and poverty of her current life (2: 406). But as she continues to contemplate her situation, she comes to see that argolla does indeed represent a form of slavery. Feeling “una impresión de azotes en las desnudas espaldas,” Leocadia realizes that “sólo faltaban seis días para la esclavitud” of going with Gaspar to England where he will become her “dueño” (2: 407).

Like a slave, she is being bought, and Pardo Bazán’s use of terminology related to the world of commerce underscores this point. The argolla itself is described as, “la señañ, las arras, por decirlo así, del contrato” (2: 406). In legal terms, arras refers to the “[c]entrage de una parte del precio o depósito de una cantidad con la que se garantiza el cumplimiento de una obligación” (1: 210), and señañ is a synonym that means the “[c]antidad o parte de precio que se adelanta en algunos contratos como garantía de su cumplimiento” (2: 2048–49). As such, the argolla is a form of earnest money that Gaspar, “el mercader,” is using to secure his illicit sexual contract with Leocadia (2: 407).

Gaspar’s treatment of their relationship as a financial transaction is particularly evident in the way he communicates with her. When he sends her a message, it does not take the form of a personal handwritten note. Rather, it is a continental, a term used to refer to a letter sent
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by a private agency and delivered by a courier. This is an official form of correspondence that requires Leocadia’s signature of receipt on the envelope. The content of the message shows that Gaspar considers the contract between them to already be in effect since she has the argolla in her possession. Using the tú form of address and signing with just the initial G, he orders her to wait for him on the corner of the street where he will pick her up for dinner. Offended by his “tono imperativo, el grosero tuteo inmovitado, la precaución de la initial,” Leocadia tears up the letter (2: 407). She had been prepared to trade her “regia hermosura,” and her purity that she had guarded, “como se conserva lejos del hielo y del cierzo una azucena destinada a marchitarse en una orgia,” for the riches promised her in the contract with Gaspar (2: 406–7). But, she is not prepared to trade her self-respect as well. Her pride now asserts its “anverso de virtud” over its “reverso de vicio,” and she negates her contract with Gaspar by throwing the argolla to the floor and stomping on it until it is broken into pieces, thereby freeing herself from the bonds of slavery that it represents (2: 406).

The plotline of this story validates and upholds society’s fixed standards of morality by having Leocadia ultimately reject Gaspar’s antinarratable proposition, presumably to continue her honorable life as a lady’s companion until she marries someone of her own social class that resembles the type of handsome young man about whom she dreams “al oír música, después de leer versos, o en la capilla, entre el olor del incienso” (2: 407). However, I suggest that this story is not an unqualified endorsement of social norms. Rather, Leocadia’s situation at the end of the story permits Pardo Bazán to build upon the semantic associations she has established in order to question society’s fixed standards on marriage as a desirable institution for women.

Geraldine Scanlon’s study of the legal status of Spanish women, as reflected in the Código Civil of 1889 and the Código de Comercio of 1885, concludes: “La mayor parte de los derechos que asistian a la mujer soltera desaparecían inmediatamente con el matrimonio” (126–37). Citing the Código Civil, Scanlon notes that a woman’s husband was her legal representative (article 60) whom she was obligated to obey (article 57). She was required to follow her husband to live wherever he chose within Spain (article 58), and he had complete control over “los bienes de la sociedad conyugal” (article 59), with the exception of her “bienes parafernales” (articles 1381 and 1384), which she brought to the marriage but were not included in her dowry or added to it afterwards. But, even her administration of these “bienes parafernales” was severely limited by her husband’s right to control many aspects of how she dealt with them (articles 1387 and 1388). Any children she bore within the marriage also were legally controlled by her husband under the concept of patria potestas (article 154), which did revert to her upon her husband’s death, but which she lost again if she remarried (unless her previous husband had stipulated in his will that she should retain it) (article 159). The Código de Comercio of 1885 states that upon marrying, a woman who “se hallará ejerciendo comercio, necesitará licencia de su marido para continuarlo” (article 9), and that he could revoke that permission at any time (article 8). Together, these legal restrictions constitute what Scanlon calls “la esclavitud legal” of the married woman (126). It is the antinarratable concept of matrimonial enslavement of women that Pardo Bazán silently communicates to the reader in “La argolla.”

The story explicitly conflates the bracelet meaning of argolla with its shackle meaning, and it equates the argolla with its status as “la señal, las arras, por decirlo así, del contrato” (2: 406). But since señal is synonymous with the legal definition of arras, the use of both terms creates a redundancy that it is superfluous on this explicit level of the text. The argolla simply could have been referred to as la señal del contrato. But, by adding the word arras, and by drawing the reader’s attention to it with the statement “por decirlo así,” Pardo Bazán was to able to take advantage of the plural meanings of the word arras to indirectly comment on the status of women within marriage. In addition to its legal meaning of earnest money, arras also has the more commonly used meaning of the “[c]onjunto de las trece monedas que, al celebrarse el matrimonio religioso, sirven como símbolo de entrega, pasando de las manos del desposado a las de la desposada y viceversa” (1: 210). Just as both meanings of argolla were inherently
available for Leocadia to access and link together, so too are both meanings of *arras* for the reader to do the same.

Originally, only the meaning of *arras* as earnest money was contextually appropriate to Leocadia’s situation because the matrimonial meaning of *arras* was implicitly disnarrated by the explicitly disnarrated word *novia*. By accepting the *argolla* as the earnest money of Gaspar’s illicit contract, Leocadia would have become unmarriageable. But, by ultimately rejecting the *argolla*, Leocadia can indeed become a *novia* someday, and her ideal man, who has been defined through disnarration as being a “tipo tan diferente” from the elderly and overweight Gaspar, can become her groom (Pardo Bazán 2: 407).

Leocadia rejected the bracelet as both the *arras del contrato* and as the *argolla de esclava*. But the matrimonial sense of the word *arras* reminds the reader that marriage itself is a contract, and the chain of associations linking the dual meanings of *arras* with the dual meanings of *argolla* implicitly suggests that by accepting the *arras* of a marriage contract, Leocadia someday will be accepting the *argolla de esclava* as well. With both of these words, Pardo Bazán uses the less common meaning (*argolla* as “bracelet” and *arras* as “earnest money”) early in the story so that the more common, and therefore more easily thought of, meanings emerge later. She also limits the shackle meaning of *argolla* by modifying it with *de esclava*—the feminine form of the word slave that is used exclusively in the text, thereby highlighting the issue of gender in Pardo Bazán’s silent commentary on the institution of marriage as a form of enslavement that pertains solely to women.

Leocadia was able to break the shackle that Gaspar had placed on her because, after all, their contract did not have the force of law. But, the marriage contract does, and when Leocadia assents to that contract, she will be bound by the civil code governing it. Although Leocadia will not have Gaspar as her owner, someday she will have her husband as her master, and the similarity between having an owner and having a master is conveyed in the word *dueño*, which encompasses both meanings. While Pardo Bazán upholds marriage as preferable to concubinage in this story, she shows the disadvantageous position of women in both forms of relationships with men.

On the surface, “La argolla” is a moral tale about the dangers of defying social norms, as exemplified by a young woman who initially is willing to yield to the temptation of living a luxurious life in an illicit relationship only to finally realize that what she really wants is the respect reserved for those who obey conventions and marry. Simultaneously, “La argolla” also is a subtle indictment of society’s ethical configuration of marriage as an institution that will grant the protagonist the respect she desires, but only at the price of abdicating dominion over her own life.

These dual readings are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they work together to present a fuller picture of the social reality experienced by Spanish women at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In “Los cirineos,” the reader does need to shift between two mutually exclusive readings, as with the optical illusion of the duck and the rabbit where one image is seen at a time. But, in “La argolla,” the interconnectedness of the two images is laid bare, allowing the reader to see how the image of the duck hides the image of the rabbit. In “La argolla,” Pardo Bazán exposes the negative aspects of marriage for women that are concealed by society’s glorification of that institution as their proper life choice.

Unhappy marriages are common in Pardo Bazán’s stories, and Leocadia’s probable matrimonial options at the end of “La argolla” are the ones already being lived unhappily by Ignacia and Romana at the beginning of “Los cirineos.” She can marry the man of her dreams and continue to live a financially limited life, or she can marry for economic security and find herself in a loveless and constraining relationship. Either way, Leocadia will be legally obligated to obey the decisions and endure the whims of her husband. Even marrying for love would not ensure marital happiness, as was quickly discovered by the protagonist of “El revólver,” who found release from the suffering at the hands of her jealous husband only after his death. A woman’s independence from her spouse is reserved for widows (as the condesa de Serená knows
when she retains custody of her beloved daughter by refusing to remarry in “La madre”), granted through an expensive and hard-to-obtain divorce (as Antonia sadly learns in “El indulto”), or gained by trading away the respect of society (as the unnamed prostitute of “Champagne” exemplifies). But with Leocadia’s honorable alternatives to matrimonial enslavement being the convent or spinsterhood, it is likely that she eventually will choose to marry. Pardo Bazán does not criticize that choice, but the dual readings of “La argolla” make the reader aware of its consequences for Leocadia’s freedom.

As with “Los cirineos,” Pardo Bazán employs double-directedness in “La argolla,” but in this case her narrative strategy is different. Rather than using oscillating narration, she uses disnarration to point to what is by referring to what is not, and she exploits the semantic richness of the words arras and argolla to connect their dual meanings, resulting in a revelation of not only Gaspar’s antinarratable offer, but also of the antinarratable situation of women within marriage. In both of these short stories, what is not narrated is just as important as what is, because the reader is required to mentally construct what is left untold. Within the resulting moments of vibrating potentiality in “Los cirineos” and of unnarratable disclosure in “La argolla,” the reader is silently encouraged to reflect upon and evaluate the validity of the legal and social standards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century concerning sex and marriage. Through these strategies of indirection, Pardo Bazán engages the reader in the ethical deliberation of sensitive issues that do not have to be stated in order to be raised.

WORKS CITED