## Introduction

## BY NAOMI LINDSTROM



The novel *Iphigenia* by Teresa de la Parra (Venezuela, 1889–1936; real name, Ana Teresa Parra Sanojo), popular with readers since its first appearance, scandalous in its day, has increasingly won the respect and attention of literary critics. Its author was a well-read, socially prominent

young woman whose wit, winning presence, elegance, and above all her powers of verbal expression had placed her in demand on the Caracas scene as a speaker at social, diplomatic, and cultural events. She possessed a talent for writing pieces on demand for notable occasions. As was typical for a woman of her time, place, and social class, she had had to pursue on her own the extensive literary learning that she later put to good use in her celebrated novels.

From the outset of her career, the public was very insistent in attributing special qualities of femininity to de la Parra and her speech and writing. At the same time, the author often appeared to invite such an attribution by employing a type of writing that her public would tag as feminine. She exhibited in her work a preference for intimate and domestic subject matter, a mannered style of somewhat whimsical, teasing humor, and, broadly, a chatty, gossipy mode. Her first publications, the journalistic pieces she began publishing in 1915, were certainly in this vein. A critic dubbed her "Miss Frivolity" and her choice of a pseudonym, Fru-Fru, is a good clue that she had reached a similar judgment about her own work. The issue of a discourse certain to be perceived as feminine is an important one in her first full-length novel, *Iphigenia*. (Between her early journalism and her famous novel, de la Parra had pseudonymously pub-

lished two short narratives with Oriental themes and backdrops.) Iphigenia makes a more purposeful use of a hyper-feminine discourse. The heroine, María Eugenia, is given to gushing, and her themes frequently run to personal adornment, household decor and entertainment, domestic intrigues and politics, and amorous involvements. This time, though, there is an important shift: the heroine's speech is utilized to make a critical examination of women, their role, and their ability to speak of important issues. The author had witnessed the spread of feminism in European intellectual circles and had considered how this movement might apply to the Spanish American context, particularly among women who had little if any chance to study progressive social thought. She found especially worrisome the case of young women who had, through travel or hearsay, glimpsed the possibility of greater freedom for women, but remained in a cloistered, sheltered environment. These concerns appear in Iphigenia (The diary of a young lady who wrote because she was bored), a novel whose five hundred manuscript pages were begun in 1922 and completed in less than a year. As de la Parra finished chapters, they appeared serialized in both Spanishand French-language literary magazines. Iphigenia appeared in its entirety as a book in 1924. When the first completed chapter appeared in the Caracas La Lectura Semanal (Weekly Reading), the magazine sold out its print run of six thousand on the day of publication,<sup>2</sup> and *Iphigenia* has often been reprinted in book form.

Encouraged by the book's first-person form (the early pages are an immensely lengthy, soul-baring letter to an intimate friend; those that follow are a diary), the public tended to view *Iphigenia* as the direct, confessional outpourings of its author, unmediated by artistry or by critical, satirical awareness. Many readers of the novel without hesitation identified the author with her excitable, daydreaming heroine, María Eugenia Alonso. The linkage of the two is not entirely rational, since the author, who was much in the public eye, was known as an accomplished literary intellectual who could find the right words for any occasion. Her heroine, in contrast, is a half-educated young woman, confused by personal vanity and romantic fantasies, often floundering in her efforts to express a critical outlook on society and personal relations. De la Parra was well aware of the wide-spread perception of her work as a "confession" and complained that her readership was insensitive to its strong ironic component.<sup>3</sup>

María Eugenia is a young woman of the upper class, though she has been despoiled of her fortune and now is seen as needing a wealthy match. She inhabits almost exclusively the personal and private sphere and has only the most tenuous notions of the feminism developing in the world at

large. When, in her long letter, María Eugenia reminisces to a schoolmate about her education, Iphigenia offers a sharply satirical look at the options for learning open to the daughters of good families of Caracas. Despite her sketchy intellectual background, María Eugenia is intelligent and independent-minded enough, and eager enough to attain pleasure in life, to begin to develop her own version of feminism based on her experiences and observations. She can draw upon these insights to analyze, sometimes rather ingenuously and sometimes with surprising sophistication and humor, the situations in which she finds herself. María Eugenia's ability to set her new insights down in effective words fluctuates widely throughout the novel. In some passages she melodramatizes her own plight and falls into a self-indulgent lyricism; in others, she is a sharp observer of individual and collective behavior, as able to mock herself as to satirize those around her. From time to time she bursts into a stiffly didactic speech on society and morals; the reader must sympathize with her ardor even while cringing at the awkwardness of her expression.

For all María Eugenia's intelligence, it is a difficult task for her to generate a critical feminist analysis out of the scanty materials she has at hand. One of the fascinating aspects of the novel is that the reader frequently observes María Eugenia faltering and blundering in her efforts to think and act with a new freedom. In her mind, liberation is often confused with simply getting her own way. At various times in the course of the novel, the heroine appears to associate personal liberation with the wearing of low-necked gowns, dancing "American dances" in public, associating with worldly friends, and coming and going at less restricted hours and unchaperoned. María Eugenia persists in her reading despite the disapproval it raises in her household; yet, she reads only for pleasure and it never occurs to her to undertake a program of study.

The limited range of María Eugenia's aspirations not only has made this heroine seem frivolous to readers, as indeed she often is, but has at times brought the same judgment down on the entire book. Amaya Llebot, for instance, complains in 1974: "What's regrettable is that Teresa de la Parra, an intelligent and well-educated woman, raised in Europe, should limit herself to showing that oppression and only fight it in the name of banal and superficial motives." To state a perhaps self-evident point, readers of *Iphigenia* need to keep in mind that the heroine's thoughts and writing, which range from romantic effusion to petty gossip to stilted attempts at serious analysis, are all intended as the expression of a very young woman not well prepared to understand and comment upon the events surrounding her.

María Eugenia is partially successful in learning to articulate her concerns, but she finds no opportunity to create change. By the end of the novel, she faces only a choice between marriage to a family-approved candidate certain to make his spouse unhappy and life as the mistress of an appealingly imaginative and romantic, but married, man. In the sacrifice prefigured in the title, she must weigh her aspirations for freedom and personal pleasure against her need for security. Readers who have built up their hopes that María Eugenia will break free of her constricting environment will be especially horrified by those pages in which the heroine expresses satisfaction over her own domination by her stodgy fiancé, although María Eugenia quickly recovers from this paroxysm of submission. In the final passages, de la Parra has no scruples about resorting to melodramatic twists and turns as the heroine swings back and forth between her alternatives.

The link between the Greek myth of Iphigenia, particularly as Euripides elaborated it in his *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and the story of María Eugenia is charged with more of de la Parra's ironies. In an obvious contrast, Iphigenia's sacrifice gives her heroic stature, while María Eugenia's turns her into a figure of capitulation. Iphigenia offers herself to be sacrificed in order to bring justice and glory to Greece, while María Eugenia's motive is a desire for comfort and security. But even so, parallelisms emerge: in both Iphigenia's story and María Eugenia's, there is a comment on a society's willingness to sacrifice the well-being of its daughters. María Eugenia is a disappointing Iphigenia, but the reader is supposed to experience disillusionment over the outcome of the heroine's conflict. The important point is that the disappointment be aimed, not at the protagonist who was struggling spiritedly in an unsupportive environment, but at the society that headed her toward surrender.

While de la Parra was the object of a widespread public fascination during the time she was writing and serializing *Iphigenia*, she became the target of negative criticism after the book was published. While the complaints were many and varied—some local readers felt that Caracas was not described in its proper beauty—the dominant objection was that the novel was immoral and might harm young female readers. A number of readers were offended that the heroine considered her respectable marriage a defeat in life and criticized her as a light-minded creature obsessed with showing off her beauty and seeking pleasure. De la Parra vigorously defended her book; among other arguments, she stated that the book's detractors were men, while women readers recognized the accuracy of *Iphigenia*'s vision of society.

Teresa de la Parra has been coming in for a rediscovery in recent years, principally for *Iphigenia* but also for her 1929 *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca*. Translated into English as *Mama Blanca's Souvenirs* (1959), the later novel offers a more lyrical and celebratory treatment of the culture of traditional upper-class women. Here a household full of women, with their feminine occupations and their intimate conversations, is nostalgically recalled by a narrator now well into adulthood.

Perhaps because of its genteel setting, upper-class heroine, and the subtly ironic way it presents ideas, *Iphigenia* was not fully perceived as a work of social criticism until after the 1960s-1970s resurgence of feminism, which affected the reading of many existing literary texts. The novel is now especially prized for its early recognition that Latin American women living in conservative environments, while no less in need of change than their counterparts in fast-moving European and U.S. cities, would necessarily approach the issues of women's role and status from a different background and perspective and face a different set of obstacles.

## NOTES

- 1. The source of this information is Louis Antoine Lemaître's biography Between Flight and Longing: The Journey of Teresa de la Parra (New York: Vantage Press, 1986), p. 60.
  - 2. Ibid., p. 65.
- 3. Laura M. Febres, Cinco perspectivas críticas sobre la obra de Teresa de la Parra (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1984), p. 14.
  - 4. Amaya Llebot, cited in Febres, Cinco perspectivas, p. 15.

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