# Introduction

## *Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda*

Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda y Arteaga was born in Puerto Príncipe (today Camagüey), a provincial capital in central Cuba, in March 1814, the eldest child and only daughter of Manuel Gómez de Avellaneda and Francisca de Arteaga y Betancourt. Her father was of aristocratic Spanish lineage, an officer in the Spanish navy in charge of that area of the island (Cuba remained a Spanish colony until 1898). While stationed in Puerto Príncipe, he had met and married Doña Francisca, a wealthy Creole from a socially prominent family;[1] Gertrudis was the first of five children of this marriage, of whom only she and her younger brother Manuel survived. She was raised much like other privileged daughters of the slaveholding landed gentry, except that her education was extraordinary for the times. Drawn to literature and especially to poetry from a very early age, Gertrudis was encouraged in her early writing by one of her tutors, the Cuban patriot and Romantic poet José María Heredia, whose influence on her poetry is evident.

Gómez de Avellaneda's life is extraordinarily well documented, especially by herself. She was a consummate letter writer, and her voluminous correspondence provides much personal information. Early in her life (1839) she wrote a short epistolary autobiography for Ignacio de Cepeda, with whom she had fallen passionately in love in Seville; this document not only contains important details about her childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood but also constitutes the backdrop against which she wrote *Sab*. Judging by her own statements—and by the kind of woman she subsequently became—one gets the impression that the young Gertrudis was intelligent, headstrong, highly imaginative, and spoiled. From the beginning Avellaneda was convinced that hers was a "superior soul," a term much in vogue during the Romantic period, but which in her case was not so much posturing as a genuine expression of an intensely sensitive and emotional self. On the other hand, she was also aware that she was

often her own worst enemy, as she confessed to Cepeda in a letter written in 1839: "There is something so unstable, so capricious and so fickle in my character that it will cause me much grief in my life" (*Diario íntimo* 54). Prophetic words indeed.

When Avellaneda was nine her father died, and her mother remarried ten months later, a—for then—scandalously brief period of time. Don Isidoro de Escalada was, like her father, a Spanish officer stationed in Cuba. Whether because of his personality or the emotional shock of losing a dearly loved parent, Gertrudis disliked Escalada from the beginning. She particularly resented having to obey his wishes because of her financial dependency upon him, a topic which comes up in *Sab,* and rejoiced when she came of age and became financially independent.

Within a few years of his marriage to Doña Francisca, Escalada began to make preparations to return to Spain, principally because he feared that the 1791 slave uprisings on the neighboring island of Haiti/Santo Domingo—then called St. Domingue—might spread to Cuba as well. His fears were not without substance. In 1798 there had been a slave rebellion in a sugar mill in Puerto Príncipe itself (Barreda 6), in 1812 black freedman José Antonio Aponte had attempted to organize both slaves and free blacks to take over the entire island—he failed and was hanged—and in the 1840s there were numerous other uprisings, culminating in massive reprisals after the Ladder Conspiracy of 1844, so called because accused blacks were tied to ladders and whipped (Luis 15–18). Thus, after Escalada sold off his wife's property and slaves, the family set sail for Bordeaux in 1836. Upon her departure Avellaneda wrote a fine sonnet which lamented leaving her native land, but she was also excited at the prospect of the voyage and at seeing Europe.

She recorded impressions of her travels for a cousin back in Cuba, which give some insights into the young woman's character. Describing a storm at sea, she maintains proudly that it exhilarated rather than terrified her and garnered her the distinction she perennially craved: "That night was dreadful, Eloísa! The captain took down the sails until the ship was left with bare masts, and all the passengers were in the grip of such terror that I was the calmest person [aboard], and perhaps the only one who enjoyed herself in that terrible clash of two elements and the sublime impressions this incites. For many days my serenity on that occasion was the topic of conversation" (Figarola 252). (All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.)

The notebooks record some attacks of homesickness, positive first impressions of France, and negative ones of Galicia, in northwestern Spain, where the family stopped to visit Escalada's relatives. Avellaneda detested his family as heartily as she did Escalada himself, a feeling which was quite mutual, especially since the women criticized her for paying more atten-

tion to her books than to household chores. In spite of chafing under their criticism, she does admit that they had reason to take umbrage at her behavior:

> In Galicia we American women are thought of as lazy, idle, and little suited for domestic duties; and I believe that it is undeniable that we, perhaps because of climate, perhaps of education, really are—the Cubans at least—more indolent than the Galician women; it would be the rare woman in our country who would willingly allow herself to get all smoky in the kitchen in the morning and spend the evening with her knitting in her hand . . . among the women of Galicia I have admired a strength and a vigor that copes with the hardest tasks. (Figarola 265)

As La Coruña, with its damp climate and lack of cultural life, soon stifled Avellaneda, she and her brother Manuel left their mother, Escalada, and three step-siblings to travel by ship to Cádiz and thence to Seville to visit paternal relatives. Andalusia was much more to her liking. Not only was the city beautiful, society lively, and cultural life thriving, but Avellaneda found fertile ground for her own initial literary endeavors. Her home became a place where the literati gathered, and she was soon publishing poetry in a number of newspapers. She organized subscribers to help her with the publication costs of *Sab* (on which she was at work at that time) and of her first play, *Leoncia,* which she wrote under her *nom de plume* "La Peregrina" (The Pilgrim); it was produced in June 1840. The play did well, and Avellaneda began to achieve a certain local fame. But she had set her sights on going to Madrid, the center of Spain's literary scene.

When one first looks at Avellaneda's life, one wonders how she as an outsider managed so deftly to infiltrate the masculine literary world and establish herself as a successful poet, playwright, and novelist. She soon learned to parlay her physical attractiveness, her exotic background, and an undeniable literary talent into useful connections with men of influence in the world of letters. A case in point is her strategy with Alberto Lista (1775–1848), thinker, educator, and "unquestionably the most learned and influential critic of the day" (Shaw 3). In his mid-sixties when she made his acquaintance in Seville, she dedicated *Sab* to him, a gesture which apparently nonplussed Lista to some degree. In his courtly letter of thanks to the young author, he admits that whereas he is flattered, "it is a little strange that you have shown preference for an old man now abandoned by the muses" (Figarola 150). Avellaneda, however, knew what she was doing. After being left an inheritance by recently deceased members of her father's family (Harter 30), she finally had the economic means to move to Madrid and asked Lista for a letter of introduction to Nicasio Gallego, a

well-connected poet and member of the Madrid Lyceum. Another poet, José Zorrilla, left a famous account of her initial entrance into this select group of writers. Avellaneda, now in her mid-twenties, appeared incognita at a gathering of the Lyceum, whereupon her escort asked Zorrilla if he would read some of her poems in public. As he was impressed by their quality, he did so, and the audience responded with enthusiasm, all the more so when he introduced the stunning young poet:

> She was a beautiful woman, very tall, with sculptured contours, well-turned arms, her head crowned with abundant chestnut curls that reached charmingly to her shoulders. Her voice was sweet, gentle, and feminine; her movements languid and measured; the gestures of her hands delicate and supple; but the firm gaze of her serene blue eyes [which in reality were dark], the flourish with which she wrote on the paper, and the manly thoughts of those vigorous verses through which she revealed her talent showed a virile and strong dimension to the spirit enclosed in that voluptuous young phenomenon. There was nothing harsh, angular, or in any way masculine in that womanly and very attractive body: no ruddy complexion, nor too heavy eyebrows, nor down to shadow the freshness of her lips, nor brusqueness of manner; she was a woman—but undoubtedly only by an error of nature, which had absentmindedly placed a manly soul in that vessel of womanly flesh. (Cited in Bravo-Villasante 57–58)

Making a smashing first impression was one thing; sustaining acceptance in the literary world of Madrid and becoming economically self-sufficient through her writing was another, but Avellaneda succeeded. She published her first—highly successful—volume of poetry and her first novel, *Sab,* in 1841, followed by another novel, *Dos mugeres* (*Two Women*), in 1842, and a number of commercially successful plays, as well as poetry and novels, in the years that followed. She in fact became one of the most famous authors of the nineteenth century, claimed by both Spain and her native Cuba. As Beth Miller observed: "From a historical and feminist perspective, probably the single most important thing Avellaneda achieved was endurance. She is one of a meager number of female Romantic poets to appear in anthologies a hundred years after first publication. . . . Avellaneda became a celebrity, a successful and envied literary artist, a woman of letters" (203).

But these achievements were not without cost. As a woman who had to negotiate societal expectations of femininity while endowed with a spirit which rebelled against the gender inequalities endemic to her times, Avellaneda was often in the forefront of establishing the right of women to

see themselves not only as narrated objects but also as writing subjects. Susan Kirkpatrick's outstanding scholarship on the problematic role of women authors during the era of Romantic literature makes patent the "tension between the desire-driven, egocentric self projected in Romantic discourse and the passionless, other-directed female subject defined by bourgeois gender ideology" (34). By nature Avellaneda was endowed with just such a "desire-driven, egocentric self" which sublimated into writing her desire for freedom from a variety of social constraints.

Her first two novels are probably her most radical expressions of this rebellion and, for that reason, among the most interesting of her works for a modern reader. Given her early negative experiences with the tyranny of matrimony, the young Avellaneda was openly gun-shy when it came to wedlock, advocating free and open relationships with—or preferably without—benefit of clergy (Miller 207). In *Sab* she equated marriage to slavery, and in *Dos mugeres* presented a tolerant view of an adulterous relationship; if change is a law of nature, she queried, why should human affections be exempt? Although Avellaneda managed to publish these works in Spain, they were banned by the censors from sale in Cuba; a royal decree in the Cuban National Archives classifies the first (*Sab*) as containing "doctrines subversive to the system of slavery on this Island and contrary to moral and good habits; and the second [*Dos mugeres*] for being plagued with doctrines prejudicious to Our Holy Religion and attacking therein conjugal Society and canonising adultery" ("Documents" 350).

Predictably, Avellaneda's personal life was stormy. After the amorous entanglements she describes in her 1839 *Autobiography,* she had a number of other relationships. Shortly after she arrived in Seville, she was smitten with the aforementioned Ignacio de Cepeda—a wealthy, well-educated, and socially prominent young man, but desperately ordinary, conservative to the point of prissiness, and visibly overwhelmed by her tropical passion. His reluctant courtship may also have been based on other concerns: Avellaneda's biographer Cotarelo y Mori maintains that Cepeda did not wish to marry her because she had no money (37). Her infatuation lasted many years, as can be seen in her many letters to him, all of which he saved and ordered published after both had died. The on-again, off-again correspondence with Cepeda lasted from 1839 to 1854, at which time, with no prior notice to Avellaneda of his intentions, he married someone else.

In 1844 the thirty-year-old Avellaneda embarked on a torrid love affair with poet and diplomat Gabriel García Tassara, with disastrous consequences, for when she became pregnant, her lover abandoned her. Tassara refused to acknowledge paternity of the child, who died less than a year later; a heartbreaking letter from Avellaneda, begging him to see his infant daughter before she died, brought no response from him. In 1846 she

married Pedro Sabater, of whom she was fond but did not love; already seriously ill with cancer, he died four months after the wedding. In her sorrow she took refuge for several months in a convent in Bordeaux.

In spite of personal unhappiness, her literary successes continued, and when her friend Nicasio Gallego died in 1853, she decided the time had come for her to storm the ultimate male bastion and solicit his chair in the Royal Spanish Academy. She had many powerful backers, and extant letters record her frantic lobbying for admission, but when the vote was taken among the membership on the issue of admitting women, Avellaneda's faction lost.[2] Apart from the generally conservative attitude many academicians held on the gender issue, her defiant independence and flaunting of social convention very likely also influenced the vote. One of her supporters, the Marquis of Pezuela, had to break the news to her: "We did what we could. The majority defeated us. In my judgment, almost all of us are worth less than you; but, nevertheless, because of the question of gender (and talent should not have any), we supporters must bear the sorrow of not counting you among our academicians for now" (Figarola 172). Avellaneda was more than bitter. In her essay on "La mujer" ("Woman"), written seven years later, she still fulminated against the "bearded academies" from which women were barred because "unfortunately [even] the greatest intellectual prowess is unable to make that animal abundance that requires cutting by a razor sprout on a [female] face" and so "this has become the only and insurmountable distinction of the literary males" who control the rules of admission (*Album cubano de lo bueno y lo bello* 261). Avellaneda had other reasons for being angry: exclusion from the academy also meant exclusion from financial benefits paid to writers by the Spanish government (Figarola 214), and she was, after all, dependent on her pen for her livelihood.

These events took their toll on her. Though she was always ambivalent about marriage, in 1853, when she was forty-two and her voluptuous figure had gone to fat, she and Antonio Romero Ortiz, a newspaperman eight years her junior, began a flirtation.[3] One senses Avellaneda's fatigue and despondency in some of her letters to him. She confesses to feeling "a barren tedium" in her existence which affected her writing (*Cartas inéditas* 19). Although love had always been the principal emotion in her life, now she felt some apprehension toward new relationships. "I have never been happy nor have I made anyone else happy" (35), she wrote, but knew much of the fault was hers for always tending to extremes: "I would like to be prudent and I get angry at myself when I feel that I am not. . . . I don't dare trust even my own heart which has been wrong so many times before" (36). At bottom she still felt the irreconcilable difference endemic to her character: "In me there are these two powerful natures, that of the poet and of the woman" (43); as Kirkpatrick noted, "The rift between the

author's 'male' character or subjectivity and her female social identity condemns her to unhappiness in Spain as well as Cuba" (140).

There is some mention of matrimony in her correspondence with Romero Ortiz, and after all Avellaneda had been through in the past few years, part of her longed to be conventional, to be settled and taken care of, while the other feared the curtailment of her freedom and a husband's possible tyranny. Initially drawn to Romero, Avellaneda subsequently changed her mind about the possibility of marriage. In any case, she managed to frighten him off in much the same way as Cepeda, with bouts of jealousy and public scenes.

Nevertheless, after breaking with Romero Ortiz, Avellaneda did decide to marry again. Colonel Domingo Verdugo had connections at the court of Isabel II (as did Avellaneda), so the two were married in April 1855 at the Royal Palace with the queen and her consort as witnesses (Harter 41). Three years later Verdugo was stabbed, almost fatally, after an altercation with a man who had attempted to disrupt one of Avellaneda's plays by heaving a live cat on stage; though Verdugo recovered from the wound, his health was permanently affected, and he died four years later.

In 1859 Verdugo had been posted to Cuba, which allowed his wife to return to the land she had left so long ago. For Avellaneda the return to the island was a triumph. She was celebrated everywhere, and at her induction into the Lyceum in Havana, she was even presented with a crown of gold laurel leaves, which she claimed was her heart's dearest treasure. As her piety increased with age, Avellaneda bequeathed her golden crown to the Virgin Mary and left it in a church in Havana before departing for Spain in 1864 (Figarola 34).

Avellaneda wrote actively during these years in Cuba, turning out a number of novels, plays, and folk legends. In 1860 she also founded a short-lived women's magazine, the *Album cubano de lo bueno y lo bello* (*The Cuban Album of the Good and the Beautiful*). She was the only woman to found and direct a magazine for women in Cuba at that time. The extant issues offer a fascinating compendium of topics important to her and to her female contemporaries. Avellaneda was both editor and occasional contributor, composing poetry, essays, short biographies of famous women of the past, including her four-part essay on "La mujer," in which she examines the roles of women in religion, history, government, and intellectual life.

After Verdugo's death Avellaneda returned to Spain via the United States. She wrote little more but instead assembled material for the publication of several volumes of her collected *Literary Works,* which appeared between 1869 and 1871. Avellaneda herself decided not to include either *Sab* or *Dos mugeres,*[4] partly because she had grown more conservative with age and partly because she was anxious to sell her books in Cuba. In spite of

her status as the island's most famous daughter, the political climate in Cuba was still extremely repressive, as slavery was not abolished until 1886 and government officials would not have tolerated any book with openly antislavery views.

Avellaneda's turbulent life came to a quiet end when she died of diabetes in Madrid in 1873. Even though she had achieved great fame during her lifetime and was celebrated in both Cuba and Spain, a reporter for a Madrid newspaper noted sadly how few people attended her funeral:

> We thought we would see all the writers of Madrid there; we could not suppose that there would be even one who would forego the duty of paying his respects to the earthly remains of this most distinguished lady, the famous writer, the inspired poetess who has given the country such glory, who esteemed writers so greatly, who had such a noble and Spanish heart; but this belief of ours was an illusion. There were only six writers there. The academicians, the artists of the Madrid theatres, the poets, the novelists, the playwrights we hoped to see on this sad occasion didn't want to take the trouble or thought themselves excused from dedicating a few moments to the illustrious lady, whose loss leaves a void in our literature, one that will never be filled. (Figarola 21)

Avellaneda was ultimately laid to rest in Seville.

## *Background to* Sab

In past discussions of *Sab* with scholars of abolitionist literature of the United States, I noticed that few of them knew that a contemporary school of antislavery literature existed in Cuba; they were also unaware that Avellaneda published *Sab* eleven years prior to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852). For this reason some background on the novel and on its critical reception seems appropriate.

In Cuba as in the United States, opposition to the institution of slavery became more vocal as the nineteenth century wore on, but in Cuba these views were severely repressed by Spanish officials anxious to preserve the island's colonial status, and most wealthy Cubans preferred "to keep the protection of the Spanish armed forces rather than risk ruin in a possible republic teeming with free Blacks" (Netchinsky 1). In most other Latin American countries, where political independence had been achieved early in the century, abolition followed soon thereafter, but in the Cuban struggle for independence "abolitionism becomes a *condition,* not a result of independence" (Sommer 118). Its fixed geographical boundaries put the island in a particularly explosive situation.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cuba found itself in an enviable economic position. The successful slave uprising on St. Domingue took that island out of the lucrative Caribbean sugar production, thus raising both the demand and the prices for Cuban sugar; in fact, in the first forty years of the century, Cuba supplied almost a quarter of the world's sugar (Rodríguez 41). Huge fortunes were made during this sugar boom, accompanied by a sharp upturn in the importation of African slaves to the island, despite the abolition of the slave trade to Cuba by treaties between Spain and England in 1817 and 1820. Statistics record a significant rise in the black population of the island; by 1827 slaves and black freemen together comprised 56 percent of Cuba's inhabitants (Barreda 7). Sugar, coffee, and tobacco, all crops produced by slave labor, drove the flourishing colonial economy while Spain tacitly ignored the illegal slave trade, and the interests of the sugar oligarchy (sacarocracy) determined what Antonio Benítez Rojo terms Cuba's "discourse of power" (12–14). Nevertheless, in the 1830s there were some Cuban whites who were genuinely concerned with establishing a counterdiscourse, which, as we shall see, was antislavery but not abolitionist in nature. I am referring to the gathering of intellectuals and writers around the wealthy, Venezuelan-born planter Domingo Del Monte (1804–1853), a group whose activities began in Matanzas in 1834 and moved to Havana the following year. Del Monte and his followers were genuinely alarmed by the huge increase in the island's black population as well as by the inhuman working conditions in the sugar mills. They used their writings to plead for the curtailment of the illegal slave trade and pointed out the injustices of the institution of slavery on human and moral grounds, yet never went so far as to openly advocate emancipation. In this counterdiscourse, scholars like Benítez Rojo (as well as Schulman, Netchinsky, and Luis) see the roots of the incipient Cuban identity and literature.

Del Monte's influence over his followers was enormous. He shared his extensive library of contemporary European authors and was in active contact with English abolitionists like Richard Madden, once British consul in Havana and still a judge on the Mixed Court, the arbitration tribunal of the slave trade. Del Monte not only commissioned antislavery texts from members of his group, but he and the authors conferred among themselves and critiqued each other's works as they were being written, in effect producing a series of collective texts. In 1835, in a kind of forerunner to today's Latin American testimonial literature, Del Monte found a literate mulatto slave, Juan Francisco Manzano, and urged him to write his autobiography. Manzano had already published poetry in Cuban newspapers, which was very unusual for a slave, and at the time of his interaction with Del Monte was a fugitive. Manzano had been promised his freedom in exchange for his text (the original is housed in the National Library in

Havana), so that he quite literally wrote his way out of bondage (Netchinsky 27); the group subsequently raised the sum needed to buy the slave and free him (Luis 36). Since Manzano's manuscript was full of orthographic and grammatical errors, one of the group's members, Anselmo Suárez y Romero, undertook to correct these mistakes; it is obvious that the autobiography heavily influenced Suárez y Romero's subsequent antislavery novel *Francisco,* as well as some other, later works (see Netchinsky's chapter on Manzano for a thorough discussion of the manuscript's many incarnations). Suárez y Romero's corrected version was also given by Del Monte to Madden, who translated and published it in English in 1840 (it did not appear in Spanish for another eighty years).

In order to elicit the sympathy of Cuban readers, the Del Monte authors often dwelt on incidents where innocent and submissive slaves were barbarously mistreated, but given the prevailing fear of slave uprisings among their readership, they never dared to present a rebellious slave who might resort to violence. For all of his activism against the continuation of the slave trade, Del Monte himself never openly advocated either abolition—he realized that this would destroy his personal fortune—or political independence from Spain (Rodríguez 52, 47). However, in spite of the group's essentially conservative stance, their "antislavery narrative represented one side of a dialogue on slavery which directly threatened slavers and Spanish officials in Cuba" (Luis 61), and after two serious slave uprisings in 1843 and 1844, the group was placed under such political pressure that it disbanded. Manzano, who was jailed for a year before being freed, never wrote again, while Del Monte was exiled and died in Spain in 1853.

Ivan Schulman's key article on the origin of the novel in Cuba points out that this genre has its roots in these crosscurrents of debate surrounding the institution of slavery (356–357), a view shared by Netchinsky, who shows how novels like *Francisco* and *Sab* "map the frustrations of youthful development for a human being and a nation," both longing to be free from outside control (263). Schulman establishes two generations of abolitionist novels, with the earliest ones being written (but not necessarily published) about 1838 and the last (*Cecilia Valdés*) making its appearance in 1882 (365).

Avellaneda was not part of the Del Monte group for a variety of reasons: her youth, her gender, and the fact that she came from central Cuba, which was a fair distance from Havana and whose principal industry was cattle, not sugar. Antonio Benítez Rojo points out the implications of this fact by noting that "since Puerto Príncipe did not depend on sugar for its economic development, its mode of slavery was much less intensive than the east, with the result that the proportion of slaves in relation to the total population was considerably less" (15). But the principal reason why Avellaneda had no contact with the Del Monte group was that she left for

Spain in 1836, only one year after it had relocated to Havana. She started work on *Sab* possibly as early as 1836, definitely by 1838, and published first in 1841 (Morejón 34). It should also be noted that her novel is her text alone, not a collective effort as was the case with the literature of the Del Monte writers. In launching a controversial novel like *Sab,* Avellaneda had the advantage of being in Spain and living under the generally liberal government of the Regent, Queen María Cristina; publication of an anti-slavery work was possible in Spain, as opposed to Cuba, where it was not.

Being her earliest novel, the one closest to her departure from the island, it is also her most American, especially in her description of the Cuban landscape.[5] In spite of Avellaneda's having adopted an American setting, critics are right in underscoring that her text is responding more to European than to autochthonous Cuban influences (Guerra 710), and indeed *Sab*'s literary ancestors are recognizably European.[6] Avellaneda was a voracious reader who was fluent in French and was conversant with such authors as Rousseau, Lamartine, Mme de Staël, George Sand, and others. Three writers influenced Avellaneda in particular: Chateaubriand, Aphra Behn, and Victor Hugo. The young François René, Vicomte de Chateaubriand, had spent seven months in the United States in 1791, and on his return he wrote the famous *Atala; or, The Love and Constancy of Two Savages in the Desert*[7] (1801), featuring a pair of star-crossed Indian lovers and containing long descriptive passages of the fauna and flora of tropical Florida and Louisiana. Avellaneda's descriptions of her native island in *Sab* (as well as the idea of a pre-European utopia of peace and harmony with nature) owe a clear debt to *Atala;* it is also more than likely that the raging storm so important to her novel's plot development has its roots in a parallel episode in Chateaubriand's work.

Whereas Chateaubriand's lovers were Indian, Avellaneda responds more to her Cuban roots by creating a hero who is mulatto. The black character in Hispanic literature had its roots in the Spanish Renaissance, and in the plays of Lope de Vega, not to mention *Othello,* to whom Sab refers in his letter to Teresa. Shakespeare aside, one of the first European writers to present a black protagonist in an American setting was the Englishwoman Aphra Behn.[8] Early in her life Behn had traveled to Suriname and claimed that her novel *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688) reflected some of her experiences there. It is almost certain that Avellaneda was familiar with a French translation of *Oroonoko,* which apparently was widely read in eighteenth-century France (Jackson 26); furthermore, Mary Cruz cites Avellaneda's reference to "Oroondates" in the *Autobiography* (letter of July 25), which Cruz feels is a misspelling of "Oroonoko" (9). Behn's text, like Chateaubriand's later *Atala,* abounds with descriptions of tropical American nature and her cast of characters—white colonists, Indians, and black slaves—reflects the multiethnic nature of the Caribbean. Her hero is

an African prince who is sold into slavery to the Americas; as Jackson noted, "It is probably due to [the popularity of] Oroonoko . . . that there are so many royal slaves in literature and that such a large percentage of black slaves were kings in their native countries or sons and grandsons of kings, persons of quality and natural goodness" (25). Sab certainly fits into this convention. Oroonoko's rebellion against his enslavement is also much like Sab's: "Reduced to the impotence of a plantation slave, he pits his personal code of honesty, honor, loyalty and fortitude against the social order that sanctions self-interest, arrogant power, and sadistic brutality" (Metzger xiv). However, *Oroonoko* is a far more violent text than *Sab,* for the hero does in fact organize a slave rebellion, is defeated, and dies a ghastly death by dismemberment. Prior to his own death Oroonoko kills his beloved wife, the princess Imoinda, to spare her a similar fate.

Violence is also prevalent in Victor Hugo's very early novel *Bug-Jargal,* which he allegedly wrote in two weeks when he was sixteen (1818) and published in 1826. *Bug-Jargal* was all the rage in France just when Avellaneda arrived in Europe, and its influence on *Sab* is unmistakable.[9] Though Hugo had never been to the Americas, he set the novel in St. Domingue and described events related to the slave uprising in 1791. Like Oroonoko, Bug-Jargal is an African prince who leads a slave rebellion and is ultimately executed; unlike Behn's hero (who had a black wife), he is in love with Marie, the daughter of the white French planter who owns him. Hugo thus presented rivals in love similar to those that Avellaneda created in *Sab,* with conflicts that cross both racial and social lines (Cruz 9). Nancy Morejón rightly urges the modern reader not to underestimate the radical nature of *Sab*'s plot: Avellaneda raised a slave, considered by most of her fellow Cubans to be not a person but a *thing,* to the status of protagonist; furthermore, the very idea that he could love a white woman was considered nothing short of heresy (35–36).

Aside from the black/white love triangle, there are other instances of intertextuality with Hugo's work: Bug-Jargal on several occasions saves the life of his white rival, like Sab he has a loyal dog, and his speech is totally correct and cultivated. As was the case with *Oroonoko* and *Atala,* Hugo's novel also dwells on the exotic aspects of tropical American nature, and the particular episode of Carlota in the garden may well have its roots in Hugo's text, where the lovely Marie, too, retreats to a leafy bower on her plantation to dream of love. In short, a reading of these three novels makes patent just who *Sab*'s principal literary ancestors were, though none of these texts developed their female characters anywhere nearly as well as Avellaneda did.

As was said earlier, Avellaneda had worked on *Sab* intermittently for several years before deciding to publish it. Barreda perceptively points out that "when she began a more independent life around 1838, the form of

*Sab* started to gel and to acquire contours" (72). By 1841 she had achieved a number of literary successes, found the subscribers to help her pay the publication costs and thus launched a book which would help to underscore her own exotic background.[10] The edition was a small one, however, and Avellaneda's Spanish relatives, scandalized by her antislavery stance, reportedly bought up a large number to take them out of circulation (Figarola 77). Nevertheless, her book made its mark. Though the novel was officially banned in Cuba, chapters of *Sab* were copied and clandestinely circulated on the island (Portuondo 212). As Cubans became more and more restive about their colonial status in the last years of the century, *Sab* resurfaced in the 1870s, "serialized in a Cuban revolutionary journal in New York [which] suggests how important an ideological weapon this novel must have been" (Sommer 119). Avellaneda did not live to see slavery abolished in 1886 or independence come in 1898, fifteen years after her death. *Sab* was finally published in Cuba in 1914, on the centennial of Avellaneda's birth, in what is still the definitive edition of her complete works.[11]

For a long time *Sab* received minimal critical attention.[12] Standard reference works on Spanish American literature of just a few years ago (cf. Torres-Ríoseco, Franco, and even Arrom, who is himself Cuban) barely mentioned Avellaneda, and *Sab* not at all. Literary historian José Antonio Portuondo noted the stance of fellow Cuban critics toward the novel: as a rule, it was "elegantly dismissed in two words. . . . What is necessary is to read *Sab,* which is what the majority of our literary historians usually fail to do" (211–212).

Portuondo's remark dates from the early 1980s. Since then a number of feminist critics have paid serious attention to *Sab,* as they have to many other examples of women's literature of the nineteenth century. Unaccustomed to the extreme sentimentality of these works and to the copious tears shed within their pages, which make for rather soggy going at times, the modern reader must learn to penetrate below the surface and to realize that some extremely important, even radical issues are being discussed. With respect to the literature of the United States, Jane Tompkins has pointed out "[that] the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view, that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (83). As Tompkins says, what makes this discussion different from other literature of the time is that it is being carried on by women, and from a woman's view of the world. The same is true for Spanish American works, so that comparative research into the literature of this hemisphere is very productive. Case

in point: the recent feminist revindication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a serious work in the United States is paralleled by the critical attention accorded *Sab* in Spanish American literature, and the conclusions drawn often transfer very well. Elizabeth Ammons, for example, has focused on the radical nature of Harriet Beecher Stowe's text, on the way in which it lays bare the "root evil of slavery: the displacement of life-giving maternal values by a profit-hungry masculine ethic that regards human beings as marketable commodities" (156), an observation which can be applied equally well to *Sab*.

Another topic common to many nineteenth-century women's texts in both North and South America was the attack on the institution of marriage. In the United States, involvement in the abolitionist movement made many women conscious both of their own lack of human and legal rights and of the similarity between the bondage of the slave and that of the woman whose need for economic security frequently forced her into analogous situations of dependence and servitude. Indicative of this awareness is southerner Mary Chesnut's bitter comment at witnessing the auction of a black woman: "You know how women sell themselves and are sold in marriage from queens downward, eh? . . . Poor women, poor slaves" (10–11). Spanish American authors, such as Mercedes Cabello de Carbonera, Clorinda Matto de Turner, and Flora Tristán, were often even more mordant than their North American counterparts, since divorce did not exist in their Catholic countries. Avellaneda was no exception: she was among the most outspoken of these women, and critics have rightly noted that in *Sab* her feminism consistently overshadows her denunciation of slavery (Kirkpatrick 156).

Recent, principally gender-oriented criticism has contributed a number of other insights, as for example some of the differences in narrative structure between Avellaneda's novel and other Cuban antislavery texts (cf. particularly Netchinsky). Whereas most male writers favored panoramic portrayals of race relations in their society, Avellaneda's stage was a smaller one, as she chose to make a personal love story the central focus of her novel.[13] Therefore, the issue of Sab's race comes to be both a Cuban social problem and the determining factor which raises him to the tragic Romantic hero in pursuit of an unrealizable goal (Barreda 71–72; Guerra 709). Another aspect unique to her text is the parallel which Avellaneda draws between women and slaves, as is the interplay between issues of gender, race, and types of social marginalization. It is evident that Avellaneda used the figure of Sab not only to protest slavery but also to vent many of her own particular frustrations. "In the imagined expression of a slave's outrage speaks, in fact, the anger of a young colonial woman who aspired to pour out her own subjectivity in writing capable of captivating the great centers of civilization and culture, but who was told to be silent and resign

herself to the self-abnegating virtues of the angel of the hearth" (Kirkpatrick 157).

This topic of Sab's rage is an important one. European-authored *Oroonoko* and *Bug-Jargal* present black characters who led bloody slave uprisings and did not hesitate to use violence to fight the enslavement of their minds and bodies, but in America Sab—like Uncle Tom—refuses this course of action. This stance has bothered a number of critics, for given the forceful articulation of Sab's anger against society, his refusal to fight seems inconsistent, unless one recalls the perennial Cuban fear of slave uprisings, which made the rebellious slave a forbidden topic; black literary characters had to remain "nonthreatening and acceptable to white readers" (Luis 53).[14] However, several gender-oriented critics have looked at this issue from their particular angles. Netchinsky feels that Avellaneda's work throbs with "a sense of power that is dormant, repressed, bound," and although "Avellaneda and her protagonist are quick to rescind the language of active protest, the words have been pronounced" (208–209). In Kirkpatrick's opinion, Sab's avoidance of violence reveals "a narrative impulse divided against itself in the attempt both to justify and contain anger" (155). Sommer has gone a step further in showing that in fact there is considerable violence in *Sab,* but that it is rhetorical and not physical. Although Avellaneda simultaneously violated accepted codes of language, race, class, and gender, she was ultimately unable to make a definitive break with convention (113–116).

The fact that Sab is a mulatto (unlike Bug-Jargal and Oroonoko who are pure African) is also significant. "Cuba," Barreda maintains, "is a mulatto nation, and the Cuban is, if not biologically, at least psychologically a mulatto" (1). Antislavery literature reflected the broad spectrum of racial blending that characterized Cuban society, and in Spanish—as opposed to English—the designation "mulatto/a" was a commonly accepted term.[15] Sab, then, is not an African who had been transplanted to the New World but an American, a Cuban, born in the Americas of the two races dominant in Cuba. Although a slave, he is an aristocrat through both of his parents and is, in fact, Carlota's cousin.[16] Despite her abolitionist stance, Avellaneda has been taken to task by contemporary critics who point to instances of unconscious racism, such as, for example, Sab's remark that "in spite of her color, my mother was beautiful." The same might be said for the description of Sab's own physical features, but in both of these cases we are in danger of reading this novel out of context. As William Luis rightly maintains:

> It stands to reason that antislavery, as a concept or as a literary, political, or economic movement in Cuba, could only exist as a white movement. The white dominant perspective . . . which helped to

> formulate the antislavery narrative could only be expressed by using the mechanism available to white or Western culture. Language and writing, as a bourgeois means of expression, can only be in the form of a dominant white aesthetic. A slave or a black described as having white characteristics may suggest, to a contemporary reader, assimilation. But within a different context, the same description was, in fact, aggressive and daring and challenged the slavery system. (65)

Sommer is also intrigued by the author's problems in classifying Sab's exact racial status. For example, when Avellaneda describes the slave's features, she maintains that Sab was neither a white *criollo* nor a perfect mulatto, "as if the inherited signs of a European language could not catch up with an elusive American referent . . . this racial indefiniteness, this new shade of social meaning . . . may be among the most radical features of this novel" (113).

Feminist critics (Gold, Schlau, and Kirkpatrick in particular) have also called attention to the importance of female friendships and female bonding as a weapon—or at least a consolation—against marginalization and powerlessness, a theme that appears in other of Avellaneda's works as well. I feel that Avellaneda also has a marked tendency to subvert the role of the innocent child/woman who functions as the quintessential heroine in many male-authored Romantic texts. Avellaneda creates a different kind of woman: in *Dos mugeres* it is the adulteress Catalina who claims center stage, and in *Sab* it is Teresa, the poor, unattractive, and illegitimate relation. Aside from their innate nobility of spirit, these two women are seen as exemplary because of their intelligence and experience in the world, qualities that Avellaneda herself had had to acquire in order to survive as a writer and to maintain her independence as a woman.

In a related vein: what has always struck me about Avellaneda is her insistent concern with the economic realities that determine a woman's status in the world. Her *Autobiography* gives us ample clues why she should think this way. Gertrudis was a child of privilege, but her refusal to marry the man her family had chosen for her had dire economic repercussions when her grandfather altered his will. Her lack of personal means forced her to obey Escalada, thwarted her plans with Ricafort, and very likely cooled Cepeda's lukewarm ardor further still. At first she disliked thinking about money. For example, when the young Gertrudis disembarked in France, she registered her disapproval with the dockside scene, where hotel keepers, porters, and fruit sellers competed for her family's attention. "This hunger for money was a disagreeable shock, for it is still quite unknown in our rich Cuba" (Figarola 253). Once she was on her own, however, it did not take her long to realize that she could not ignore material concerns. In *Sab* one still notices her ambivalence toward the topic of

money—she detests the materialistic Otways but also realizes that Don Carlos's lack of business acumen has dire consequences for his daughters—but this disappears in *Dos mugeres,* published only a year later. Her heroine Catalina is not only lovely and accomplished in all social and cultural graces but also is an efficient manager both of her own fortune and that of a woman friend whom she saves from financial ruin.

A word about the *Autobiography.* I have included it in this translation not only because Avellaneda wrote it at about the same time as *Sab* and readers will notice the intertextuality between Avellaneda's life and novel but because in both cases the author was engaged in writing a fictional self through the medium of epistolary autobiography (cf. Kirkpatrick, Netchinsky, and Sommer). I am also fascinated by her style. In the *Autobiography* one gets to appreciate the mercurial temperament of the young writer, as well as her transparent efforts to manipulate and seduce her reader. It was a good thing that she failed or that Cepeda was too terrified of her to let himself be ensnared, for at heart she knew that her independence was her greatest strength. Later, when she rejected Antonio Romero, Avellaneda again realized this fact. I particularly remember a sentence with which she ended one angry letter to him, a sentence which could well be an epigraph for her whole life: "I feel . . . that true freedom is never enslaving yourself to anyone in anything" (*Cartas inéditas* 39).