

**Original citation:**

Hooper, Kirsty. (2002) Fin de Siécle . . . anxieties and future(s) perfect : Sofía Casanova's El doctor Wolski (1894). *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, Vol.79 (No.2). pp. 175-187.

**Permanent WRAP url:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/53276/>

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes the work of researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**A note on versions:**

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk)



**Fin de Siècle Anxieties and Future(s) Perfect:  
Sofía Casanova's *El doctor Wolski* (1894)**

KIRSTY HOOPER

*Hertford College, University of Oxford*

Sofía Casanova's little-known novel, *El doctor Wolski*, represents an important but rarely acknowledged aspect of the Spanish *fin de siglo*. Published in 1894, it addresses the fears and uncertainties, inspired by the approaching turn of the century, that were shared by writers and intellectuals across Europe. However, while the universal concerns of the fin de siècle have become a focal area for scholars of other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European literatures, much of the work on Spanish literature of the period has remained insular, dominated by interest in the artificially-constructed tension between the so-called 'Generation of 1898' and the 'Modernistas'. This has distracted scholars both from seeing Spanish literature in the broader European context, and from considering works such as *El doctor Wolski* – virtually unique among Spanish novels of its period not only in dealing with non-Spanish-specific issues, but also in being set outside Spain itself – that do not fall into either of the aforementioned 'movements'. In recent years, scholars have begun to recognise that while Spain (like any other nation) did, to an extent, follow its own path, Spanish culture was also inextricably bound up with developments in Europe: to acknowledge this contributes to greater understanding of the period from either perspective, as Lily Litvak has explained:

En ese momento, los avances científicos, los desarrollos económicos y el medio ambiente cultural se conjugaron para crear un conjunto de condiciones intelectuales único. España, con sus combinaciones peculiares de provincialismo y cosmopolitanismo, de tradicionalismo y modernismo, formaba un contexto ideal para el estudio de los que estaba ocurriendo en toda Europa.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I examine *El doctor Wolski* within both a specifically Spanish and a broader European cultural context, and also in the light of Roberta Johnson's claim that while male writing of the period in Spain is concerned almost exclusively with the past, 'the minority discourse by women, on the other hand, emphasises the present and the future'.<sup>2</sup> Although the explicit theme of the novel – Casanova's criticism of society's increasing dependence on science and hastening towards modernity, at the expense of faith and traditional values – may seem to contradict Johnson's thesis, in fact the novel is also a biting critique of the androcentricity of modern society and that society's plans for the future, as Casanova postulates instead an alternative, explicitly feminine, utopian future that rather than rejecting traditional values, strives to reconfigure them.

The Galician Spanish writer Sofia Casanova (1861-1958) lived an unusually cosmopolitan life, which is reflected in the internationalism of her work. *El doctor Wolski* was her first novel, and her first attempt to convey her experiences and observations to a Spanish audience. In 1887, already celebrated in Spain as a poet, she married the Polish philosopher Wincenty Lutosławski. On her marriage, she left

Spain for Eastern Europe, accompanying her husband through temporary academic positions and research visits to Warsaw, Dorpat (Estonia), London, and Moscow. In 1890, the couple and their daughters moved to Kazan, a Russian city eight hundred kilometres east of Moscow on the Volga (now in Tatarstan), where a third daughter was born. They remained there from 1890-1892, during which time Casanova began writing *El doctor Wolski*, which is set almost exclusively in the city. At the end of the 1892 academic year, the family returned to spend the vacation with Lutosławski's family in Poland, and in January 1893, Casanova and Lutosławski made the journey back to Kazan alone, leaving their three daughters in Poland: this journey is described in the travelogue *Sobre el Volga helado*, first published in 1899. This time they remained in Kazan for only one semester; Casanova completed *El doctor Wolski*, and it was published in Madrid in 1894, by which time the family were once again in London. It would be one of her most critically and commercially successful works.<sup>3</sup>

The novel's main plot can be summarised as follows: Enrique Wolski, who is Polish, graduates in medicine from the University of Kazan and goes abroad for two years to develop his theory that through judicious breeding, and the elimination of hereditary illness, the human race can be improved. His plan is twofold: to regenerate the human race, and to work towards independence for his beloved Poland. When he returns, he finds his fiancée, Mara, is suffering from tuberculosis, which – because it is inherited – rules her out as a suitable mate. Mara breaks off their engagement so that Enrique does not have to compromise his ideals; he goes

abroad again, and hears nothing more from her. Four years later, he meets Gelcha, a healthy but simple girl from a good Polish family, and – after investigating her family history and finding no evidence of inherited illness – marries her. A year later, she gives birth to a son who dies within days, and in the same week, Wolski's model hospital is razed to the ground: his project has failed both on a personal and a professional level, in what has been interpreted as: 'the ironic hand of fate [destroying] all his ideals'.<sup>4</sup> In a final twist, the closing chapter of the novel reveals Mara (whom both we and Wolski suppose to be dead), alive, and working as a schoolmistress in Lithuania, happily surrounded by children.

### **Wolski: a man of his generation?**

In their recent reader on the fin de siècle, Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst remark that '[o]ne of the most marked features of the fin de siècle is the authority given to science',<sup>5</sup> and the question of this authority is at the centre of *El doctor Wolski*: Wolski is a scientist, a man conversant with current thinking and technological developments, who frequently shows off his scientific knowledge and expresses his faith in science as the bringer of progress, as when he explains at length to his pessimistic Russian friend Iwan Iwanowich that:

[l]a ley de la gravitación, el cálculo infinitesimal, el análisis y la síntesis químicos, nos han hecho adelantar asombrosamente en el conocimiento de la naturaleza...La antiséptica ha quitado de los ojos de la medicina la venda que los cegaba. La embriología, esa ciencia de ayer, penetra hasta las fuentes mismas de la vida para sorprender en las entrañas el secreto de la concepción ... La bacteriología busca y encuentra el

invisible germen de la enfermedad que los antisépticos destruyen. La cirugía hace prodigios, porque los instrumentos quirúrgicos han llegado a un perfeccionamiento ...<sup>6</sup>

The driving force behind his work is his realization that humanity is struggling to fulfil its potential, which he rationalises as the result of moral and physical degeneration: '[d]egeneramos porque nos faltan los dos elementos, base de las sociedades trabajadoras y fuertes: la higiene que preserva y fortifica el cuerpo, y en el orden moral un fin elevado y generoso' [49]. His answer is to '[e]stirpar el mal para que la propagación de la especie se perfeccione' [165], a Darwinian solution clearly influenced by the new science of eugenics:<sup>7</sup>

[T]odos los hombres de buena voluntad [he says], deben emplear su energía combatiendo ese terrible enemigo de la herencia morbosa, impidiendo *en absoluto* las uniones entre personas enfermas y entre parientes ... Hay que atajar el mal en su origen, haciendo entender a todas las clases sociales, *que es el mayor de los crímenes dar la vida en condiciones perjudiciales al nuevo ser* [67, italics the author's].

Enrique's use of the term 'degenerar' shows a conscious participation in contemporary intellectual debate. The twin concepts of degeneration and regeneration – far from being peculiarly Spanish, as Spanish literary criticism has tended to assume – pervaded European thought in the last decades of the nineteenth century as people tried to come to terms with their uncertainties about the future of civilization and the human race, inspired by the approaching turn of

the century. William Greenslade has recently said of the origins of degeneration theory that: '[f]ounded on the Darwinian revolution in biology and harnessed to psychological medicine, the idea of degeneration spread to social science, to literature and art. In its scientific and rational practices it offered to diagnose the agencies of the irrational component threatening the orderly progress of the society'.<sup>8</sup> In other words, ideas of degeneration offered a solution to those looking for someone or something to blame for the perceived disintegration of society. Since those who were most concerned by the possibility of changes to the status quo were those at the centre of the threatened establishment – the white, middle class males – blame tended to fall on those who differed from the centre's perception of the norm: the non-white, lower-class, non-male (or non-stereotypically male) members of society. Thus fears of degeneration focused on the four central axes of race, class, gender, and nation. Elaine Showalter draws out the reason for this in *Sexual Anarchy*, her study of gender and culture at the fin de siècle:

In periods of cultural insecurity, where there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense. If the different races can be kept in their places, if the various classes can be held in their proper districts in the city, and if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless spectre of millennial change.<sup>9</sup>

*El doctor Wolski* precedes most Spanish polemics on race, which began in earnest after Spain's defeat by the USA in 1898. Nevertheless, Casanova presents Wolski as a

man highly attuned to the potential problems of racial difference. He lives in a world governed by the principles of 'racialized Darwinism, which placed the spatial diffusion of different peoples along a single temporal axis, moving from the 'primitive' to the 'civilised'.<sup>10</sup> Kazan is a frontier society, 'donde la civilización entra lentísimamente, como medrosa de librar batalla con los mahometanos que la habitan y con las legiones de rusos semibárbaros allí nacidos' [1]. This vision of Kazan corresponds to Wolski's vision of the world: he sees his 'civilizing' mission in imperialist terms, and Kazan as a battleground, as he tells his Russian friend María Fiodorowna in Chapter XVII: 'Aseguro a usted que no hay conquistador pacífico, deseoso de captarse la simpatía y la confianza de los indígenas del país conquistado, que emplee más medios que los que voy a emplear con esas gentes' [251]. His attitude towards the Tartars, the indigenous Russians, the Chuwashis and the Chirimyses who form his potential constituency is patronising, to say the least, as his friend Iwan points out. Iwan repeatedly challenges Enrique's arguments, and his self-definition as a conquering hero of the 'uncivilised': '¿Y con qué derechos quieres violentar a esas pobres criaturas que viven como pueden? ... ¿Con qué derecho quieres imponer la salud a quien no la desea?' [228]. Enrique can offer no response to Iwan's reasoning, but he remains convinced – like many of his peers – that the only way to reverse degeneration is to force the 'bárbaros' to adapt, whether they like it or not.

Many contemporary thinkers agreed that the explosion in urban dwelling – and the subsequent growth of an urban working class – was a primary factor in

degeneration. Spanish novelists in the 1880s, notably Pérez Galdós in *La desheredada* (1881) and *Fortunata y Jacinta* (1887), and Pardo Bazán in *La Tribuna* (1883), had brought the plight of Spain's urban poor into the public eye, and Casanova's detailed descriptions of poverty in Kazan show a similarly sympathetic awareness of the working class. As William Greenslade writes: '[t]he post-Darwinian city was imagined not merely as a city of moral darkness and of outcasts. Here were tracts of new degenerate energies, menageries of sub-races of men and women'.<sup>11</sup> Enrique shares in this nightmarish 'imagining' of the contemporary urban landscape, where vice and disease rage hand in hand:

Los hombres, cegados por la vanidad y el egoismo, se agrupan, se apelmazan, se asfixian en los grandes centros ... El aire esparce los gérmenes morbosos, y las escrófulas, las herpes y las úlceras malignas ... se contagian a otras gentes en la plaza, en las tiendas, en el bulak de Kazán, en el cual viven hacinadas muchas familias miserables. Por los mil medios de propagación que cada enfermedad tiene, ha llegado a nuestro país el *coltun*, la *plica pletórica*, esa repugnante enfermedad del cuero cabelludo que los tártaros nos trajeron, y que hoy, casi extinguida entre esa raza, aún existe en muchas aldeas de Polonia [168-9].

He lays much of the blame at the door of women – both working- and middle-class – whom he sees only in terms of their role in the propagation of the species:

Él sabía por experiencia que entre las jóvenes de los grandes centros de población, apenas una por ciento se halla en condiciones favorables de ser madre ... [183].

Emplee usted [he says to María Fiodorowna] toda su energía, hasta la amenaza y el castigo con esas madres que, holgazanas y viciosas, prefieren a dejar sus hijos en las casas benéficas, traficar con ellos moviendo a compasión al transeunte, llevando en los brazos al pobrecito ser, que, lleno el cuerpo de llagas, deja tras sí un rastro de infección, y está condenado a morir precozmente o a vivir hecho un idiota [244-5].

Enrique's relationships with the women he loves are defined by the same terms. For Enrique, Gelcha is no more than a vehicle for his experiments: a brood mare who will supply him with the children he craves. He marries her and, metaphorically, squashes the life out of her. Our first impression of Gelcha is of the sound of her voice: she is lively, healthy, active and robust. By imposing his beliefs on her, forcing her to live according to his 'hygienic' rules, banning the theatre, books, newspapers and activity, Enrique almost certainly contributes to her inability to bear a healthy child. After they are married, we see Gelcha only once before she fades out of the novel. Enrique clearly perceives a need to redefine and limit gender boundaries, and he acts on that need; but in contrast with the way in which he deals with race/class and, as we will see below, nation, he never makes his desires explicit.

Enrique himself sees his battle as being fought on the fronts of race/class (his medical work) and nation, frequently referring to his two-sided struggle for 'la regeneración de la humanidad y la independencia de Polonia' [84]:

Mi amor ... y mi ansia de ser útil a mi patria y a los hombres, llenan mi corazón ... son dos sentimientos inseparables ... [69]

[Enrique's father says of him] El amor, los anhelos de su juventud, todo lo pospone a la ciencia y a su patriotismo, que forman un sólo ideal en su alma ... Temo que sus ideales científico-patrióticos le impidan ser feliz así llanamente, a la manera de los demás hombres ... [204]

In a letter to Mara, he expresses the inextricable connection between scientific regenerationism and patriotism that is at the heart of his world view:

¡Nuestros hijos! ... Serán polacos ... y para que sirvan a nuestra Polonia les daremos la salud, la instrucción y la fuerza de voluntad necesarias a los hombres, que tienen el santo fin de ayudar a la salvación de su patria. Ellos, como nosotros, se casarán por amor, sus hijos seguirán su ejemplo, y ese manantial de salud y energías que nuestros hijos y nuestros nietos aportarán a la vida, no se perderá en el flujo y reflujo de las generaciones [65].

Today, degeneration is often privileged over regeneration, as Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst recognise in their recent reader:

The current focus on the fin de siècle has risked becoming too fascinated with the 'gothic' science of degeneration, forgetting a host of other voices that contested visions of collapse with dreams of regeneration ... [the] dialectic between de- and re-generation was played out on a broad scale between different political stances and different philosophies, and often in factions between disciplines.<sup>12</sup>

Ledger and Luckhurst offer examples of these voices, ranging from socialists, anarchists and feminists, to – significantly for our discussion – 'eugenicists planning

to reverse the decline and regenerate the race'.<sup>13</sup> In Spain, debates about regeneration had been taking place in various contexts since the early nineteenth century: Catholics talked of moral and spiritual regeneration, Republicans of political and national regeneration. The word was loaded, and became more so throughout the 1890s as politicians from all sides began to use it as a slogan. In literature, as Pedro Saínz Rodríguez and, following him, Lily Litvak, have noted, the notion of regeneration followed two distinct paths:

En general, toda esa literatura del desastre ... puede ser agrupada en dos secciones; obras que tratan sobre la psicología y problemas históricos del pueblo español en una reacción esencialmente nacionalista ... y obras de punto de vista europeizante que exponen un programa de regeneración.<sup>14</sup>

Casanova's novel was published four years before the 'disaster' of 1898, to which Litvak refers, but even so, I would argue that it has much in common with the second of Litvak's categories: regeneration in *El doctor Wolski* is understood in the broader, 'European' sense, as a modern concept and the necessary response to the Darwinist perception of degeneration.

Casanova purposely positions Enrique at the centre of fin de siècle debates about the future of humanity, setting him up as a representative of the white, middle class, male establishment that clung to theories of de- and re-generation in a desperate struggle to avoid an apparently inevitable change in the status quo. Enrique's approach to national (re)construction responds to the perceived need to redefine

and fix cultural boundaries, and his solution to the problem of Poland's independence, as to the 'problem' of perceived race- and class-related threats to the social order, is modern in the extreme: he aligns himself explicitly with modernity, with science and with the contemporary white, middle class, male vision of the future.

Enrique's aggressive redefinition of the boundaries of race, class, gender, and nation on behalf of 'modernity' and the future is a response to the sense of cultural insecurity that Elaine Showalter sees as characteristic of fin de siècle generations. This insecurity is reflected in the descriptive framework within which Wolski is placed: he occupies an ambiguous position, in both space – Kazan forms the border between 'civilisation' and 'savagery' – and time – as part of a generation torn between the past and the future, romantic and positivist beliefs, tradition and modernity. His aggression is translated, within this framework, into the language of battle. We have already seen how he conceives of his mission in imperialistic terms and Kazan as the battleground for his struggle against the menace of racial, social, and national degeneration. This image is underscored by Casanova's repeated references to him as a warrior, or a soldier. She explicitly locates him within the framework of Polish history, comparing him to Poland's great military heroes, Sobieski and Kościuszko:

Adivinábase al mirar al doctor Wolski, que de haber nacido en el siglo XVII como Sobieski,<sup>15</sup> hubiera luchado por una idea generosa; contemporáneo de Kościuszko,<sup>16</sup>

como él hubiera combatido en extranjero suelo por la libertad que no lograra para el suyo ... [26].

Enrique goes even further, defining himself as a mould-breaking hero in terms of the Promethean myth: 'yo sé, la razón me demuestra, que la voluntad puede robar su fuego a los dioses sin temor al castigo imaginado por la fantasía griega' [41-2]. The 'fire' he hopes to steal is that of knowledge and scientific truth. His aggressive attitude towards the Chuwashis and the Chirimyses is here directed towards the higher power that he chooses to define as nature.

In order to fulfil his self-imposed mission, Wolski must re-enact two myths: the national myth, whereby he is the saviour of the Polish nation, and the Promethean myth, whereby he will enlighten humanity with the flame of science. As well as re-enact them, however, he must also rewrite them: significantly, although both Sobieski and Kościuszko were heroes of the Polish Romantic Movement, they each failed to maintain (in the case of Sobieski) or restore (in the case of Kościuszko) Poland's independence. It is the same with the Promethean myth: Prometheus was severely punished for his audacity. Confidently, Wolski predicts that he can alter this pattern, ensuring victory over 'the gods', but ultimately the myth prevails, and he is left utterly defeated: when he learns of the death of his son, Casanova compares him explicitly to Prometheus chained to the rock. In a final ironic twist, his hospital is destroyed by the literal incarnation of the fire he figuratively sought to steal. Our last sight of him is as a mixture of images from the two myths he tried and failed to redefine, running towards the fire 'cual esforzado capitán ... herido de muerte' [307].

Enrique Wolski is representative of his nation, his generation, and even his gender: Casanova's depiction of him in terms of images from the military and classical traditions underlines the androcentricity of the values that he represents. His personal failure at the end of the novel reflects, I think, the author's criticism of those values, but it does not mean that Casanova believes that the nation and generation that Enrique represents will also fail: significantly, Mara shares Enrique's desire for the liberation of Poland and the regeneration of mankind. Casanova's description of Lithuania, where Mara resides at the end of the novel, makes it clear that Wolski's defeat does not mean defeat for the Polish cause. Similarly, the failure of Wolski's theory of the regeneration of humankind does not mean that humankind cannot be helped. In fact, Mara has always shared Wolski's vision, and now we see that she is living out his dream: she has reached the promised land of Lithuania – while Wolski is still in Kazan – and she is surrounded by children – while Wolski's child is dead.

### **Mara: a woman of her generation?**

The tension between 'modernity', the worldview represented by Enrique, and its alternative, which I will call 'tradition', is at the centre of *El doctor Wolski*. We have already seen how Enrique finds himself in an ambiguous position – temporally and spatially, literally and figuratively – and reacts aggressively, trying to redefine and fix the threateningly permeable boundaries of race, class, gender, and nation in order to defend the position he represents. Mara is of the same generation as

Enrique and occupies the same ambiguous space between tradition and modernity, civilisation and savagery, but she is a woman and therefore not only excluded from the values he represents, but even perceived as a threat to them.

The question of Wolski's failure must be considered alongside the parallel question: why does Mara succeed? These questions – two sides of the same coin – foreground the tension between different visions of the future that informs the entire novel. I will argue in the following section that Enrique's failure represents the failure of the androcentric world view, intrinsically linked with modernity, to which he implicitly subscribes, while Mara's success, in turn, represents Casanova's own, female-centred, vision of a future that, at the very least, does not require a total break with the past.

Like Wolski, Mara faces the task of reconfiguring the past in order to forge the future, and throughout the first half of the novel, she struggles against the weight of convention and the limitations this imposes on her, just as Enrique does – although for different reasons. She is one of a long line of literary heroines, both in Spain and elsewhere, who have to compromise between their desire for education and a useful role in society, and the demands of social acceptance. Like her namesake, Rosalía de Castro's Mara from the 1861 novel *Flavio*, or *La Regenta's* Ana Ozores, she wants to study, and to be Enrique's equal, but she encounters resistance all around her. Mara's guardian, Doña María, tells Wolski that 'en toda su vida [Mara] no ha hecho otra cosa que estudiar y con aprovechamiento' [22]: she disapproves of this,

warning Mara later that ‘viéndote durante dos años engolfada en tus estudios, temí que perdieras tu *feminidad*’ [71, italics the author’s]. The younger generation too, or at least the male half of it, disapprove just as much of the idea of women’s participation in education: at the very beginning of the novel, as Enrique’s friends wait for him to come out of his doctoral viva, one comments that:

Para mí, en el caso de nuestro amigo, no sería lo peor ni la presencia del Claustro en pleno, ni las preguntas de los estúpidos, ni las miradas de los cientos de estudiantes que llenan la sala, sino la asistencia de tantas mujeres. ¿Qué vienen a hacer las mujeres a estos actos universitarios? [4-5]

Enrique himself is not so dismissive: he encourages Mara to come to the viva, although afterwards he admits that it is because ‘¡Me hubiera gustado tenerte cerca de mí, poder mirarte!’ [13], rather than because he hopes she herself will learn something. When he does not see her at the viva, he chastises her, and she explains:

he ido a la Universidad, he atravesado aquel laberinto de aulas y corredores, y cuando llegué a la puerta de la sala, atestada de gente, te oí, me detuve y se me ocurrió una tontería. Figúrate que pensé que mi presencia podría distraerte, y no me atreví a entrar. Desde la puerta he oído toda la discusión... [12-13]

The difficulties she describes in finding her way to the room where Enrique is receiving the holy grail of education clearly symbolise the difficulties she faces in her own education – where a doctorate is, of course, out of the question. Enrique interprets her decision to wait outside as evidence of her timidity – which he seems

to find rather attractive – but I believe it also shows her awareness of his desire to silence and objectify her as an image. By waiting outside, she removes herself from his gaze, and from the disapproving gaze of his friends, which allows her to listen to the proceedings – and to engage intellectually in them – on her own terms.

The gulf between the real Mara and the image Enrique and others have of her is one more example of the ambiguity of her position, as she negotiates the conflict between her desire for education and independence, and the demands of social acceptance. Her sometimes-difficult relationship with Doña María is a constant reminder of this: Doña María has a firm idea of a woman's role, telling Mara that: 'Tú serás el ángel tutelar de ese hogarcito tan higiénico, tan confortable y tan polaco como Enrique lo sueña...' [59]. While Enrique is away, Doña María pressurises Mara to fulfil the duties of the 'angel of the hearth', while Mara struggles to complete her studies. She can condone Mara's longing for education so long as it is the result of her affection for Enrique, and her desire to help him: she is not against women's education in principle, but believes that it should be restricted to the aesthetic sphere, because women who study mathematics and science are unattractive to men: 'a los sabios no les disgustan las mujeres *mujeres*; es decir, con sus inclinaciones delicadas, risueñas, superficiales alguna vez, que no quitan nada a la seriedad, base del carácter, pero que lo equilibran' [72, italics the author's]. Mara does not accept Doña María's limitations, but at the same time, she pacifies her by carrying out the domestic duties she is assigned, leading the older woman to remark with relief that: 'Ya sé que tu buen sentido y tus aficciones artísticas te hubieran

preservado siempre de caer en la tentación de hacerte *sabia* a la manera que lo suelen ser las mujeres olvidadas de su sexo' [72, italics the author's].

Mara is very good at playing the part that is required of her, but when she comes under stress, her facade cracks. When she becomes ill, she refuses to accept the fact, accusing Doña María of stifling her and contributing to her illness: 'Alguna culpa tiene usted en todo esto, porque con sus cuidados y sus mimos, parece que soy de cristal. Me arropa usted como dama ociosa a gatito friolero' [96]. Casanova makes even more explicit the link between the constraint placed on female bodies and minds, and the physical weakness that was such a feature of the time, in a later passage when she refers to the corset as the bars on the door of society's prison:

[Enrique] veía pasar por su memoria un sinnúmero de adolescentes flácidas, anémicas, sin vigor, prensadas en los corsés, que son una barrera puesta al desarrollo en la pubertad y el grillete del sistema venoso ...

Y viendo desfilan por su memoria la legión de adolescentes cuya miseria fisiológica aumenta una educación absurda y un género de vida irrazonable y perturbador, el médico comparaba con aquellos cuerpecillos linfáticos y débiles, el cuerpo robusto de [Gelcha] ... [183].

After undergoing a profound psychological crisis on discovering her illness, Mara turns to God. The imagery Casanova uses to describe her from this point on is unequivocally Christian: Mara is compared variously to a martyr, an angel and a saint, and her decision to leave Enrique can therefore be read as an example of selfless sacrifice (by leaving, she enables Enrique to be true to his ideals). The

novel's final paragraph appears all too explicitly to support this interpretation as Casanova describes a halo of light descending over Mara's head.

The few critics who have dealt with *El doctor Wolski* have used this imagery to outline a reading of the novel as a defence of faith in the tension between faith and science that had occupied Spanish intellectuals since the middle of the century, and more pressingly since Darwin's works were first translated into Spanish between 1870 and 1877. Other authors had dealt with the same topic, in both journalism and fiction: in 1877, Emilia Pardo Bazán had published a series of articles attacking Darwinism, and the novel *Pascual López*, which reflected the growing awareness among Spanish Catholics that the new 'scientific' trend towards rationalisation and explanation was threatening society's previously unquestioning belief in God and Catholic doctrine, as embodied in the institution of the Church. It is true that there was increasing questioning of the Church's role at this time as Europeanising thinkers in Spain increasingly blamed the Church for failing to keep pace with social and political developments: when the debate over the decline of the Latin race caught fire after the disaster of 1898, a number of books appeared that argued that the Church was the root of Spain's problems. Lily Litvak, summarising one of the most influential of these texts – Leon Bazalgette's *A quoi tient l'infériorité française* – writes that: 'en las naciones donde ha dominado el espíritu católico ve un carácter dogmático y reaccionario. Esto es visible en España, Polonia y Hungría, que han quedado atrás y son incapaces de regenerarse'.<sup>17</sup> From the 1880s, dissatisfaction

with the Church even inspired a body of anarchist poetry that replaced God as an object of worship with science.

Despite the Church's apparent strength at the centre of Spanish society, science, far from being confined to marginal groups – such as anarchists or scientists – had a very broad appeal in Spain. By the turn of the century, however, writers such as Unamuno were beginning to realise that although scientific advances had undermined – and often destroyed – traditional ethical and social foundations, they offered no serious alternative, leaving man spiritually directionless. *El doctor Wolski* anticipates Unamuno's 1902 novel *Amor y pedagogía*, which also describes the failure of a man of science to produce a perfect child, by several years, and I think that Casanova's anti-scientific stance responds less to the lack of direction that concerned Unamuno, than to the destruction – and replacement by faith in science – of ethical and social foundations, particularly those connected with social consciousness and religious faith. This suggests that we should consider it more as a continuation of the socially aware, profoundly moral realist novels of Galdós and Pardo Bazán, than as a precursor of the introspective, individualistic early twentieth-century writers like Unamuno. But does this mean that we must read *El doctor Wolski* simply as a rather late voice raised in support of Catholicism, in the conflict between faith and science?

Many writers remained faithful to Catholicism, although as Pardo Bazán pointed out in an 1891 book review, which may have been an indirect response to Zola's

comment that her Catholicism meant she could not produce truly naturalistic works,<sup>18</sup> it is simplistic not to make a distinction between a 'Catholic novel' and a novel written by a Catholic. This is a useful distinction to bear in mind when considering *El doctor Wolski*: like Pardo Bazán, Casanova was intensely Catholic, but I would argue that *El doctor Wolski* is not a Catholic novel, that is, the faith-science tension is not the central tenet, and the role of faith in the novel is not connected with a defence of the Church. Rather, as I shall explain now, a general Christian faith forms part of the broader vision of an ideal society that Casanova explores in the novel's final chapter.

### **Casanova's vision of the future**

The final chapter of the novel, which describes Mara's life in Lithuania, can be read as a manifesto for Casanova's vision of the future, proposed as an alternative to that represented by Enrique. The fact that Mara, having extricated herself from Enrique's demands, has survived considerably longer than anticipated, suggests that her decision to leave Enrique amounts to an act of self-preservation. We saw above how Enrique's treatment of her replacement, Gelcha, who is healthy, strong and apparently an ideal mother, is probably the principal reason why their child is born sickly and Gelcha herself is left infertile. We also saw how Mara was well aware of the limitations imposed by Enrique's vision of their future, which saw her as a silent producer of children.

Mara's life in Lithuania is quite different. Women are the driving force of society: Mara and Doña María have overcome their differences to work together, running a school for poor children where Mara teaches the children, feeds them, and, with her customary parting 'Si Dios quiere' [318], reminds them that human life is in God's hands. Although Lithuania appears idyllic, Mara and Doña María are aware that all is not yet perfect: male violence can still intrude, as in the case of a woman known only as 'Wenceslao's wife', of whom Doña María says:

ha venido hoy llorando como una Magdalena. Figúrate que su marido ha vuelto a pegarla, la arrojó de la choza y ha vendido los aperos de labranza y todo el ajuar. Hoy no tenía la pobre un bocado de pan para su hijo [319].

Mara's response is immediate: '¡Infeliz! ... que venga y vivirá con nosotros' [319]: female solidarity is the only solution in a world where the balance of power in male-female relationships is still tipped decisively in favour of men, and it must be enacted without regard to class or race. As Mara tells Enrique on the day of his viva, 'El dolor no tiene nacionalidad' [16], and similarly, where Enrique saw the poor children of the Kazan Bulak as subjects to be conquered, Mara empowers the poor children she encounters by giving them access to the education for which she herself had to struggle so hard.

Casanova's vision of the future as described in the final chapter of *El doctor Wolski* juxtaposes tradition – symbolised by the reminders of the past that pervade the Lithuanian setting – with modernity, seen in Mara's reconfiguring of social roles to

place women as a dynamic force at the centre of society. Where Wolski's vision was based on exclusion and subjugation, Mara's is founded on inclusion and empowerment. Faith in God is central to this utopia, but it is a personal faith rather than one based on the institution of the Catholic Church. I would argue that *El doctor Wolski* is based not so much on the tension between faith and science, as between inclusive – here identified with feminine – and exclusive – identified with masculine – visions of the future.

### **Conclusion**

*El doctor Wolski* is Sofía Casanova's consciously feminist response to contemporary pan-European conversations about the fin de siècle crisis of confidence in the future of humanity that affected the entire continent. A Galician woman writing in Spanish who married a Pole and lived much of her life in Eastern Europe, but nevertheless enjoyed commercial and critical success in Spain and beyond, Casanova's explicitly cross-cultural, consciously feminist perspective proves yet again the inadequacy of the generational model of Spanish literary studies, which has perpetuated the double myth that turn-of-the-century Spanish culture was not only monolithically masculine and exclusively Castilian, but also isolated from the European mainstream. My feminist reading of *El doctor Wolski* is one example of how, by approaching works by a wide variety of *fin de siglo* writers – male and female, canonical and unknown, representing all parts of Spain – from a range of critical positions, we can uncover diverse visions of present(s) unsatisfying and future(s)

perfect that not only contribute to a reimagining of the *fin de siglo* in Spain, but also offer novel, much-needed Hispanic perspectives on fin de siècle Europe.

Notes:

- 1 L. Litvak, *España 1900. Modernismo, anarquismo y fin de siglo* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1990), 18.
- 2 R. Johnson, 'Gender and Nation in Spanish Fiction Between the Wars (1898-1936)', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 21 (1996), 168.
- 3 After the initial 1894 edition, *El doctor Wolski* was reprinted at least four times in Spain and abroad: 'El doctor Wolski', serialised in *Revista Contemporánea* (Madrid), numbers 493 (15.6.1896), 547-552 to 512 (30.3.1897), 101-6. 'El doctor Wolski', *La Novela Corta* (Madrid), 255 (6.11.1920). *El doctor Wolski*, in *Obras Completas, Volumen II* (Madrid: Librería y Editorial Madrid, 1925). *Doktor Wolski (kartki z życia Polaków i Rosyan) Przekład z hiszpańskiego H.J.*, (Warsaw: Drukarnia Ed. Nicz i S-ka, 1907). The blurb at the end of Casanova's third novel, *Más que amor. Cartas* (Madrid: R. Velasco, 1908), says that *El doctor Wolski* was also translated into Dutch by 'la Baronesa Baszkiewicz' and published in *Dageblag* (La Haya). This would seem to be a reference to a daily newspaper, but I have not yet been able to establish which one.
- 4 C. Galerstein & K. McNerney, eds., *Women Writers of Spain: an annotated bio-bibliographical guide* (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 70.
- 5 S. Ledger & R. Luckhurst, eds., *The fin de siècle: a reader in cultural history, c.1880-1900* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 221.
- 6 S. Casanova, *El doctor Wolski* (Madrid: J. Cruzado, 1894), 44-5. All future references to *El doctor Wolski* (incorporated into the text) will be from this edition.
- 7 'Eugenics' was a term coined by Francis Galton (1822-1911) in 1883: the discipline involved 'the conscious development and improvement of man by the application of rational principles' [Greenslade, see below, 26].
- 8 W. Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture, and the Novel, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 16.
- 9 E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: gender and culture at the fin de siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 4.
- 10 Ledger & Luckhurst, *op. cit.*, xvii.
- 11 Greenslade, *op. cit.*, 38.
- 12 Ledger & Luckhurst, *op. cit.*, xxiii.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Litvak, *op. cit.*, 169.
- 15 Jan Sobieski (1624-96), elected King Jan III of Poland (1674-96). Defended Christian Europe against the Ottoman Empire, raising the Siege of Vienna in 1683. His death saw the effective end of Polish independence, although the Empire was not partitioned until 1772.
- 16 Tadeusz Kościuszko (1752-1817). Served Washington in the American War of Independence. Back in Poland, he fought for Poniatowski against the Russians in 1789. Led the doomed 1794 uprising, but was captured by the Russians and imprisoned for two years, eventually retiring to France and, later, Switzerland.
- 17 Litvak, *op. cit.*, 161.
- 18 For convincing argument of this point, see G. Davies, 'Pardo Bazán's reply to Zola', *MLN*, 90 (1975), 282-7.