

Periodicals for Women in Mexico during the Nineteenth Century

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PERIODICALS FOR WOMEN IN MEXICO DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

COLONIAL Spanish America would have found the idea of publishing a periodical directed toward a feminine audience alien. Yet the colonial period was not long over when such periodicals began to appear in Mexico. Typical of those published in the period 1841-1855 were *El Semanario de las señoritas mejicanas* (3 vols.; México, 1841-1842) and *La Semana de las señoritas mejicanas* (5 vols.; México, 1851-1852). They have been examined in detail to determine what appeal the fledglings tried to make to Mexican society. *El Album mexicano* (2 vols.; México, 1849), *La Camelia* (México, 1853), *El Album de las señoritas potosinas* (San Luis Potosí, 1865) and, as examples of a later type, *El Album de la mujer* (Mexico, 1883-1890) and *El Correo de las señoras* (México, 1883-1893) have been used to supplement the information.¹ While none of them achieved the success of *Godey's Lady's Book*² which by 1860 claimed a circulation of 150,000, they did show that in the nineteenth century some publishers in Mexico were concerned with woman's edification, education, and entertainment through reading.

Literary annuals had a vogue much as they did elsewhere, comparable to the rage for Keepsakes in Europe during the first half of the century.³ *Presente Amistoso* was typical. Its illustrations stressed feminine beauty—the 1852 edition boasted that its twenty illustrations of lovely women all came from London; and of course it had a high moral purpose:

El Presente Amistoso es una obra consagrada al Bello Secso y así en ella se ha procurado formar una coleccion de piezas escogidas en prosa y verso, y en que bajo las formas mas agradables se den lecciones útiles y preceptos morales.⁴

¹ Bibliography and information on Mexican periodicals in general may be found in Jefferson Rea Spell, "Mexican Literary Periodicals of the Nineteenth Century," PMLA, LII (1937), 272-312; Fortino Ibarra de Anda, *El Periodismo en México* (2 vols.; México, 1934-1935); Miguel Velasco Valdes, *Historia del periodismo mexicano* (México, 1955), and others.

² Under various related titles this had an almost continuous existence from 1830 to 1898.

³ These volumes were fashionable Christmas gifts from 1822 to 1850. B. H. Gausseron, *Les Keepsakes et les annuaires illustres de l'époque* (Paris, 1898), lists one hundred and nineteen different ones, and Frédéric Lachève, *Bibliographie sommaire des Keepsakes* (2 vols.; Paris, 1929), has an even more extensive list.

⁴ *El Presente Amistoso*, 1852, p. 1.

But in addition to these annuals there were regular periodicals that appeared weekly or biweekly.

These periodicals concurred in their devotion to *el bello sexo* but not always in their understanding of their duty toward it. *El Semanario de las señoritas mejicanas* took the education of women very seriously. It felt that women had been neglected in the nineteenth-century scramble for education and that its publication should remedy that neglect.⁵ So its purpose was “á contribuir con una piedra al menos para la construcción del edificio de la ilustración del sexo débil.”⁶ *El Album mexicano* had less ambitious aims. The chief reason for its existence seems to have been the publication of a series of engravings called “Las Flores Animadas,” a fascinating set of cuts showing women dressed as flowers.

La Semana de las señoritas mejicanas announced that it was founded to fill a void in the national literature—a publication dedicated exclusively to the *bello sexo*—and to supply the lack of an organ defending the ideas of piety and religion. It did not intend to go into political controversy but to remain purely literary, to give to its readers “un manantial de inocente recreo y sólida instrucción.”⁷ By the time they reached volume four the editors were publicly delighted that they had been so successful with a journal presenting the moral rectitude and good customs of the immortal Dickens rather than the adultery and obscenity of Dumas.⁸ The introduction to volume five pointed out that here was sure proof that virtue was popular: a literary journal specializing in it had lasted more than two years, a phenomenal existence for a Mexican periodical. That was the last volume published.

The next year Juan R. Navarro, who had published *La Semana*, presented *La Camelia*. Less of a crusade is apparent:

Damos principio á nuestras tareas animadas por el deseo de contribuir en algun modo á los adelantos del bello sexo mejicano y obrigando la esperanza de conseguirlo, no paraque creamos suficientes nuestros trabajos, sino contando con la docilidad y el deseo de saber que anima generalmente á esa hermosa mitad de nuestra existencia. . . .⁹

However, only one volume appeared. From its contents one is tempted to suspect it was concocted from material left over at the demise of *La Semana*.

Most notable of the publications for Mexican women in the middle

⁵ *El Semanario*, I, i.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

⁷ *La Semana*, I, 1-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, IV, Introduction.

⁹ *La Camelia*, Introduction.

of the nineteenth century were *El Semanario de las señoritas mejicanas* and *La Semana de las señoritas mejicanas*.

El Semanario claimed to be the first publication of its kind in Mexico and while that is a moot claim,¹⁰ it certainly took seriously its purpose of educating the Mexican woman. Isidro Rafael Gondra was the editor and the material in each issue clearly bears the mark of his taste and usually of his pen.

El Semanario had four chief divisions: *belles arts, física, literatura, moral*. For the most part the articles were carefully pedagogical. One on history explained the customary divisions as ancient history: creation, flood, etc. Lessons were given in botany and in ornithology and in geometry (by the question and answer method) and in bible history. There were frequent discussions of literary heroines, those of Shakespeare and Scott being most popular. As was usual in this type of Mexican publication, much of the material was translated from other languages, but *El Semanario* gave some indication of the sources; for instance, there were a number of translations from *Keepsakes franceses*.¹¹

Apparently the original plan was to maintain this high intellectual plane—no jokes, no puzzles, no recipes, no embroidery patterns, no fashions (music was acceptable; each volume had some sheet music folded into it). But about a third of the way through the first volume embroidery patterns began to appear. Before that volume was concluded a meager division on *economía domestica* was added, eventually including directions for cleaning oil paintings and an article on budgeting.¹² Recipes continued to be taboo but an article was published on the art of cooking,¹³ and some advice was included in “*Higiana de la infancia*” (give them pure air of moderate temperature),¹⁴ “*Higiana de los vestidos, . . . de los alimentos, etc.*” Fashions were mentioned only because the editor felt someone had to talk sense about them. Instead of picturing the latest Paris gowns, he gave a discourse on the historical background of style.¹⁵ Volume three took up dispensing practical advice from the north: *O Como Dice El Compadre Ricardo*.

The engravings in *El Semanario* for the most part illustrate the articles, and the subjects include Juliet and Rebecca and Virginie and Queen Victoria and St. John Baptist. There are a rather large number

¹⁰ Fortino Ibarra de Anda in *Las Mexicanas en el periodismo* (Vol. I, *El Periodismo en México*; México, 1935), for instance, says the first was *El Aquila mexicana* (1823); but the variations in terminology make the designation “first” somewhat meaningless.

¹¹ Evidently *Keepsake français*, of which five volumes were published, 1837-1842.

¹² *El Semanario*, II, 201-208.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 314.

¹³ *Ibid.*, II, 257.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I, 281.

of religious pictures, particularly in connection with a series of articles on Holy Week.¹⁶ One plate of gowns of the Louis XIV period accompanied the article on style; much more attention was paid to geometric solids and sketches of an eclipse. "La Rosa," an illustration in volume three, is somewhat out of this austere pattern; one bud is embroidered in red, several leaves and part of the stem in green.

These minor silken aberrations aside, the dominant theme in *El Semanario* is the lively concern of the editor, Isidro Gondra, for the education of women. His ideas on the subject appear in his little discourses on philosophy while suffering insomnia and on the defense of needlework (he still held it an essential talent of the well-educated woman in spite of his devotion to the "Perfeccion de las facultades intelectuales") as well in more formal articles in the periodical.

The whole approach to education was that of the enlightenment: it was a panacea. Such a concept applied to the education of women is certainly at variance with the Spanish tradition. Education was considered dangerous, particularly for women. Sixteenth-century Spain tolerated reading and painting for women; writing might lead to undesirable correspondence. Not education but ignorance was "un perfume protector de la fragilidad atribuída vulgaramente á la mujer." The educational aim of a school for girls established in Madrid at the end of the eighteenth century was to help the students progress in virtue and learn to manage a home; only if one insisted, would she be taught to read. Neither Spain nor colonial Spanish America quickly picked up the idea that women should be educated because of their influence on their sons.¹⁷

Quite at the other extreme is the influence of education as shown in *El Semanario*. The well educated woman will not only be the most "amable, honrada y apreciable" but also the most useful to society.¹⁸

La mujer cuya inteligencia se haya desarrollado por medio de los estudios y las artes adecuadas á su sexo, ni será frívola, ni disipada, y . . . jamás será indiscreta, ligera, ni imprudente.¹⁹

And her education will be the most durable of her charms.

De todos los atractivos de una muger, los de una educacion cultivada son los mas seguros. Si á la buena educacion, á la finura y al talento reúne

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 400 ff. These articles and illustrations seem to be the product of a period of religious interest on the part of the editor. Miguel Velasco Valdes, *Historia del periodismo mexicano* (México, 1955), p. 61, considers him proficient in changing sides: "pues era alternativamente clerical, clerófobo, liberal, conservador, masón, etc. etc."

¹⁷ Juan Probst, "La Educación en la república Argentina durante la época colonial," *Nosotros*, XXXVIII (1921), 236-238.

¹⁸ *El Semanario*, I, iv.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

una joven interesante las seducciones de cantar con alma, y los hechizos de unos ojos celestiales, intentar resistirla es empresa de un loco ó de un tonto.²⁰

While not denying that there were differences between men and women, *El Semanario* held that they certainly had equal intellectual faculties. If woman was weaker than man, more impressionable, more imaginative, this was all the more reason why she should be given training in exact, rational thinking. Her natural gifts needed this discipline.

Si su complecion es menos robusto que las de los hombres, la naturaleza parece les ha dado en compensacion la economía, la limpieza, la vista penetrante de la sagacidad, y las ventajas de la destreza. Si el Bello Sexo es mas débil necessita por lo mismo, que se le fortifique con la educacion. . . .²¹

Capaz de las virtudes mas sublimes, de las acciones mas heroicas, suele cometer grandes errores, guiada tan solo por una sensibilidad escesiva y pasiones delirantes. . . . La educacion pues . . . es necesaria para templar y moderar estas pasiones, modificar esta imaginacion, dar á su alma sólidos principios, que la fortalezcan y la hagan capaz de apreciar toda la estension de sus altos destinos en la sociedad.²²

This educated woman was not to change her career. The editor left no doubt that the woman's place was in the home but her role there was of dominant importance in all world affairs. She should be the intelligent companion of man and thus exert an influence for the public good since, as an article on the "Influencia de la mujer en la educacion popular" claimed, "el hombre domina al mundo; la mujer domina al hombre."²³ In proportion as women become as distinguished for their intellectual and moral qualities as they have been for physical beauty, humanity will advance toward real civilization.²⁴ This would entail no hardship for men, for matrimony is acclaimed as the most perfect state of civilized man, "el estado en que la muger debe ser para él un ángel de paz y de consuelo";²⁵ "imágen anticipada de la felicidad eterna es para el hombre la muger virtuosa é instruida. . . ."²⁶

Una muger cuya alma ha sido formada por una buena educacion, conservará su dignidad, no avezandose á los caprichos del hombre; al contrario, sabrá moderarlos con su ejemplo: le hará respetar sus deberes, aceptando ella los suyos; ejercerá sobre él aquel ascendiente tan irresistible de la virtud, sin que jamas quiera arrogarse atribuciones ajenas de su sexo y de su condicion social; censora de las acciones del hombre,

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, III, 350.

²² *Ibid.*, II, 107-108.

²³ *Ibid.*, III, 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 68-69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II, 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 109.

este respetará como sagrada la opinion de aquella: conservará por una prudente economía la fortuna de su marido.²⁷

In her role in the home the woman has a vital role to play in the training of young members of society. If there is to be a well trained society, the mother is the basis of it. She needs education to be an influential member of that society, to fulfill properly her role as her husband's companion, and above all, as a mother, "*está obligada á* [italics from *El Semanario*] ser la maestra de sus hijos á formar sus primeros sentimientos y de consiguiente á zanjar los cimientos de su futura suerte."²⁸

And with this high destiny the girls had been left uneducated. Such education as they ordinarily received was in "la hipocrasía, el fingimiento, el disimulo, la afectacion, la estudiada reserva y una carencia absoluta de instruccion y de principios de verdadera moral. . . ." ²⁹ All that should go, but not domestic skills. Women should certainly cultivate all their pleasant talents and learn well how to manage a household, but rational training would facilitate both.³⁰ *El Semanario* was prepared to assist in the process. For the basic elements of this education it preferred the teaching of any science whatever in preference to languages.³¹ Hence the mathematics and physics lessons. The aim was organized knowledge. To give an orderly presentation of the important science of physics, *El Semanario* thoughtfully reprinted the encyclopedia article on it.³² It gave a survey of logic,³³ and material on moral philosophy "siendo la moral uno de los estudios mas importantes al bello sexo y uno de los ramos mas necesarios á la educacion."³⁴ No space for flippancies with such material to be covered. The educated woman had to be formed. As the editor wrote:

Ya es tiempo de salir de esa situacion ignorante y limitada que no os permitia ser considerados compañeras inteligentes del hombre, y como una mitad del ser social: el mundo y nuestro pais mismo, se transforman al rededor de vosotras y todo clama por otra organizacion en favor de los progresos sociales. No aguardéis á que los hombres os vengan á ofrecer vuestro lugar en este nuevo estado de cosas. Si vuestra alma ha hablado con la fuerza que ella os da, venid á sentaros al lado del hombre, obligadlo á que os confie su felicidad, y á que os vea con gusto ejercer el imperio doméstico, acaso com mas propiedad que él ejerce político; Cuántas de vosotras que otras veces se sentian amilandas á la sola idea de tener que emitir su opinion, si no era delante de una de sus más íntimas amigas; retiradas muy léjos de un mundo del que apenas oíais un vago rumor, os sentíais como sí no perteneciéseis á una misma sociedad; pero en el siglo en que vivimos, una voz ha gritado en

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 351-352.

³¹ *Ibid.*, III, 24.

³² *Ibid.*, III, 37 ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, III, 227 ff.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 121.

vuestro corazon y os ha hecho saber que teneis un destino que cumplir, que es nada menos, que desempeñar la mitad de la grande obra de la felicidad social. Feliz yo sí una sola señorita al leer estas lineas, se convence de la necesidad que tiene de cultivar su educacion y de perfeccionar su inteligencia para llegar á ser verdaderamente una muger de casa.³⁵

No such weighty thesis permeated *La Semana de las señoritas mejicanas*. Its format evolved gradually; departments and topics appeared and disappeared, evidently determined partly by their success and partly by the material at hand. Gradually too that material changed from almost all translations from French or English through works indicated as written for *La Semana* to signed stories and poems. The early issues presented capsule history through a calendar of anniversaries and thus informed the ladies of D. Juan of Austria, Pierre Corneille, St. Francis of Assisi, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But even such limited amounts of history soon disappeared, unless a brief fling at famous last words³⁶ which gave a whole paragraph from Mozart on his death bed as well as apt quotations from Ann Boleyn and Nero and Jefferson be presumed historical exposure. Thenceforth most of each issue was occupied by continued stories, often with quasi-historical backgrounds and usually translated from other languages—Dickens was one of the favorite authors. Poetry was given a little space as were some occasional religious articles.

Advice to the ladies was available in *La Semana* on practically any subject. Bits of left-over space were filled with “Pensamientos Suéltos,” bringing them the wisdom of Pascal, Bossuet, Seneca, St. Bonaventure, Rousseau, Franklin—a great catholicity in selection. Under “Higiene del Tocador” a first letter to milady advised that she eschew all cosmetics—the natural look is always to be preferred.³⁷ Much to the reader’s disappointment, no second letter ever appeared, but under other headings the periodical managed to inform the lady how to keep hands white, how to wash leather gloves, renovate velvet, clean ivory and pearls; to point out that “la coquetería es una confesion patente y desvergonzada que el individuo hace de su deseo de llamar la atencion de los hombres . . .”³⁸ and to caution the young lady choosing a husband not to pay too much attention to social graces for an enemy of the polka may become the best of husbands.³⁹ There were regular notes on etiquette and much medical advice: bad feet come from too little exercise and too much food or drink⁴⁰ while sea air is healthful because the constant

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 215.

³⁶ For example, *La Semana*, III, 170.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, I, 41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 292.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 66.

movement of the water keeps oxygen and hydrogen “en convenientes proporciones.”⁴¹

About the only regular department to appear in *La Semana* was “Economía Doméstica.” Though it might be only one page, it was in each issue. Here were new recipes—someone on the staff must have liked “pudins” for there were many recipes for them; instructions for cooking “Beefsteaks”⁴²; and an ecstatic report on colored gelatin. Volume two carried a series of articles on the management of the household, including the proper way of treating servants.

Leisure time was provided for. There were puzzles of various sorts: *jeroglíficos*, *charadas*, *logorifos*, *enigmas*. Volume one gave complete instructions for some parlor games. Chess instructions began in volume three and continued through two volumes, with problems in one issue, answers in the next. Basic instruction on the terminology of music, fully illustrated,⁴³ was followed shortly by instructions on how to use a fan, “el arma de las mujeras” as the sword is man’s.⁴⁴ *La Semana* introduced from Germany the making of bracelets and other ornaments out of hair. Embroidery patterns, particularly for elaborate initials, were a regular feature. Volume four gave complete illustrated instructions for making lace and the same extensive coverage to knitting lessons.⁴⁵

Current events seldom penetrated the pages of *La Semana*. The Crystal Palace for the Hyde Park Exposition of 1851 was an exception; even a picture of it was included.⁴⁶ The readers were also informed that a stupendous show boat was being built in Cincinnati.⁴⁷ But there is an almost complete absence of personal gossip; a report that Jenny Lind is about to get married⁴⁸ is noticeable only because that kind of item is so rare.

Fashions are an important part of the illustrations from volume two on and are usually partly or wholly in color. The rest of the engravings illustrate the stories and poems and include a series on the life of Christ. There are four elaborate engravings of particular interest, one showing most graphically the evils of drink all over the world;⁴⁹ the others entitled “La Obesidad y la Flaqueza,”⁵⁰ “La Caza y la Pesca,”⁵¹ and “Los Alimentos.”⁵² Volume four concludes with two pages of cartoons.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, III, 142.

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, 192.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, I, 99 ff.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 131-146.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, IV, 358-383.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 147, 161; III, 167.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, III, 203.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 399.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, facing page 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, III, facing page 319.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, III, facing page 410.

⁵² *Ibid.*, IV, facing page 12.

Volume five of *La Semana* shows a decided change in temper from the earlier volumes. It had become much more distinctly a literary magazine. The theme seems still to be "To the beautiful ladies! We love them all!" but the puzzles are gone and so is "Economía Doméstica." The articles are involved in things like comparisons of Sappho and Theresa of Jesus and one, "Educación—Cultivo de las facultades intelectuales," daringly declares that it is not the object of education to prosper in the world.⁵³ This was the last volume of *La Semana*.

Not all the attempts to publish a periodical for women were made in the capital. Some were tried in the provinces. *El Album de las señoritas potosinas* is typical of these provincial publications. Published in San Luis Potosi, it was a tiny thing, four small pages, a "periodico de literatura y variedades." It aimed to publish instructive yet non-offensive material so as never to displease the delicate sensibilities of the fair sex to which it was dedicated. Tiny though it was, *El Album* could not survive. It lost money all along and did not even get support in the form of literary contributions; no one wanted to publish in it. And so it died with the issue of October 14, 1865, ending in a flurry with a forty-eight page issue, almost all stories written by the editor. *El Album* always started with historical notes on the area. When this section caught up with the century, it became almost all current statistics. It was extraordinarily informative for this type of magazine.

Later in the century periodical publications for women lost the literary cast and became more strictly journalistic looking. *El Correo de las señoras* looked more like a woman's section of a present day newspaper. Published weekly, its sixteen pages as a rule carried one article, a little poetry, and departments on home medicine, cooking, etc. The department "Higiene de la familia," for instance, was concerned about "El café y el alcohol de los niños"; throughout the publication (as well as in many others) there seems to be a preoccupation with legumes and with teeth cleaning. *El Album de la Mujer* was similar but it carried pictures; the front page was always the picture of some prominent woman (frequently the owner and editor of the paper but now and then other women such as Patti were given the honor) and there were two other pages of pictures. These publications also carried ads: *El Correo* carried an occasional one for "Agua de Juvencio" but *El Album* usually carried two pages of small ads for steamship companies, shoe shops, fabrics, etc., and always notices of the theatre programs.

El Album and *El Correo* had longer lives than the periodicals of the

⁵³ *Ibid.*, V, 248-251.

middle of the century. Then it was evidently impossible to get enough subscribers to support a publication for women. From its own account *La Semana* had the largest circulation. Volume one gives a list of 1116 subscriptions, 146 of them in Mexico City. The second volume lists 1383, with the number in Mexico City going up to 196. No list was given in subsequent volumes. *El Semanario* listed 1020 subscribers at the end of volume one but that had gone down to 886 in the next volume. Of course, each publisher states that these lists are not complete but they probably give a good idea of the number of copies actually circulated. The little *Album de las señoritas potosinas* had achieved 124 subscriptions three weeks after its founding.

No matter how well endowed a publication was, it could not go on indefinitely without readers, preferably ones that paid. *El Album Mexicano*, in announcing it was suspending publication, admitted it evidently was just too expensive for potential subscribers, but then it could be philosophical about the end since the series of "Flores Animadas" had been completed. *El Semanario* discussed its difficulties at more length. The subscriptions had been falling off during the publication of volume two and the trend continued. About half the capital invested in the venture was withdrawn. The editor stated that it was impossible to continue with less than seven hundred subscriptions, but his plea to get support back failed.⁵⁴ He was forced to end *El Semanario* without having completed volume three. He held out hope—to himself or to his readers—that he might pick up the publication again in a style not so "hermosa y magnífica" but for the time being he had no recourse but to cease publication.⁵⁵ His campaign to mold an educated female public in Mexico evidently did not attract financial investment.

The recurrent failure of periodicals directed toward the Mexican woman in the middle of the nineteenth century is an indication that there probably was not yet a large audience for them and that the creation of such a literate audience was of little interest to the majority of Mexicans.

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⁵⁴ *El Semanario*, III, 288.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 382.