

# Alicia Le Fanu's *Don Juan de las Sierras, or, El Empecinado* (1823): appropriations of Spain in Irish romanticism<sup>1</sup>

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Within the European background of the nineteenth century, the use of Spain, Spanish history and Spanish literature by some Anglo-Irish authors as a pivotal element for their construction of the Anglo-Irish discourse of the Romantic period, has received cursory critical attention. Indeed, although a myriad of Anglo-Irish writers had recourse to the history, tradition, religion and even landscape of a contemporary nineteenth-century Spain, many of these poets, novelists and playwrights have been considered non-canonical and minor in importance by literary criticism on the grounds of their lack of aesthetic quality and their political, social and religious partisan biases. Even if this pre-assumption is conceded, this is rapidly counterbalanced by the nuanced 'will to be heard'<sup>2</sup> of a considerable bulk of Anglo-Irish writing with Spanish referents. This essay focuses on Miss Alicia Le Fanu's multiple appropriations of Spain in *Don Juan de las Sierras, or, El Empecinado: a romance* (1823). Through her choice of this nineteenth-century European 'anecdote',<sup>3</sup> Spain and Spanish referents, Le Fanu also tackles contemporary issues in Ireland, thus establishing a seminal dialogue within a specific 'signifying system' (Ireland in the nineteenth century). Thus her superficially 'Spanish' novel is able to interrogate equally 'Irish' issues, such as race, secret societies, patriotism, religion, the forging of heroes, intermarriage and the eventual construction of Anglo-Irish tradition and identity.

Alicia Le Fanu (1791–1844, or later)<sup>4</sup> is one of the few Anglo-Irish female writers of Irish Romanticism who turns to contemporary Spain for inspiration.<sup>5</sup> Although,

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little is known about the writer's life, Le Fanu belonged to an important Anglo-Irish family which influenced both the English and Irish literary panoramas during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>6</sup> A friend of Thomas Moore,<sup>7</sup> Alicia Le Fanu was author of longer poems and romantic novels of minor importance.<sup>8</sup> *Don Juan de las Sierras, or, El Empecinado*, in its three volumes, is the only one of her novels to deal with contemporary Spanish history, making special reference to the Peninsular War (1808–14), or the War of Independence as it was known within the Spanish context. Le Fanu depicts El Empecinado's figure, a well-known, hardy folk 'guerrillero', who became a great support to the troops of the Anglo-Irish Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, in the Peninsula.<sup>9</sup> The figure of the Spanish El Empecinado was well known both in Britain and Ireland, as numerous entries in *The Times* attest;<sup>10</sup> but from the very start Le Fanu warns the reader of her national imagining and her construction of Spanish history, when she states in the preface that 'the management of the story is entirely [her] own, [so] it is necessary to caution the young reader

involved 'Spanish ladies and Irish lovers'. The operetta was produced in Dublin in 1807 'before a crowded audience'. *Lady Morgan's memoirs: autobiography, diaries and correspondence*, 2 vols (London, 1863), vol. 2, p. 316. 6 Alicia Le Fanu was Richard Brinsley Sheridan's niece. Both her mother (Elizabeth Le Fanu) and her aunt were authors; the latter, Alicia Le Fanu, had 'a leading place in literary society in Dublin and particularly in private theatricals which were then much in vogue': T.P. Le Fanu, *Memoir of the Le Fanu family* (Manchester, 1924), p. 51. 7 Thomas Moore maintained correspondence with the Le Fanus and there are many instances in which, as early as 1818, he shows a special interest in getting Alicia Le Fanu's works published in London by Longmans, most probably as a personal favour as Le Fanu had collected and copied materials for Moore [who was preparing a book on Sheridan; *Memoirs of the life of Richard Brinsley Sheridan* in 2 volumes, published in 1825]: Thomas Moore to Mrs Le Fanu [Miss Alicia Le Fanu's mother], 16 September 1818. Moore even offers to read manuscripts of her novels, most probably *Leolin abbey*, before submitting them to the Longmans: Thomas Moore to Miss Alicia Le Fanu, 21 December 1818. Most of Le Fanu's major works were published before 1826 and Moore continued to encourage her work: Thomas Moore to Alicia Le Fanu, 5 January 1828; also on 3 April 1829. See Wilfred S. Dowden, *The letters of Thomas Moore*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1964). 8 *The flowers of the sylphid queen* (1809), *Rosara's chains, or the choice of a life* (1812), *Strathallen* (1816), *Helen Monteagle* (1818), *Leolin abbey* (1819), *Tales of a tourist* (1823), *Memoirs of the life and writings of Mrs Frances Sheridan* (1824), *Henry the fourth of France* (1826). *Ibid.*, pp 76–7. 9 'Spain was to be saved, in fact, not by grape-shot, greybeards and grandees, but by hardy guerrillas and the sudden flash of the knife. These peasants spontaneously organized themselves into small, do-or-die bands, at least one to each province headed by folk heroes: Juan Martin Diaz 'El Empecinado', the dweller-by-the-stream in the Guadalajara mountains; Julian Sanchez, the farmer in Old Castile whose family had been murdered by the abhorred French dragoons; El Marquisito in the Asturias, El Medico; the Minas, Elder and Younger'. See Elizabeth Longford, *Wellington: the years of the sword* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), vol. 1, p. 211. 10 The most significant are: *The Times*, 30 March 1811; 15 July 1812; 16 May 1823; 17 August 1824; 9 September 1825. These note El Empecinado's prowess against injustice, mainly French, and present proclamations issued by El Empecinado aimed at obtaining a Constitution, religious freedom and liberty.

against identifying, in every thing, the “Empecinado” of romance, with the Empecinado of history’.<sup>11</sup>

In this vein, Le Fanu’s treatment of this contemporary historical event intermingles Spanish legend and history, ballad and literary quotation, social differences and political biases, although Le Fanu’s political statements and her vision of Anglo-Irish society underlie the main progression of the novel. Katie Trumpener’s analysis of another of Alicia Le Fanu’s novels published that very same year, *Tales of a tourist* (1823), induce her to class Le Fanu within that group of Irish novelists whose works became ‘a prime genre for the dissemination of nationalist ideas’. For Trumpener, *Tales of a tourist*, which introduces the character of an antiquary named O’Carolan in close reference to the famous eighteenth-century Irish poet and harper Turlough Carolan (1670–1738), exemplified a ‘coherent revival’ in the literature of nationalism because ‘it commemorate[d] and celebrate[d] its [Ireland’s] own history’.<sup>12</sup> The case of Le Fanu’s novel *Don Juan de las Sierras, or, El Empecinado* offers, however, a few intriguing ambivalences. Indeed, if Le Fanu’s romances partake of a trend to spread ‘nationalist ideas’, what is the reason for the exclusion of Le Fanu’s novel with contemporary Spanish referent from the Irish literary canon? Is it actually a ‘literary work regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon’.<sup>13</sup>

Le Fanu’s novel follows the life of an orphan boy adopted by the noble Spanish family of Almarez in the Andalusian ‘Sierra de Ronda’, an enclave renowned for its picturesque ‘guerrillas’ and banditti. She highlights the dichotomy between the patriot peasants and the landowning ‘Big House’ of Almarez, whose situation resembles the predicament of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy in Ireland. From the start of the romance, Le Fanu opposes the model being proposed by Irish cultural nationalism which closely linked national claims to racial and physical traits, when she recalls how a gipsy woman, a ‘serrana’, delivered the hero-figure of the romance, Don Juan de Las Sierras, to Donna Rosaura de Almarez. In her revealing approach towards the inhabitants of the enclave of the ‘Serrania de Ronda’, Le Fanu attributes to this hardy people features which did not divert from any prejudiced profile of the Irish peasant of the time. Le Fanu thus objects to this exchange of national for racial characteristics when she mentions traits of race and complexion. Accordingly, the gipsy woman,<sup>14</sup> a peasant, wild and sunburnt (Irish) – even a tinge of ‘nigrescence’ can be

II Alicia Le Fanu, *Don Juan de las Sierras, or, el Empecinado* (1823), pp i–ii. Further references to this novel appear in parentheses. 12 Katie Trumpener, *Bardic nationalism. The romantic novel and the British empire* (Princeton, 1997), pp 13–14. Trumpener compares Sydney Owenson’s *O’Donnell: a national tale* (1814) with Le Fanu’s *Tales of a tourist* (1823) in their use of characters with names which recall past historical revivalists (for example, Sylvester O’Halloran, Charlotte Brooke and Carolan). 13 Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher (eds), *Practicing the new historicism* (Chicago, 2000), p. 9. 14 Even if the figure of the gipsy presents different connotations in Ireland at the time of Le Fanu’s composition, we could be tempted to compare the Spanish gipsies with representations of ‘the tinker’ in Ireland. Jane Helleiner has published a detailed study on the subject and laments the lack of