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Sullivan, Kelly

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# BOOK REVIEW

## **PROPERTIES OF MODERNITY: ROMANTIC SPAIN, MODERN EUROPE, AND THE LEGACIES OF EMPIRE.**

BY KELLY SULLIVAN

University of California at Berkeley

Michael Iarocci. *Properties of Modernity: Romantic Spain, Modern Europe, and the Legacies of Empire*. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2006, 286 págs.

Michael Iarocci's latest book contributes to the conversation surrounding Spanish romanticism by examining the historical trajectory that saw Spain, once the center and focal point of early modern Europe, cast to a site of subordination somewhere in the outskirts of the newly modern (and northern) Europe. One of several objectives of the book is to grapple with the representation of Spain as existing, almost as though frozen in time, outside of what is commonly imagined as modern European history. Iarocci claims that his aim is not to offer a new theory of modernity, nor to give a revision of the history of romanticism in Spain; rather, one of the primary goals of this book is to learn from what is revealed when the realms of Modern Europe, Spanish Romanticism, Empire and Colonialism dialogue together. The results of this new "conversation" Iarocci stages in his book are no less than fascinating.

*Properties of Modernity* is divided into an introduction, four chapters and a compelling afterward. Prior to delving into specific works by Spanish romantic writers, in chapter 1: "From the Narratives of Modernity to Spanish Romanticism", Iarocci deals with the historical revision that displaced Spain to the periphery of the modern. Iarocci posits that in order to assure its own central place in modernity, northern Europe defined itself as everything southern Europe, and Spain in particular was not. If Spain were

barbaric, northern Europe was civilized, if Spain were lazy, France, Germany, England, the Netherlands and other northern European countries were hard-working. Key to the northern European agenda was the denial of the modernity of Spain's early modern period, as well as the constant reminder of the Spanish Inquisition and the Black Legend. Northern Europe's access to the written word helped in painting Catholic Spaniards as an evil, barbaric people in the shadow of good Protestants. As Iarocci describes, throughout the Reformation and Enlightenment, Spain had become a convenient scapegoat that enabled northern Europe to take attention away from its own bloody past and history of religious persecution.

Curiously, by the late eighteenth century, unenlightened and nonmodern in the eyes of the rest of Europe, Spain becomes an attractive object of representation once the romantic period is ushered in and artistic sensibilities seek the Middle Age charm of those locales untouched by modern concerns and progress. While some literary historians might consider Spain not to have had a romantic period, or that Spain inspired romanticism but did not produce it, Iarocci successfully shows the lack of accuracy of such claims.

In the remaining chapters, the book deals in depth with three examples of romantic Spanish writers, and illustrates the qualities that make each of them not only romantic, but modern. Chapter 2: "Beginnings without End: José Cadalso and the Melancholy of Modernity" is a discussion of romantic themes present in Cadalso's *Noches lúgubres*. Chapter 3: "Rethinking the Modern in Saavedra's *Don Alvaro*" traces the story of *Don Alvaro* from el Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Comentarios reales de los Incas* to the play by el Duque de Rivas *Don Alvaro o la fuerza del sino*, to its ultimate metamorphosis into Giuseppe Verdi's more famous play *La forza del*

*destino*. An example of the sort of historical revision or "housecleaning" discussed in depth in chapter 1, Iarocci remarks that "the very fact that the figure of Don Alvaro has come to be known internationally through non-Spanish mediation—in this case Verdi, Piave, and Ghislanzoni—speaks again to the manner in which, throughout much of the modern era, Spanish culture tended to circulate primarily by means of the representation of others" (103). In chapter 4: "Late Larra, or Death as Critique", Iarocci reads Larra's work and premature death as "one of the more perspicacious Spanish romantic critiques of liberal modernity itself" (141). In the afterward, Iarocci summarizes what has been developed in prior chapters, while innovatively bringing the dialectic into the modern day, posing several thought-provoking parallels between the romantic period and our own.

While it would be impossible to do justice to a project of such depth and insight in a short book review, it does not seem brash to say that *Properties of Modernity* is a study that will not only interest students of Romanticism, but scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe in general. This would be an invaluable text for any student of Spanish Literature, Culture or History, and should be required reading for graduate students in such departments. Thanks to Michael Iarocci's clear prose style, *Properties of Modernity* provides an outstanding road map for anyone wishing to navigate their way through Romantic Spain, or from Spain's transition from world power to a country whose literature is all too often forgotten or left by the wayside in classes and texts with subject headings of "Comparative", "General" or "European" Literature.