

SAB BY Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Katja Mihurko-Poniz : 6-8 minutes

The ninth article of the *Distant Reading Recommends* series was written by Borja Navarro Colorado (Universidad de Alicante) and Rosario Arias (Universidad de Málaga)

In 1840, the Spanish writer Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (Puerto Príncipe, Cuba, 1814 – Madrid, 1873) published in Madrid *Sab*, a highly critical novel of the society of that time. The novel denounces both nineteenth-century slavery and women's social condition, which the author compares due to their similar lack of freedom.



Author: Federico de Madrazo (1815 – 1894)

Year: 1857

Public domain

[Source](#)

Sab is a sentimental novel. It recounts the impossible love between Sab, a mulatto slave, and Carlota, the master's daughter. The ethnic and social differences make that love impossible. The love triangle that helps structure the novel is completed with Enrique Otway, Carlota's fiancé and Sab's antagonist.

For Gómez de Avellaneda, Sab's emotions and his capacity for love make him an honourable character like any other human being, and also superior to his antagonist, the noble Enrique Otway, who is characterised by his incapacity of feeling passion or love. In addition to this dignified portrayal of the slave, the novel overtly denounces slavery. This can be seen in the passage below:

“under this fiery sky, the almost naked slave works all morning without rest, and at the terrible hour of noon panting, burdened with the weight of the firewood and the reed over

his back, and burnt by the solar radiation that roasts his complexion, the poor slave comes to enjoy all the pleasures that life has for him: two hours of sleep and a miserable ration” (Chapter 1; our translation)

Also, the end of the novel interestingly reflects upon Sab himself:

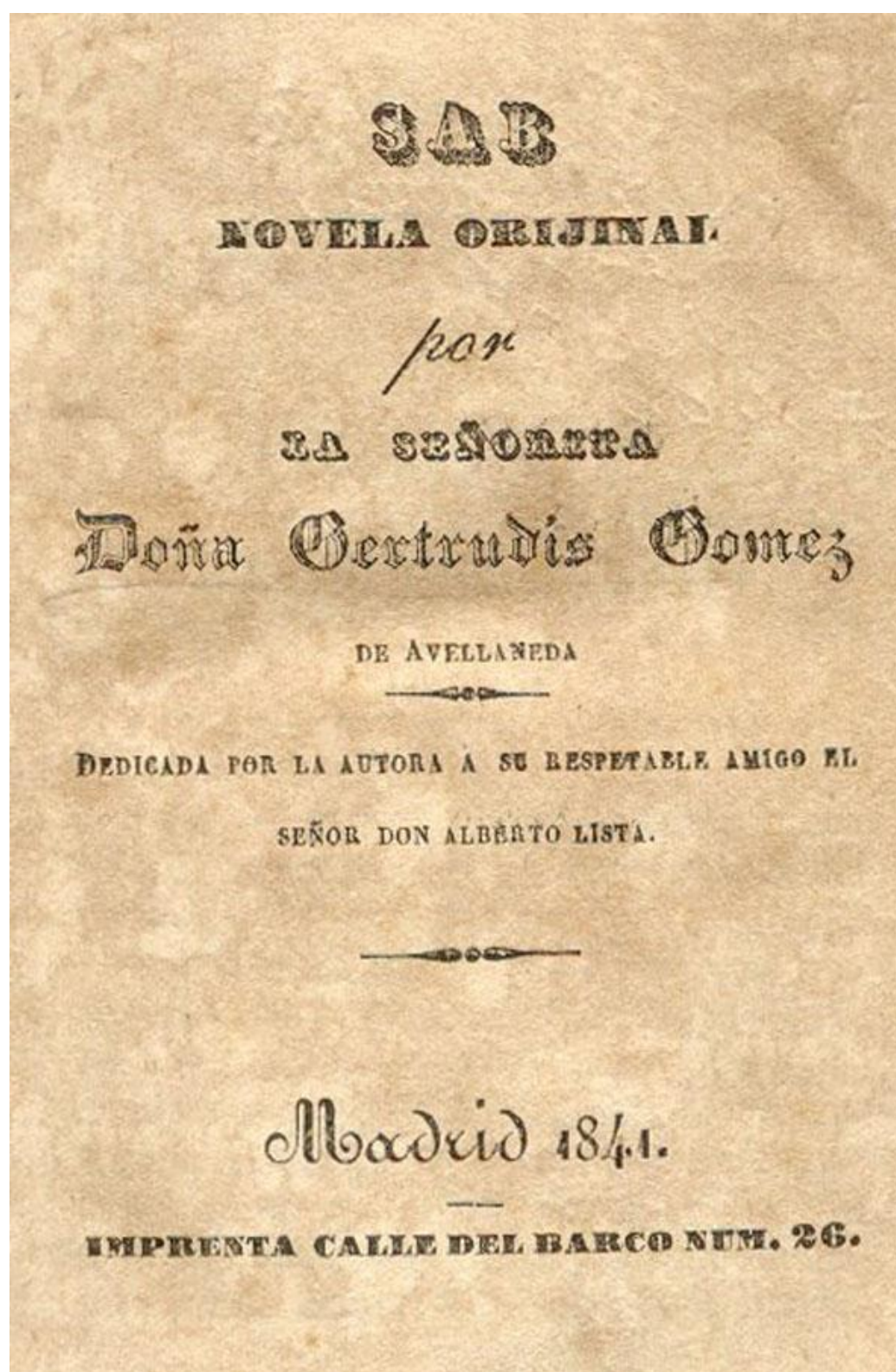
Is Virtue not the same for everybody? Has the Great Master of this human family established different laws between the ones born with a dark skin and those born with a bright skin? Have we all not the same necessities, the same passions and the same defects? Then, why have some the right of enslaving and some the obligation of obeying?

Thus, *Sab* is situated among the first European abolitionist novels. It was published in the same year of the abolition of slavery in Great Britain and its colonies, eleven years before the publication of Beecher-Stroke’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and twenty years before the publication of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). While it remains clear that there is a social denunciation, it must be said that *Sab* is not an abolitionist novel in the same way as those published in Great Britain or the United States during the nineteenth century. The material life conditions of slaves, as well as the whipping and punishments carried out by cruel masters, do not feature in *Sab*. The novel focuses on showing the feelings and passions of the characters, which in this way become more dignified.

What especially differentiates *Sab* from other abolitionist novels is how Gómez de Avellaneda uses the theme of slavery to also denounce the position of the nineteenth-century woman and her lack of freedom. In the novel, the situation of the slave is compared and runs parallel to the woman’s situation, whose life is limited and dominated by a man, regardless of her race or social position. In this way, *Sab* is innovative and ground-breaking as far as women’s literature is concerned. The Romantic movement allowed some women to access literary circles, as well as to see their work published, but not without some difficulties. Along with Gómez de Avellaneda, writers like Fernán Caballero (Cecilia Böhl de Faber’s pen name), Carolina Coronado or Rosalía de Castro published some of their works in Spain. They contributed to the visibility of women’s social situation, being *Sab* one of the first texts portraying such a topic.

In this way, at the end of the novel, Gómez de Avellaneda reflects on this topic by means of the slave Sab:

“Oh, women! Poor and blind victims! As the slaves do, they patiently drag their chain and hang their heads beneath the yoke of human laws. With no other guide than their ignorant and credulous hearts, they choose an owner for life. At least the slave might change his master, he can hope that by getting enough money he will one day buy his freedom: but when the woman puts her slim hands up and look up with her outraged forehead to ask for freedom, she hears the monster with a sepulchral voice which says: “In the grave.”



[Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.](#)

Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes.

All in all, *Sab* is a vindication of the freedom and dignity of human beings because of their capacity to feel emotions and love. Due to its social criticism, the novel was not well-received when it was first published. In fact, it was removed from Gómez de Avellaneda's *Complete Works* (1869-1871) which was compiled at the end of the nineteenth century. However, the novel did not fall into oblivion, and it gained widespread recognition in the twentieth century, being now considered one of the main works of the Spanish Romanticism. However, the novel has not sufficiently attracted scholarly interest as yet, and it has only been translated into English (Austin, University Texas Press, 1993), French (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010) and Italian (Rome, Bibliotheka Edizioni, 2018).

«Sab» is included in the Spanish corpus of ELTeC, and can be read [here](#).

LINKS:

Digital source of the novel: <http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra/sab-0/>

1914 edition: <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000140422&page=407>

Bibliography

Bravo Villasante, Carmen, *Una vida romántica: la Avellaneda*, Madrid, Instituto de Cooperación Iberoamericana y Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1986.

Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab and Autobiography*, Austin, University Texas Press, 1993. Translated and edited by Nina M. Scott.

Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab. Roman Original*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010. Traduit en français pour Élisabeth Pluton.

Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*, Roma, Bibliotheka Edizioni, 2018. Traduzione da Giussepina De Vita.

Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1997. Edición, introducción y notas de José Servera.

Kirkpatrick, Susan, *Las románticas. Escritoras y subjetividad en España. 1835-1850*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1991.

Rexarch, Rosario, *Estudios sobre Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda*, Madrid, Verbum, 1996.

Servera, José, "Introducción" a Gómez de Avellaneda, *Sab*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1997.