

Juana Manuela Gorriti, Argentine Liberal

Juana Manuela Gorriti (1818-1892) lived a long and amazing life. As a child her family was forced from their home in Argentina by political enemies. Growing up in Bolivia and Peru, she was married to the President of Bolivia, while spending most of her time operating a girl's school in Peru. For decades her tertulias (salons) were a social center for the liberal, anti-dictatorship intellectual and political leaders of Peru, Bolivia and Argentina, many of whom wrote articles for journals she published. Her own writing, mostly fiction, was widely popular.

Despite spending much of her life in Peru, and being First Lady of Bolivia, Gorriti identified with Argentina. Much of her political and literary viewpoint was shaped by her relationship with the dictatorship of Manuel Rosas, who ruled Argentina from 1838 to 1853. Rosas was extraordinarily brutal. His secret police, the Mazorca, killed thousands. They were particularly known for kidnapping and killing people in the middle of the night. The more recent



Argentine “death squads” were patterned after the Mazorca. Rosas’ political rivals were called “Unitarians”. This had nothing to do with religion but referred to his opponents’ belief that the government should represent all Argentines, not just Rosas’ clique in Buenos Aires. Rosas used the word a lot. For example, all government documents had to have as their header Rosas’s motto, “Death to the Savage Unitarians.”

Gorriti hated the Rosas dictatorship and all political violence, which she associated with patriarchy, quite literally. In her writing, violent, oppressive fathers, usually wealthy men of Spanish descent, are the villains. She didn’t hate all men. Many men were her friends, and several were lovers. But she believed that abusive men were the source of the world’s evil.

Like other Argentine liberals, Gorriti was a strong opponent of Catholic clerical authority and a supporter of universal, free, government-run education, which the Catholic Church furiously opposed. But she was not hostile to what she considered true Christianity, which, in her view was about love and mercy. Her writing often invokes Christian ideas to argue that her villains are bad Christians.

In her story, *The Mazorquero's Daughter*, she describes a sympathetic young woman, Clemencia, whose father, Roque, is a leader in Rosas' Matorca.

From: *The Mazorquero's Daughter* (1853)

One evening, Clemencia saw a group of men enter her house and head to her father's room; they had a sinister, hair-raising appearance, and were wrapped in long ponchos, in the folds of which could be seen the bright blades of their daggers. Clemencia foresaw something evil in the presence of those men, and after hesitating a brief instant, she hurried to put her ear against the keyhole of a door that led into her father's room.

Roque [her father], standing near a table, held some papers in his hand, he was speaking in a loud voice to his audience.

"Yes, my friends," he said, "this is a war to the death against those Unitarians! A war to the death against those villains! You think that you have accomplished a great deal? Well, you are only fooling yourselves. All you have to do is read the list of our executions for this month and compare it with all the denunciations that we have received even just today. Read and you will see that there is still much work left for the blade of the Matorca to do; when you compare the number of those who have fallen with the number of those who will fall,..yes, who will fall, even if they hide under the mantle of the Virgin Mary herself!"

Roque captures the lover of an opposing political activist and decides to execute her himself. Clemencia, aware of her father's plan, sneaks into the prison cell, called the cell of the Three Crosses, and takes the place of the condemned woman, who thereby escapes. Roque comes to the cell at night to kill the young woman:

Roque crossed the patio and upon reaching the cell of the Three Crosses, he shoved open the heavy bolts and felt his way into the darkness.

A stray ray of light from the waning moon slid through the narrow window of the vault; it formed a leaden stain on the wet stone floor and made the darkness of the frightening dungeon around it even darker. The bandit's greedy eye, however, sported the white shape it was looking for in the corner.

He stormed toward her, reached out with his bloodstained hand, and, feeling a woman's throat, plunged his dagger into it, shouting in anger:

"You are an informer, you have given away our secrets. You are an accomplice of the vile Unitarians, and now you will die in place of the conspirator you love. But you should know

before you do that not even your bones will be together, for our grave will be at the bottom of this dungeon.”

Then he let out a loud, terrifying laugh.

When she felt herself to be mortally wounded, the poor girl reached with her hands for her sliced throat and tried to hold back the blood spurting from the wound.

“Oh, God!” she murmured. “My sacrifice has been consummated! Now that the mission that I set for myself here on earth has been fulfilled, make my blood, oh Lord, cleanse that other blood that cries out to you from this world.”

When he heard that voice, Roque felt his heart break and his hairs stand on end. He got up quickly, picked his victim up in his arms, and ran to the light under the window, where he looked at her bloodied face in the moonlight.

“Clemencia!” the murderer shouted in a horrible howl.

“Father!...My poor father!...Turn your eyes toward heaven and look for her there.” The girl stammered in her sweet voice as she exhaled her last breath.

The bandit collapsed to the ground, holding the decapitated body of his daughter in his arms....

This is pretty grim, but the audience really liked it. Gorriti often made her political points in the form of romantic horror stories. Gorriti’s readers would have been perfectly willing to believe almost any horrible story about Rosas. They would have been aware of the true story of Camila O’Gorman. Camila O’Gorman was a wealthy woman whose tyrannical father had engaged her to be married to a man she loathed. Instead, she loved a young priest. She was 23 and he was 24. This is how Gorriti tells the story.

From: *Camila O’Gorman* (1876)

[after a separation caused by various misunderstandings]

Their eyes met; and their souls, thirsting for love, united once more, forgetting everything:

She, honor, society, family.

He, his promise to God.

They fled!

They fled, and went to extend their outlawed happiness in an unknown place, where neither the investigations of an irate father, nor the emissaries of Rosas, armed with the terrifying orders of their master, could discover it.

But what can be hidden from the jealous eye of a defeated rival?

Since the lovers' elopement, Camila's scorned suitor devoted himself to searching for them with all the resentment accumulated in his soul.

Hidden under various disguises, he traveled the country, from the outskirts of Buenos Aires to the most distant provinces. He visited cities, villages, isolated cabins in the countryside; he explored the most remote corners of the land. All to no avail.

Exhausted and sick with spite, he arrived one night at a small village lost in the Corrientes jungles.

It was late, and the small neighborhood slept in darkness.

The sinister pilgrim sat down under the shelter of a tree that grew at the door of a small white house, spreading its thick foliage over it.

He had been there for some time, his forehead in his hands, lost in bitter thoughts, which contrasted with the peaceful haze of the night.

Suddenly, accompanied by the piano chords, a melodious voice rose in the silence, singing the mournful romance of *The Willow*.

Upon hearing her, the traveler leaped up like a tiger; and throwing himself onto the back of his horse, he rode off at full gallop.

A few days later, an armed group entered the quiet little town; and surrounding the white house, they seized Camila and her lover, who were brought before Rosas, and a few hours later condemned to death.

In 1848, this really happened. Rosas ordered the young man and woman to be executed by firing squad without any semblance of a trial. This did not follow any law. Camila was friends with Rosas' daughter, who pleaded for her. She was eight months pregnant. Camila's own father would not ask her life to be spared. For many people, this proved that Rosas really was truly evil. People in Argentina are still mad about it. In 1983, when democracy was restored in Argentina after years of rule by death squads, the first film made, *Camila*, was a dramatization of this story.

Much of Gorriti's life can be seen as a response to Camila's execution and the world it represented. In this Gorriti and her allies were quite successful. By the end of the nineteenth century, Argentina had a functioning democracy with universal male suffrage and regular elections. Laws had established a free, universal secular school system, including universities. Civil marriage had been established. Rosas was universally reviled.

This progress did not continue smoothly in the 20th century, but Gorriti did not live to see that.

An important aspect of Gorriti's writing is her attitude towards the Quechua speaking population, usually known today as the Inca. Gorriti grew up in Salta in northern Argentina near Bolivia where many people, including Gorriti, spoke Quechua. That would have been useful as First Lady of Bolivia, where the majority of the population was, and is, Native American. Indeed her husband, President Belzu, was extremely popular with the Native American majority, easily winning free elections.

Gorriti's wrote very romantically about a hidden treasure of the Inca, which would someday support a revival of the Incan empire along lines which distinctly resemble Gorriti's humanist philosophy. In her first book, *La Quena*, Gorriti has an Incan elder prophesy:



La Quena (1851)

“A day shall come in which human science will discover those treasures; but by then people will be free and equal, and they shall use the wealth to serve humanity! The reign of worries and despotism will have ended, and only human genius will rule the world, whether it reside upon the head of a European, or upon that of an Indian.”

The protagonist of *La Quena*, Hernan, has been told by his mother that he is to fulfill that prophecy by learning science, overthrowing tyranny and establishing utopia. He explains this to the young woman he loves. He quotes his mother, who is concerned that she has committed a sin by using hidden Inca treasure to travel to Spain to make sure that her son, who is studying there, understands his obligations.

“Hernan, my beloved son, promise me that my crime will not have been fruitless; promise me that you will redeem it with the good that you will do for our nation!”

“Tell me, Mother, tell me! What should I do?” I exclaimed, letting my tears fall at my mother's feet.

“Listen, my son,” she said, lifting me up on her lap. “Our prophecies speak of a liberator who will live a long time among our enemies, learn the conqueror's science, and return to break the chains enslaving our homeland, leading it to a greater glory and happiness.”

“Promise me that you will be that liberator, but that to liberate our brothers you will not use the hatred that demands the blood of our masters, but rather the enlightenment that shall make us their equals – enlightenment, the most sublime and certain means of liberation.”

I barely even heard these last words, for the first had awoken in my heart a chord that had never sounded before. I was overcome by a strange excitement, and a glorious vision flashed across my mind. I thought I saw the man from the prophecies, surrounded by a glowing light, swinging a fiery sword in one hand and discarding the chains of slavery with the other. And with my heart full of a burning faith, I swore to my mother that I would do as she asked.

Hernan explains that he did just as his mother instructed.

“I devoted the next ten years to studying science [in Spain] so that I might fulfill her last wish. When I was twenty years old, I returned to my homeland, my heart empty of all sentiments other than the memory of my mother, to fulfill the double mission she had entrusted to me: to bury her remains under our skies and to liberate my brothers by taking them out of the abyss of ignorance into which their tyrants, in their hateful calculations, bury them deeper and deeper every day. But my mother loved me too much to make me wait very long to reward my obedience. She has sent you to me, oh, my heavenly angel, to smile upon her son’s life, to that when he has fulfilled her plans and covered himself with glory before his own country and Spain, you shall be rewarded.”

Unfortunately, in Gorriti’s world bad things happen to young lovers. The young woman’s evil father arranges for her to marry someone else, and a series of events results in her romantic death. Her femur becomes the Quena, the Andean flute which is the book’s title. So, whenever we hear Andean flute, we should think of her. Gorriti was a liberal humanist who also knew how to write books that sell.