

## **Acts of Reading and Resisting Readers: Isabel-Clara Simó's *La vida sense ell***

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Isabel-Clara Simó (Alcoi 1943), an exceptionally productive and versatile writer, has published books for children and young adults, scripts for radio and television, essays, theater, and poetry but is best known for her novels and short stories, which have received numerous awards, including the Premis Víctor Català, Crítica del País Valencià, Crítica Serra d'Or, Sant Jordi, València de Literatura, as well as the Creu de Sant Jordi.<sup>1</sup> In addition she writes a column for *Avui* and headed the weekly *Canigó* from 1971 to 1983, served for two years as Delegada del Llibre del Department de Cultura de la Generalitat de Catalunya, and taught at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

Both in her creative writing and her journalism Simó passionately defends the Catalan language, the rights of the oppressed, and women's equality. Reflections on and portrayals of women's status are a constant of her fiction, in which she repeatedly reformulates male-centered literary and social scripts. One of her favorite techniques is to let characters speak for themselves. What they say and how they say it often leads to unconscious self-exposure. In effect, Simó allows her readers to eavesdrop on private conversations, grants them entry into characters' minds, and charges them with the responsibility of evaluating the validity of what those characters say and think. Given the peculiar complicity of her audience in this exercise, reader-response criticism affords a particularly fruitful approach to Simó's fiction.

This form of criticism has focused our attention on the complexities of the reading process and the interaction between texts and readers. While the latter play an active role in producing textual meaning, texts guide readers in that undertaking. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan has summarized how this guidance takes place:

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Júlia* (1983), *Històries perverses* (1992), *La salvatge* (1994), and *Dones* (1997).

On the one hand [a text] ‘selects’ its appropriate reader, projects an image of such a reader, through its specific linguistic code, its style, the ‘encyclopedia’ it implicitly presupposes [...] On the other hand, just as the text pre-shapes a certain competence to be brought by the reader from outside, so in the course of reading, it develops in the reader a specific competence needed to come to grips with it, often inducing him to change his previous conceptions and modify his outlook. (1983:117-118)<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the expectations with which readers approach a text, the literary and cultural baggage they bring to it, as well as their knowledge of narrative conventions and strategies, influence how they participate in making it signify.

In the pages that follow I draw upon theoretical insights afforded by reader-oriented criticism to ground my study of Simó’s *La vida sense ell* (2013), which showcases multiple acts of *reading*, both in the sense of using one’s eyes to peruse printed or written material and in that of understanding or interpreting the meaning of said material. As we turn the pages of her novel, we read its characters and their reading of themselves, of others, and of a written text.<sup>3</sup> *La vida*

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<sup>2</sup> The last clause of the quotation, with its ‘him’ and ‘his,’ posits a male reader. This essay will postulate a person who reads as a woman.

<sup>3</sup> The two main characters also, on occasion, reread portions of that text. *La vida* can be considered another example of rereading in that it is a revision of Simó’s 2000 *T’imagines la vida sense ell?* Most of the changes made in the 2013 work are geographical, linguistic, or typographical and are the result of the author’s desire to pay homage to her birthplace, Alcoi. The 2000 heading for the diary entry that precedes Chapter 1, ‘3 d’abril del 1971,’ becomes in 2013 ‘Alcoi, 3 d’abril,’ and earlier allusions to Barcelona and its environs are replaced by references to the Comunitat Valenciana. Mateu now does his undergraduate work in Valencia, not Barcelona, and what were day trips to Sitges become excursions to Gandia. Simó introduces a number of valencianismes, lexical choices change, with *eixir*, *criar*, and *xiquet*, for instance, replacing *sortir*, *pujar*, and *nen*, and Mercè and Agnès become Mercé and Agnés. Modifications in content are few in number (Simó tightens Mercé’s 1998 diary entry by cutting an unnecessary passage, and she changes Agnés’s profession from molecular biologist to electronics engineer).

*sense ell* features two storylines and two first-person voices, that of a mother and that of her son. Mateu's voice dominates Chapters 1-13, in which he first relates how after his mother's death he finds her diaries and then describes his own life and the people who figure in it. Inserted into his narrative are excerpts from two of Mercé's notebooks. Chapter 1 includes a brief passage she wrote on 7 October 1998 (after she had been diagnosed with cancer) that concerns her frenzied search for an earlier notebook and fear it might fall into her son's hands. Twenty-seven passages from the earlier diary, written between 17 May 1971 and 20 January 1972, are included in Chapters 2 through 12 of *La vida*. They detail the psychological and physical abuse to which her husband, Ricard, subjects her. Issues of gender are at play in both stories. Mercé's narrative is a reading of her experiences and her relationship with Ricard; Mateu, in turn, reads himself, his wife (Agnés), and his mother in conjunction with his experience of a female-authored text. In the closing lines of the novel, Mateu recounts Agnés's reaction to her reading of his mother's story. Most responses to *La vida*—and to its earlier version—have centered on Mercé and largely ignored Mateu even though he plays a significant role in Simó's portrayal of sexist behavior and retrograde ideas. Reading as a woman and a resisting reader, I propose to trace how Simó deftly lays bare his way of thinking. Literature abounds in examples of works in which male authors, like ventriloquists, have assumed a female voice. Simó turns that convention on its head and adopts the voice of a man who, unwittingly, exposes his masculinist attitudes and propensity for violence.

A number of literary critics have pointed to differences between reading as a man or as a woman. Judith Fetterley is among those who have highlighted such differences in her discussion of Washington Irving's 1819 tale 'Rip Van Winkle.' Irving portrays Rip as 'a simple good natured man [...] a kind neighbor, and an obedient, henpecked husband' (1984: 4) who is averse to any form of profitable labor and 'would rather starve on a penny than work for a pound' (6). Instead of tending his fields, he devotes himself to drinking and playing ninepins. In the vernacular of the American South, he is a good ol' boy. The terms Irving employs to describe Rip's wife, in contrast, are overwhelmingly negative: she is tyrannical, a shrew, a

termagant, a terrible virago, has a tart temper and a sharp tongue (4, 6, 7, 18), and unreasonably wants her husband to act responsibly and support his family. It is obvious that Irving expects readers to empathize with ‘long suffering’ (4) Rip. But what, asks Fetterley, if the consumer of this text is a woman? Should she allow herself to be co-opted into participating ‘in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded [...] to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her [...] to identify against herself’ (1978: xii)? Rather than let herself be seduced by such a text, she should, Fetterley argues, become a resisting rather than an assenting reader—as I intend to do—recognize male misreadings, and reject their distortions.<sup>4</sup>

One of the narrative conventions analyzed by Peter Rabinowitz is rules of notice, which show us where to focus our attention. Titles, beginnings and endings of entire texts but also of their component parts, as well as epigraphs and descriptive subtitles, occupy privileged positions (1987: 58). Rabinowitz points out that while the claim that titles, openings, and closings are privileged may seem trivial, ‘it is curious how often [they] serve to answer interpretive disputes by supporting one reading over another’ (1987: 63), and in a similar vein Rimmon-Kenan observes that texts can direct our comprehension ‘by positioning certain items before others’ (1983: 120). In the case of *La vida sense ell*, the title taken in isolation could lend itself to positive or negative interpretations depending on whether it is viewed as intimating consuming love or a yearning for freedom (e.g., he is my whole life and I cannot imagine living without him, or, he is the bane of my existence and life without him would be heavenly). Readers who are familiar with other works by Simó know that she has repeatedly spoken out in favor of equal rights for women

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that women are not necessarily resisting readers but can in fact read as men (see Heilbrun 1971: 39; for an extended discussion of reading as a woman see Culler 1982: 43-64). A nameless blogger who identified herself as ‘una chica de Barcelona, amante de los libros’ wrote in her 2010 review of *T’images* that in the storyline dealing with Mateu and his wife ‘no se ven malos tratos ni nada parecido’ (Devoradora de libros). Reading as a woman, I take issue with that claim.

and against domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> The diary entry that precedes Chapter 1 of *La vida sense ell* alerts us to the issue of abuse and introduces what will be recurrent themes of Mercé's 1971 diary. Life with Ricard is absolute hell, 'un infern' (2013: 7), because he constantly criticizes her and controls every aspect of her life, from what she eats, how she dresses, and when she can leave the apartment to how she is to raise their son, of whom he is jealous. Ricard is the boss and she his slave. Furthermore, Mercé finds her husband physically repugnant and having to clip his toenails sickens her,<sup>6</sup> but if she were to leave him, he would track her down, kill her, and take possession of Mateu, even though he does not love the boy. Repetition of the rhetorical question 'T'imagines la vida sense ell?', which opens and closes the diary entry in addition to appearing within it several times, emphasizes the obsessive nature of Mercé's longing for an end to her fear and suffering.

The detail that at one point Mercé in effect answers her rhetorical question by stating that she does indeed imagine life without Ricard, day and night, prepares us for the first sentence of Chapter 1: 'Quan la mare va morir va deixar 248 rellotges i una confessió d'assassinat' (9).<sup>7</sup> Mateu immediately proceeds to talk about himself and his family. The world in which he and Agnés live is that of present-day Spain when women enjoy far greater freedom than they did during the Franco era; not all men, however, are comfortable with this change. While before her marriage Mercé worked as a secretary in a factory, Agnés has a degree in engineering, but Mateu's attitude toward her is condescending and his remarks supercilious. He describes himself as rational, patient, and ambitious; she, however, is 'preciosa, tossuda i emotiva' (9). The fact that she aspires to a position at Alcoi's Politècnica apparently does not signify, in Mateu's eyes,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, her novel *Júlia* and the short story collection *Dones*.

<sup>6</sup> Simó's use of the verb *ajupir* ('he d'ajupir-me a tallar-li les unghes dels peus' [7]) suggests submission, bowing down before another person.

<sup>7</sup> Columna published *T'imagines la vida sense ell?* in its *Sèrie Negra* collection, but the novel is not a typical whodunit where readers do not know who committed a crime until the end of the work. It is not the *who* but the *how* and *why* that interest Simó.

that she too is ambitious. He contrasts his professional success with her failure to pass the competitive exams for the position she wants and insinuates that she is jealous of him. Although she had planned to postpone having children until she had a job, he decides that the cure for her depression is to get her pregnant. His ‘Jo ho vaig aprofitar per deixar-la prenyada’ (9) implies that the decision to have a child is not *theirs* but *his*.<sup>8</sup> His assertion that women, even the intelligent ones, are ‘biologia pura’ (9) is breathtakingly sexist.<sup>9</sup> Supposedly unambitious Agnés is now studying ‘com una boja’ (9) for another opening, but Mateu admits that he has been so absorbed with his own career that he has not been of much help to her, which she resents. As is typical of women, according to Mateu, she has retaliated ‘amb putadetes silencioses i subtils d’aquelles que destaroten’ (10). Even Mateu’s compliments are left-handed, as when he acknowledges that ‘Agnés, que, tot i ser una mica retorçada, és una bellíssima persona’ (10). It has taken little more than three paragraphs for him to make clear, unintentionally, how overbearing, self-absorbed, spiteful, and petty he is. His sexism may not be as blatant as Ricard’s but since Mateu, unlike his father, is an educated man and lives in a supposedly more enlightened era than did his father, it is equally—if not more—reprehensible.

Mateu’s unconscious self-exposure continues in Chapter 2, which provides examples of his bad temper, his irritability and vindictiveness when things do not go as he wishes; his lack of consideration for others, and his tendency to be hypercritical, especially of women. His leaving for a business trip to Amsterdam puts Agnés in a bad mood (‘està insuportable’ [19]) and she makes a sarcastic remark about his job, which triggers his comment that he detests her when she is sarcastic. He then proceeds with his own sarcastic remark about know-it-all women: ‘Agnés ho sap –ella ho sap

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<sup>8</sup> His ‘Etic casat amb Agnés [...] i tinc un fill’ (9) reinforces the impression that he regards Carles as *his* son, not *theirs*.

<sup>9</sup> His remark is likely to remind readers of Lawrence Summers’ suggestions, made while he was president of Harvard University, that women were under-represented in science and engineering because they lacked the aptitude of men.

*tot-*, que em fot el seu sarcasme de seteciències' (19, emphasis added). If Agnés is a 'gata maula' (20), the flight attendant is ugly and scowls when he rejects a meal and instead asks for a malt whisky. The woman seated next to him on the plane removes her shoes as soon as she sits down, another thing that he detests. Since when he calls home Agnés is not in, the next day he decides to punish her by not calling ('vull castigar Agnés' [23]), and he makes another sweeping, negative generalization about women: 'Déu, per què les dones són tan maleïdament misterioses? Ho fan a propòsit o han nascut amb una tara?' (22, emphasis added). By the end of this chapter, resisting readers are likely to wonder if Agnés, at least on occasion, has thought about *la vida sense ell*.

This second chapter contains the first example of the interplay between what Mateu says and what his mother has written in her diary. Mercé reports in her 20 May 1971 entry that Ricard has told her he expects her to stay at home: 'Et vull en casa, havia dit Ricard. La meua dona no treballa, i no se'n parle més' (31).<sup>10</sup> On the next page, when Mateu reproaches his wife for not being at home when he called, she retorts that she can do as she pleases and is not under house arrest. While the two men have somewhat similar attitudes about where women belong, Agnés has more opportunities and therefore can afford to show more backbone than did Mercé. Subsequent chapters will develop further examples of parallels and contrasts between the two storylines.

Violence against women, be it literal or figurative, verbal or physical in nature, dominates Chapter 3. In the two diary entries included in this chapter, Mercé describes how Ricard isolates her from her friends, humiliates her, makes fun of her ideas, and finds fault with everything she does, claiming that the apartment is not sufficiently clean, there is a speck of dust on a shelf, a small stain on a towel, or a wrinkle on one of his shirts. As he becomes more and more threatening, she grows too afraid of him to stand up for herself. Mateu reacts angrily to what he terms his mother's passivity, and he tends to dismiss as 'confessions de doneta' (39) what she, 'aquesta

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<sup>10</sup> Clearly he subscribes to the Francoist conception of the place of women: *en casa y con la pata quebrada*.

bleda patidora' (40), has written. Furthermore, he reflects, there is always another side to a story and his father, surely, was not as Mercé portrays him. Mateu's own propensity for violence, at least in thought if not yet in deed, surfaces in his account of a dinner with another couple. The women's conversation so annoys him that he expresses the wish that he had been born in a country or a time when cutting off women's tongues was permitted (42). That appalling thought is followed by Mercé's account of explicit violations of her right to privacy and of her body. When she breaks down and tells her male gynecologist how lonely and unhappy she is, the good doctor, in a display of male solidarity, promptly phones Ricard to warn him his wife is an hysterical female and a betrayer. Subsequently Ricard flies into a rage and beats Mercé.

The more Mateu reads, the more he finds himself siding with his father, a man who—according to his son—merely wants to be in control but, unfortunately, suffers the humiliation of losing his job and being supported by his wife, and so takes refuge in the bottle. Mateu sympathizes with his father's 'dignitat de mascle, de mascle antic' (70) to the point of downplaying Ricard's beating of Mercé. After all, he thinks, it was a one-time occurrence, and if Ricard occasionally rapes his wife, well, such behavior was typical of many men of his generation. A resisting reader is likely to find less than credible Mateu's claim that although he understands his father, he is not defending him (70).

Juxtaposition can be a telling device, another means of calling attention to contrasts or, in this instance, similarities. Mateu's remarks about real men's sense of dignity and his 'No ho defense, però ho entenc' (70) are immediately followed by his impassioned defense of a man who insists on moving away from Alcoi despite his wife's opposition, a defense which provokes Agnés's telling comment: 'si rasques una miqueta, però només una miqueta, en aquests homes tan ben educats i tan llegits, ix el mascle atàvic, el de tota la vida [...] No ho sabia, que fores tan carca, Mateu' (72-73).

Chapter 6 adds further nuances to Mateu's self-portrait. Agnés has renewed studying for competitive exams and is, again, 'insuportable' (82), with her nerves on edge, so Mateu spends extra time with their son. He reports smugly that he is pleased to see that he

does a better job of caring for the boy than does Agnés. In his own way Mateu is as heavy-handed as his father, for his reaction to the fact that Agnés has started smoking again is ‘aquell tros de traïdora ha tornat a fumar. Aquesta me la paga’ (84). His pettiness, spitefulness, and self-absorption lead him to complain that while he has shown an interest in his wife’s ‘fotudes oposicions’ (105), Agnés, ‘aquell tros de podrida’ (104), has not devoted sufficient attention to his problems, and so he thinks of taking a vacation by himself ‘per castigar-la’ (105). Rather than celebrate his wife’s eventual success in the exams, he proceeds to goad her about her low salary, which is comparable to that of his secretary.

The second half of the book, chapters 7-12, explains in detail how Mercé plans to kill her husband by inserting a needle into one of his eyes and causing a cerebral hemorrhage.<sup>11</sup> Mateu has consistently underestimated his mother’s intelligence, and he cannot get used to the idea that a woman he considers simple, ignorant, and uneducated should have been so ingenious and enterprising. His reaction to what he now reads is, as usual, primarily about himself. He wonders if Mercé was insane and whether he has inherited her madness. And he is terrified by the thought that Agnés would be appalled by Mercé’s actions and would regard him differently.

In Chapter 13, the shortest of the book at little more than three pages, Mateu discovers Agnés reading Mercé’s diary, which she then burns. Rules of notice are again at play, for endings, like beginnings, are privileged positions, and the last five lines of the novel are given special prominence by being separated slightly from the preceding text and indented several spaces:

-Una dona valenta –diu [Agnés].  
I ix a poc a poc del dormitori.  
A la porta, es gira i afig:  
-Aquesta vegada sí que no la trobarà ningú, la llibreta.

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<sup>11</sup> Since Ricard has consistently shown himself to be figuratively blind and incapable of *seeing*, in the sense of understanding, the method Mercé uses is fitting.

La meua Agnés. (184)<sup>12</sup>

Mateu's fears to the contrary, Agnés does not recoil in horror or regard her husband as a monster. Instead, she focuses on the figure of Mercé and, reading as a woman, declares her mother-in-law to have been a person of great courage. The last words of the novel are Mateu's and, like the book's title, they can be read in more than one way. His 'My Agnés' may denote pride, as if to say, 'What a woman!', or it may simply be an affirmation of possessiveness, as was Ricard's 'La meua dona' (31). Simó leaves it up to her readers to decide.

Rather than directly criticize Mateu, Simó has chosen the more effective strategy of letting the character speak for himself and thus display his prejudices. His disparaging remarks about women in general and Agnés in particular, his repeated desire to punish his wife, and his violent language indicate that old habits and ways of thinking die hard. Domestic violence, Simó makes clear, was common in the early 1970s, in 2000, and it persists in the present.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> These final lines were even more prominent in the page proofs of *La vida* because they were set in larger, darker type and indented more.

<sup>13</sup> The 9 October 2013 issue of *La Vanguardia* reported on a current example—an 18-year-old boy killed the 14-year-old girl who had broken off their relationship—and included a shot of a protest banner that declared 'No confonguem amor amb possessió' (26-27). Celeste López's article quoted a recent survey's conclusion that 'las campañas de concienciación sobre el maltrato no estaban calando en un porcentaje nada despreciable de población joven, lo que hacía intuir que la violencia de género proseguirá en generaciones posteriores' (26).

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