



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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*The Shrouded Woman:*  
María Luisa Bombal  
and Peripheral  
Modernism

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## *The Shrouded Woman:* María Luisa Bombal and Peripheral Modernism

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Bombal's novel vindicates the powers of fiction and above all the overlooked agency and creativity of those who are confined to the margins within society, or on the periphery of a global system in which it is too often assumed that everything of cultural interest and originality comes from Europe or North America.



# THE POWERS OF FICTION

All literature is fictitious. Even a realist text cannot hide the fact that it is a product of invention: however much it may try hard to give the impression of reality or lay claim to documentary truth, the best realism can achieve is verisimilitude, the “likeness” of truth, rather than truth itself.

Novels have always played with  
this inevitable gap between  
fictiveness and reality.



*Clark & Paine*

THE  
**L I F E**  
AND  
STRANGE SURPRIZING  
**ADVENTURES**  
OF  
*ROBINSON CRUSOE,*  
OF *YORK,* MARINER:

Who lived Eight and Twenty Years,  
all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the  
Coast of AMERICA, near the Mouth of  
the Great River of OROONOQUE;

Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, where-  
in all the Men perished but himself.

WITH  
An Account how he was at last so strangely deli-  
ver'd by PYRATES.

---

*Written by Himself.*

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L O N D O N:  
Printed for W. TAYLOR at the Ship in Pater-Noster-  
Row. MDCCXIX.



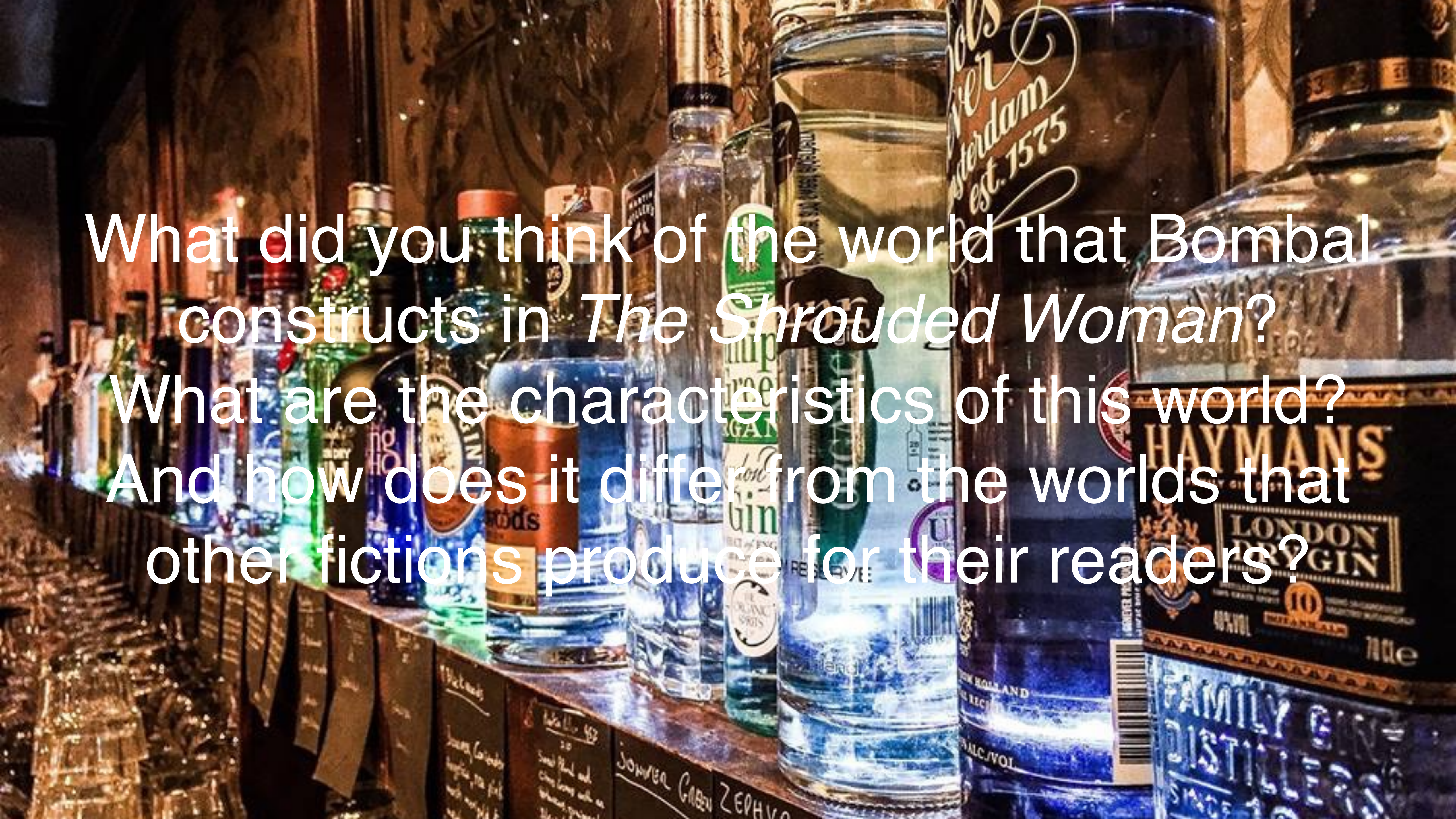
The book's power derives not from this pretence to truth or authenticity, but from its *infidelity*, its creativity.

To write a novel is to create a world,  
a milieu, more than it is to reflect or  
mimic one that already (allegedly) exists  
somewhere outside of the text.

The power of fiction resides in the fact that it is not simply mimicry—or rather, that even mimicry is more than mere copy. Moreover, the fact that a text is fiction—that it is invented or constructed, and perhaps even flaunts that constructedness—does not make it any the less “real.”

Fiction is not simply a veil placed on the world, obscuring our view; it is centrally concerned with the interplay between “veil” and world, with the notion that the world, too, is a construction, to which fiction also contributes.

What did you think of the world that Bombal constructs in *The Shrouded Woman*?  
What are the characteristics of this world?  
And how does it differ from the worlds that other fictions produce for their readers?

A close-up photograph of a bar counter with various bottles of alcohol. The bottles are arranged on a wooden shelf, and the background is a dark, textured wall. The lighting is warm and focused on the bottles. The text is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

What did you think of the world that Bombal constructs in *The Shrouded Woman*?  
What are the characteristics of this world?  
And how does it differ from the worlds that other fictions produce for their readers?



# **GENDER AND AGENCY**

This is a woman's world, a world perceived and felt in terms of gender. Such is the hold of gendered expectations that they do not disappear even with death: dead or alive, a woman remains subject to the gaze of others.



The dominant tone for much of the novel is frustration or disillusion. Death comes as a relief. In death, she is no longer faced with the gap between her own sense of agency and the passivity with which she is expected to accept her destiny as more object than subject.

In life, however, in the world that *The Shrouded Woman* constructs, women very much have agency, even if they have limited opportunities to exercise it. It is this sense of untapped female agency that accounts for the fact that the women in this novel can never quite be pinned down.

Not even the tomb can contain  
a woman such as Ana Maria.

The women characters in *The Shrouded Woman* are much more interesting and lively than the men. At times, even the dead woman narrator is more vivacious than the living men who surround her!

What haunts this novel is loneliness,  
the fact that the women are turned against  
each other, and suffer and rage  
on their own.



# **A VIEW FROM THE MARGINS**

Repeatedly the novel suggests that life is somehow beyond the grasp of the living:  
“Must we die in order to know?” (176).

Ana Maria is paradoxically both at the  
centre of things and to one side.





**Alameda de las Delicias, Santiago, Chile, 1912**

There are advantages to such marginality.

There are advantages to such marginality.

In the end the hierarchies of master and mastered, centre and margin, come to seem precarious and equivocal, rather than absolute.

We might think of this novel as an instance of modernism on the periphery, which both acknowledges the realities of global cultural hierarchies and at the same time offers a gentle critique of presumptions that the so-called centre is where all progress and innovation is to be found.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



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# PRODUCTION

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