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"Performing Middle-Class Womanhood in 19th-Century Spain: The Memoirs of Juana de Vega, countess of Espoz y Mina"

Mónica Burguera
University of Valencia

I wanted to take this opportunity to briefly present what is very much a work in progress based on the set of memoirs written by Juana de Vega, countess of Espoz y Mina, during the late 1830s and 1840s in Spain.

In 1836, Juana de Vega became the widow of one of the most representative military leaders of early Spanish Liberalism, a popular hero of the Liberal cause against absolutism. But after her husband's death, the figure of the Countess of Espoz y Mina grew to be more outstanding within Liberal circles. She was the lady that Liberal progressivism chose in 1840 to carve out the first Constitutional Queen, after the model of Queen Victoria of England. She left her voluntary retirement in Galicia to go to Madrid and move into the Royal Palace to become the governess of the Queen-child Isabel II. Her purpose was to provide the so called "pupil of Liberty" with the kind of education Progressivism had imagined for the new nation's Liberal Queen.

Along these same years (late 1830s and 1840s) Juana de Vega wrote three intertwined texts: her husband's memoirs, her own *En honor de Mina, memorias íntimas* [*In Honor of Mina Intimate Memoirs*], and her *Apuntes para la Historia. Del tiempo enque ocupó los destinos de Aya de S.M. y A. y Camarera Mayor de Palacio* [Notes for History. On the Days in which She was the Governess of the Queen Isabel II and of her Sister (1841-

1843)]. Whereas the first two texts are meant as a tribute to her dead heroic husband, the last one was a self-exculpating text written after her resignation in which she created a pretty idealized image of herself. In the book the Countess gave a complete and thorough account of her experience in the Palace; the experience of a woman that ultimately had all the attributes defining the new Liberal middle-class woman: educated but modest, loving but self-controlled, austere but philanthropic, patriotic and progressive. Moreover, this was the set of attributes, she argued, that prevented her from succeeding as a liberal educator of the future governing woman in an aristocratic atmosphere she completely ignored because, as she wrote, “I did not belong to their class.”

She had depicted herself in this set of memoirs as a loving domestic wife, showed by her permanent perennial mourning, and a philanthropic and patriotic public and political lady, proved by her abnegation to accept the position in the Royal Palace. One could read a few months before she died, in a celebratory note on her life: “she was reluctant to accept [her position in Palace], only when she was asked to do it in the name of the public good, did she make up her mind [to do so]. There she was the caring mother, the sensible mentor of the princesses.” Those were also the terms in which she was remembered in the pamphlets written right after her death. The very same terms in which she was depicted many years later in a variety of introductory notes or essays, when her work was first published, in 1910, and later, in 1944, 1960, and 1977 in different editions of her memoirs. Even recent publications, as gender historiography has started to revise traditional narratives of Modern Spain in a wider historiographical context that has revisited the importance and peculiarity of the Liberal rupture, have recaptured the figure of Juana de Vega as the epitome of the Liberal and middle-class woman,.

However, I think the analysis of the life and work of the so called *Dama del progresismo* (Lady of Progressivism) in post-revolutionary Spain may pose some further relevant questions for historians regarding not only the relationship between female autobiographical writing and biography, but also the possibility of historically contextualizing (gendered) individual strategies of self-representation in the midst of a rising middle-class Liberal discourse of domesticity.

Let me then situate my own work very briefly. There are two key questions running across my recent research that also frame today's presentation. First, against a too homogeneous and coherent understanding of the discourse of domesticity, I argue that, during the Spanish post-revolutionary years, from within the political cultures of respectable liberalism and through the languages of romanticism and social reform, a diversity of female models emerged in the midst of a climate of anxiety about the limits of women's education, their intellectual capabilities and their public projection. These debates revolved around the need to respect the principles of the sexual order upon which the new liberal society had to be stabilized, based on the idea of the "complementarity of the sexes," as well as the claim to broaden the realm of public action for women, in particular, in the field of philanthropy and literary creation.

And, second, in this context, by problematizing the biographical profile of Juana de Vega, I aim to problematize the too lineal relationship often established between women's experiences and the making of, in this case, diverse female and feminist identities.

With a background of deep political and social transformations sanctioned by the Spanish Constitution of 1837 and through the following decade, the Liberal Revolution in Spain brought about a new social and sexual order. A romantic Liberal public sphere was reorganized and reinvented around newly conceptualized Learned Societies. These scientific and literary associations became true idealized pictures of the emerging Liberal family's founding principles. Thus reason, individuality, knowledge and the projection of the common good through philanthropy was their goal. However, in practice, these spaces were conceived of as legitimate sites for the production, not only of (objective) knowledge, but also of a public (male) status; a gendered social status associated with the emergence and institutionalization of the modern (male) citizen, with the public projection of his intellectual and political capabilities.

As from 1838, and out of the associational spirit shaping these new Learned Societies, a series of philanthropic associations also invaded Spanish public sphere. From and within theses philanthropic societies circulated a renovated social discourse mostly imported from Europe that implicitly redefined maternity as well as women's education in connection with their intellectual capabilities and public projection. Thus, paradoxically, it was from these societies, exclusively conceived of as masculine that female members of their ladies' sections were conceptualized as individuals and women, as modern active public citizens, as similar and differing from men. The Countess of Espoz y Mina embodied all these contradictions. By 1841, when she moved in to the court, Juana de Vega already had become the symbol of the renewed philanthropic Lady who was to be actively involved in public matters as founder of the *Asociación de Señoras del Hospital de Caridad de La Coruña* [Ladies' Association of the Charity House of La Coruña]. A year later, as the governess of the Queen, she became the President of the ladies'

section of the Instituto Español, the progressive philanthropic society close to Espartero and most actively committed to women's rational education and their public projection as a symbol of modernity. Not surprisingly, years later, in 1854, Espartero, then General President of the Cabinet, offered her the title of Duchess of Charity, which she rejected. Juana's modesty enlarged her public representation as a proper lady.

A similar paradox shaped her own publishing politics. Whereas in the early 1850s General Espoz y Mina appeared as the author of his published memoirs—written by his wife—the Countess bequeathed her Notes for History. On the Days in which She was the Governess of the Queen Isabel II and of her Sister (1841-1843) along with her In Honor of Mina Intimate Memoirs to the Parliament's Library, in yet another symbolic gesture. The Countess was actively involved in politics, she hosted one of the most influential "tertulias" or gatherings attended by the most representative politicians of liberal progressivism: renown social reformists like Ramón de la Sagra, and in particular, her friend and pupil, Concepcion Arenal, one of the most celebrated writers of the 1860s and 1870s, and the first woman to be included among the most published and read social reformists of the second half of the decade.

As Susan Kirkpatrick already showed years ago, the languages of Romanticism gave a few women the possibility of articulating a voice of their own; a sensitive and liberating self capable of questioning the gender order that rendered women as subjected victims of man's passion and power. Women like Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda or Carolina Coronado among others imagined alternative lives for themselves and other women. They entered successfully the newly created spaces of romantic literary sociability. These women published many works generally praised by (male) critics, although the latter still felt reluctant to accept women in the world of intellectuals or creative writers. They developed durable networks forged in mutual admiration and friendship; networks channeled often through the emerging female press in the second half of the 1840s. In my own research I have seen how they question the limits of female domesticity and their capability to choose as individuals and women their own personal and professional destiny. They assembled the traces of an unfinished project of emancipation from women's slavery and

circumscription to the domestic space from a set of shared expectations; and they did so through mostly masculine languages. Some of them even claimed for an alternative revolution that turned over its moral foundations to question the assumed natural roots of the difference between men and women. As one could read in early late 1845 in the journal *La Ilustración, Álbum de Damas,* [The Enlightenment. An Album for ladies] directed by Avellaneda,

> "We want to be able to act freely and follow our vocation, and our own husbands should wish it that way too."

The Countess of Espoz y Mina, as a very visible woman immersed in the same political cultures of respectability, however, never meant to forge a female collective identity, nor aimed to reach a concrete audience as most of these women did. She did believe in a redefined notion of the "complemetarity of the sexes" based on women's rationally and an appropriate education for them, as well as on a patriotism that had a clear public philanthropic projection. Thus she never meant to invert the moral bases of the liberal revolution. She just wanted it to be progressive and capable of incorporating women into civil society.

As opposed to the case of Avellaneda, for instance—the most successful and much published woman writer celebrated by Romantic men writers as "*varonil*" or "masculine;" that is, as an exception to the female intellectual and creative capabilities—, the Countess, as a writer, also embodied the attributes of the middle-class woman; that is, of a hidden and successful author of her husband's memoirs, and a female unpublished author of her own. The woman behind her husband's memoirs was celebrated as a silent female author. In the foreword to the first edition of Vega's texts as an author, a member of the Academy of History wrote in 1910, "in the beautiful national language [the works of Espoz y Mina] do not have the virility of Avellaneda's dramas, nor the accentuated feminism

of Coronado." Differing attributes led to different audiences and publishing possibilities. However, my point is that all these women and their alternative strategies did participate actively in the process of redefinition of the newly created gendered Liberal public sphere, mobilizing a diversity of models for Liberal and respectable ladies.

In short, the exploration of Juana de Vega's texts in the light of a revisited postrevolutionary context may help us understand how she built and performed her own identity as a middle-class lady. She did this paradoxically through a set of transgressing practices in a Liberal society that was being founded on deeply assumed (and contradictory) notions about sexual difference. She crossed back and forth the gendered boundaries between the private and the public (female and male) spheres that prevented women from participating in civil society. She had to be public and political by definition in order to perform the ideal of Liberal and respectable female domesticity. She believed deeply in the role she played and she performed it accordingly. However, by reflecting on Juana's case, my intention is not to bring into light the exceptionality of a calculating mid that dressed like a woman, but rather to confirm her as a middle-class woman in full. Her case I think also conforms that neither domesticity nor the complementarity of the sexes may be conceivable as fixed operative ideologies free of contradictions that foster coherent gender identities.