



SOLITUDE AND SENSIBILITY: FEMALE IDENTITIES IN THE SPANISH ENLIGHTENMENT

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Introduction

What did solitude mean to the men and women of the eighteenth century? To newly enlightened minds, the idea that anyone might withdraw from his or her fellows, whether physically or mentally, was anything but desirable. Nor could voluntary isolation any more be construed as a sign of nearness to God. Individuals were expected to spend their time neither searching for heaven on earth nor preparing their souls for the afterlife, but working towards the common good in the here and now. Personal interests and desires were seen as secondary to the needs of society and therefore great importance was attributed to the exchange of ideas, dialogue, cooperation, philanthropic urges and a sense of sympathy for humanity as a whole. In a reversal of the ascetic vision of the Baroque, those who opted for a life of seclusion were no longer viewed as hermits, holy men or sages, but instead seen as marginalised, anti-social, eccentric and, above all, misanthropic (Minois 297).

The intellectual élites of the eighteenth century, most of whom were Christian believers, continued to imagine God as an invisible being, present everywhere and nowhere. But if anything set the Lord aside from humankind, it was that he alone enjoyed the unity and integrity of perfect solitude. The sentiment expressed some decades earlier by Sir Thomas Browne was increasingly widely held:

There is no such thing as solitude, nor any thing that can be said to be alone, and by itselfe, but God, who is in his owne circle, and can subsist by himselfe ... In briefe, there can be nothing truely alone, and by its self, which is not truely one; and such is onely God; all others doe transcend an unity, and so by consequence are many. (Browne 81-82)

Despite Browne's opaque language (*Deus est sphaera infinita, cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam*²), his message could not be clearer: the

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idealised image of a self-sufficient God stood in stark contrast to the nature of humanity, namely the interdependence of all individuals, from cradle to grave. As the eighteenth century wore on, this idea expanded to embrace the notion of there being an essential relationship between all living beings, as upheld by immanent pantheism.³

Sociability

The Age of Reason and the Age of Pleasure attacked solitude from opposite flanks: moralists and bon vivants alike favoured sociability and saw solitude as unnatural. Thinkers as disparate as Montesquieu and Diderot openly acknowledged their sociable temperament and need for company. "I am almost as happy with fools as I am with intelligent folk" (Je suis presque aussi content avec des sots qu'avec des gens d'esprit) [Montesquieu 619]), wrote the former, while the "Society" entry of the *Encyclopédie* includes the following statement: "Such is the nature and constitution of man that, outside society, he would be unable to preserve his life, or to develop and perfect his faculties and talents, or procure true and lasting happiness for himself" (Telle est en effet la nature et la constitution de l'homme, que hors de la société, il ne saurait ni conserver sa vie, ni développer et perfectionner ses facultés et ses talents, ni se procurer un vrai et solide bonheur [Diderot and d'Alembert, XV: 252]). In another of his works Diderot confesses: "A pleasure which I experience alone has but little effect on me and soon passes. It is both for myself and for my friends that I read, reflect, write, contemplate, listen, observe and feel" (Un plaisir qui n'est que pour moi me touche faiblement et dure peu. C'est pour moi et pour mes amis que je lis, que je réfléchis, que j'écris, que je médite, que j'entends, que je regarde, que je sens [Diderot, IX: 185])." For him, there was something suspect about those who set themselves apart from society, and he expresses the disquiet they cause him: "He whose emotion is not deepened by the great number of those who share it has some secret vice. There is in his character some kind of solitariness that displeases me" (Celui qui ne sent pas augmenter sa sensation par le grand nombre de ceux qui la partagent a quelque vice secret: il y a dans son caractère je ne sais quoi de solitaire qui me déplaît. [Denis Diderot, "Second Entretiens sur le Fils naturel" IV: 166-167])."

² Attributed to the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, this metaphor can be found quoted at least as early as the twelfth century, but was popularised in the fourteenth, by the writings of Meister Eckhart, and in the fifteenth by those of Nicholas of Cusa. See Harries.

³ Coined by mathematician Joseph Raphson in 1697, the term "pantheism" has been used to describe the beliefs of many different individuals and organisations. See Thomson.

There was no shortage of eighteenth-century clerics ready to decry seclusion from the moral perspective as a form of selfishness.⁴ In response to Petrarch's treatise extolling the virtues of solitude, the enormously influential *De vita solitaria* (1346-56),⁵ the Abbé Pluquet—in his treatise *De la sociabilité*—upheld that true happiness could only be achieved by integrating oneself into society, and that those who tried to avoid the company of others were abnormal, their behaviour verging on the monstrous. For this French theologian, a love of solitude was the preserve of evil-doers, zealots and fools (Pluquet II: 28).

From the purely medical point of view, meanwhile, it was believed that those who distanced themselves from others risked physical and mental deterioration. Solitude would expose them to all kinds of spiritual ills, chief among which were depression and melancholia. It was seen as not just a pernicious vice, but a dangerous pathology. As Georges Minois notes, as far as most Enlightenment philosophers were concerned, “the solitary man was not just a parasite but an invalid, a neurasthenic, a melancholic, even a lunatic” (Condamné à une immobilité stérile, le solitaire est non seulement un parasite, mais c'est aussi un malade, un neurasthénique, un mélancolique, voire un fou [Minois 307]).

The growing sociability of the educated classes was reflected in the many gatherings that sprang up during this period for the discussion and exchange of ideas – from academies, societies and salons to meetings in coffee-houses. This trend did not, however, prevent some artists of the day from being seduced by the charismatic appeal of certain individuals who had chosen a life of isolation. Incipient signs of the fascination with seclusion that would flourish in the Romantic era can be found in the work of several Enlightenment writers, including Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, the “Graveyard poets”⁶ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

A particularly significant example of the eighteenth-century tensions between society and individualism can be found in the writings of Defoe. Although he initially despairs at the extreme isolation in which he finds himself when he washes up on a desert island, the sole survivor of a shipwreck, Defoe's Robinson Crusoe ultimately re-evaluates his situation,

⁴ Notably the Abbés Desfourneaux (*Essai d'une philosophie naturelle*, 1724), Marquet (*Discours sur l'esprit de société*, 1735) and Pluquet (*De la sociabilité*, 1767).

⁵ Petrarch, *The Life of Solitude*, ed. Jacob Zeitlin (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1924).

⁶ Writers such as Thomas Parnell, Thomas Warton, Thomas Percy, Thomas Gray, James Macpherson, Robert Blair, William Collins, Mark Akenside, Joseph Warton and Edward Young. See Parisot.

acknowledging that he has achieved a previously unknown state of contentment:

I gave humble and hearty Thanks that God had been pleased to discover to me that it was possible I might be more happy in this solitary Condition than I should have been in a Liberty of Society, and in all the Pleasures of the World ... It was now that I began sensibly to feel how much more happy the Life I now led was, with all its miserable Circumstances, than the wicked, cursed, abominable Life I led all the past part of my Days ... I learned to look more upon the bright side of my condition, and less upon the dark side, and to consider what I enjoyed rather than what I wanted, and this gave me sometimes such secret comforts that I cannot express them. (Defoe, *The Life* 132)

He later expands on this: “for when I began to regret the want of Conversation, I would ask myself, whether thus conversing mutually with my own Thoughts, and, as I hope I may say, with even God Himself by Ejaculations, was not better than the utmost Enjoyment of humane Society in the World?” (Defoe, *Serious Reflections* 160).

Intriguingly, however, in an essay that appeared just one year later, Defoe –still writing as his fictional castaway– contradicted this essentially positive take on solitude by condemning the idea of retreating from the world as “unlawful”, “a breach of Christian duties” and even “a rape upon human nature” (Defoe, *Serious Reflections* 7-11). Why this change of heart? As Barbara Taylor observes, Defoe’s rapid denunciation of opting out of society may have been a way of countering potential criticism of what originally appeared to be praise for a form of monasticism—a religious practise closely associated with Catholicism— or, given his own ardent Protestantism, may have “expressed [his] more considered views as he looked back on Crusoe’s history”. Either way, Taylor notes, the attitudes expressed in the essay put him “firmly in line with dominant opinion,” at a time when removing oneself from society was seen not just as selfish but as ungodly because it went against the obligation to care for others and because, without the protection of virtuous companions, a recluse would be at the mercy of his worst inclinations—at the mercy of the devil— known to associate with hermits.

As the eighteenth century went on, however, solitude began, gradually and tentatively, to be viewed with less suspicion, as it was reconciled with the cult of sensibility. Rousseau saw the dreamlike introspection of such a figure as the zenith of happiness. Fielding, too, implied that solitude could sometimes be a gift rather than a punishment, a sign of purity as opposed to the corruption of life in society. In *Tom Jones* (1749) the story of Jack,⁷

⁷ The name Jacques and its many variants (Jack, Jaques, Sjaak, etc) is associated with a tradition of literary misanthropes, from Shakespeare’s “Melancholy Jaques”

nicknamed the “Man of the Hill” —a wild-looking man clothed in the skin of an ass— acts as a warning to the picaresque protagonist. A former swindler, Jack has found redemption only by withdrawing from society: a cautionary tale of the dangers that lie behind the enticements of London life (see Tannenbaum).

The dialectic between the poles of sociability and individualism continued throughout the eighteenth century. It lies behind the work of such influential artists as Jonathan Swift, in whose “benevolent misanthropy” the famous adventures of Gulliver are steeped (Preston 3). In a letter to Alexander Pope dated on 29 September 1725, Swift acknowledged this paradoxical duality of feeling towards his fellow humans:

I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is toward individuals ... I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth I have got materials toward a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition animal rationale, and to show it would be only rationis capax. Upon this great foundation of misanthropy, though not in Timon's manner, the whole building of my Travels is erected; and I never will have peace of mind till all honest men are of my opinion. (Pope 53)

The new misanthropes might previously have been portrayed as antisocial deviants, but now conveyed a certain disquieting ambiguity, their more appealing character traits combined with others that were less so — ranging from foolishness, via intolerance, to a profound rejection of their fellow men. Harley, the hypersensitive protagonist of Henry Mackenzie's 1771 novel *The Man of Feeling*, is for example frequently moved to tears by his sympathy for the plight of others. Indeed, there are no fewer than 40 references to weeping in a mere 100 pages. But his excessive sentimentality prevents him from helping others or himself. And on his deathbed he expresses a disillusionment with eighteenth-century society that verges on misanthropy (Carter 157).

Responding to Mackenzie's highly successful novel, in 1805 William Godwin established a different model of masculine sensitivity in *Fleetwood: Or, The New Man of Feeling*. In this *Bildungsroman*, his eponymous hero —a highly-educated only child— travels in the opposite direction from Mackenzie's protagonist, learning through his own suffering and mistakes to accept those around him as they are. This particularly applies to the woman he marries late in life, whom he wrongly accuses of adultery, but with whom he is eventually reconciled. Godwin's misanthropic protagonist is gradually drawn away from an isolation inseparable from his feelings of moral superiority and towards a growing attitude of benevolence and

(*As You Like It*; 1603), to the protagonist of Diderot's satirical novel *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* (1765-1780).

indulgence. For Godwin, perhaps influenced by his wife Mary Wollstonecraft, this transformation represented true sensibility (see Handwerk and Pollock).

It is no coincidence that some of the eighteenth-century writers who chose to explore the depths of solitude had personal experience of melancholia (see Vila). In 1779, the poet William Cowper (1731-1800), who had tried to commit suicide on several occasions, having overcome his latest crisis, wrote the poem *Retirement*, which includes this ironic statement:

I praise the Frenchman [Voltaire], his remark was shrewd –
 How sweet, how passing sweet, is solitude!
 But grant me still a friend in my retreat
 Whom I may whisper – solitude is sweet. (vv. 739-742)

“Retirement” was published in a 1782 collection which also included a poem dedicated to the Scottish sailor whose four-year abandonment on an island off the Chilean coast had served as inspiration to Defoe. In “The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk”, Cowper casts a more negative light on the events in question:

O Solitude! where are the charms
 That sages have seen in thy face?
 Better dwell in the midst of alarms,
 Than reign in this horrible place ...

Society, Friendship, and Love
 Divinely bestow'd upon man,
 O, had I the wings of a dove
 How soon would I taste you again! ...

My friends, do they now and then send
 A wish or a thought after me?
 O tell me I yet have a friend,
 Though a friend I am never to see ...” (Cowper 305-307)

After this first-person lament, the poet breaks away from his original tone to end with a more consolatory thought:

There's mercy in every place,
 And mercy, encouraging thought!
 Gives even affliction a grace,
 And reconciles man to his lot. (Cowper 308)

Taking an equally lucid if less poetic, religious and emotional view, the Swiss philosopher and physician Johann Georg Zimmermann wrote his four-volume treatise on solitude over a period of almost thirty years (1756-1784) (*Betrachtungen, Über die Einsamkeit* and *Von der Einsamkeit*). In it he

succeeded in finding a kind of third way of approaching this divisive subject (see Goodson). With considerable psychological insight, he set out the advantages and disadvantages (even dangers) of solitude. Among the latter he noted a tendency to arrogance and inflexibility. According to him, society improves our character and behaviour, by accustoming us to dealing with contradiction and argument, and to living with people who think differently from us. Hence at the beginning of his treatise he claims:

While I exhort my readers to listen to the advantages of occasional retirement, I warn them against the dangerous excess into which some of the disciples of this philosophy have fallen, an excess equally repugnant to Reason and Religion. (Zimmermann, *Solitude* 5)

On the other hand, Zimmermann also notes that solitude, when put to good use, can mitigate sadness and provide an individual with independence, energy, self-knowledge and an ability to observe the world shrewdly, along with a varied range of pleasures. If nothing else, it could be a worthwhile learning experience and, despite appearances, might be closely linked to love, since it often involved time spent thinking of the object of one's affections.

Zimmermann has been called a strange mixture of sentimentalism, melancholia and enthusiasm, which may have enabled him to express himself more openly than most of his contemporaries. His text is free from any extreme or moralising intent and, rather than coming down on one side or the other, he confesses that his main aim is to set his readers free:

It is not my doctrine that men should reside in deserts or sleep like owls in the hollow trunks of trees; but I am anxious to expel from their minds the excessive fear which they too frequently entertain of the opinion of the world. I would, as far as it is consistent with their respective stations in life, render them independent. I wish them to break through the fetters of prejudice, to imbibe a just contempt for the vices of society, and to seek occasionally *a rational solitude*, where they may so far enlarge their sphere of thought and action as to be able to say, at least during a few hours every day: *We are free*. (Zimmermann, *Solitude* 270)

Squaring the circle in characteristically rationalist fashion, he concludes:

We must therefore learn to divide our time between the world and solitude ... Thus shall we avoid being led either towards folly by the recklessness of one who seeks pleasure, or towards misanthropy by the dark and morose seriousness of the recluse (Zimmermann, *Solitude* 315).

Masculine solitude

In different eras and cultures, solitude has adopted a multitude of often mutually contradictory faces. From a sense of emptiness to one of personal empowerment, from sterile depression to creative euphoria, it could be seen as an indicator of success or of failure, and as the result of a lack of affection or as an expression of freedom and self-affirmation. Some pursue it, others – suffering in the most extreme cases from a disorder known as *autophobia* – flee from it as if were some kind of monster (see Svendsen).

One can experience both physical solitude and psychological or inner solitude, the latter being the sense of isolation or detachment a person can feel when standing in a crowd, or even when involved in a loving relationship. Over the years, such eminent thinkers as Michel de Montaigne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Cowper Powys have noted that if we can come to terms with this form of solitude, we will get to the core of our personal identity and find an answer to the question, “Who am I?”⁸ Our most hidden self, that deep kernel to which we only feel we have access through certain aesthetic, emotional or religious experiences, presumes the recognition of an identity-forming solitude that could be equated with a high level of understanding, creativity and, ultimately, happiness (Cowper Powys 42).

Solitude understood as the art of being oneself is truly the greatest of mysteries. Its enigmatic nature makes it a particularly elusive area of study. Just like death —or dreaming— its essence cannot be perceived from the other side of the veil. By their very nature, true recluses do not communicate their feelings to others, and therefore we have no testimony from those who have withdrawn from society. To quote Peter Anson, “The perfect, and perfectly successful, solitary —like a happy people— has no history, and remains unknown” (Anson 11).

The outer shell of solitude protects access to what is hidden within. If it is hard in general to pierce the secrecy in which solitude is shrouded, and gain access to that which is hidden within, it is an even more complex task to gain any understanding of the experience of female solitude. Given the high levels of illiteracy, by which girls were particularly badly affected, very few women of this period were able to communicate anything about their lives in writing. The vast majority of evidence we do have, therefore, was written by men. The old cliché still held firm —for a man, being alone was perfectly normal, and might indeed be beneficial to him. For a woman, being alone equalled failure, and was generally associated with unhappiness, in the cases of unmarried women and widows. It might even be seen as a

⁸ According to Montaigne, “the greatest thing in the world is to know how to belong to oneself” (Michel de Montaigne, *De la solitude*, I: 39), while for Emerson, “your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation” (Emerson 160).

cause for turning to evil—a tendency thought to be more characteristic of women—when it came to those accused of witchcraft.⁹

Without going so far as to accuse single women of being in league with the Devil, even at the height of the Age of Reason Zimmermann wrote:

A woman's imagination is more easily swayed than that of a man; therefore she is inclined to fall into all kinds of excessive behaviour when she leads a very withdrawn life and is constantly in her own company. (Zimmermann, *Solitude* 162-163)

The innate irrationality attributed to women suggested they were a danger not only to themselves but also to men. Taking this argument to its absurd extreme, certain writers held that it was wrong for a woman to be on her own, but also to be in male company. Despite having passed into history as one of the great love poets of the Renaissance, Petrarch wrote of Adam that while he lived in blissful solitude, no man could have been wiser or happier, but once Eve had been created, none could have been more wretched (Petrarch 195-196). Alone he is immortal, but “as soon as he is joined with woman he becomes mortal” (Petrarch 197).

The perception of masculine solitude in relation to the opposite sex gives some initial insight into the mysterious area of female solitude throughout history. Three centuries after Petrarch's assertion that Eve had destroyed Adam's contentment, Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, took the opposite view, presenting a vision of a sensitive Adam, aware that human affection is of prime importance. “In solitude, what happiness, who can enjoy alone...?” (Milton, VIII: 364-365), he asks his creator, pre-echoing Mary Shelley's monster in *Frankenstein*. On hearing God's semi-pantheist response that the earth is full of living creatures who also possess knowledge and reason, Adam asks: “Among unequals what society can sort, what harmony, or true delight?” (Milton, VIII: 383-384). This time, Milton has God give a reply revolutionary for the age in its implications of gender equality:

... I, ere thou spakest,
Knew it not good for Man to be alone;
And no such company as then thou sawest
Intended thee; for trial only brought,
To see how thou couldest judge of fit and meet:
What next I bring shall please thee, be assured,
Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self,
Thy wish exactly to thy heart's desire. (Milton, VIII: 444-451)

⁹ “When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil thoughts”, *Malleus Maleficarum*, part 1, question VI (Kramer, 163).

Milton's Adam picks the forbidden fruit willingly, in full knowledge of the risk it represents. "For with thee/Certain my resolution is to die:/ How can I live without thee!" (Milton, IX: 906-908), he says to Eve, after the event, adding:

... I feel
 The link of Nature draw me: flesh of flesh,
 Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
 Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (Milton, IX: 913-916)

In contrast to Miltonian idealism, traditional patriarchal Christianity tended to hold that women would harm men's aspirations for spiritual peace. Gradually, however, as contempt for women began to give way to an incipient egalitarianism, the eighteenth century looked to Classical Antiquity, and the "troubled solitude"¹⁰ of men began to take the shape of female deities or inspirational spirits. Male characters preyed upon by women and dragged to perdition by their amorous desire – Góngora's lost and ailing wanderer¹¹, Goethe's sinister traveller¹² – were succeeded by others whose creativity is revealed by the female figures who accompany them in their seclusion.

In his treatise, Zimmermann, himself a widower, took up the classic motif of the bereaved man who finds true peace in rural surroundings.¹³ Unlike the hermits of previous centuries, he is neither alone nor tormented by demons, but aided by his muse. The example he gives is the legend of Numa Pompilius, later second king of Rome: widowed, Numa seeks refuge alone in the countryside but meets the nymph Egeria, who not only brings him happiness but inspires him to introduce the religious legislation for which he would be remembered (Zimmermann, *Solitude* 27).

The poet Shelley reflected on the relationship between man and his inner self in similar if more lyrical fashion. In *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*

¹⁰ Góngora headed his poem *Soledades* (1613) with the following dedication: "Pasos de un peregrino son, errante,/Cuanto me dictó verso dulce Musa/En soledad confusa,/Perdidos unos, otros inspirados." (All these lines, dictated by a gentle Muse, are the steps, some lost, others inspired, of a pilgrim wandering in troubled solitude.)

¹¹ Góngora's sonnet that begins "Descaminado, enfermo, peregrino" (A pilgrim, lost and ailing) tells the tale of a lost wanderer who finds love and lodgings, but pays for them with his life (see McGrady).

¹² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Die Braut von Korinth*, 1797 (see Tausiet).

¹³ An early example of this theme can be found in Cristóbal Acosta's *Tratado en contra y pro de la vida solitaria*. Venice: Giacomo Cornetti, 1592.

(1816), a poet becomes obsessed by a visionary maiden who sparks his imagination, leading him to explore his own character and the natural and supernatural worlds (see Macpherson). Male solitude, understood as a manifestation of possession by a female spirit, or nympholepsy (from the Greek *νύμφη* [nymph] and *ληψις* [-lepsy, or possession]), as a feeling of emptiness and, at the same time, of yearning for the unattainable, was a concept invented in the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that at the same time, a minority of women were beginning to claim a new identity, independent from men, through encounters with their own sensibility.

Female Solitude

In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft called attention to women's need for solitude. Referencing Rousseau's attempts "to prove that man was naturally a solitary animal" (81), she realised that this seemed less evident applied to females. Women are "seldom absolutely alone", observed Wollstonecraft, and hence,

they are more under the influence of sentiments than passions. Solitude and reflection are necessary to give to wishes the force of passions, and to enable the imagination to enlarge the object, and make it the most desirable. (133)

The passive state of degradation and infantilisation to which most women were reduced was fundamentally linked to their search for appreciation or love —let's call it submission— rather than respect; with their general inability to claim to be anything other than the object of male desire; and with the lack of any education to develop their own sensibility —let's call it identity— through self-esteem.

A number of other erudite women —Mary Astell, Mary Montagu, Catharine Macaulay, Mary Hays (in Britain) or Olympe de Gouges, Louise d'Épinay, Émilie du Châtelet and Madame de Lambert (in France), to mention just some of the most distinguished female writers of the day — were particularly aware of the obstacles to female autonomy imposed by social convention. It was, however, one thing to experience solitude as inner strength, independence, the power to make one's own decisions or, in Sartrian terms, "être-pour-soi" —as was beginning to be true for some women in the educated classes— but it was quite another to endure the involuntary isolation associated with domestic imprisonment and desertion, the fate suffered by so many lower-class women.

¹⁴ The term "nympholepsy" was first used in 1776 by Richard Chandler in *Travels in Greece Or an Account of a Tour Made at the Expense of the Society of Dilettanti* (see Connor).

Although many eighteenth-century Europeans were hostile towards Spain, considering it to be a backward nation, dominated by religious fanaticism and superstition, its people suspicious of hard work and scientific progress, the truth is that there was little real difference between the lives of Spanish women and those elsewhere on the continent (Medina 31 and Bolufer, "Neither Male"). As the century came to an end, Spain, like other European countries, saw a chasm open up between traditional attitudes towards women and more forward-thinking views (see Fernández Quintanilla). Among those advocating greater freedom for women were such well-known figures as Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos and Leandro Fernández de Moratín, as well as other, lesser-known writers, such as Manuel Antonio Ramírez y Góngora, whose early death prevented his literary genius from reaching its full potential.

Ramírez's original work (see Ramírez y Góngora) on courtship¹⁵ tells us something about the solitude of Spanish women and bears exceptional testimony to the transformation that was taking place at around this time. Like other Enlightenment writers, he uses the theme of nympholepsy, describing an allegorical dream in which he is visited by a young girl who explains to him the difference between the aloofness of Spanish ladies of days gone by and the carefree nature of his contemporaries. According to the girl, Spanish women, like ghosts,¹⁶ had remained invisible for centuries, confined within the four walls of their homes ("back then, when Spain was closed to all foreign trade; in the days when people wore ruffs" (Ramírez y Góngora 4). But that situation had now reached an end:

Before, when they were living in seclusion, women suffered endless deceptions because of their lack of education. But, now that we are showing our faces to the world, we are meeting other people, doing business and ... living according to our own will, and enjoying that freedom ... Now we may truly say that we are living, because a life spent in captivity is no life at all. Now we know that we have natural and legitimate ownership of that freedom of will that was endowed on our first Fathers by the Almighty. (Ramírez y Góngora 4-5)

In a protofeminist tone, she sums up the "sad and lonely life" of her female ancestors, encouraging modern women readers to satisfy their own desires rather than trying to please others:

¹⁵ On the accepted practice of courtship of married women by gallant admirers, see Martín Gaité, 13-32 and Bizzocchi.

¹⁶ In Calderón de la Barca's *La dama duende* (1629), a play inspired by the myth of Cupid and Psyche, the protagonist falls in love with an "invisible" woman—a widow confined to her home through social convention.

Our Spanish Ladies of bygone days ... lived shut away in seclusion; they destroyed the vivacity of their spirits with silence; they restricted themselves to a sad and lonely life in order to avoid falling victim to gossip ... they denied themselves dealings and communication with other people ... and lived without education, without freedom, without enjoyment, but with fear and timidity, purely because men esteemed them for their good sense and venerated them for their prudence. (Ramírez y Góngora 7-8)¹⁷

For her, women's only hope is to look within themselves to discover their own identity: "In striving to help everyone else they themselves end up suffering" (Ramírez y Góngora 8).

The isolation of women through domestic captivity was also denounced by two leading figures of the Spanish Enlightenment. Lawyer and judge Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos believed women had become weak and dependent precisely because men had subjected them to lives of seclusion:

It is we who ... in our wisdom have kept them from active professions, have imprisoned them, made them idle and, in sum, have associated with their very existence an idea of weakness. (Jovellanos 66)

Another central figure of the Spanish Enlightenment, playwright Leandro Fernández de Moratín, gives us a slightly different take on the results of isolating women in the home. In his comedy *La mojigata* (*The Pious Deceiver*) he shows how familial oppression could lead girls from childhood onwards to practise hypocrisy and deception in order to fool their parents. One of the characters, Clara, is a young woman who feigns religious devotion, convincing her father that she wants to become a nun while secretly planning to run away and get married. She depicts a cloistered life as comic as it is pitiful:

She is always at home ...
 She performs her novenas
 and says her chaplet, prays
 inwardly, shuts herself in
 her room, then in the dark,
 when her father cannot
 see her, opens up her balcony
 and spends the cool nights
 of summer chatting with
 the young soldier

¹⁷ Although most European women led fairly secluded lives in this period, the idea that Spanish women were particularly reclusive, solitary and unhappy, was a cliché of the age, associated with the obscurantist vision of the country.

across the street. (Moratín II: 487)

Like Jovellanos, Moratín blames youthful duplicity on adult authoritarianism. As the tolerant Don Luis reproaches Don Martín, father of the unhappy Clara:

As a child she was innocent
and well behaved;
but you, harsh and obdurate,
desirous to see her achieve
even greater perfection,
undertook to correct the tiniest
faults; you shouted that she
could do nothing right ...
Your severity led to nothing but
dishonesty and caution;
your oppression to a greater
desire for freedom, your frequent
punishments to fearfulness;
and, lacking those virtues which
you failed to instil in her,
she has feigned them instead. (Moratín II: 488)

One of the most revealing aspects of female solitude was the harsh reality of spinsterhood. Unmarried women were subject to an alarming if unsurprising double standard. While for men being single was seen as perfectly acceptable and even desirable, for women it was shameful. Statesman José García de León y Pizarro wrote in his memoirs, "‘Anything but marriage’, that was my motto" (García de León 49). By contrast, Josefa Amar y Borbón wrote in 1792 that a single woman was worthless not only to her household but to herself:

Women have but two states from which to choose – they can become nuns or they can marry, and although, strictly speaking, men have no additional choices, there is a notable difference in that a single man can exercise his freedom without consequence, but a single woman is nothing, often a burden even in her own home, and has to endure a wretched situation; for, though she finds herself at an age when she may prudently make the most of her freedom, within the bounds of morality, public opinion, which is more powerful than all reason, sees her always as worthy of less respect than a married woman or a widow. (Amar y Borbón, 226)

What is particularly sad about this is not so much the external social condemnation, but the way in which women internalised their humiliation. The deep sense of failure experienced by many unmarried women was widespread and increased as women grew older. Once they were into their

twenties, their chances of marrying drastically diminished, and once they had passed the age of twenty-five, they were seen as “old”.¹⁸ In this fictional letter, in which a father offers his son various pieces of advice, he warns him of the threat posed by such women:

Be on your guard against old maids for, if they reach the age of thirty without receiving any bids for their goods, they will throw themselves at even a tonsured monk in a skull-cap. (Afan de Ribera, III: 16, 66)

Meanwhile as can be seen in this non-fictional letter, published in a Madrid newspaper in 1787, spinsterhood was for many a desperate reality:

Dear Sir, I am unmarried, and am twenty-eight years of age into the bargain ... I have been tempted a thousand times to post notices, offering my hand in marriage to any man. But as long as such a practice does not exist in France, it is madness to think it might be adopted here.¹⁹

It is ironic that the young correspondent should have come up with an easy cure for her sadness, but is too afraid of public opinion to pursue it. And that her liberal attitude is doomed in a Spain which, in fact, was apparently not much more repressive towards women than its northern neighbour on the eve of the Revolution.

The prevailing opinion at this time was still that female education was something to be discouraged, given that between the ages of eighteen and forty women ought to be devoting themselves to producing and caring for children —a view summed up in this extract from a 1788 letter of male authorship to the Madrid daily *El Correo*:

We must conclude that during this period it is impossible to expect any effort to be expended on contemplation. Can such a thing be demanded of a mother while she is nursing a child? No, her attention at this time cannot and must not be distracted by anything except the precious burden in her arms. (*Correo de Madrid* 1788, II: 727; see García-Martínez 119-121)²⁰

¹⁸ Remaining single was not an option for most eighteenth-century Spanish women. There were hardly any women of “doncella” status older than 23 since the vast majority felt obliged to either marry or enter a convent before that age. See Donoso García.

¹⁹ “El Corresponsal del Censor”: letters written to *El Censor*; Madrid, 1787, letter VI. In Rubín de Celis.

²⁰ *Correo de Madrid*, Saturday 2 February 1788, in *Correo De Madrid (o De Los Ciegos): Obra Periódica En Que Se Publican Rasgos De Varia Literatura, Noticias Y Los Escritos De Toda Especie Que Se Dirigen Al Editor*, II. Madrid: José Herrera, 1788, 727.

Despite opinions of this type, as in other European countries, there were some women in Spain by this time (Bolufer "Mujeres") whose education enabled them to enjoy not only the pastimes of reading and writing but also the pleasure of physical solitude which, as Mary Wollstonecraft had recognised at the end of the eighteenth century (and Virginia Woolf would restate in the early twentieth), was an essential first step on the path to true emancipation.²¹

Writer and translator Inés Joyes y Blake (Bolufer, *La vida y la escritura*), for example, not only denounced male attitudes towards spinsterhood, but went as far as to advocate it in certain cases as a genuine safeguard of independence: "It will always be better to remain unmarried than to hand over one's freedom to a man one hates or does not love", she wrote in 1798 ("Apología" 151-152). Another female Spanish writer, Rita Caveda y Solares, in a letter headed "On the qualities women should possess" (1800), recommended solitary reading to her niece as the best means for adding to her knowledge.²² And, going one step further, María Gertrudis de Hore, in her poem "Advice for a young woman about to go out into the world", suggested that women would find true happiness in solitary detachment rather than in worldly concerns and family life:

This, dear Filena,
is the destiny that awaits
the ignorant ambition of our sex,
the imprudent young woman rushes
towards unholy ruin
when she goes out too much into the world;
flee its charms,
which debase the soul,
and if you must live in the world,
avoid its pleasures,
keep close guard upon yourself,
for if you remain strong,
it will lose hope of conquering you. (125-127; see Morand)

The eighteenth century witnessed the opening of a divide between the solitude freely chosen by a minority of erudite women and the isolation imposed on those with no access to education (Bolufer, *Mujeres*). Hidden in

²¹ In the late eighteenth century, "the pleasure of solitude, of intimate moments, popularised a new attitude towards reading and writing. Times of collective reading gave way to ... solitary reading and individual reflection, an activity that in earlier days would have been unthinkable outside convent walls". See Martínez Medina.

²² See Caveda. Caveda was influenced by English writer Hester Chapone, much admired by Mary Wollstonecraft (see Jaffe and Bolufer, *Arte y artificio*).

the shadows of the Century of Light were a wide range of experiences of female solitude, many of them tragic—from the domestic captivity of most married women, the cloistering of nuns without vocation, and the restrictions imposed on widows and elderly women to the imprisonment of female “criminals”, the shunning of the allegedly possessed, and the marginalisation of those labelled as madwomen or accused of witchcraft. Spanish historiography has made considerable progress in this area in recent decades, but there is still much to investigate and much to learn about the lives of our female ancestors.

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