ENLIGHTENMENT UTILITY AND FEMININE COMMUNITY: THE JUNTA DE DAMAS DE HONOR Y MÉRITO OF THE REAL SOCIEDAD ECONÓMICA MATRITENSE

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From Caritas to Public Utility

In the late eighteenth century, Enlightenment ideals of advancing knowledge, studying technological innovations, and implementing industrial reforms to contribute to the public welfare led to the widespread founding of economic societies in Europe and North and South America (Stapelbroek and Marjanen). In Spain, the Real Sociedad Bascongada de los Amigos del País was founded in 1764-65 and the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense, promoted by Count Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, fiscal of the Council of Castile, was established in 1775. Economic societies were manifestations of overlapping and complex social, economic, and political processes occurring throughout the century, such as the emergence of a public sphere of free debate and public opinion separate from the state and the growth of the science of political economy (Astigarraga, “Economic Societies” 63-78). Economic societies in Spain promoted reforms “based on the guiding principle of individual and social ‘happiness’ in a transforming and reforming sense, and a clear economic sense based on material well-being” (Usoz 106).

Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes stated in his widely read Discurso sobre el fomento de la industria popular (1774) that King Carlos III’s wish to “desterrar la ociosidad y promover la industria popular y común de las gentes” could be accomplished if all orders of society were to contribute to the common good, including the nobility:

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La nobleza, reducida a Sociedades Patrióticas, cuales se proponen, consumirá en ellas útilesmente el tiempo que le sobre de sus cuidados domésticos, alistándose los caballeros, eclesiásticos y gentes ricas en estas Academias Económicas de los Amigos del País, para dedicarse a hacer las observaciones y cálculos necesarios, o experimentos, y a adquirir los demás conocimientos instructivos que se indican con individualidad en el mismo discurso. (Rodríguez de Campomanes, “Advertencia,” n. p.)

The notion of the common good is a new conception of the traditional idea of Christian caridad. According to Campomanes, “La caridad con el prójimo, muy recomendada en la moral cristiana, tendrá un seguro método de ayudar al Estado. La verdadera riqueza de este consiste en que a nadie falte dentro del Reino ocupación provechosa y acomodada a sus fuerzas, con que poder mantenerse y criar sus hijos aplicados” (“Advertencia,” n. p.). The Real Sociedad Económica Matritense was keenly interested in this enlightened conception of charity, and even commissioned a translation of the works of Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, an American inventor who experimented with modern programs to employ the poor instead of merely feeding them. As reported in “Noticia de la vida y obras del conde de Rumford,” translated in 1802 by the Marquise of Fuerte-Híjar of the Junta de Damas, Rumford shows in his works that “para ejercitar bien la caridad no basta ser humano, es menester saberlo ser; porque hay para esto un arte que cuando se ignora, de grandísimos sacrificios que se hacen, resultan muy pocos bienes, y muchas más males que bienes” (Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos 355; Jaffe, “‘Noticia de la vida y obras’”). The purpose of the “escuelas patrióticas” established and run by the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense and later by the Junta de Damas was to teach poor women and children useful skills that would allow them to earn a living, thus carrying out the Real Sociedad’s motto, “Socorre enseñando.”

The eighteenth-century “obsesión por la utilidad,” as Pedro Álvarez de Miranda has called it, the “cultura utilitaria,” as Jean Sarrailh described it, provided a rationale for communal efforts to advance general social prosperity (Álvarez de Miranda, Palabras e ideas, chap. 4; Sarrailh, chap. 2). Campomanes even suggests that women would have a role in this work: “El sexo más débil de los dos, en que están divididos los mortales, se halla en lastimosa ociosidad. Toca pues a una policía bien ordenada aprovecharse de estas varias clases. Con este principal objeto se formaron las sociedades; e inutiliza su institución en gran parte cualquier descuido en la reunión de la industria común de hombres y mujeres” (Rodríguez de Campomanes ii). Campomanes discusses in his Discurso sobre el fomento de la industria popular and in the Discurso sobre la educación popular de los artesanos y su fomento (1775) how women and children of the popular classes can contribute to public

2 Spelling has been modernized in all quotations from eighteenth-century texts. Translations from Spanish are the authors’ own.
prosperity and improve their own well-being with their labor. By encouraging popular education for rural women, he would make them a useful instrument for society, doing away with their idleness that impeded economic development (Pedro Robles 200).

Inspired by the same goals of public utility, even though a different role was imagined for them by *ilustrados* such as Campomanes, women across Europe and the Americas during the eighteenth century also began to organize associations to participate in the “industria común,” the enlightened goal of public utility, manifesting what Rosa Capel Martínez calls “un proto-asociacionismo femenino” (20). Among the associations they founded were the Naturkundig Genootschap der Dames (Women’s Society for Natural Knowledge) established in the Netherlands in 1785; the Parisian Société de Charité Maternelle founded in 1788; the Quaker Female Association of Philadelphia for the Relief of Women and Children in Distressed Circumstances, the Newark Female Charitable Society, and the Boston Female Society, founded following the American Revolution; and in France the Société des républicaines révolutionnaires (Jacob and Sturkenboom; Kerber 99-105, 111-13; Levy, Applewhite, and Johnson; Capel Martínez 20-22). These societies had interests ranging from political, to patriotic, to charitable, to scientific, but were similar in that they were formed by women eager to participate in the Enlightenment ideal of public utility by seeking an acceptable feminine role in the public sphere, both in the open debate of ideas and opinions and in pragmatic plans and actions to further social welfare.

The scholar and translator Josefa Amar, herself a member of the Sociedad Económica Aragonesa (Sullivan; López-Cordón, *Condición femenina* 57-68), stoutly asserted women’s right to join the all-male Real Sociedad Económica Matritense in her famous 1786 “Discurso en defensa del talento de las mujeres,” a founding text of eighteenth-century rational feminism. *Ilustrados* like Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, and Ignacio López de Ayala supported women’s admission. But despite their efforts, the Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito was eventually established by royal decree in 1787 as an affiliated but separate society in the face of strong opposition from some of the Matritense’s male members—notably, a financier of French origin, Francisco de Cabarrús— in a polemic that was widely reported in the national and international press.

The landmark dispute crystallized the intellectual debate over gender roles in eighteenth-century Spanish society (Bolufer, “Women in Patriotic Societies”). To “help by teaching,” the Junta de Damas devoted itself primarily to poor women and girls and abandoned children. The women of the Junta de Damas continued to spar with the male Sociedad Económica for the authority to make their own decisions regarding matters under their purview. The members of the Junta de Damas carried out works of public interest such as the administration of popular or “patriotic” schools, the
“Montepio de Hilazas” that lent women small sums to purchase raw materials for spinning, and the Inclusa, the Madrid foundling hospital.

An Enlightenment Female Community

Scholarship on the Junta de Damas is rich and varied. Historians have studied the Junta de Damas and its management of charitable and educational institutions (Negrín Fajardo; Sherwood; Méndez Vázquez, Formación profesional; Vidal Galache and Vidal Galache); the Junta’s early history, members, and significance for the legacy of Enlightenment in modern feminism (Jaffe and Martín-Valdepeñas, eds., Society Women and Enlightened Charity in Spain); and its contributions to science (Serrano, “Chemistry” and Ladies of Honor and Merit; Martín-Valdepeñas, “El eco del saber”; Poska). Mónica Bolufer has analyzed the Junta’s rhetoric and its commitment to Enlightenment principles and shown how its members deliberately assumed the acceptable, public role of “maternidad cívica” (Mujeres e Ilustración, chap. 8), while Theresa Ann Smith discussed the members of the Junta de Damas as “emerging female citizens” who engaged in the public sphere (chap. 5). Members of the Junta have been studied individually (Demerson; Yebes; López-Cordón, Condición; Fernández Quintanilla; Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos), and as corporate authors (Lewis, “A su reina benéfica”; Jaffe and Martín-Valdepeñas, “Un espacio femenino”).

The significance of the Junta de Damas to modern feminism, though, has not been fully considered until relatively recently (Bolufer, “New Inflections”; Jaffe and Martín-Valdepeñas, “Epilogue”). This oversight is perhaps due to the generally elite nature of the association that did not mirror a society in transition in the nineteenth century, as Antonio Calvo Maturana concludes: “… la incorporación de la mujer a la instrucción y a instituciones como la Junta de Damas supuso un avance femenino en lo que acceso al espacio público se refiere, pero tuvo unas claras connotaciones preburguesas y preliberales (en el sentido más patriarcal de ambas palabras) en cuanto al mensaje subyacente” (146). Mónica Burguera shows how the repressive gender discourses of liberalism in the 1830s and 1840s led to the occlusion of the contributions of the Junta de Damas to the debate over women’s rational equality and the importance of their education and role in society (Burguera, “The Junta de Damas in the Nineteenth Century”).

The Junta de Damas, we argue, contributed to the development of modern feminism in Spain because of its place in the history of female communities. In this sense, it is not only a female community comprised of women, but also a feminine community because of its deliberate performance of a role for women in the public sphere. The Enlightenment proposed new models of mixed-gender sociability such as salons and tertulias that drove the cultural revolution of the eighteenth century and undoubtedly motivated women to attempt to join the Real Sociedad
As a formal, secular organization of women dedicated to the public good and unrelated to religiously-affiliated charitable associations, the Junta de Damas can be studied through the lens of the theory of communities elaborated in the social sciences.

In the Catholic world of Spain, female communities traditionally meant cloistered convents of religious orders of professed nuns (López-Cordón, “Situating Women” 31-32). But new models of communities were being imagined in the eighteenth century. Alongside traditional religious associations formed for charitable, devotional, or ceremonial purposes that shared motivations rooted in Christian piety, such as religious orders or confraternities, secular organizations like the economic societies were formed to promote the immediate welfare and prosperity of the nation, allowing different models of association based on common Enlightenment goals of public utility and prosperity (Beer; Calderón España; Callahan; Woolf; Pérez Moreda). It is important to note, however, that the newer types of associations did not displace earlier communities but rather existed alongside them, and women participated in both kinds simultaneously. For example, Josefa Amar worked in reform programs associated with the economic societies of Zaragoza and Madrid and was also a senior sister of the Hermandad de la Sopa, a community of laywomen at the Hospital de Nuestra Señora de Gracia in Zaragoza. Amar labored intensively with the Hermandad to care for refugees and the wounded during the first French siege of Zaragoza in 1808 (López-Cordón, “The Decisive Intervention of Josefa Amar” 45).

Campomanes’s essay and the founding of economic societies that he urged reflect what the philosopher Charles Taylor has identified as a significant shift in social relations, a new “social imaginary” that arose during the late eighteenth century. Taylor explains how human relations began to be reimagined as connections between equal individuals who serve each other in political society for mutual benefit, such as providing security and contributing to prosperity, rather than as subjects fixed within a hierarchical system. Political society began to be understood as an “economy,” in which the “economic” defines how members of a society are linked together in a system of mutual exchanges. In a modern self-understanding, argues Taylor, we imagine ourselves as “collective agencies”: “And it is these new modes of collective agency which are among the most striking feature of Western modernity and beyond; we understand ourselves after all to be living in a democratic age” (171-81). While the members of the Junta de Damas still undoubtedly understood themselves as operating within a hierarchical system, their ability to form horizontal ties with women outside their families in an association with the purpose to promote social welfare and utility, with a secular rather than a religious rationale (national prosperity rather than religious salvation), is a sign of their modernity.
Forming a Community: Membership, Influence, Integration, Connection

In the influential 1986 formulation of psychologists David McMillan and David Chavis, communities are identified by four factors whether they are geographically limited or defined by human relations irrespective of geography: a sense of “membership” or belonging; a sense of “influence,” because members matter and make a difference to each other; a sense of “integration and fulfillment of needs”; and a “shared emotional connection” through commitment, shared history, or activities (9). Historians Rebecca D’Monté and Nicole Pohl posit that a community “suggests the pursuit of an ideal fellowship,” and that official and more limited “intentional communities” are composed as “an aggregate of persons engaging in common activities, sharing common interests, and having a feeling of sociopsychological unity” (4). The Junta de Damas of the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense is an example of an eighteenth-century secular, regulated, female society whose members comprised a community that shared goals, interests, and activities related to their condition as women that advanced social welfare. The Junta formally constructed its identity and identified its goals and sphere of action with its statutes and strengthened its ties of community by sharing activities and tasks. Through its reports, minutes, and other publications such as the elogios to their patron, the queen, the Junta de Damas also established its community through writing.

Social anthropologist Anthony Cohen claims that community “expresses a relational idea” with a sense of discrimination. Boundaries form the community’s identity by distinguishing its members from others who are not. Cohen emphasizes the symbolic aspect of community boundaries that allows members to foster cohesion by endowing the boundaries with meaning (12-14). The communities formed by eighteenth-century economic societies and the Junta de Damas are thus more limited and discrete than Benedict Anderson’s proposal of nations as “imagined communities.” Like economic societies, the Junta de Damas drew its boundaries through its statutes. Bolufer describes how the male Real Sociedad Económica Matritense did not specify in its own statutes that membership was restricted to men; it was simply accepted implicitly, leaving a gap that the first members of the Junta de Damas were able to exploit. Women’s participation was never considered in other European economic societies, either (“Women in Patriotic Societies” 21). The formal statutes of the Junta de Damas that regulated its membership and activities were finally published in 1794 after a lengthy process of revision in conjunction with the male Sociedad Económica Matritense (Fig. 1). Until their publication, the Junta governed itself according to provisional statutes that were written by male members and amended by the Junta soon after its formation in 1787. The purpose of the Junta de Damas was established in 1794:
“establecer y radicar la buena educación, mejorar las costumbres con su ejemplo y sus luces, introducir el amor al trabajo, y fomentar la industria” (Título I, ii; Martín-Valdepeñas, “Women’s Associationism” 65).³

Fig. 1. Cover page of statutes of the Junta de Socias de Honor y Mérito, 1794. Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid. Biblioteca Regional de la Comunidad de Madrid.

³ The Estatutos of the Junta de Damas will be cited by Título and subsection: I, ii. An English translation of the Estatutos can be found in Jaffe and Martín-Valdepeñas, Society Women and Enlightened Charity in Spain 265-80.
The *socías* of the Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito were drawn primarily from the aristocracy and elite society, reflecting the vertical ties between noble families and the Crown that characterized the hierarchical society of the ancien régime (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Relaciones”). Carlos III approved the “admisión de socías de mérito y honor” in the Sociedad, “escogiendo las que por sus circunstancias sean más acreedoras a esta honrosa distinción.” For unknown reasons, the terms “mérito” and “honor” were eventually inverted. Finally the aristocratic component, “honor,” prevailed over that of “mérito,” which may have reflected the Junta’s composition as a circle of predominantly aristocratic women (Capel 25).

The first *Titulo* of the *Estatutos* stipulates that prospective members must be well-educated. The Junta was formed by elite women, an “indeterminado número de Socías” (I, i), and certainly there were ties of family and rank involved in their selection. But they set boundaries to their membership and established a shared sense of values and ideals by writing the requirement for an education commensurate with their duties into their statutes: “Para ser Socia es necesario una buena educación y conducta, con instrucción notoria en los objetos del Instituto” (I, iii). A woman who desired to join would have to write a “memorial” to the Junta, and once she was admitted she would be given a copy of the Junta’s *Estatutos* and those of the male society (I, iv-v) (Fig. 2). Unlike the male Sociedad Económica Matritense, the Junta de Damas did not limit the number of *socías* or have different categories of membership for local members and those who lived elsewhere. The male society also had difficulty because some men were made members without their knowledge, and others apparently joined in order to have the recognition of having their name on the list, but never paid their dues, attended meetings, or contributed to the society’s work (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Los Estatutos”).

From its founding in 1775 until the first decade of the nineteenth century, the male society attempted various reforms to control the naming and acceptance of new members in an effort to restrict membership to active participants and contributors to the society’s work. As with the Junta de Damas, it is difficult to establish the motivations of the members who joined based solely on the lists and records that remain in the archive of the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense, and it is likely that their motivations changed over time (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Los Estatutos” 223-26). The Junta de Damas may have benefited by studying the problems caused by the Sociedad Económica’s lack of clear guidelines for admission, for establishing categories of membership, and for voting. Two opposing tendencies —latent in Enlightenment thought— informed the disputes about membership in the male society during its first decades of existence. The first was a democratic desire to open membership to all as equals and to restrict voting to those present at meetings. The second, elitist impulse,
would restrict executive positions and voting privileges to a limited minority (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Los Estatutos” 248-50). As an elite female community that established its own boundaries by examining prospective members, demanding their financial contributions, requiring a good education as a qualification, and stipulating that all active members could vote and were eligible to be officers, the Junta de Damas may have avoided the sociological challenges experienced by the male society.

Fig. 2. Certificate of Admission of Francisca de Beaufort, Marquise of Peñafiel, 1804. Ministerio de Cultura y Deporte. Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza.

The statutes of the Junta de Damas established the Junta’s membership, set out orderly procedures for presenting proposals and reports, for discussion, for voting, the assignment of tasks, and described the duties of each officer. Because of their published statutes, the Junta was an avenue for ordered public discourse, both in oral debate and in writing, and any socia could propose an idea: “Asimismo podrá proponer de palabra, o por escrito todo pensamiento útil” (I, vii). The socias were under an obligation, even if not in attendance in the meetings, to perform their assigned tasks and to report on their activities and their “useful ideas”: “Las ausentes ejecutarán los experimentos, y comunicarán las noticias que se las encarguen” (I, viii). Their identity and responsibilities as socias, therefore, had a lasting temporal dimension that paralleled but did not preclude other social roles they may have held, such as wife, mother, or member of a religiously-affiliated group, like Josefa Amar and the Hermandad de la Sopa.
Their identity was manifested through their writings and publications as well as through their activities: “Las memorias que las Socías quieran presentar o dirigir a la Junta, se imprimirán sueltas, o en la colección de la Sociedad a la letra, o en extracto, según se determine” (I, ix).

The required financial contribution of the socías of the Junta de Damas, “ciento y sesenta reales de vellón al año” (I, x), exceeded that of the male socios of the Matritense (120 reales) and represented a concrete economic investment in the shared goals of the Junta de Damas. But the rewards and recognition for a socia’s contribution would be limited altruistically to the regard of the association itself and of the public and they were not allowed to “obtener fuera de [la Junta] el premio” (I, xi). In this they differed from the male society, which in 1787 requested, unsuccessfully, that the king remunerate those socios who actively worked on the society’s undertakings (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Los Estatutos” 227).

The statutes set out regular meeting times (afternoons), days (Fridays), and length (two hours), along with the standard agenda. They stipulated that while the president and other officers would sit at the head of the table, other members would be seated in the order in which they arrived, thereby dispensing to a certain degree with hierarchies of rank, as stated in Título II, De las sesiones: “El orden de los asientos será según vayan llegando las Socías, colocándose la Presidenta a la testera, la Censora y la Secretaria a sus dos lados en mesa traviesa, y la Vice-Presidenta a la cabeza del banco derecho” (II, iii). The meetings would begin with the reading and ratification of the previous meeting’s minutes (II, iv) and then the socías would inform the group of their reports (II, v-vi). The statutes set out very precisely the orderly procedure for stating, reviewing, approving and publishing opinions, findings, and reports by the socías.

To deal with polemical proposals and debates, the statutes stipulated that all members should be allowed to speak in turn and that proper decorum should be observed: “La Junta no violentará la opinión ajena, dejando en las materias opinables a cada una la libertad de discurrir, guardada modestia y orden” (II, vii). Differences of opinion would be settled by voting (II, vii), and the voting procedures were carefully elaborated. They required that propositions be written and read aloud three times (II, ix). At least half of the socías in attendance would have to approve a proposition for it to pass, and the reasons it was approved would be added to the minutes (II, x-xii). If a socia particularly wanted the reasons for her vote to be noted in the minutes, she could submit her reasoning in writing, also taking into account the opposing views (II, xiii). A vote from an earlier session could only be amended or replaced in a later session by presenting new reasoning and winning the vote of two-thirds of the members present (II, xiv). The statutes sought a balance between free but regulated speech and collaborative decision-making. In all cases, the written record ultimately proclaimed communally established policy.
Disorderly speech and interruptions were prohibited by the statutes, as were personal interests that would prejudice a decision (II, xv-xvi). One of the duties of the president was to control unruly speech: “No permitirá que se turbe la buena armonía de la Junta con personalidades en las conferencias, sino que impondrá silencio, el que se observará inviolablemente” (IV, v). In this way the statutes established the ground rules for the free exchange of thoughts and opinions among members of the Junta de Damas, contributing to the shared set of values that governed their interactions as a community.

A Community of Voices

An example of the free exchange of thoughts and opinions among the members of the community is the “Informe sobre el establecimiento de un asilo de criadas” presented to the Junta de Damas in 1789 by Doña María Josefa de Veitia and the Marquise of Fuerte-Híjar. The authors of the “Informe” had analyzed a proposal submitted earlier to the Junta by another member, Doña Rita López de Porras, who advocated the establishment of an asylum/educational facility that would house and instruct poor women who arrived in Madrid in search of domestic employment (Méndez Vázquez, “Escuelas”). López de Porras believed that these women with no other means of support—evidence of the sociological shifts shifts underway in Spain, including rural depopulation due to the agricultural crisis at the end of the century—were often taken advantage of and at times ended up prostituting themselves out of desperation.

This type of “fallen woman” had fascinated the public throughout the century, as William Hogarth had shown in his series of paintings and engravings, “A Harlot’s Progress” (1731-32). While Spanish censorship would have prohibited the type of satirical caricature depicted by Hogarth, and Spain did not have the same market for print series as existed in England or in France, Hogarth’s prints were undoubtedly known to enlightened elites. Several of Goya’s Caprichos (1799) have been associated with Hogarth (Vega 427). Capricho 16, “Dios la perdone. Y era su madre,” that depicts a fashionable young woman looking askance at an old woman, relates to the story of Hogarth’s fallen Moll Hackabout in “A Harlot’s Progress,” who arrives as a naïve young country woman in London looking for work and is corrupted into prostitution. The caption to Capricho 16 explains: “La señorita salió muy niña de su tierra; hizo su aprendizaje en Cádiz, vino a Madrid: le cayó la lotería. Baja al Prado, oye que una vieja mugrienta y decrépita la pide limosna, ella la despide; insta la vieja: vuélvese la petimetra y halla—quién lo diría?—que la pobretona es su madre” (Vega 442). Capricho 17, “Bien tirada está,” shows a young woman smoothing on her stocking as an old crone watches, and its caption slyly observes: “¡Oh! La tía Curra no es tonta. Bien sabe ella lo que conviene que las medias vayan estiraditas” (Vega 442). The image of a woman stretching
on her stocking relates visually to the fourth print of Hogarth’s series, which represents Moll being forced to work in jail as her maid tries on her shoes and stockings. A similar image in Capricho 31, “Ruega por ella,” presents a young woman who pulls on her stocking while an old woman watches and a maid combs the girl’s hair. Its caption recalls Moll’s grooming and seduction in Hogarth’s first print: “Y hace muy bien para que Dios le dé fortuna y la libre del mal y de cirujanos y alguaciles y llegue a ser tan diestra, tan despejada y tan para todos como su madre, que en gloria esté” (Vega 442). While the story of the corruption of a naive, working-class girl is not presented in the Caprichos as a single, narrative series like Hogarth’s, Goya clearly intended to warn of the moral perils that threatened young women in need.

María Josefa de Veitia and María Lorenza de los Ríos, the Marquise of Fuerte-Híjar, state that they examined López de Porras’s proposal very carefully. They tactfully express their reservations, acknowledging their fellow socia’s good intentions:

Nada más común, aun en las gentes de mayor juicio, que forman sus ideas por las relaciones que más frecuentemente llegan a sus oídos; y cuando se conciben hacia el beneficio público, cuanto más nobles sean los sentimientos de quien las produce, tanto mayor es el peligro de seguir con vehemencia las primeras impresiones que recibió su ánimo. (Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos 366)

Veitia and Fuerte-Híjar diplomatically suggest that López de Porras had been swayed more by her compassion when she made her proposal than by any statistics that would point to the abundance of these endangered women.

Alarmada con la imagen del peligro, en que considera la inocencia de aquellas jóvenes, que sin destino a determinada casa en que servir, vienen con este objeto de los lugares comarcanos y de otros de las provincias, así por la seducción de sus conductores, como por los malos consejos … quien viva persuadida a que es frecuente la concurrencia de las jóvenes de los pueblos con este motivo y estos riesgos a Madrid, no podrá emplear mejor su celo, que en descubrir medios para salvar su virtud. (Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos 367).

There were surely many needy women, but as Fuerte-Híjar and Veitia point out, and as the popularity of Hogarth’s print series and Goya’s Caprichos suggests, López de Porras’s desire to preserve the young women’s “virtue” is a reaction to the public’s prurient interest in their “fall.” Besides doubting

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4 We thank Jesusa Vega and Álvaro Molina for their helpful insights on the relation between Hogarth and Goya.
the reality of the pressing need for such an establishment, the authors of the response calculate the expense of running such an educational asylum and conclude that it would be difficult to maintain given the model of financing by subscription presented by López de Porras, under which sponsors would pledge recurring donations. Veitia and Fuerte-Híjar present to Doña Rita “las más expresivas gracias de parte de la Junta” for her proposal, and remit their report to the Junta de Damas, “cuyas superiores luces corregirán los defectos de este informe” (Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos 367). This interchange reveals how the members of the Junta de Damas shared common ideals of helping the poor, but also were governed by a community ethos that demanded pragmatic study and group consensus. Individual voices might be heard, but common actions demanded the community’s approval.

Regulating the Community

In Título III of the statutes, the Junta de Damas regulated the offices and elections of the society. The president, secretary, and censor would be elected by a vote in which all active socías were eligible to be elected for any position without any restrictions. Socías had to attend twelve sessions annually to be eligible to vote (“voto activo”) and to be eligible to be a candidate (“voto pasivo”): “No tendrá voto activo ni pasivo en las elecciones de la Junta ni de la Sociedad, la que no haya asistido en todo el año a doce sesiones” (III, iii). This condition, fruit of the experience of the running of the male Sociedad Económica, was intended to resolve certain problems that had arisen in the annual elections and at the same time to encourage attendance at the meetings, participation in the activities, and the election of the most active members to administrative positions. The voters would place their ballots in an urn and they would then be read aloud. They would continue to vote for the two candidates who had the most votes until a plurality (half of the votes plus one) was achieved, and in case of a tie, they would decide by drawing lots (III, iv).

The censor’s role was to ensure that the Estatutos were followed correctly: “A la Censora pertenece cuidar de la observancia de los Estatutos y de los acuerdos de la Junta, y de que cada Socia cumpla con sus oficios y comisiones” (V, i). She was prohibited from voting in a matter in which she had previously issued a judgement, and she was responsible for maintaining a list of eligible voters (those who had attended enough meeting) before the sessions at which a vote would be taken (V, ii). The secretary would take attendance at all meetings and provide the list to the censor of eligible voters (VI, vii).

As explained in Título VI, the secretary’s job was perhaps the most crucial because she was responsible for keeping a record of activities and reports and informing the membership. She would keep the minutes and present them for ratification. She was a crucial voice for the Junta outside the society: “Será la persona por donde se explique la voluntad de la Junta;
en cuyo concepto seguirá la correspondencia con el Ministerio y los Tribunales, y con todos los Cuerpos y personas de dentro y fuera de la Sociedad” (VI, iii). She kept the archives of the Junta’s work and writings and served as official liaison with the male Sociedad: “Antes de las sesiones públicas de la Sociedad, presentará a la Junta una puntual relación razonada de los trabajos hechos o acordados por las Socias desde la sesión última, la cual aprobada por la Junta, se remitirá a la Sociedad para que se lea” (VI, viii). In this way, the Junta was able to speak with a collective voice that reflected their communal identity.

The final Título X, “De la Observancia de estos Estatutos,” testifies to the Junta de Damas’s seriousness of purpose and its intent to regulate itself strictly by its statutes: “No se podrá alterar ni derogar ningún estatuto sin preceder acuerdo de la Junta de Señoras convocada formalmente al intento, y observarse además las mismas solemnidades con que haya recibido su sanción” (X, i). All decisions would be made by a formal process and ratified by an official vote of the group. The Estatutos were meant to be a lasting blueprint for regulation of the society: “Será muy circunspecta la Junta en alterar o variar sus leyes; y cada Socia de por sí escrupulosa en ajustarse exactamente a lo que ellas disponen, y en cumplir con sus cargas sin omisión ni tergiversación” (X, ii). All members of the Junta had to agree to follow the established rules governing their interaction, and a change in the rules could only be undertaken by agreement of the group. As a community, the socías had a sense of belonging because of these shared ground rules; they felt that their opinion, voice, and efforts mattered and made a difference to each other (McMillan and Chavis 9).

Working for a Common Purpose

The Junta de Damas’s dedication to administering charitable institutions and studying reforms to help poor women and children through their role as “civic mothers” gave the socías a communal sense of purpose. Emotional connection was also formed through their commitment to various activities. Their shared ideals supported their steadfast commitment to their projects, especially throughout the devastation caused by the Peninsular War. The Marquise of Fuerte-Híjar expresses this shared bond of feeling in the face of desperate circumstances in her urgent letter to the authorities begging for help during the occupation of Madrid in 1813:

En estos días se han marchado todas las amas y solo han quedado 5 para acallar a 52 criaturas que gritan sin cesar, y si tuvieran conocimiento para ver al género de muerte que les aguarda, ellos mismos terminarían su vivir. En este conflicto, ¿qué puede hacer la Junta de Señoras para salvar a estas criaturas? Está desenfrenada de que sus conatos son inútiles, sus deseos impotentes y sus representaciones desatendidas por la falta de fondos, y porque los pocos que pueden hacer los absorben las urgencias de esta
Despite the frustrating sense that their efforts were “inútiles,” the very opposite of their sense of mission, the Junta de Damas held on throughout the war and continued their efforts throughout the nineteenth century and until the present day. These experiences, compounded over the decades of their operations, gave the Junta de Damas an emotional bond and a shared history, which they chronicled in their annual reports, and their Elogios to the queen and to two deceased members, the Infanta María Victoria and the Marquise of Valdeolmos (Jaffe and Martín-Valdepeñas, “Un espacio” 150-59).

The Junta remained limited to women of the elite class with a preponderance of aristocrats, such as its first president, the Duchess of Osuna, and its longtime secretary, the Countess of Montijo. The women’s practical stance, focused on popular education, contrasted with the excessively theoretical, arbitrary nature displayed by the socios of the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense, who became easily entangled in useless theoretical arguments in any given situation. Between 1789 and 1796, the Junta opened new, specialized professional schools such as the Embroidery School, the Artificial Flower School, and the Society Education School or School of Fashion. In 1799, the Junta de Damas took charge of the management of Madrid’s Royal Foundling Hospital, the Inclusa, where they introduced basic reforms to try to reduce the elevated mortality rates and improve the children’s quality of life. In 1807, the Junta de Damas took charge of the management of the School of Our Lady of Peace, where orphaned or abandoned girls received a basic education and learned a trade. A portrait that still hangs today in the Junta’s meeting room shows the Countess of Truillas, a president of the Junta, with one of the school’s students presenting her prize-winning needlework. The portrait features the emblem of the Madrid Economic Society, “Socorre enseñando” (Martín-Valdepeñas, “El retrato”) (Fig. 3).

In 1790, the Junta de Damas undertook the management of the Montepío de Hilazas, an institution for the development of industry for the poor and working classes inspired in the “poor policy” measures of the Council of Castile. Years later, the prestige of the Junta de Damas due to its successes in the field of social welfare had even reached Russia. The Marquise of Villafranca, daughter of the Countess of Montijo, informed the assembly of socias that the mother of the czar of Russia had written to the Junta de Damas to ask about the management, organization, and improvements implemented in the Madrid orphanage (Villafranca 14; Espigado 261).
Fig. 3. Francisca María Dávila Carrillo de Albornoz, Countess of Truillas (Agustín Esteve), 1797. Collection of the Real e Ilustre Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito. Photography by Ana María Fernández Piquer.
Feminine Roles and Modernity

In relation to other Enlightenment women’s associations within and outside Spain, the Junta de Damas is exceptional as a model to study a secular, feminine community during the Enlightenment because of its long trajectory, the breadth of its fields of action (education, charity, literature, science), and its persistence in continuing its work. During the first decades of its existence, the women of the Junta studied the economics of training poor women to spin or to sew; they considered the unintended effects of direct charity, as seen in Fuerte-Híjar’s translation of the article about Count Rumford; they tested new inventions for spinning silk; they considered a proposal to establish a school for maids and adopted educational innovations such as the Lancasterian system; they experimented with new infant feeding methods, the smallpox vaccine (Poska), and the benefits of ventilation in women’s prisons.

The Damas implicitly aligned themselves with acceptable feminine and maternal roles. They provided a model for how educated women could form an association—one that has endured to this day—to contribute to the betterment of society. They participated in the creation of public opinion by openly debating, in an orderly fashion, ideas, rationales, processes, and innovations regarding the welfare and education of poor women and children, and by recording and publishing their debates and reports. Aligned with the monarchy, the promotion of social equality was not among their goals, although they attempted to improve the living conditions and future welfare of poor women. In this sense, while not feminist in the modern understanding of the term, they had a consciousness of problems common to all women that gave them a shared sense of purpose. They defined themselves as a secular, feminine community by setting boundaries to their membership, regulating their interaction, and sharing the ideals and goals of the rational administration of their activities as “civic mothers.”

The Junta de Damas as a feminine community reflected subtle changes in society regarding women’s status and abilities. In addition to generating the heated debate in the press regarding their admission to the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense, the creation of the Junta de Damas also provoked a linguistic polemic in Spain, when the feminine form “presidenta” of the word “presidente” was used to refer to the first president of the Junta de Damas, the Duchess of Osuna (Álvarez de Miranda, “La presidenta” 822). Álvarez de Miranda also points out that the word “sociedad,” little used in Spanish before 1700, developed throughout the eighteenth century. At first it signified both an abstract meaning of “behavior, coexistence, human commerce” and a concrete reality— influenced by the founding in 1662 of the Royal Society in Britain—of “a group or company of individuals for the advancement of the faculties and sciences.” The noun “socio” even gains, by the end of the eighteenth century, a political value like that of “citizen” (Palabras e ideas 351-78). The
socias of the Junta de Damas participated in a feminine community that, for all its rootedness in ancien régime hierarchy and culture, signaled a route for future women’s participation in the public sphere, as many scholars have noted.

The women of the Junta de Damas claimed a secular, corporate identity as agents of public utility, successfully combining this identity with their traditional identities bound by private ties of family and class. As a formal association, they were a community, a fellowship engaged “in common activities, sharing common interests, and having a feeling of sociopsychological unity” (D’Monté and Pohl 4). As Taylor has theorized, the model of sociability that arose during the eighteenth-century, in which mixed groups might follow the rules of civility to interact and exchange views, with a relative distancing from hierarchy, along with the “new centrality of benevolence” and the “inclusion of economic functions in ‘society,’” was crucial to the “development of Western modernity” (217-18).

Spain’s economic societies were comprised of men drawn from different classes: nobility, clergy, magistrates, bureaucrats. Overall more elite than that of the Matri tense, the composition of the Junta de Damas was “limited to women of the elite class with a preponderance of aristocrats […] The majority came from families whose male members held high positions in the court, in the politico-administrative network, and in the army” (Martín-Valdepeñas, “Women’s Associationism” 67). Nevertheless, hierarchical divisions were relativized both symbolically, as according to the Estatutos the ladies would be seated in order of their arrival to the meeting rather than by rank, and practically, as those with the lower rank of “Doña” such as Josefa Amar, Ana Carasa de O’Farrill, Rita López de Porras, and Rosario Cepeda collaborated on projects and authored documents with aristocrats from old noble families like the Countess of Montijo and the Duchess of Osuna, and with ladies with newly-minted titles, like the Marquise of Fuerte-Híjar (Martín-Valdepeñas and Jaffe, María Lorenza de los Ríos 374, 376, 389-91, 399). The Junta de Damas was a product of this new way of imagining social relations that co-existed with more traditional networks and ties of religion, family, and social status. It was a pioneering example of a modern, secular, community of women devoted to civic activism to promote social welfare. It established its communal identity through its written statutes and chronicled its activities through its written reports. In this way, it is a crucial milestone in the continuum of feminine associations and communities from the early modern period to the modern era.


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