“Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.”

Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”

El sí de las niñas by Leandro Fernández de Moratín (1760-1828) debuted in Madrid on January 24, 1806. When it closed after an unprecedented 26 days, running up against the end of the theater season with the start of Lent, an estimated one quarter of the city’s adult population had seen it (Andioc 497). The comedy, treating the topical themes of arranged marriage and abuse of parental authority, was the most successful play of the season and of its literary period. It upholds the neoclassical tradition of a theater cured of what the reformers saw as the excesses of the baroque stage, adhering to the three unities, while maintaining verisimilitude. Most crucially, it promotes the pedagogical mission central to the Enlightenment project: “[E]n todos los tratos o planes de reforma, se afirma que el teatro debe ser una ‘escuela de buenas costumbres’, la ‘escuela más pública’, el ‘Maestro público de las costumbres’, la ‘escuela del pueblo, en donde al divertirse aprendiese sus obligaciones’” (Andioc 545).

The obligations imparted by El sí inhere in its ending: although the secretly enamored Francisca and Carlos are prepared to abandon their relationship to obey their elders, don Diego, the soon-to-be groom, faced with his fiancée’s unhappiness, permits Francisca to break the engagement, one sorely desired by her mother, doña Irene. The happy ending, however, neither disguises the play’s benevolent paternalism nor seems to strike a blow against René Andioc’s view that the Spanish theater reforms of the late eighteenth century, concerted under the aegis of the absolutist monarchy, aimed at “el adoctrinamiento del pueblo” (516). Moratín’s play certainly suggests as much in Francisca’s and Carlos’s submission to the wishes of their parental figures, evincing the obedience owed by subjects to their king. For Andioc, theater represented a cog in a machine designed to keep the masses compliant and productive, qualities in which the Enlightenment elite and the government it served had a vested interest. He concludes, “La ‘instrucción’ del pueblo viene a ser, pues, como una variante de la represión” (545).

Moratín’s letters to Manuel Godoy, minister and favorite of Carlos IV, do not depart from his cohort’s mindset. In 1792 he explained that as “la escuela de las costumbres,” theater’s lessons should stress “la estabilidad del
orden civil, que mantiene los Estados en la dependencia justa de la suprema autoridad” (*Epistolario* 144). He reiterated these objectives in 1797: “instructar al pueblo en lo que necesariamente debe ser, si ha de ser obediente, modesto, humano, y virtuoso”; “preparar y dirigir como conviene la opinión pública para que no se inutilicen o desprecien las más acertadas provisiones del Gobierno” (qtd. in Andioc 517-18). This is theater as soft power, and the pointed title of Julio Prieto Martínez’s analysis says it all: “El sí de los súbditos: Leandro Fernández de Moratín y la escenografía neoclásica del poder.”

A reading of *El sí* as endorsing suppression of the masses makes sense if we accept that in *El sí* the figure representing Enlightenment values — reason and restraint—is don Diego, the 59-year-old who recognizes that at 16, Francisca should have a husband more her age. He regrets the traditional upbringing that teaches girls “que su voluntad ha de torcerse al capricho de quien las gobierna” (III viii, 263) and declares, “[I]os padres que tienen juicio no mandan. Insinúan, proponen, aconsejan” (II v, 212). Andioc, however, points out, “la obediencia incondicional de los hijos no se discute” and “don Diego [...es de los que no aconsejan sino en la medida en que tienen la seguridad de que su consejo se ha de seguir igual que si fuera una orden” (482). Moreover, the gratitude for Diego’s bondad that Francisca and Carlos display as they kneel before him simply ensures further compliance: “No se puede por menos de considerar ese maridaje de la autoridad más rígida y de la bondad más paternal como un reflejo del que caracteriza el poder real tal como lo presentan los propagandistas del absolutismo” (Andioc 487). Hence, if we concur, as most readers do, that Diego stands in for Moratín, and Moratín supports submission to authority as one of theater’s most essential teachings, then yes, Prieto Martínez’s *El sí de los súbditos* is an apt alternate title for the play.

While some details of Diego’s life —his station, friends, even his love of chocolate—reflect Moratín’s, those of other characters do as well. Irene’s complaints about the heat and her health echo her creator’s, as when he laments in one instance of a frequent litany: “Yo soi demasiado sensible para llevar en paciencia muchas cosas que aqui suceden; mi salud está en términos de no poder resistir el calor del verano, por una escesa irritabilidad de nervios e hipocondria” (*E* 131). Francisca’s numerous aunts may reference Moratín’s own relatives. In a missive from abroad to Ana Fernández de Moratín, the author says he’s behaving himself and “mis catorce tíos no hallarán nada que reprender en la conducta de su sobrino

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1 Subsequent references to Moratín’s *Epistolario*, edited by Andioc, will be signaled with the initial “E” and the page number.

2 Act and scene numbers are given, along with the page number of the edition used (cf. “Works Cited”).
predilecto” (E 97). Regarding the upright military officer, Carlos, courting Francisca on the sly, readers have seen him as Moratín’s younger alter ego. An August 1794 letter of recommendation by Moratín to Godoy on behalf of royal guard Francisco Bernabeu enhances our understanding: “Bernabeu no es de aquellos hombres atrevidos, importunos, bulliciosos, que saben abrirse el paso a la fortuna a fuerza de osadías; su modestia y su natural encogimiento le impiden proceder así” (E 176). The portrait highlights modesty and virtue, qualities valued by Enlightenment thinkers and that reappear in Carlos. But the letter writer could also very well be describing himself, or at least a self he was interested in promoting to Godoy, a powerful protector who had facilitated the 1790 staging of Moratín’s El viejo y la niña after production had been stymied. The recommendation ends in an ingenious way: “pero a los ojos de V.E. (que sabe apreciar la virtud por la practica) lejos de serle funestas estas prendas [su modestia y su natural encogimiento], le harán más acreedor a sus favores.” In a single locution Moratín flatters Godoy’s discernment and virtue, while paving the way for future benefits for Bernabeu, the immediate object of the letter, but also, and perhaps most importantly, for Moratín himself.

The relationship between Moratín and patrons such as Godoy brings us to a fifth character, Rita, the maid serving the widow doña Irene and, with greater devotion, her daughter, doña Francisca, known to all as Paquita. Rita represents one category of “súbdito” schooled by neoclassical theater, a young woman of the working classes. While this demographic seems the extreme opposite of Moratín’s condition as a middle-aged bourgeois writer collaborating with the highest government officials, Moratín and Rita share a key characteristic: they are both servants. As a public servant, first as aide to finance minister and reformer Francisco de Cabarrús and then as a functionary, Secretary of the Interpretation of Languages, Moratín knew his place. He used all the customary formulas — “Mi amo,” “mi dueño,” “su seguro servidor” — that positioned him as the servant and supplicant he was in the social structure of his day. He ends a letter to Jovellanos in typical fashion: “V.S. me mande; manténgase bueno, y no se olvide de MORATIN” (E 82).

Moratín sought to remain in the good graces of his superiors through subservience and humility. These traits figured highly in the correct

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3 Bernabeu had introduced Moratín to Luis Godoy, who then presented him to his brother Manuel (E 130n35).

4 Russell P. Sebold believes that Moratín identified with Irene, Francisca, Carlos, and Rita “porque todos estos personajes tienen modelos reales que él ha tratado” and he modeled Diego on himself (“Autobiografía” 321). This is slightly different from what I am offering, which is that the playwright injected parts of his personality or ways of thinking into his characters.
comportment of subordinates — servants and women, among them. But even if Moratín recognized the servant in himself—he called himself an “empleado” (E 291)—could he also have recognized a serving girl? Once again, a telling formulation appears in a letter. Ecclesiastical censors are giving Moratín trouble with El viejo y la niña, a forerunner to El sí. Writing from Paris in July 1787, where he is traveling with Cabarrús, he pleads with Jovellanos, whom he calls “mi padrino” (E 91), to intervene on his behalf. He closes, “Isabel [the “niña” of the title] es su pupila, y recibirá con resignación las órdenes que quiera darla; haga V.S. lo que se le antoje con ella, y mande como pueda a su más seguro servidor, MORATIN” (E 93). Whereas in the Bernabeu letter, Moratín conflates the young man and himself as potential beneficiaries of Godoy’s largesse, here he and “la niña” are united, perhaps inadvertently, in their subaltern status. Antonio Domínguez Ortiz proposes, “Quizás aquel tímido que, a pesar de la simpatía que le inspiraban las mujeres, nunca se casó, reflejaba en ellas sus propios rasgos: inseguridad, encogimiento, opresión del medio social” (633). With these strands of Moratín’s background in mind, an exploration of El sí’s depiction of Rita, a heretofore neglected character in the play, can go far in illuminating how its author saw his society and how he imagined its future. It may also enhance our understanding of what Moratín considered worth learning at theater’s school for the masses.

The figure of the maid in Spanish drama is a type associated with the graciosa, happy-go-lucky agent of comic relief and ironic asides. A descendent of Lucrecia in La Celestina, she serves her mistress as confidant and go-between, facilitating amorous communication and trysts. Among her other functions, she advises her mistress, supplies expository context, and often offers a knowing wink to the audience, revealing a metatheatrical dimension. Finally, convention attributes to the maid and her male counterpart, the criado or gracioso, the propensity to “hablar llano” (Angulo Egea 286), transmitting a kind of common-sense wisdom.

Although Moratín was no fan of seventeenth-century drama and its early eighteenth-century imitators, he did not depart overtly from tradition when he fashioned the character of Rita. Paquita’s girl, alternately plain-speaking and playful, is privy to her mistress’s clandestine relationship with Carlos, sympathizes and schemes with her, reconnoiters and gathers information. Even elements that seem exceptional have like instances in precursors or among Moratín’s contemporaries. For example, Josep Maria Sala Valldaura, the only critic that I know of to examine the figure of Rita in a sustained way, points to “la amistad entre doña Francisca y su criada Rita” (117). But

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5 La criada en el teatro español del Siglo de Oro contains pertinent material; cf. in particular studies by José Luis Canet, María Grazia Profeti, Reina Ruiz, and María Angulo Egea. This last scholar, treating the graciosa’s role in the eighteenth century, discusses Rita briefly towards the end of her article (291-92).
a century and a half earlier, doña Clara of Francisco Rojas Zorrilla’s *Abrir el ojo* (1645) had already dubbed Marichispa, Rita’s counterpart in that play, “amiga mía” (Ruiz 115). In Moratín’s own time, a maid who sides with her mistress against parental authority took a turn on the boards in Gaspar Zavala y Zamora’s *El triunfo de la amistad*, *Jenwal y Faustina* (1804), two years before Rita. There, the outspoken Enriqueta did not limit her dissent to a like-minded few, but chided Faustina’s father directly for supporting a poor match for her mistress (Angulo Egea 285).

Rather than the foregoing, what is most noteworthy about Rita is her likeness to Diego. They share a pedagogical approach, a no-nonsense demeanor, similar protocols for assessing evidence, a habit of measured response, and even an argot. The young maid and older bachelor, for instance, both exhibit an impatience with excessive sentimentality and verbosity. Waiting at the inn for Paquita and her mother, Diego’s servant Simón surmises that the women are probably delayed visiting an aunt in town. His master retorts, “Yo no digo que no la viese; pero con media hora de visita y cuatro lágrimas estaba concluido” (I i, 165). Like Diego and his allusion to a half-hour visit, Rita also frames her irritation at Irene’s “cartas y más cartas” (I viii, 192) in measurements of time: “¡Qué chapucerías! No ha dos horas, como quien dice, que salimos de allá, y ya empiezan a ir y venir correos. ¡Qué poco me gustan a mí las mujeres gazmoñas y zalameras!” (I vi, 189). Diego, too, has his complaints about certain kinds of women, in his case, housekeepers “regalonas, entremetidas, habladoras, llenas de histérico” (I i, 170). They both have little tolerance for over-emoting —Diego tells Irene to calm down and “no me apure usted el sufrimiento” (III xi, 277)— and crying over spilled milk. When Paquita exclaims over a broken St. Gertrudis cookie, Rita merely comments, “No importa; yo me la comeré” (I ii, 177).

Most strikingly, Diego and Rita share a common procedure for collecting and evaluating information, with Rita, the character of inferior rank, showing herself more skilled than Diego, her superior. The latter, who has never had a conversation with Paquita, outlines his method for judging compatibility:

> Yo, la verdad, nunca había visto a tal doña Paquita; pero mediante la amistad con su madre, he tenido frecuentes noticias de ella; he leído

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6 When Enriqueta questions an unsuitable marriage concerted to “mantener el orden de las cosas,” calling rather it “desorden,” she draw attention to “los contrasentidos de algunas de las actitudes y deseos de sus amos” (Angulo Egea 286). In much the same way, Diego’s retainer Simón is the first to articulate doubt regarding his master’s choice of bride (I i, 172). Common folk uttering blunt truths expressive of the *voc populi* constitutes a trope and does not generally convey solidarity with “the people” (Andioc 489, Maravall 26).
mucho de las cartas que escribe; he visto algunas de su tía la monja, con quien ha vivido en Guadalajara; en suma, he tenido cuantos informes pudiera desear acerca de sus inclinaciones y su conducta. Ya he logrado verla; he procurado observarla en estos pocos días, y a decir verdad, cuantos elogios hicieron de ella me parecen escasos. (I i, 167-68)

Ya ves tú la tía religiosa de Guadalajara si es mujer de juicio; esta de Alcalá, aunque no la conozco, sé que es una señora de excelentes prendas; mira tú si Doña Irene querría el bien de su hija; pues todas ellas me han dado cuantas seguridades puedo apetecer... La criada, que la ha servido en Madrid y más de cuatro años en el convento, se hace lenguas de ella (I i, 172-73)

Diego has assembled the testimony of reliable third parties (Irene, Paquita’s aunt, and the criada Rita), written evidence (letters), and his own brief observations to form an assessment of Paquita as a person. Rita, for her part, lays out the facts that prove Carlos’s devotion to her mistress. After hearing a third-party description of Carlos’s distress upon learning that Paquita is about to be married, Rita surmises, “Ahora sí se conoce que la tiene amor” (I viii, 192). She points, as Diego does, to written documentation as a point of reference, but trusts even more what her eyes have seen: “Mire usted que todo cuanto hemos leído a hurtadillas en las novelas no equivale a lo que hemos visto en él” (II ix, 198). And most important, while Diego has only been able to study Paquita “en estos pocos días,” Rita’s evidence has accumulated over the months Paquita and Carlos have known each other. Of the latter, she argues, “ha dado pruebas tan repetidas de perseverancia y amor. Tres meses duró el terrero y la conversación a obscuras, y en todo aquel tiempo, bien sabe usted que no vimos en él una acción descompuesta, ni oímos de su boca una palabra indecente ni atrevida” (II ix, 198, italics added). Rita bases her conclusions on direct experience and repeated trials yielding consistent results. Her methodology, while similar to the older man’s, is more sound, whereas Diego’s procedures have led him to form a mistaken impression of Paquita’s naiveté. He acknowledges that his misjudgment comes to light only by chance when he finds Carlos’s good-bye letter to Paquita: “Por una casualidad he sabido a tiempo el error en que estaba...¡Ay de aquellos que lo saben tarde!” (III xiii, 283).7 Rita’s evidence-based appraisal of Carlos, however, is corroborated by the young man’s continued appropriate behavior.

Now let us compare how Diego and Rita instruct the adolescent Paquita in the proper way to approach a problem. Here is another area where the two coincide. The scenes in which Diego demonstrates

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7 Recently Philip Deacon (213) and Sally-Ann Kitts (206) have shown that Diego’s assumptions and reactions do not comport with the rational mentality he has been supposed to embody.
Enlightenment values to greatest effect are in the play’s final act. In scene four, Diego is alone, faced with his monumental error. Paquita loves someone else, but is afraid to say; he has entertained false hopes based on his own misreading of the situation. An avalanche of emotions —anger, jealousy, embarrassment, desire for retribution— overtakes him, but he pauses:

¿Y a quién debo culpar? ¿Es ella la delincuente, o su madre, o sus tías, o yo?... ¿Sobre quién ha de caer esta cólera, que por más que lo procuro no la sé reprimir? [...] ¡Celos!... ¿Yo?... ¡En qué edad tengo celos!... Vergüenza es... Pero esta inquietud que yo siento, esta indignación, estos deseos de venganza, ¿de qué provienen? ¿Cómo he de llamarlos? (III iv, 253)

Rather than submitting to his feelings, he parses his confusion via Socratic questioning. He applies the method again in his meeting with Paquita as he encourages her to discover, in her own mind, why acceding to a marriage she does not want is the wrong course of action.

The interview proceeds as a series of questions: if you know that I love and care about you, why do you not trust me?; don’t you think I want to see you happy?; if you recognize me as your friend, why not share your troubles? Diego then has Paquita come to see the inconsistency of her answers:

Diego: ¿Pues cómo, sabiendo que tiene usted un amigo, no desahoga con él su corazón?
Francisca: Porque eso mismo me obliga a callar.
Diego: Eso quiere decir que tal vez soy yo la causa de su pesadumbre de usted.
Francisca: No, señor; usted en nada me ha ofendido... No es de usted de quién yo me debo quejar.
Diego: Pues ¿de quién, hija mía? (III viii, 259-60)

The conversation proceeds in this manner until Diego exposes the illogic of what Paquita has told him so that she can consider it for herself:

[T]odo de lo que acabo de oír resulta una gravísima contradicción. Usted no se halla inclinada al estado religioso, según parece. Usted me asegura que no tiene queja ninguna de mí, que está persuadida de lo mucho que la estimo, que no piensa casarse con otro, ni debo recelar que nadie me dispute su mano...Pues ¿qué llanto es ése? ¿De dónde nace esa tristeza profunda [...]? ¿Son éstas las señales de quererme exclusivamente a mí, de casarse gustosa conmigo dentro de pocos días? ¿Se anuncian así la alegría y el amor? (III viii, 261)

Diego next poses simple queries —“Y después, Paquita?,” “¿Por qué?”— to coax his respondent into reflecting upon the consequences of her
decisions. Meanwhile, dawn nears and the scene grows brighter. The illumination furnished by Enlightenment principles begins to take effect.

Confronted with Paquita’s fear that Carlos, “entretenido acaso con otros amores” (II ix, 198), has abandoned her to her fate, Rita proceeds in similar fashion. First, just as Diego asks Irene not to jump to conclusions, the maid tells Irene’s daughter “que no hay motivo todavía para tanta angustia” (II ix, 197). She also supplies questions, in this case to encourage Paquita to examine past precedent and recall examples of Carlos’s honorable behavior. Rather than feed Paquita the information, she provides an exercise to develop her faculty of rational assessment. This involves introducing partial sentences for the other girl to complete with the facts as she has experienced them.

Rita: ¿No se acuerda usted ya de aquel día de asueto que tuvimos el año pasado en la casa de campo del intendente?
Francisca: ¡Ay! ¿Cómo puedo olvidarlo?... Pero ¿qué me vas a contar?
Rita: Quiero decir que aquel caballero que vimos allí con aquella cruz verde, tan galán, tan fino...
Francisca: ¡Qué rodeos!... Don Félix [Carlos’s pseudonym]. ¿Y qué?
Rita: Que nos fue acompañando hasta la ciudad...
Francisca: Y bien...Y luego volvió, y le vi, por mi desgracia, muchas veces... Mal aconsejada de ti.
Rita: ¿Por qué, señora?... ¿A quién dimos escándalo? (I ix, 197)

The methods deployed by Rita and Diego for argumentation and pedagogical ends represented a common strategy of the eighteenth century. As Theresa Ann Smith points out, Feijoo included rhetorical questions in his tracts, not least to signal the inadequacy of claims of women’s inferiority (29). Pertinent as well is the shift in reasoning during this period as inductive patterns of thought, a mainstay of classical philosophers, regained ascendancy over deductive modes. Emphasis on individual discovery and personal observation displaced reliance on top-down theories and would blossom in romanticism’s foregrounding of experience radiating from the self (Sebold, “Enlightenment” 117-18). For our purposes, that Rita cites Paquita’s direct familiarity with Carlos’s behavior, while Diego depends mainly on outside observers, discloses the maid’s more advanced thinking.

Rita’s arsenal includes disentangling what is believable from what is not. When her mistress imagines Carlos’s infidelity, saying all men are alike, Rita responds, “Eso no lo puedo yo creer” (II ix, 198). She adduces a simple, homely comparison:

¡Qué bobería! Desengáñese usted, señorita. Con los hombres y las mujeres sucede lo mismo que con los melones de Añover. Hay de todo; la dificultad está en saber escogerlos. [...] Hay hombres muy embusteros,
muy picarones; pero no es creíble que lo sea el que ha dado pruebas tan repitidas de perseverancia y amor. (II ix, 198-99)

Rita’s rustic saying—men and women are like melons—imparts the Enlightenment lesson of keen judgment (“Desengañese, “no es creíble,” “pruebas”) over lazy thinking. Her folksy adage also appeals to the audience. Aphorisms, proverbs, and sayings summon the recognition of the outside; they move from the personal to the communal (Robbins 75).

Madrid theaters had no shortage of commoners in the standing-area patio (Andioc 13) and in the women-only cazuela (218-22). The urban working class, including servants, attended El sí, with “las mujeres de la clase media o popular” (Andioc 498), especially well represented. Andioc postulates that didactic opportunities occurred more often and had greater chance for success in the neoclassical comedy than in the tragedy, since audience sympathies lay more firmly with the non-aristocratic characters of the former (414). Through the same critic we know that Moratín took note of theatergoers’ reactions to his plays. On one occasion, he remembered some dialogue that he wrote “con particular estudio; pero sólo en la cazuela se percibe todo su mérito; allí produce los efectos que se propuso el autor” (qtd. in Andioc 425). Among other things, Moratín saw that women showed their disapproval of a sexist male character “a quien interrumpen frecuentemente con execraciones y dicterios.” Rita’s melon comparison would likely have brought nods, especially from other maids in the cazuela.

In any case, it is not hard to see that as Rita is educating Paquita in the practice of right-thinking, she is instructing her peers in the audience as well. Her admonitions of “Desengañese” and declaring certain notions, in light of the facts, simply not credible are addressed to her fictional mistress, but also to her real-life counterparts.

In the public school of theater, Rita administers exemplary Enlightenment instruction. Asked, “¿Y qué debo hacer?” she tells Paquita, in words that could easily come from Diego, “lo que importa es no gastar el tiempo en melindres de amor....Al asunto....y juicio...” (II vi, 218). But another element comes into focus as well. In the same way that Diego applies rational processes to himself, Rita models a similar approach when

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8 Ten years after El sí first played in Madrid, Moratín would advise his friend, the real Francisca “Paquita” Muñoz, in an almost identical manner: “no malgaste el tiempo en gemir y llorar y moquear [...]. Pues para reflexionar con juicio y buena razón si a vm. la conviene el tal matrimonio, si le quiere, o no le quiere, ¿se necesita llorar tanto, ni poco, ni nada?” (E 334-35). On at least one other occasion, Moratín gave Rita a line that he used himself; “Sin que usted se lo jure lo creo” (II ix, 201), she says to Paquita. Moratín remarked in a letter, “Pasó por aquí el hijo de D. Dámaso; yo estaba en el campo, y cuando volví, ya se había marchado; dice que se ha divertido mucho en París, y lo creo sin que lo jure” (E 680).
the girls discover that Carlos, who arrived at the inn expressly to support Paquita, has suddenly left. Even though her distraught mistress shares the stage with her, Rita’s dialogue, no longer really addressed to Paquita, might as well be a monologue similar to Diego’s:

Rita: “[N]o creo lo que he visto....Aquí no hay nadie...., ni maletas, ni ropa, ni...Pero ¿cómo podía engañarme?
Francisca: [...]
Rita: Yo estoy temblando toda... Pero... Si es incomprensible... Si no alcanzo a descubrir qué motivos ha podido haber para esta novedad.
Francisca: [...]
Rita: No sé qué decir al considerar una acción tan infame.
Francisca: [...]
Rita: Pensar que su venida fue con otro designio, no me parece natural...
Celos... ?Por qué ha de tener celos?... Y aun eso mismo debiera enamorarle más... Él no es cobarde, y no hay que decir que habrá tenido miedo de su competidor. (II xvi, 242-44)

Like Diego sorting through his confusion, Rita feels upset (“estoy temblando toda”) at having been deceived. Yet she too sets aside her emotion to conduct a reasoned inquiry: the evidence does not fit; Carlos’s present behavior is inconsistent with his tested character; is his abrupt departure wholly irrational or do other factors come to bear? Just as Diego teaches Paquita the tactics of dispassionate analysis and uses them on himself, Rita tutors her mistress in methodical thinking and demonstrates how it is done.

The affinity between Diego and Rita extends to a theater argot that only they employ. Trying to convince Irene that Paquita should be allowed to speak freely, Diego says, “ella debe hablar, y sin apuntador y sin intérprete” (II v, 213). Rita’s instance is even more notable. She plans a way for Paquita and Carlos to talk in person, stressing the need for rehearsal so that things don’t go awry: “si no ensayamos bien esta contradanza, nos hemos de perder en ella” (II ix, 200). According to the arrangement, Rita will remain on alert as she goes about her tasks and, when the time is right, bring Carlos to the parlor while stalling Paquita’s mother with chatter. Once Carlos is in place, she will cue her mistress with a “tosecilla seca” (201). Rita’s uses theater terminology once more in the final act when she explains how she was caught searching for a lost letter in the dark: “el criado sacó una luz, y me hallé de repente, como por máquina, entre él y su amo” (III vi, 256). Diego and Simón, assuming they are alone, suddenly see Rita, lit-up and appearing as if by magic.9

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9 On the instrumental role of servants in the plots of their masters, Bruce Robbins finds, “The common “deus ex machina” ending for comedies usually entails the doings of a servant, so that “one is tempted to redefine the deus ex machina as a servus ex machina” (131). Though Rita’s behind-the-scenes maneuvering does not lead
This element — meta-theatrical references employed exclusively by the maid Rita and by Diego, the character most evocative of Moratín himself — represents one of the most suggestive aspects of the play. Perhaps Moratín meant simply to draw attention to the similarities between Rita’s orchestration of a meeting between Paquita and Carlos — “mire usted que en el paraje en que estamos la conversación no puede ser muy larga” (II vi, 218) — and a dramaturge organizing scenes and dialogue. But there might be something more. Earlier we noted that as a functionary, Moratín was constantly aware of his status. Playwriting, a potential opportunity to take charge, offered no relief, as authors found their works subject to the assessment of censors, critics, audiences, theater companies, and patrons. Working at the pleasure of government ministers during a period of political and social agitation, such as that occurring in France and reflected in Spain, injected additional uncertainty vis-à-vis one’s professional and creative fortunes. Moratín felt the precariousness of his position acutely. He wrote to his friend Juan Antonio Melón in 1797, “¿Crees tú que debo irme o debo quedarme? Parece que estoy en buen concepto todabía; la ocasión es calva, y toda la escena puede mudarse repentinamente, y quedarme a oscuras” (E 177). Moratín has the world-as-a-stage commonplace in mind and, indeed, the concept of performance animates El sí. We can see it in Paquita’s innocent convent-girl act in the presence of her mother and Diego, and in the latter’s denunciation of duplicity as the inevitable outcome of girls’ oppressive upbringing:

Todo se las permite, menos la sinceridad. Con tal que no digan lo que sienten, con tal que finjan aborrecer lo que más desean, con tal que se presten a pronunciar, cuando se lo manden, un sí perjuro, sacrílego, origen de tantos escándalos, ya están bien criadas, y se llama excelente educación la que inspira en ellas el temor, la astucia y el silencio de un esclavo. (III viii, 263)

Diego’s famous lines apply to all inferiors subject to the demands of their masters, employers, and parents. But they apply most prominently to servants, who must double themselves in the interest of keeping their job. The servant is “one who role plays for the other” (Soliday 133). Certainly, in his dealings with the ministers he served, Moratín must have performed well, saying yes when he wanted to say no, as when his boss, the Conde de directly to the play’s dénouement, her appearance “como por máquina,” evokes her string-pulling abilities.

Elizabeth Rivlin reminds us that “playwrights and authors were themselves servants” (11). Apart from patrons and the public, theater writers also had to please the actors, since companies voted for the works they would take on (Andioc 541).
Cabarrús, asked him to write a zarzuela, a form that Moratín despised (E 81, cf. also E 101).  

The most interesting aspect of the performance undertaken by servants, however, is a more subtle one. For this, let us return to Rita. We might first consider whether Diego’s depiction of girls deemed “bien criadas” describes the play’s actual criada. The short answer is no. Rita’s directness belies the “silencio de un esclavo” attributed to underlings. (Her “astucia” is another matter and will be taken up shortly.) Rita’s role-playing, then, does not take place as servile mendacity. Instead, it enacts another representational dimension of serving “in which acting for one’s master shades, often imperceptibly, into acting as one’s master” (Rivlin 3). A process that begins with obedience transforms into loyalty and then identification, a servant with his master or a maid and her mistress (Maza 331-32). Rita’s identification with Paquita emerges in her use of first-person plural verbs. When Paquita first met Carlos at the outing “que tuvimos el año pasado,” he was “aquel caballero que vimos allí” (II ix, 197). Who can object to the lovers’ secret meetings, asks Rita, “¿A quién dimos escándalo?” (197). Carlos’s worth is confirmed as “todo cuanto hemos leído en las novelas no equivale a lo que hemos visto en él” (198). All these months “no vimos en él una acción descompuesta, ni oímos de su boca una palabra indecente” (199). When faced with marriage to Diego, Rita tells Carlos’s mozo, Calamocha, “no hallamos otro [remedio] que avisar a tu amo” (II viii, 193), and she assures Paquita, “hicimos bien en avisarle” (II ix, 200, all italics added). Mary Anne Soliday, studying the figure of the maid in eighteenth-century novels of female education, asserts that the servant’s substitution of her mistress can even extend to replacing her in the master’s bed (25-26). This bald example of role-playing obviously does not occur in El sí. Nevertheless, it bears noting that whereas Paquita and Carlos conversed during their courtship with “una distancia tan grande” between them, Rita does not hesitate to greet Carlos with a hug. “Ahora mismo acaba de llegar,” she informs Paquita, “Le he dado un abrazo con licencia de usted” (II vi, 218). Her mistress’s affair practically becomes her own: “Ya se ve, si con estos amores tengo yo también la cabeza...” (II xiv, 240).  

Rita instructs her mistress in the same neoclassical values held by don Diego. At the same time, together with her novel-reading and involvement in the plot of Paquita’s romance, essentially as an understudy for the ingénue, Rita is rehearsing for other roles. This is what I would like to take

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11 Moratín singled out for disdain “la maldita música” (E 81) of zarzuelas. The success of El sí would lead to a funny turn of events, described to Juan Antonio Melón during the playwright’s exile in Bordeaux: “Figúrate que tres autores han pillado El Si de las niñas, le han convertido en Vaudeville, y han sacado a D. Diego y a Doña Irene al teatro público a cantar coplillas agudas y epigramáticas, llenas de esprit, y con sus estribillos correspondientes” (548).
up now: the play’s challenge to submission and wide-eyed innocence as a societal desiderata. A good place to start is Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation of the relationship between master and servant in European aristocracies: “The servant ultimately detaches his notion of interest from his own person; he deserts himself, as it were, or rather he transports himself into the character of his master and thus assumes an imaginary personality” (qtd. in Maza 331). Assuming an imaginary personality, inventing a fictional alter-ego, playing a role describes, in a broad sense, Rita’s activities in El sí. The artifice implicit in these activities contravenes the values apparently upheld in Diego’s “Yo soy ingenuo; mi corazón y mi lengua no se contradicen jamás” (III v, 213), his characterization of Paquita as “natural” (I iv, 183), and Irene’s proud rejoinder, “Criada sin artificio ni embelescos de mundo.”

12 But artificio —encompassing the DRAE’s definitions as “arte, primor, ingenio o habilidad con que está hecho algo,” “la elaboración artística sobre la naturalidad,” and “doblez”— does form the basis for the creation of a character, as Rita is doing as a maid imagining herself as her mistress and as Moratín was undertaking in his theater. His “Discurso preliminar a sus comedias,” written in the third person (perhaps a further instance of doubling on Moratín’s part?), uses a related word for “artist”—artífice—in setting forth the author’s charge:

> [E]l poeta observador de la naturaleza, escoge en ella lo que únicamente conviene á su propósito, lo distribuye, lo embellece, y de muchas partes verdaderas compone un todo que es mera ficción; verisímil, pero no cierto; semejante al original, pero idéntico nunca. [...] [L]a naturaleza presenta los originales; el artífice los elige, los hermosea y los combina. (Obras 320)

Rather than a blind copying of nature, an innocent imitation, invention necessitates discernment, judgment, selection.

This brings us to Rita’s quasi-dramaturge role as the orchestrator and narrator of action. The second function comes to the fore in scenes eight and nine of the first act in which she informs Calamocha of Paquita’s letter to Carlos and reminds her mistress of her history with Carlos—how they met, his proven devotion, and so forth. Rita tells Paquita’s story as a logical and organized sequence of events, an element crucial, as Moratín explains, to the Aristotelian unity of action: “Sujeta la fábula cómica a los preceptos que van indicados, hallará comprobada el espectador en su origen, progreso y desenlace la verdad moral e intelectual que el poeta ha querido recomendarle” (qtd. in Andioc 519). Rita’s exposition contains “lo que

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12 Both Enlightenment reformers and their detractors used natural and naturaleza as rhetorical tools to further their aesthetic and ideological cause (Andioc 323, Noyes 213).
únicamente conviene á su propósito.” Diego’s research into Paquita’s stay at the convent has yielded, for example, the following: “La criada […] me ha informado de que jamás observó en esta criatura la más remota inclinación a ninguno de los pocos hombres que ha podido ver en aquel encierro” (I i, 173, italics added). As we know, Carlos “no entró jamás por las puertas” (II ix, 198). Rita has cannily cast her report to elide Diego’s main concern.

Rita’s ability to order, assess, cull, and present information towards a specific end—in this case, helping her mistress—comports with Enlightenment ideals and exemplifies a desired outcome, an educated citizenry. The ilustrados and their government allies hoped that a less credulous pueblo would acquire the discrimination necessary to reject the influence of rabble-rousers of all stripes, Jacobin revolutionaries as well as anti-monarchist nobles passing as majos and stirring up the masses against “Frenchified” customs. But eighteenth-century intellectuals did not envision the leveling of their social hierarchy, irrespective of a maid’s approximation of a master’s reasoned thinking. Diego underscores the importance of recognizing one’s place in an unequal order, saying, “Un oficial siempre hace falta a sus soldados. El rey le tiene allí para que los instruya, los proteja y les dé ejemplo de subordinación, de valor, de virtud” (II xi, 233, italics added). Moratín clearly recognized his condition as a subordinate and the way he saw himself suggests something else about Rita.

Moratín worked for the ministers Cabarrús and Godoy. He considered the first a father-figure. Alluding to Cabarrús’s legal difficulties in a 1795 letter, he writes, “yo quiero a ese hombre como si fuera mi padre, y sus desgracias han aumentado mi cariño, lexos de extinguirle” (E 196). Some thirty years later he would describe his relationship to Godoy like this: “Ni fue su amigo Moratin ni su consejero, ni su criado; pero fue su hechura” (Obras 618n3). Together with its definition of hechura as “Una persona respecto de otra a quien debe su empleo, dignidad y fortuna,” the DRAE also specifies, “Cualquier cosa respecto de quien la ha hecho o formado.” The concept of formation and its association with shaping, training, educating, and creating bears on the discussion here. Moratín accepted his standing as an apprentice and beneficiary of a paternalistic system. He saw his country in a similar state of development in need of responsible guidance: “No es ya tiempo de poner en manos de un niño relaciones de acaecimientos imposibles; porque en los primeros años todo se cree, y dura el error lo que dura la vida” (E 47). He described political intrigue, stymied infrastructure, inadequacies in education, and terrible theater and asked Jovellanos, “¿No es esto burlarse de los intereses de una nación y

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13 Cf. Noyes (205, 208-209), Andioc (475-93), and especially Rudat for a discussion of the complex relationship between nationalism, golden-age theater, and aristocratic privilege on the one hand and neoclassical thinkers and drama and the absolutism of Carlos III and IV on the other.
mantenerla siempre en estado de infancia?” (E 100). At some level, Moratín must have felt, like Kant in “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), that emergence from immaturity constituted the movement’s animating principle.

The recognition by Moratín of a lamentably infantilized society seems at odds with his allegiance to obedience within a fixed hierarchy and his goal for a didactic theater as stated to Godoy, one which would maintain “los Estados en la dependencia justa de la suprema autoridad” (E 144). His personal dissatisfaction with a state of eternal, obsequious dependence, though, surfaces in his sense of liberation on leaving Madrid for Valencia with the French occupation in summer 1812. Even amid the uncertainty, he recalled, “Si alguna tranquilidad he tenido en todo este tiempo, fue cuando me vi libre de mi dependencia” (E 291). Based on a feudal paradigm, the aristocratic model that de Tocqueville referenced in his discussion of the master-servant relationship persisted in Spain well into the nineteenth century (Cruz 171-76, 258) and was imitated by the middle-classes (Sarasúa 102-103). This structure makes everyone a servant:

[V]irtually any aspect of life could be, and often was, defined and described as a service relationship. Political life was conceived of as public service; war was military service; lovers served their ladies; domestic life consisted of a master who was owed various kinds of service by his wife, children, and servants. All of these kinds of service are regarded in some degree analogous [...]. (Anderson 19)

Playwrights, too, were servants, as were painters. Moratín’s friend, Goya, depicted a monkey painting a flattering portrait of a posing donkey in his (self-)mocking Capricho 41. What Ronald Paulson ascertains about the artist may well apply to the writer. Goya, Paulson surmises, “felt himself somehow devoured by vacillating patronage and allegiances” (380). In other commentary, Paulson associates Capricho 12, in which a girl extracts the tooth of a hanged man to use as a love charm, with Goya himself. As odd an attribution as that may seem, Paulson adduces that in a milieu where everyone is relegated to the role of child or servant, subalterns need a way to exert some kind of mastery over their surroundings; “all these are children oppressed by parents and seeking a way out” (332). Equally germane, Paulson speculates that Capricho 56, titled “Subir y bajar” and where a figure generally viewed as Godoy is held up while another is cast aside, presents another oblique self-portrait of Goya. Both originally from outside the capital, each rose or fell in royal service through the whims of the powerful. Then Paulson makes a remark about the government minister and court painter that applies as well to the girls, some immigrants to the city, whose fortunes depended on the households they worked for: “In a sense Godoy, the outsider, the male version of the preying and preyed-upon woman, is Goya’s protagonist. From nowhere, having no connections, [...]

[...Numerous examples of such oblique self-portraits by Goya exist, where the artist seeks to project an image of himself amidst the tumult of power and patronage. For example, in Capricho 12, a young girl extracts a tooth from a hanged man to use as a love charm, a ploy that hints at the artist’s own struggles with patronage and allegiances. The artwork seems to suggest that the artist himself is being played upon, just as those in positions of power might manipulate others. Such works serve as a form of self-expression and resistance, allowing Goya to assert his independence amidst the chaotic court life.]
he rises to the very top but can at any moment be cast down again" (320). Goya, like Moratín, may have intuited that a society like his forces all subordinates to play the maid. His playwright friend, however, intimates how these characters might alter their situation, as we shall see now.

Domestic service during the old regime presumed the absorption of servants into the master's family which, in exchange for loyalty, afforded protection, training, and education. If from the provinces, servants became acculturated to urban life; others learned to read in their master's house. Young and female, the family maid and the family daughter occupied similar positions as inferiors involved in a kind of apprenticeship centered on expectations of social integration—primarily, household tasks, caretaking, and religious doctrine. The Enlightenment, too, concerns itself with matters of formation as ideological masters of the nation, macrocosm to the family's microcosm depicted in El sí. But although Diego, one of the author's surrogates, illuminates Paquita on the reasons for speaking up, he remains in the dark figuratively and literally—early in the play he warns, "no quiero que esto se trasluzca" (I i, 175). Meanwhile, Rita, Moratín's other representative, likewise teaches Paquita the methods of rational inquiry, but she also is the character most associated with light: “Voy a traer luces” (I ix, 200), she announces; sitting in the dark with her daughter, Irene complains, “Pero aquella muchacha, ¿qué hace que no trae una luz?” (II i, 203); “Rita sacará una luz y la pone sobre la mesa” (II xiv, 239); Diego asks for light and Rita says, “Ah! Deje usted, encenderemos ésta (Enciende la vela que está sobre la mesa)” (III vi, 255); and so on. Perhaps Rita merely performs a function appropriate for the hours depicted in the play—early evening to early morning the following day. Diego’s criado Simón also brings lamps (230, 253, 256). But the references to luz in connection with Rita double Simón’s. Indeed, no other of Moratín’s plays includes such frequent allusions to light itself (El barón, taking place between 5:00 and 10:00 in the evening, for instance, only presents three references), much less to light linked to a single character.

In El sí Rita also identifies and rejects bad light (“Voy a hacer esotras [camas] antes que anochezca porque si no, como no hay más alumbrado que el del candil [...], me veo perdida” [I vi, 189]); has availed herself of light on previous occasions to negotiate a room in its absence, as when she tells Paquita she doesn’t need a lamp to fetch something in Irene’s room (II xiv, 240); and understands lack of light / sight as a state of confusion when she notes that Paquita “está ciega por él [Carlos]” (I ix, 196). Rita’s repeated association with luces evinces the greater significance of her teaching compared to Diego’s. While both train Paquita in the use of reason, Rita points up the very thing criticized by Diego as an outgrowth of overbearing

14 Cf. Maravall, Maza, and Sarasúa on old regime paternalism. Robbins cites maids and footmen, “who had leisure, light, and books for reading, and by all accounts used them” (104).
parental authority. In an often-quoted scene, Diego denounces “el arte de callar y mentir” and “la astucia”; that is, he condemns the duplicity and doubleness demanded from people who understand “que su voluntad ha de torcerse al capricho de quien las gobierna” (III viii, 263). The “las” in Diego’s statement refers to “las hijas,” but encompasses all female and feminized subjects of a paternalistic administration.

Rita, Paquita’s more reliable mentor, delivers another lesson, one in keeping with Moratín’s own thoughts on artifice and invention. Through her advice and actions, she teaches Paquita how to manage the system, not by promoting magical thinking—no saints’ images or love charms—but through the use of judgment, observation, weighing of data. Rita does not criticize Paquita for reading romantic novels, but she balances those models by dissuading her mistress from emulating weepy heroines. Rather than counseling direct action, Rita offers subterfuge—omission, eavesdropping, behind-the-scenes orchestration, distraction, and performance—as an intelligent and reasonable response to the conditions at hand. Rita trains Paquita in manías, the very canniness, arte, and astucia rejected by Diego who has less need for these tactics than the lowest members of his society, maids and daughters. Whereas the establishment line, voiced by Diego, dismisses performance as dishonest, “unnatural,” or inauthentic, Rita shows that “performative qualities [...] can become translated into facilities—including adaptability, skill in impersonation, and explicitly artistic abilities—[... ] instrumental to succeeding in service” (Rivlin 16). The ability to act—as and act as-if—implies the capacity for mutability. It is the opposite of the ossification inherent in Moratín’s social and professional milieu.

Moratín learned from Cabarrús as from a father and he was an eager student of the dramatic arts, telling Jovellanos, “el teatro Francés era una aula para mí” (E 97). He acknowledged his good fortune with Godoy. Nevertheless, Luis Felipe Vivanco glimpses “el descontento que se apoderaba de él cuando era autor aplaudido y protegido del favorito” (218). In contrast to his relationship with Cabarrús, Moratín kept a certain distance from Godoy (Vivanco 85-86, 134, 147). Vivanco observes,

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15 Spanish reformers generally deplored sentimental novels as poor examples of coherent behavior (cf. Andioc 471-72 and Rueda). However, Ana Fernández de Moratín was a reader and Leandro affectionately tells her, “Tía más romancista que Vmd. ningún sobrino la ha tenido jamás” (E 55).

16 A younger Moratín wrote Cabarrús’s odious zarzuela, as mentioned above, but when Godoy in summer of 1798 asks him for a translation, the writer, having shortly earlier received his post at the Interpretation of Languages, sends a long letter in verse saying he can’t do it. Vivanco postulates that Moratín didn’t want his summer spoiled with this tedium (158-60).
Durante toda su vida va a haber en él esta oposición entre su aparente sumisión externa y su resistencia interior. Así pudo mantenerse independiente como escritor en las circunstancias más adversas que no son, creo yo, los años en que le perseguían por afrancesado, sino aquellos otros en que gozaba de la confianza y la protección del Príncipe de la Paz. (68)

It seems that Moratín did not want to be a child all his life in a society that kept everyone, not only the pueblo, dependent. Moratín was not a radical. He could not support revolution or class upheaval and witnessing disorder in Parisian streets left him cold. Still, Enlightenment principles demanded advancing, increased acumen, and growing up. Perhaps Moratín could not see that progress happening as the current system stood. But room for maneuver yet existed. It was predicated on precisely the activities that struck some as false —invention and performance.

The creation of believable fiction implies rehearsal and Moratín insisted on practicing his actors rigorously. From Paris he extolled French theater:

La Comedia, en particular, se representa con tal verdad, tal expresión, tanta soltura y tan delicado chiste, que me parece que no se puede hacer más: las figuras, la edad, los trages, el gesto, los movimientos, la entonación, la total armonía, los grupos, las distancias, la interrupción del diálogo, los soliloquios, los apartes, todas las menudencias que deben observarse en este arte difícilísimo; todo se estudia, y todo aparece como espontáneo y casual. (E 83, italics added)

Moratín may have discovered a way to tolerate his subservient positions not through sinceridad, such as recommended by Diego (I v, 213; III viii, 263), but through its studied and rehearsed appearance, its simulation.17 Certainly, Rita endorsed this tactic with her advice to Paquita, “ensayamos esta contradanza.” And her mistress’s last words in the play —uttered not to Diego or Carlos or her mother, but to Rita— express gratitude for the maid’s good counsel and unwavering partnership: “Siempre, siempre serás mi amiga” (III xiii, 284).

The author of El sí de las niñas toed the establishment line in his communications with his superiors, most notably Godoy, where his pro-authority rhetoric figures most vehemently. But Moratín’s turn as Rita instantiates a feature noticed by Soliday in other literary works of the period:

17 The trick resides, as Moratín states, in a measured performance. His erstwhile boss, Cabarrús, saw through and disapproved of the pose of excessive obsequiousness: “Es muy humildito el niño, dicen, cuando quieren elogiar a alguno. Esto significa que ya ha contraído el abatimiento, la poquedad, o si se quiere, la tétrica hipocresía monacal” (qtd. in Andioc 469).
When writers impersonate female servants, they adopt a humble position from which to briefly question the paternal ordering of eighteenth-century domestic and social relations. What Defoe, Richardson, or Edgeworth might assert in their non-fiction prose about the sanctity of paternal continuity, they subvert in their novels [...]. (28)

Something like this occurs in El sí in which the lowly maid supports her mistress more effectively than the enlightened patriarch and the two young women form an alliance resembling that of equals.

Did Moratín, who shared the cultural biases of his time, seriously think that representatives of the masses, like Rita, could edify as ably as someone like Diego? The commentary for his Obras, authored when he was in France and independent, at least of his ministerial obligations, reveals that perhaps he did. A high post, he declares, does not guarantee rational behavior: “Un ministro, cuya principal obligación era la de favorecer los buenos estudios, hablaba el lenguaje de los fanáticos más feroces [...]. Tales son los obstáculos que han impedido frecuentemente en España el progreso rápido de las luces” (Obras 418). His thoughts concerning the pueblo, in particular, merit attention because they temper his more irascible statements.18 In his 1792 letter to Godoy even as he alluded to “el vulgo más abatido,” he mentioned the “natural talento” of “el pueblo baxo de Madrid” (E 144). As we have seen, some readers contend that Moratín, like his peers, sought to instruct the masses in the proper behavior of a súbdito. Andioc also speculates that El sí attracted the Inquisition’s scrutiny, while miracle plays and others featuring magic and the supernatural more often escaped its examination, precisely because Moratín’s work “incitaba a su auditorio a valerse de su juicio crítico” (100). His “Discurso preliminar,” praises Feijoo, who “llevó adelante la empresa de ser el desengañador del pueblo, a pesar de los que aseguran su privado interés en hacerlo estúpido” (Obras 309, italics added). He worries that the common playgoer falls victim to partisan hecklers. He targets low-brow taste —gusto— but his rhetoric is plainly political:

El pueblo que tan estragado gusto manifestaba, se hubiera engañado mucho menos en sus juicios, si no se hubiese dejado suponer por la opinión de ciertos candillos que por entonces le dirigían, tiranizando las opiniones y distribuyendo como querían los silbidos, las palmadas y los alborotos. (Obras 314, italics added)

18 For the ilustrado attitude concerning the pueblo, cf. Helman and Rudat. Characteristic of their views is Jovellanos, who once wrote a poem portraying the lower classes as “el más humilde cieno” threatening to overrun “los tronos de Olympos” (qtd. in Andioc 143-44).
He describes the conditions of the Madrid stage as “esta anarquía teatral” and continues, “los censores de la literatura eran intolerantes, y á semejanza de los revolucionarios, para reformar empezaron por destruir” (Obras 318n14, italics added). Moratín’s notions of order and disorder, tyranny and revolution, oppression and anarchy seem impressionistic to us now. But it is clear that he rejects rowdiness and extremism, irrespective of the source—over-eager guardians of public morality, theater-enthusiasts-turned-troublemakers, nobles slumming as chulos, perhaps even the absolutist monarchy that hired him—as distractions to and repressive of the exercise of juicio. Other observations in the same essay address the origins of feeble-minded thought. Some of these have a standard moralistic tinge—laziness, pride, bad habits—but others redound to poor legislation: “la multitud de las leyes contradictorias, feroces, inútiles ó absurdas,” “[el] abuso de la autoridad doméstica y [...] las falsas máximas que la dirigen” (Obras 322).

Together with personal and state failures, Moratín cites the social, specifically the dominance of “interés personal,” which segregates one group from another and foments “[un] espíritu de corporación, de clase ó paisanaje.”

These statements confirm that in addition to abhorring disorder, Moratín looked askance at manipulation and engaño of the masses based on the interest of a few. This last, its own kind of tyranny, determined to infantilize its subjects and keep them dependent. Through his twin alter-egos in El sí de las niñas, Moratín offers two options. As Diego, he advises transparency, absence of guile, and continued reliance on the benevolence of one’s elders. In the person of Rita, however, he counsels something else. Maids and girls and others of like status cannot depend on their superiors to secure their “interés personal.” Rather, they must seize Enlightenment faculties—observation, reason, calculation, and judgment—and use them to emerge from a state of innocence to one of maturity. Transparency is not the answer. The cultivation of artifice and the art of performance represents a rational decision to assert independence and author alternate selves, separate and apart from the “imaginary personality” of the loyal servant. “La vida mejor,” Ortega submits, “es siempre otra que la primaria y dada; [...] la vida debe ser construcción y no dejarse ser” (qtd. in Rudat 97).

In the literary canon Moratín remains the standard-bearer of the Spanish Enlightenment, promoting society’s improvement through reason. Yet within the parameters of his age, he harbored advanced notions: “En realidad, [...] siempre se está asomando, tímidamente, al XIX” (Vivanco 88).19 The ilustrados desired an informed middle class, represented in El sí by

19 Ironically, Carmen Sarasúa’s research on domestic service in Madrid suggests that as a maid with intelligence and spunk, by the second half of the nineteenth century Rita will be replaced in the real world by the more obedient, humble, and deferential serving girls preferred by middle-class families eager to establish distance between themselves and aspiring servants (229). Robbins, among others,
Paquita. They also tried to train the masses. Moratín's play shows Rita, the pueblo's stand-in, more training than trained. When Paquita asks, “¿Qué debo hacer?” (II vi, 218) and follows that with “Guíame” (III ii, 251), Rita shows the way. That the end of the play finds the two young women aligned speaks perhaps to a vision the politically cautious Moratín had for his nation’s future. Bruce Robbins proposes, “it is impossible for the sympathizing servant to put herself in her mistress’ shoes without evoking the eventuality of walking away in them” (68). El sí de las niñas entertains a modified prospect—that of the middle and lower classes growing up and walking away together.

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notes that the eighteenth century represents the apex of master-servant depictions in literature. The mid-nineteenth century saw the bourgeoisie eschewing identification with the serving classes as it gained ascendency and began to distrust the militant masses beneath it (80-81).


___ Obras de don Nicolás y de don Leandro Fernández de Moratín. Madrid: Rivadeneira, 1846.


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