Human rights and the nature and extent of their applicability to women were much debated issues throughout Europe and the Americas in the eighteenth century (Chernock, Clark, Desan, Knott, Pani, Zagarri). In Spain, as elsewhere, both women’s natural rights and their civil rights were the subject of widespread debate as part of a wider enquiry by educated men and women seeking to understand the nature, and to influence the behavior and status, of women in society (Bolufer, Kitts Debate, Smith). Rights labeled as "natural" or "unalienable", such as the three cited in the opening to the U.S. Declaration of Independence (1776) "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness", were most famously defended for women in Spain by Leandro Fernández de Moratín whose plays discussed the most appropriate forms of education for women and explored the question of who decides whether and whom they should marry. Debate on women’s civil rights, that is to say of the rights, duties and obligations consequent on the recognition of women as citizens of the state and members of society, formed a central part of European discussion in periodical and other types of publications that considered women’s role as the educators of future generations and as a key influence in the making of a civilized society (Bolufer Mujeres, Kitts Debate, Mander, Moran, Sebastiani, Smith, Tomaselli).

On the one hand, the fact that such debate took place should be of no surprise to anyone familiar with the century that was to draw to a close with the publication of such fundamental texts as Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man (1791), the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789), Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1791), and in Spain would find the enshrinement of many of its principles at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the liberal Constitution of Cadiz (1812). On the other hand, the facts that Wollstonecraft should have found it necessary to publish a gender-specific justification for the recognition of women’s rights as late as 1791 or that even during the drafting of the so-called liberal Constitution of 1812, women were not permitted to be spectators, let alone receive the rights of citizenship, (Bolufer Mujeres 370), demonstrate the extent to which even the most basic of natural rights or "the rights of humanity" as Wollstonecraft calls them (196), were repeatedly
being denied to women even amongst some of the period’s foremost enlightened thinkers.¹

The exact nature of those rights, how and indeed whether they should be exercised, are multifaceted and contested issues in eighteenth-century Spain. Following a brief exploration of the context of women’s rights debate, this paper will highlight the originality and significance of the ideas of Ignacio López de Ayala, as expressed in his contribution to the debate surrounding the admission of women to the Madrid Economic Society (1786). Somewhat dismissed in recent scholarship on the debate on women in Spain,² López de Ayala’s essay is given a new reading through a comparison with aspects of the "radical feminism" (Ansart 358) of the Marquis de Condorcet, as expressed in his second letter from the Lettres d’un bourgeois de New-Haven à un citoyen de Virginie, sur l’inutilité de partager le pouvoir législatif entre plusieurs corps (1787). The aim is to demonstrate the radical nature of Ayala’s thinking in a country where even the most fêted enlightened defenders of women’s rationality and fundamental rights are unable to overcome the limitations imposed upon their thinking by a dominant narrative of gendered social roles articulated as conformity to nature.

*****

Throughout the eighteenth century in Spain, women were frequently denied the most basic of human rights, both in practice, for their legal situation was one of almost total powerlessness and increased subordination to patriarchal control (Friedman), and in the many misogynist diatribes that continued to be published in books, pamphlets and the periodical press right through the century (Kitts Debate). Women are considered by these authors to be essentially different from and secondary to men, with an inferior intelligence, little or no ability to reason, dangerous passions and at best a limited notion of morality with which to keep them in check. In conceiving of women in this hierarchical way and denying their rationality, these authors are also ruling out any need for them

¹ Wollstonecraft’s text was known in Spain through its French translation. See Kitts ‘Mary’.

² Bolufer Mujeres 77-78 and 361-363 recognises his text as a philosophical dissertation on the natural equality of the sexes similar in its arguments to those of the renowned French feminist Condorcet but fails to appreciate fully the radical nature of these arguments, instead criticising it for a lack of passion, warmth and indignation such as can be found in Amar’s contribution. Smith 88-89, while seeing his speech as ‘part of the larger question of defining the nature of female citizenship’, at the same time accuses him of ‘patriarchal paternalism’.
to be seen as having any form of equality of rights with men, for as Condorcet wrote in 1787, reason and rights go hand in hand:

Nous appelons ces droits _naturels_, parce qu'ils dérivent de la nature de l'homme; c'est à dire parce que du moment qu'il existe un être sensible, capable de raisonner et d'avoir des idées morales, il en résulte, par une conséquence évidente, nécessaire, qu'il doit jouir de ces droits, qu'il ne peut en être privé sans injustice. ("Lettre" 14)

Yet for every misogynist Spanish author in the eighteenth century, research has shown that, as the century wore on, there were growing numbers of enlightened thinkers who were rejecting this hierarchical conception of the sexes, which constituted women as incomplete and imperfect men, for one that was based instead on the idea of a "natural" complementarity (Bolufer _Mujeres_, Kitts _Debate_, Smith). Beginning with Feijoo, enlightened writers argued that both men and women should be recognized as perfect creations in God's image, equal in intelligence, in virtue, in potential, but also suited by nature—a term that was used to refer to biological and social determinism—to fulfill specific roles in society. This enlightenment conception of the nature of women as rational beings brings with it both repeated calls for women to be educated and, following the logic of Condorcet's argument, a recognition that women have certain fundamental human rights.

Feijoo's "Defensa de las mujeres" (1726) was to set the tone for enlightened defenses of women's rights throughout the century. In recognition of the key function of reason as a prerequisite to being accorded natural rights, Feijoo dedicates the majority of his essay to proving "su aptitud para todo género de ciencias y conocimientos útiles" (para. 1), rebutting those arguments that claim women are no more than inferior versions of men, arguing that they should be seen for what they are, rational human beings with consequent rights to be regarded and treated as respected and valued members of society. His central thesis is to demonstrate that women are morally, socially and intellectually disadvantaged as opposed to inherently inferior to men. Nearly 40 years later, contributors to the burgeoning periodical press of the 1760s offer similar views on the rationality of women and encourage both parents and the young women themselves to take their education more seriously. There is also a recognition of women's intelligence and increasing visibility as readers and writers and, given the participatory nature of the periodical medium, encouragement for them to enter into the public sphere through contributing to periodicals such as _El pensador_, _El diuende especulativo_, _El hablador juicioso_ and _La pensadora gaditana_, all of which are overtly aimed at an upper-middle and upper class female readership (Kitts "La prensa").
The following decade sees the setting up of the first Economic Societies. In 1775 the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense de Amigos del País begins a debate on the admission of women that is eventually resolved after a ten-year period of silence in 1786 with the creation of the Junta de Damas (Bolufer *Mujeres* 341-88, Demerson 127-37, Domergue 136-65, Kitts *Debate* 139-172, Negrín 33-38, Smith 74-107). This debate concentrates the minds of some of Spain’s most enlightened and erudite thinkers on the question of the pros and cons of female participation both in the Matritense and on a wider level, in society at large. The newly-formed Economic Societies are a key influence on the tone and nature of discourse on women’s rights in this period through to the end of the century, focusing debate increasingly on women’s duties and obligations as citizens. While the language of earlier enlightened thinkers focused on rationality and education, leaving the notion of rights as an implicit consequence, increasingly from this time authors speak explicitly of "derecho/s". Their declared objective is the regeneration of the economy and culture of the Spanish nation and their aim is the conversion of everyone including "mujeres, niños, mendigos y hasta monjas [...] en ciudadanos aplicados y útiles" (Varela 13, Abellán 485-487). In their contributions to the debate, key enlightenment figures Campomanes, Jovellanos and Floridablanca all speak of women’s rights to participate in the work of the Matritense, recognizing them as equal citizens implicated in the desired social and economic regeneration of Spain. Campomanes writes that "las mujeres [tienen] igual derecho a ser admitidas en la Sociedad. Mi opinión se extiende a que su admisión no sólo es justa, sino conveniente y necesaria" (234). Jovellanos also voiced his support for women being admitted "con las mismas formalidades y derechos que los demás individuos" (487), and the King’s then First Minister, Floridablanca, similarly aligned himself with such opinions when in communicating the monarch’s approval for the admission of women, he noted that it was beyond doubt that women have the same natural abilities as men (204).

A contribution of particular note came from outside the membership of the society. Enlightened Aragonese thinker Josefa Amar y Borbón, already a member of the Aragonese Economic Society (an institution that had not found it necessary to debate the admission of women)\(^3\) was the only Spanish woman to contribute openly to the debate with her "Discurso en defensa del talento de las mujeres, y de su aptitud para el gobierno y otros cargos en que se emplean los hombres" (1786) (Chaves McClendon,

---

\(^3\) In a letter of support to his fellow ‘socia’, renowned botanist and clergyman Juan Antonio Hernández de Larrea, member of the Aragonese Economic Society, congratulates Amar on her paper and also speaks in terms of women’s right to be recognized as citizens.
Franklin Lewis, Lopéz Cordón). Her central theme is the importance and value of education and the essay is reminiscent of Feijoo’s "Defensa" in its focus on the vicious circle that women are caught up in, whereby their lack of stimulus and opportunities for education leads to a false impression that they are inherently incapable of learning from which they are therefore excluded. Like Feijoo before her, she includes accounts of a large number of women who have displayed great intelligence as well as other virtues seen traditionally to be male characteristics, in order to prove that these skills are not gender-specific but rather linked to education and opportunity: "si las mujeres tuvieran la misma educación que los hombres, harían tanto o más que estos" (414). Amar berates the members of the Matritense for even considering it necessary to debate the admission of women and recognizes that the root of their concerns lies in the fact that allowing women to become members involves recognizing them as equals and respecting their opinions and their intelligence.

As this brief review has indicated, a number of eighteenth-century writers implicitly and explicitly recognized women’s rights. Even in the reactionary period following the French Revolution, the normally conservative periodical Miscelánea instructiva y curiosa noted in an essay of 1798 that "la mujer tiene en la sociedad los mismos derechos que el hombre" (206). However this very same article continues with a warning that encapsulates the essence of the discourse of almost all those who wrote on the subject when the author reminds women that "la igualdad de vuestra condición natural" (207). It is this coda emphasizing the limitation imposed by what are seen as "natural" differences between the sexes that lies at the heart of women’s rights discourse in eighteenth-century Spain. For while on numerous occasions Spanish enlightened authors offer arguments for seeing the female sex as intelligent, endowed with reason as a result of which women’s fundamental and often their civil rights should be recognized, yet these same authors also argue that women have a very particular role to fulfill in society, that of wife and mother, and insist time and again that this should be their single sphere of activity.

Although a robust defense of women’s rationality, intelligence and right to an education, Feijoo’s "Defensa" reveals a continued belief in the existence of gender-based virtues and abilities (paras 18-34) and offers a view of men and women as complementary, with each sex making up for deficiencies of temperament and nature in the other. At the end of his essay he accepts the status quo of a wife’s subjection to her husband as set out in Genesis but is unable to provide a clear reason other than the need to avoid marital "confusión y desorden" (para. 151), concluding that "es mejor decir que en las divinas resoluciones ignoramos por la mayor parte los motivos" (para. 151). Periodical essays of the 1760s, many of which are dedicated to the discussion of women’s nature and social role, reflect a similar sense of
both opening up and yet restricting women’s social involvement in both encouraging women’s participation in print culture while at the same time offering, as Kathryn Shevelow puts it in her work on the early English periodical, "an increasingly narrow and restrictive model of femininity" (1).

Campomanes, Jovellanos and Floridablanca all temper their talk of rights and equality by noting that there are certain tasks which are more suited to women, and Jovellanos and Floridablanca both seek to limit women’s rights as members even further by having them concentrate only on those specific tasks and operate through separate women-only meetings. Even the remarkable, educated and intelligent Josefa Amar, defender of women’s rights and abilities in her "Discurso", was to publish only four years later her Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres (1790), a work described as a "manual for feminine happiness [that…] attempted to help women find happiness from within their prescribed domestic roles" (Lewis Women 154-155). While Amar is clear that women can and should receive an intellectual education, according to their individual abilities, she is also firm in her view that it should be subordinate to their primary social and familial obligations:

En [...] familias [...] tienen las mujeres su particular empleo. Éste es la dirección y gobierno de la casa, el cuidado y crianza de los hijos, y sobretodo la íntima y perfecta sociedad con el marido. (xii)

While she considers women to have equal claim to an intellectual education on the grounds of equal ability, Amar also considers that the specific nature of that education should vary according to gendered social roles. She writes explicitly that women have their particular employment at the heart of the family, looking after their children and providing their husbands with intellectual stimulus and companionship after a hard day at work (Amar Discurso xxvi-xxxvii, Kitts Debate 202-205).

What all these authors have in common is that their often heart-felt and eloquent defenses of women’s rationality and rights are always followed by the requirement that the exercise of those rights must be curtailed along gendered lines. Women are thus linked exclusively to a range of activities considered suitable and appropriate for them within either the domestic or associated areas, such as supporting the education of poor children or the work of other lower-class women through the Junta de Damas. Writers such as Feijoo, Campomanes, Jovellanos and Amar are at the forefront of Spanish enlightened thinking on women in offering explicit recognition of women’s rationality and their human and civil rights. Yet they are also reflective of the restraint and moderation that typifies much of the Spanish Enlightenment in linking this vision to a restricted notion of women’s emancipation based on gendered social roles. Women’s rights discourse at this time, therefore, appears to encapsulate something of a paradox, a
simultaneous give and take, both an opening up and a restriction. As these examples make clear, when eighteenth-century Spanish men and women wrote in favor of women’s equality of intellect and rights with men they did so only subsequently to impose limits on the exercise of those rights. As Theresa Ann Smith so aptly writes, Spanish "men and women did not see appeals to universal rights as theoretically incompatible with a gender-specific civil society" (199), and the Spanish were not alone in this with similar attitudes and arguments being found in elsewhere in Europe (Outram 75-92). It appears that with very few exceptions (Chernock), even the most enlightened men and women in the eighteenth century were not able to accept the logical consequences of their declared beliefs in the fundamental rational equality of men and women, namely the creation of a society in which men and women could live as equals with the same rights and opportunities, or as Thomas Laqueur puts it, "that mankind in all its social and cultural relations could be regenerated, that women could achieve not only civil but personal liberties, that family, morality, and personal relations could all be made afresh" (Making 194). On the contrary, these possibilities were viewed negatively and with great fear, as posing a serious threat to established social order. It is a perception which is abundantly apparent in Spain from the numbers of publications right through the century that speak out against women’s increasing presence in society and call for them to be restricted to the home, a position again echoed in other European countries (Outram 86).

Rather than embrace the new possibilities that the recognition of equal rationality opened up, eighteenth-century intellectuals sought out ways to justify the status quo and "to legitimate as ‘natural’ the real world of male dominion" (Laqueur Making 196). It is as if they were searching for a way to deviate from the road on which recognition of equal rationality had placed them.\(^4\) Laqueur has argued cogently that they found it in a conceptualization of gender based on an ideology of equality in difference. Women are conceived of no longer as incomplete males within a metaphysics of hierarchy but instead as essentially different and complementary human beings, with women seen as equal to men in their rationality and their potential but destined by their biology to fulfill a different social role. He succinctly sums up the response taken by the vast majority of enlightened thinkers to the quandary in which they now found themselves:

\[^4\] A good example of this can be found in Feijoo’s last paragraphs when he tries to offer rational arguments for the political subjection of women to men in marriage. In the end he can do no more than offer an evasion along the lines of ‘God not man has all the answers’.
The dilemma, at least for theorists interested in the subordination of women, is resolved by grounding the social and cultural differentiation of the sexes in a biology of incommensurability that liberal theory itself helped bring into being. ("Orgasm" 19)

Laqueur identifies this fundamental change in the conception of the relation between the sexes, with a gradual move from one based on a "one-sex model" that sees women as essentially incomplete males, to a "two-sex model" that sees men and women as fundamentally different beings as a result of their particular biologies and, most significantly, with social roles that are founded on those biologies. This reconception of gender difference is frequently expressed by appeals to a fixed nature and therefore legitimized as preordained and God-given. With gender conceptualised in this way, eighteenth-century authors are able on the one hand to defend women’s fundamental human and civil rights as the logical result of the recognition of their human rationality. Yet on the other, they are also able to argue for the limitation and curtailment of those rights on the basis of their sexed bodies to a sphere of action that remains strictly out of or at no more than the margins of the public domain:

political, economic, and cultural transformations of the eighteenth century created the context in which the articulation of radical differences between the sexes became culturally imperative [... and] a biology of incommensurability became the means by which such differences could be authoritatively represented. (Laqueur "Orgasm" 35)

Women’s reproductive capabilities became their key defining characteristic, marking them out as suited by nature to the private realm of the management of the home and the care and education of children, as Amar makes clear:

Las labores de manos y el gobierno doméstico son como las prendas características de las mujeres; es decir, que aun cuando reúnan otras, que será muy conveniente, aquellas deben ser las primeras y esenciales. (my italics, Discurso 150)

Zagarri (676) notes a similar dilemma faced Americans in the year following the revolution and argues that ‘the reluctance to embrace the cause of women’s rights reflected deep-seated fears about disrupting the gender status quo’, a very similar situation to that which we see played out in the debate on women’s social role and rights in Spain.

Feijoo’s ‘Defensa’ captures this move perfectly, as over his 160 paragraphs he rejects the traditional ‘one-sex’ hierarchical system and firmly establishes in its place the ‘two-sex’ complementary model.
As we survey the various writings on women’s nature and role, it becomes clear that this "biology of incommensurability" is at the centre of women’s rights discourse throughout the eighteenth century in Spain and that "a novel construal of nature comes to serve as the foundation of otherwise indefensible social practices" (Laqueur "Orgasm" 19). There was one contributor to the Economic Society debate, however, who envisaged women playing a full and active role in the Society, unfettered by any limitations supposedly imposed by their sex: the poet, playwright, academic and ilustrado Ignacio López de Ayala. Indeed, as the title his Papel sobre si las señoras deben admitirse como individuos de las sociedades indicates, he writes in favor of women’s involvement in societies and institutions of all types and offers the most powerfully-argued defense of women’s rights and equality with men to be found in eighteenth-century Spain.

Ayala was born in the province of Cadiz probably around 1749 or 1750. Little is known about his life and nothing about his childhood and education, apart from the fact that he studied at some point in a Jesuit institution and went as far as becoming a novice in the Order of Jesus, subsequently to abandon this route following the expulsion of the Jesuits from Spain in 1767. Ayala was a life-long friend of the poet and playwright Nicolás Fernández de Moratín, and with him contertulio of the Fonda de San Sebastián. In 1770 both Moratín and Ayala took part in oposiciones for the chair of poetry at the Reales Estudios de San Isidro. Although it was Ayala who was successful and who held the position officially until his death in 1789, for many years the role was actually fulfilled by his friend Nicolás due to Ignacio’s lengthy and debilitating illness. In spite of his ill-health, Ayala was to publish a number of poems, studies and translations as well as the tragedy Numancia destruída (1775). He also acted as a censor of plays and in 1781 was made a member of the Real Academia de la Historia.

7 The fullest account of Ayala’s life and works is provided by Sebold’s introductory study to his Numancia destruída (11-65), where Sebold offers his reasons for considering Ayala to have been born around 1749-50 (14).

8 Ayala was also the author of another tragedy, entitled Habides, unpublished in his lifetime (Coughlin). In his introductory study Coughlin writes that ‘el tema más intrigante para el lector moderno y uno que aparece frecuentemente es el de los diferentes conceptos del hombre y la sociedad’ (32). He highlights ‘la polémica sobre los derechos naturales del hombre […] en el diálogo entre Gargoris y Habides’, and notes that, while Gargoris argues in favour of absolute monarchy, Habides, who finally accedes peacefully to the throne, ‘simboliza la segunda y más importante escuela, que sostenía que todos los hombres son iguales basándose en el derecho natural del hombre a ser libre’ (34).
Ayala’s membership of the Matritense began four years earlier in 1777. His admission speech, read on 6 September, has been described by Sebold as "una elocuente muestra del humanitarismo ilustrado característico de las esferas intelectuales en ese momento y de su autor" (18-19) and is perhaps an indication of things to come in its expression of a firm belief in universal fraternity. Ayala writes:

Se deja sentir en lo interior de nuestros corazones un dulce movimiento que nos hace mirar a todos los hombres como a hermanos. Nos lastiman las miserias ajenas, y creemos que la sólida gloria consiste en destinar los talentos y el estudio al beneficio de los demás mortales. Triunfa la humanidad [...]. (Qtd. in Sebold 19)

However he was not at this time able to apply his thoughts to the admission of women since debate on this matter had stalled two years earlier in 1775 and was not to be resuscitated for some nine years. While the decision to admit women was taken on 28 August 1786, the precise conditions of their admission were not discussed until 2 September. On this same day, Ayala read a paper that, rather than simply a contribution to the on-going debate, can also be seen as a direct response to the decision taken by the committee six days earlier, which had set limitations and conditions on the women members of the Society. It is an intelligent and persuasive essay that has a number of important similarities to the section of Condorcet’s second "Lettre" of 1787 which advocates the equality of men and women’s rights and roles in a constitutional state (14-20).

Ayala opens his paper with comments that paint such a negative picture of women’s current behavior and apparently negative influence on society as to suggest that he is going to be yet another in a long line of trenchant male critics who blame women for the perceived declining standards of moral and social behavior in eighteenth-century Spain:

Trátese de saber si las mujeres españolas, esto es, si la mitad de España, han de permanecer inútiles como hasta aquí; o si, por el contrario, se les han de suministrar luces y conocimientos para que ayuden a los hombres y gobiernen con inteligencia sus caudales y familias. (176)

9 Bolufer Mujeres (362) also notes the similarity between López de Ayala’s ideas and Condorcet’s arguments in his Esquisse d’un tableau sur les progrès de l’espriè humain (1795) and Sur l’admission des femmes au droit de cité (1790).

10 While Smith (88) sees these words as reflective of a ‘patriarchal paternalism’ in Ayala’s thoughts whereby he is casting men as the real actors in determining women’s future, I believe that they should also be viewed as a realistic assessment of the actual socio-political situation in eighteenth-century Spain. Men did indeed have substantial power over women’s intellectual development in terms of
However, in framing his arguments both initially and on several occasions throughout his paper, on the social and economic benefits to be had from enabling women to play a full and equal part in society, Ayala is ensuring that he has properly contextualized his arguments for his audience, namely the current men who form the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense de Amigos del País (my italics). Addressing an audience of self-declared patriots, he knows that he is more likely to succeed in putting forward his case if he speaks in a language that they understand and appreciate.

Ayala is quick to deal with the most tenacious argument employed against equality of the sexes, that of superior male physical strength from which is argued a natural social hierarchy. While he recognizes that men and women are physically different, in the same way that all species of animals have a male and a female, he emphasizes that this is merely a matter of physical strength and robustness and has no effect on "la parte racional, que es en la que consiste la excelencia de nuestra especie" (177). He rejects any lines of reasoning that would seek to favor men over women on the basis of strength, pointing out that "querer probar nuestras ventajas porque somos más fuertes y robustos es dar argumento a un caballo o a un elefante para que se prefiera al hombre" (177). The central proposition of his argument is that rationality is the key defining characteristic of all human beings and in this area he is clear that men and women are equally endowed. Condorcet similarly highlights the primacy of reason in deciding whether or not a being has rights: "N'est-ce pas en qualité d'êtres sensibles, capables de raison, ayant des idées morales, que les homes ont des droits? Les femmes doivent donc avoir absolument les mêmes […]" ("Lettre" 15). This fundamental and uniquely human characteristic of reason forms the key to what for Ayala is both logical and useful in his discussion of women’s social role, namely the recognition of their rights to receive equal treatment in terms of education, employment, business, and to gain access to forums for debate, decision-making, and even government: "no hay razón fundada para que carezcan [las mujeres] de luces más universales, de luces útiles para el gobierno y conducta de todos los negocios" (177). Condorcet again makes a similar point on the question of women’s eligibility for all manner of public roles and concludes that there is no valid controlling both their access to education and the messages they received about their intellectual abilities and the nature of their education through the burgeoning media. Ayala’s later arguments indicate how important he believes these first steps (enabling women to have access to institutions of debate and intellectual development) are towards loosening that patriarchal control and thereby enabling the development of the sort of equal and fair society he wishes to see created.
reason to legislate against women’s participation: "la loi ne devrait exclure les femmes d’aucune place" ("Lettre" 17)

In pressing forward his point, Ayala will rely on a number of occasions on a fundamental opposition he establishes early on in his paper, between an opinion based on "la práctica" and an opinion founded on "la razón y humanidad", the latter type of which he classes as "más sólido y sensato" (176). He will use this contrast, which is variously expressed in his arguments and examples through a series of dichotomous pairs – unreasonable/reasonable, tradition/modernity, stagnation/progress, superstition/enlightenment— in order to support one of the key strands to his argument, namely that "los hombres son los que han deprivado el otro sexo" (177). Far from being inherently inferior, women are men’s equal in every area (except strength which Ayala has dismissed as irrelevant to reason and intelligence) but have been kept in a position of ignorance and inactivity that reduces them to nullities: "Celosos de una autoridad inhumana, las reducen al ocio, [...] a ser nada." (177) Again we find Condorcet making a very similar point the following year: "Les faits ont prouvés que les hommes avaient ou croyaient avoir des intérêts forts différents de ceux des femmes, puisque partout ils ont fait contre elles des lois oppressives, ou du moins établi entre les deux sexes une grande inégalité" ("Lettre" 15). Ayala sums up forcefully the frustrating and debilitating effects of this treatment a few pages further on when he recognizes that, "Un hombre reducido a vivir como mujer sería tan mujer como cualquiera de ellas, y sólo añadiría a la pequeñez la desesperación" (181).

In answer to his initial question as to why men still seek to exclude women from active involvement in societies such as the Matritense, Ayala sees men’s oppressive behavior as based on superstitious and outdated practices. He argues that it is their inability to rid themselves of the effects of years of custom and ingrained behavior which caused them to keep women uneducated and restricted to the home and that is still causing them to act with "el recelo, la cavilación, la envidia o mahometismo que las excluye de la instrucción y comercio racional con los hombres" (179). Instead men should understand that it is through recognizing women’s rationality and educating them so as to enable them to appreciate and value themselves as men’s equals that the whole of society can and will benefit:

El mundo es nuevo. Han pasado los siglos de barbarie, la ambición romana, la fiera de los septentrionales, el entusiasmo brutal de los mahometanos. A fuerza de lastimosas experiencias conoce ya la Europa que no consiste la felicidad de las naciones ni el esplendor de los imperios en ganar batallas ni en destruir provincias, sino en cultivar sus posesiones y artes haciendo útiles todos los ciudadanos. No miremos, pues, como máquinas o como estatuas a las mujeres, hagámoslas compañeras del
hombre en el trabajo, hagámoslas racionales, y sepan lo que son y lo que pueden. (178-9)

His words embrace the spirit of economic and social regeneration that was at the heart of the Economic Societies, and echo the arguments grounded in a belief in human fraternity from his own admission speech highlighted above.

Throughout his paper, Ayala does not pull his punches when it comes to pointing the finger at who is to blame for current accepted practice with regard to women’s upbringing and education. He places responsibility squarely at the feet of men with forthright statements such as when he compares the practice of past civilizations with the present –"Es verdad que el mundo estaba en la cuna y todavía no habían logrado los grandes talentos de los hombres inutilizar la mitad del género humano" (178)– or when he complains that "se han traído colonias a costa de muchos millones, y se descuida absolutamente de cinco millones de almas. Nos quejamos de la falta de población y, según nuestra conducta, sobra la mitad de la que tenemos" (178). These assertions are supported by arguments that continue to emphasize women’s rationalism and to present as irrational, unreasonable, outmoded and superstitious, any attempts to cling to the past:

Consultemos sólo la razón… […] Estos son progresos de la razón. […] Vuelvo a decir que estos son triunfos de la razón y me parece, en consecuencia, que se oponen a sus progresos los que excluyen las señoras de estas juntas en que tanto se cultiva (178-179).

Ayala uses arguments also later employed by Condorcet ("Lettre" 18) that focus on women as having a civilizing effect on society –"siempre el otro sexo ha dado la ley al nuestro y ha sido el árbitro de las costumbres"12– citing what he sees as their greater humanity and more peaceful natures (181). He appeals to his audience’s sense of patriotism, both in terms of the way they will be perceived by future generations –"Llegará tiempo en que nuestro siglo parezca tan mal a los futuros por excluir las señoras de la instrucción y manejos de que son capaces, como parecen mal los pasados por la superstición con que anhelaban a tenerlas encarceladas" (179)– and

11 It is a phrase echoed by Codorcet: ‘Songez qu’il s’agit des droits de la moitié du genre humain, droits oubliée par tous les législateurs’ (‘Lettre’ 20).

12 Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor note the importance of ideas about ‘women’s influence as a prime factor in the making of a polite, enlightened citizenry’ to such key feminist writers as Wollstonecraft and Condorcet (xviii).
in suggesting that they should set an example to their neighbors in offering
"este ejmeplo de razón a las naciones de Europa" (178).

López de Ayala’s paper stands out in a century of often intense
discussion of women’s nature and rights in Spain as the most complete and
unfettered defense of their fundamental and civil rights to an equal
treatment with men in terms of education and involvement in society and
the world of work. He forcefully rejects the different treatment women
have received in past centuries and still receive in the eighteenth, as
culturally and historically dependant, the result of traditions and beliefs
which the modern era has shown to be either mistaken or inappropriate to
the very different needs and understanding of his time. His view that the
recognition of human rights is the necessary result of the recognition of
human reason is notably similar to the ideas put forward in this area by
Condorcet. His position is all the more remarkable for being made a year
before the publication of the latter’s "Lettre" and four years prior to the
publication of his revolutionary pamphlet calling for the recognition of
women’s civil rights to become members of the National Assembly, Sur
l’admission des femmes au droit de cité (1790). Moreover, unlike the French
radical thinker, who appears to succumb to a biologically-determined view
in the last pages of his 1790 pamphlet,13 when Ayala speaks of women’s
"obligaciones domésticas" (182), there is nothing to indicate that he
considers women suited only to such activities. Far from subscribing to an
ideology of gender difference founded on a conception of nature and
biology that defines and limits women’s role in society, rather he
emphasizes again and again with numerous examples their inherent and
equal rationality and their equal ability with men to demonstrate, with
education and encouragement, "luces más universales, […] luces útiles para
el gobierno y conducta de todos los negocios" (177).14

Seen in the context of writings by Spain’s foremost enlightened
thinkers, Ignacio López de Ayala stands out as a radical thinker on a par
with the likes of Wollstonecraft in England and Condorcet in France. His
Papel goes further than any other Spanish text from the period in offering a
clear perception of the real significance and possibilities of full equality of
the sexes. David Williams has argued that,

13 Condorcet argues from the biological fact of female lactation to a social
determinism that binds women ‘naturally’ to the domestic: ‘Il est naturel que la
femme allaite ses enfants, qu’elle soigné leurs premières années; attachée à sa
maison par ces soins, plus faible que l’homme, il est naturel encore qu’elle mène
une vie plus retirée, plus domestique.’ (128).

14 Douthwaite notes that Condorcet similarly ‘argued that social conditioning
outweighs the impact of physiological determinants’ (90).
For Condorcet female equality implied an entirely new order of things affecting the full range of society’s institutions. It was no longer primarily a moral issue but a wider constitutional problem relating to the sources of legislative and executive power in the state. Justice for women would involve a basic reappraisal of the mechanics of government administration to enable both sexes to play an active part in political life. (348)

Wollstonecraft similarly understands the need for radical social change before true equality of the sexes can come about: "Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in. [...] It may then be fairly inferred, that, till society be differently constituted, much cannot be expected from education." (25) Differing political circumstances meant that explicit statements about radical constitutional change such as Condorcet and Wollstonecraft were able to consider are not to be found anywhere in women’s rights discourse in Spain. Nevertheless, a similar understanding of the significance of these ideas and the radical changes he wants to see brought about are intimated by Ayala who speaks the rhetoric of the Enlightenment when he talks of his time being witness to the triumph of philosophy and reason and emphasizes the need to see the world as new and embrace progress (178-9).

Sebold notes in his introductory study to Ayala’s tragedy Numancia destruida, this was not the first time that the author had revealed radical thinking in his writing, having adopted "un tono casi revolucionario" (27) in his poem Thermae Archenicae, when considering the lack of facilities and access for the poor to the thermal waters at Archena and other sites in Spain. Yet if revolutionary France was unable to accept such radical thoughts about women’s rights (and not only imprisoned Condorcet who raised them, but also executed Olympe de Gouges who tried to claim them) then how much more unacceptable would they be in conservative Bourbon Spain? There are no recorded responses to Ayala’s paper. Its timing was not helpful, coming as it did right at the end of a period of debate when the decision had already been taken to admit women (separately and to work in limited areas). Only two years later, in the momentous year of 1789, Ayala was to succumb to his long-term illnesses and die at the age of no more than 40. Sadly we can only imagine what his involvement might have been in the debates about natural and political rights that took place across Europe during the time following the French Revolution.

Roy Porter wrote that, "in valuing 'reason', yet also helping to launch a cult of idealized “motherhood”, the Enlightenment left an ambiguous

---

15 Javier Herrero, in his review of Sebold’s edition, also considers that ‘la significación de Ayala radica sobre todo en la temprana fecha [...] en que su acerada pluma produce alguna de las obras más radicales del siglo’ (351).
This notion of ambiguity is certainly applicable to women’s rights discourse in Spain. On the one hand, the emphasis placed by enlightened authors on women’s rationality can be seen to echo a growing belief in Spanish intellectual circles in the basic equality of men and women as human beings, and from that of the need to ensure that women’s natural rights be respected and upheld. In addition, the incorporation of women into the regenerationist discourse of the 1770s and 80s and their admission to the Matritense sees them accorded greater civil rights, in this case to be considered as citizens of the state with corresponding rights and duties. Yet in giving primacy to physical difference in defining social roles, at the same time eighteenth-century authors put strict limits on the exercise of those rights and encouraged a narrowing of the focus and sphere of activity of women that led to the nineteenth-century affirmation of female perfection as the "ángel del hogar", strictly within the limits of the domestic (Aldaraca).

The recognition of rationality that was inherent in eighteenth-century discourse on women’s rights can be seen as somewhat of a Pyrrhic victory. On the one hand it raised women’s natural and social status from that of an inferior version of the male to that of an equal but different human being with consequent rights. Yet the ideology of equality in difference that these very debates engendered provided arguments for women’s increasing restriction to the private sphere and kept them paradoxically from the full and free exercise of those rights. Within this context, the writings of the very small minority of eighteenth-century intellectuals able to put aside biology and custom and focus instead on the logical consequences of the recognition of the universality of human reason, such as the unique Spanish voice of Ignacio López de Ayala, should be recognized and valued for the radical and free-thinking texts that they surely are.

---

16 This ambiguity is also reflected in current debates on whether the Enlightenment had a positive or negative effect on women, a subject on which the articles in section 9 ‘Women and Revolutionary Citizenship: Enlightenment Legacies’ of Taylor and Knott, eds., provide a useful review of the most recent thinking.

17 Smith similarly concludes that ‘the angel-of-the-house paradigm that dominated women’s lives in the nineteenth century was rooted in the gendered discourse that came to define women’s public role in Enlightenment Spain’ (197).
WORKS CITED


___. *Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres*. Madrid: Benito Cano, 1790.


378 Kitts, "Ayala and Women’s Rights"


Condorcet, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de. "Lettre deuxième." Lettres d'un bourgeois de New-Haven à un citoyen de Virginie, sur l'inutilité de partager le pouvoir législatif entre plusieurs corps. In Oeuvres. IX. Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag (Günther Holzboog), 1968. 10-56.

__. Sur l'admission des femmes au droit de cité. In Oeuvres. X. 121-30.


"Sobre si las mujeres son más propias que los hombres para cultivar las artes." *Miscelánea instructiva, curiosa y agradable, o anales de literatura, ciencias y artes, sacados de los mejores escritos que se publican en Europa en diversos idiomas*. Madrid: Antonio Cruzado, 1798. Vol. 8. 197-207.


