

SERRANO, Elena (2022). *Ladies of Honor and Merit: Gender, Useful Knowledge, and Politics in Enlightened Spain*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 244 p. ISBN: 9780822947165.

In *Ladies of Honor and Merit: Gender, Useful Knowledge, and Politics in Enlightened Spain*, Elena Serrano delves into the relationships between women and men engaged in knowledge-building and Enlightenment politics within elite Spanish society of the late 18th century. The book's goals are ambitious, with some framed as opening new historiographical avenues for future exploration. Among the multiple brilliantly achieved objectives, one certainly stands out: giving back a voice to a group of upper-class Madrilenian women who appropriated and innovated a body of knowledge reshaping it into “useful” terms. As with so many other women of the time whose activities have increasingly been the focus of research in recent decades, these Spanish gentlewomen sought (and in part found) ways to escape marginalization – or outright exclusion – from the realms of knowledge and power. These women reclaimed their studies, both economic and scientific, from the self-referential scholarly agendas that often dominated male academic endeavors, both religious or secular. It is in this sense, as Elena Serrano demonstrates, that these women made a political contribution in the framework of an Enlightenment that, in Spain as elsewhere in Europe, was fueled by transnational networks of various kinds – including those cultivated by elite women. These are women about whom we have long known very little and who, although possibly representing “exceptions” in many respects, were far from exceptional: just like many men about whom we have always known a great deal. And it is by embracing the perspective of these unexceptional exceptions that research like this once again helps us to shed light on the gray areas of history.

As Elena Serrano reminds us in the first chapter, most readers are at least familiar with the names (if not the lives and works) of Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) and Maria Kirch Winckelmann (1670–1720), Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749), Maria Gaetana Agnesi

(1718-1799), and Anna Morandi Manzolini (1714-1774), Dorothea Erxleben (1715-1762), Caroline Hershel (1750-1848) ... and many other female natural philosophers active in the 18th century. These women are only the tip of an iceberg, however, beneath which lies an extraordinary number of other female thinkers operating in every cultural, institutional, and social context across Europe. This book, like the work of Montserrat Cabré on the medieval period and Mónica Bolufer on the Modern age, provides an important and fresh perspective on the late XVIII century Spanish case.

Elena Serrano's book recounts how, in an era when Rousseauian ideas about women's "natural" domesticity were held up to reassure both conservative nobles and revolutionary bourgeois alike, the topic was debated in Spain by a series of "enlightened" men who managed to move beyond such clichés. These men engaged in discussions with high-ranking women about their right to join one of the country's leading institutions: the Real Sociedad Económica Matritense de Amigos del País (Royal Madrid Economic Society of Friends of the Country). Institutions like these, Elena Serrano explains, were based on the idea that laypeople could contribute to their country's development. After intense debate, on October 5, 1787, the Duchess of Benavente and nine other gentlewomen inaugurated the Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito (Committee of Ladies of Honor and Merit) within this prestigious institution: the only known female branch to be found in any of the roughly five hundred 18th-century patriotic societies. The book reconstructs the scholarly activities – including laboratory practices – and social interventions of these determined Ladies. Ten years later, the Junta had established a network of over sixty correspondents spanning from Tenerife to Asturias and from Austria to Cuba.

The book compellingly tells the story of how the Duchess and her friends, consistently emphasizing the "feminine" value in noblewomen's efforts to reform education and rural economies to benefit the poorest sections of society, helped shape the culture of 18th-century Spain. In so doing, the Junta generated and disseminated knowledge applied to European-inspired social improvement policies which, until then, had been the exclusive domain of men in Spain. Within this broader milieu, Serrano engages with the historiographical category of center-periphery relations, an approach that has been significantly enriched over time by the work of historians of science focused on Spanish context. The networking strategies that have proved so crucial to the self-promotion of every male scientist or merchant, philosopher, economist, or historian evidently applied to women as well. This book contributes to demonstrating the role the Ladies of Honor and Merit played in shaping scientific and political networks in Spain within the Enlightened European context.

To secure acceptance and the freedom to act, these female scholars and social reformers had to make significant compromises, starting with establishing a separate Ladies' Committee within the Real Sociedad. Serrano explains that there are no documents (p. 36) indicating whether these women would have preferred to be members of the "male" Madrid Economic Society. In any case, they never gave up their commitment to holding weekly

meetings at the Madrid City Hall. By mapping their activities and relationships with (some) members of the Real Sociedad who supported them (though – as always – only to a certain extent), Elena Serrano offers glimpses into intriguing stories, places, practices, and circumstances that enrich our understanding of the European Enlightenment. This second important goal achieved by the book, in my opinion, is contributing to dismantling the monolithic image of the Enlightenment – a view that too often persists among students, reinforced by the enduring influence of a stereotypical historiographical literature still found in nearly every language. A reductive image that – as Serrano explains – has portrayed the Spanish-speaking context as devoid of any significant contributions to the debates of the European Enlightenment. Against this background, the book reconstructs the transnational networking Spanish elites contributed to via their various relationships and practices, including translation and the appropriation of popular works – such as the significant case, thoroughly discussed by Serrano, of Antoine N. Pluche’s book (*Le spectacle de la nature*, 1732–1750). Adopting the viewpoint of these elite Spanish women offers a original perspective on these issues, shedding light on the tensions and shifts among various traditional gender hierarchies.

Whether featuring internationally renowned figures or relatively unknown women like the group of Madrid-based ‘ladies’ described in this book, these cases invariably contribute to granting the 18th century more nuanced, and convincing contours. They challenge the historiographical narratives that still today relegate relationships between women and men to “separate chapters” in the history of scientific culture. Instead, these stories provide an additional piece of the puzzle for better understanding the first decades of the 19th century, a period marked by women being sent “back to the home” by legal codes (from the *Code Napoléon* to others, inspired by it, used in building European nation-states) and regulations that excluded them from universities after they had been partially and temporarily allowed to enter at moments during the 18th century.

The women Elena Serrano brings back to light dedicated themselves to a number of issues. One of the most intriguing is perhaps their project of collecting demographic and social data and conducting lengthy experiments to identify dietary and other strategies that might improve the survival of abandoned babies. This is an inherently scientific and political issue which, as outlined by Serrano, reveals how the Damas – eager gain equal recognition – succeeded in their endeavor even while remaining firmly anchored to the gender roles that were integral to their social status. What could be more fitting for a woman than caring for babies? For noblewomen, it was even more ideal that these babies had been abandoned: this gave the Damas the opportunity to display the human face of a social class that was suffering an increasingly severe crisis in Europe. Often dismissed as secondary or supportive, Serrano demonstrates that these activities contributed significantly to the cultural transformations of the era. If these women succeeded in being taken seriously, it was because they skillfully navigated the gender boundaries of Enlightenment knowledge-pro-

duction: a political, scientific, and psychological strategy that allowed them to gain recognition and exert influence without openly challenging patriarchal norms. Women's participation in the Society's activities was self-confined to roles that became firmly established as "suitable for women": those of educators and moral guides. Ultimately, the reader is left with the impression that these Damas, much like their husbands, fathers, brothers, and enlightened friends, were primarily concerned with ensuring that their immense class privileges remained unchallenged. At the same time, however, the results achieved by these educated gentlewomen, such as the Duchess of Osuna, were significant: they provided their daughters with the tools to be politically and socially active, thereby contributing to the formation of a new generation of women engaged in study and public life.

To tell these stories, the author has drawn on exceptionally rich archival documentation, putting it into dialogue with a historiography that ranges widely in terms of both approaches and languages. However, the chosen communicative style leans towards narrative, avoiding jargon as well as overly scholarly tones, thereby making the book a highly enjoyable read.

In conclusion, it could be added that the book demonstrates how the Damas de Honor y Mérito, by skillfully cloaking their scientific pursuits in the rhetorical smoke of categories such as "female", "useful", or "moral," managed to avoid offending the sensitivities of men accustomed – as Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) would ironically write much later – to seeing themselves reflected in women's eyes at twice their actual bodily, intellectual, and professional size. Moreover, by helping to reflect on the long term, I believe this book contributes to both the history of women and gender studies and the history of the diverse European "Enlightenments" and their long, contested roots. This latter is important because even today such roots seem – judging by numerous, various reports – to feed the conformism underlying the discriminatory practices of far too many men working in Europe's universities and research institutions.

Paola Govoni
Dipartimento di Filosofia
Università di Bologna
ORCID: 0000-0003-1253-6614