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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture, Volume 52, 2023, pp. 271-279
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/sec.2023.0021

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Knowledge on Display: Aristocratic Sociability, Female Learning, and Enlightenment Pedagogies in Eighteenth-Century Spain and Italy

MÓNICA BOLUFER

In eighteenth-century Europe, while women were generally discouraged from participating in intellectual activities for moral, "natural," and even medical reasons, extraordinary exhibitions of female learning were, in some cases, given a place of honor in courtly, aristocratic, and academic rituals. These were particularly visible in Italy.[1] Several Italian women were admitted to literary, artistic, and scientific academies; a few were granted university degrees and even held teaching positions (particularly in Bologna). From Laura Bassi (1711–88) to Maria Clotilde Tambroni (1758–1817), these women became international cultural attractions for foreign intellectuals and travelers on their Grand Tour.[2] To a lesser, but still important extent, "exceptional" women (often young girls) from Spain and Portugal acquired local, sometimes national, occasionally international, and always ephemeral public celebrity, which has hardly been acknowledged by scholars. This essay will examine this phenomenon transnationally in order to explore several significant issues: how did gender, rank, and age intersect in such

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displays, what were the interests at stake, and how did they help build a European imaginary of women's learning that was fraught with ambiguities, but nonetheless may have fostered further aspirations on the part of women.

We will be focusing on the exhibition of humanistic learning (grammar, geography, cartography, history, modern and sometimes classical languages; more rarely, mathematics, natural philosophy, and natural history) in aristocratic and academic performances. These worked far differently than the appearance of musical *wunderkinder* in courts and concert houses for the entertainment of noble patrons or paying audiences, or the increasing display of female artistic "accomplishments" (drawing, painting, music, dancing) in genteel and middle-class domestic and polite circles.[3] In Italy, the families involved are nobles (in the case of Maria Delfini Dossi), but also aspiring merchants (Maria Gaetana Agnesi), low patricians (Mariangella Ardinghelli), lawyers (Laura Bassi), and even plebeians (Maria Clotilde Tambroni, Maria Dalle Donne). The Spanish cases cover a narrower social spectrum, ranging from courtly aristocrats to local nobles or patricians.[4] Described usually as "prodigies" of "extraordinary talent," these women were exhibited to prove their allegedly exceptional individual capacities, the intrinsic superiority of their noble blood, or their enlightened education. Those three elements, combining and complicating the distinctions and connections between nature and culture, were mixed in different proportions depending on the specific contexts (courtly, polite, or academic) in which these women were displayed, and also on when they were displayed, with education gaining more significance over the course of the eighteenth century.

Some girls performed alongside their brothers. Individual exhibitions of male "prodigies" were also held. The education of royal children was subject to public scrutiny: European intellectuals followed with great interest Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's reports of his (failed) efforts to educate Prince Ferdinand of Parma (1751–1802) as a child—and future monarch—of the Enlightenment.[5] Other educators used their own children as pedagogic experiments. In 1785 (and again in 1787), Juan Bautista Picornell had his three-year-old son tested by professors at the University of Salamanca, who compared him to the German *wunderkind* Christian Heinrich Heineken (1721–25) and expressed reservations about the effects of such precocious training, which echoed the growing enlightened suspicions toward "unnatural" education.[6] However, female demonstrations of learning were presented more emphatically as extraordinary and spectacular, even if some contemporary accounts went out of their way to declare that the girls were interrogated thoroughly and according to custom, as if to exclude any hint of paternalism or gallantry.

If a prodigy was someone who crossed "natural" boundaries, female prodigies were credited with not only surpassing the barrier of age, like their

male counterparts, but also that of gender, thus connecting them to the robust tradition of "illustrious women" celebrated in early modern literature and art, particularly in aristocratic circles (in catalogues of women distinguished in letters, government, and arms; in works of the *querelle des femmes*; in tapestries, frescoes, and even tea sets). In the cultural universe of the Ancien Régime, the notion that blood was the vehicle for the transmission of superior moral and intellectual abilities justified the privileges of the nobility, setting it symbolically apart as a wonder in itself. Exceptionally talented noble girls were therefore presented as wonders among wonders, powerful images of the hierarchical and gendered system of knowledge and power. At the same time, public performances by highly educated girls and women conveyed the idea that culture could help nature to develop its full potential: with a proper education, the limitations of gender could be surpassed. Textual and iconographic emphasis on the exceptionality of these figures worked to contain their potentially disruptive implications by setting them up not as models to be imitated, but rather as prodigies to be admired. However, in the context of the ongoing debate regarding the extent to which men's and women's moral and intellectual abilities were natural (as opposed to the result of education), some women used these examples to justify their own intellectual ambitions by stressing the equal talents of their sex.

These celebrations were held and publicized in different countries in ways that show striking similarities and that were sometimes reinforced by symbolic or explicit propaganda. Cultural and political relations between the Spanish monarchy and the Italian peninsula were strong and self-conscious: three Spanish queen consorts in the eighteenth century were Italian-born, and there was a constant two-way flow of courtiers, artists, intellectuals, and clerics, with the artistic and literary academies of the two regions tightly interwoven. Personal and family connections reinforced those ties: at least one Spanish noble family that displayed their gifted daughter was of Italian origin, and members of the Bourbon and Farnese dynasties also participated in acts celebrating learned women. A portrait of Elisabeth Farnese, queen consort to King Philip V of Spain, presides over the engraving commemorating Maria Vittoria Delfina Dosi's defense of her legal thesis at the Collegio di Spagna in Bologna in 1722.[7] Her son Charles, the former Duke of Parma, was welcomed in 1735 as King of Naples and Sicily at the palace of the Prince of Tarsia by Eleanora Barbapiccola and Faustina Pignatelli, who were each internationally renowned patrons and disseminators of Cartesianism and Newtonianism, and by Mariangela Ardinghelli, a natural historian, translator, and facilitator of exchanges between French and Neapolitan circles of learning.[8] This experience must have weighed on his decision to award the daughter of one of his courtiers a university degree when he became King Charles III of Spain in 1759.

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Charles hoped to prove that in his new kingdom women could "publicly demonstrate their progress," as they did in Italy.[9] Both Spain and Italy were considered by foreign travelers and intellectuals to be lagging behind France and Britain in their cultural achievements, and therefore the exhibition of learned women (the more extraordinary, the better) was for scholars, civic and academic authorities, and ruling dynasties a highly political gesture.

Displays of female "prodigies" sometimes took place through elaborate rituals presented to an elite audience distinguished by their social rank, learning, or public office. Sometimes they were also shown to cheering crowds and further publicized through programs for the event, newspaper articles, poems, engravings, medals, and word of mouth. They all embodied the strongly performative and spectacular qualities of Ancien Régime culture, but in ways that had differing gender connotations. In some cases, these spectacles were staged at court or in aristocratic and genteel residences, which were mixed-gender spaces in which the conspicuous consumption and exhibition of culture (a mixture of the learned and the polite) was an integral part of education, above all for gentlemen but also, to a lesser extent, for ladies. For example, Maria Gaetana Agnesi (1718–99) entertained distinguished guests in the family *palazzo* in Milan with her scholarly conversation, while her sister Maria Teresa played the harpsichord, thus aiding their socially ambitious father's ascent.[10] In 1763, the count and countess of Parcent exhibited the talents of their fourteen-year-old daughter, Cayetana de la Cerda (1748–1808), and their sixteen-year-old son, José, at a performance in Valencia that followed a highly theatrical script, organized into acts and scenes and punctuated with musical intervals. A contemporary poetical description highlights the siblings' equal learning: except for Latin (which was reserved for José), they were said to have both received the same lessons, and members of the audience were encouraged to ask questions of both of them. At the same time, the gender difference between the two was visually and textually marked: the brother and sister entered the stage from opposite ends (with the former gallantly giving preference to the latter) and were compared, respectively, to the shining Sun and the crescent Moon.[11] Emphasizing the girl's achievements added luster to their lineage precisely because it was considered an even more extraordinary proof of the family's distinction and the special care that her parents had taken in going beyond the customary education for noble girls. Twenty years later, King Charles IV of Spain and his queen, María Luisa (originally from Parma and educated, along with her brother, by Condillac), sought to impress the Portuguese court of Queen Maria I when their daughter, Carlota Joaquina (1775–1830), arrived in 1785 to marry Prince João They made Princess Carlota take a public examination that was praised by the press in both countries, thereby

raising the Bourbons to the level of the (highly cultivated) Braganças and publicizing the political links between the two dynasties and the allegiance of Carlota to her new nation.[12]

A different approach was taken when female prodigies were being displayed at university or civic buildings. Like the polite performances we have just considered, these had some theatrical aspects (a conductor, music, a genteel audience). But they put more emphasis on the scholarly content of the demonstration and adopted solemn rituals that mimicked the *disputatio* of the (male-only) universities or the public examinations of pupils at the (equally male-only) schools that were promoted by the Jesuits and popularized during the eighteenth century. Laura Bassi's defense of her thesis, the subsequent conferral of a degree on her, and the public lectures she gave at the Archiginnasio and the anatomical theater in Bologna, all of which were internationally celebrated in the 1730s, may have influenced the examination of María Rosario Cepeda (1756–1816) in 1768 by ecclesiastics and teachers at the Royal Naval Academy in Cádiz, on a stage adorned with symbols of the sciences and the monarchy.[13] Contemporary engravings and textual descriptions certainly suggest that Italian precedents helped shape the presentation of María Isidra de Guzmán (1767–1803), who publicly defended her thesis and was awarded a degree at the University of Alcalá in 1785 at the express wish of Charles III—two years before Dorothea Schlözer received her degree in Göttingen. In two subsequent celebrations, she paraded through the city accompanied by university authorities and preceded by horsemen, drums, and bugles, in a carriage with glass windows so that the populace could see and cheer her.[14] This is the most lavish case of the spectacularizing of female learning, but it was operating within a cultural economy of spectacular science that, as many historians have shown, was an integral part of Ancien Régime society and that typically assigned women an iconic, often allegorical, but ultimately limited role.[15]

Several social and political forces intersected in the staging of these performances, in each instance with a different balance of complementary or competing interests. The girls' families were always heavily involved and sought to enhance their own social prestige and cultural capital by proving their commitment to refined, up-to-date educational practices. They were also, of course, showcasing their daughters' abilities as prospective wives, mothers, and hostesses. Both in Italy and Spain, fathers appear more conspicuously in the sources as the ones hiring tutors and seeking institutional support. However, the agency of mothers in promoting their daughters' education became more visible in cases in which they insisted on their status as the holders of noble titles in their own right or as widows. For example, in 1781, the Marquise of la Romana made her daughter,

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Pascuala Caro (1768–1827), take a public exam that was primarily devoted to arithmetic and geometry. Pascuala had had the same education as her elder brothers, who were bound for military careers, where those skills were in high demand. However, the international prestige of female mathematicians like Bassi and Agnesi must have helped make the Marquise's unusual approach respectable.[16]

In a few cases, the girls' tutors were mentioned (generally if they were renowned pedagogues who counted on the prestige they would gain from their pupils' exams to advance their careers). More often, public credit was given to the girls' allegedly exceptional abilities or to the liberality of their aristocratic patrons. In the 1760s, girl prodigies (such as de la Cerda and Cepeda) were presented as embodying the intrinsic, "natural" superiority of their noble blood more than personal merit, individual effort, or pedagogic excellence. Exhibitions held in the 1780s and 1790s, on the other hand, put a heavier emphasis on education, as confidence in its powers grew. The most singular example of the latter was the public examination taken jointly in 1797 by the four elder children of the Duke and Duchess of Osuna: two girls (Joaquina, 1783–1817, and Josefa, 1784–1851) and two boys (Francisco and Pedro).[17] We know about this examination because of a description written by their tutor and probably supervised by the duchess herself, who was a formidable figure in Enlightened Spain and went to great lengths to secure the most modern education for her offspring. The Osuna examination is less a celebration of aristocratic exceptionalism than a declaration of Enlightened principles, one optimistic about how culture and nature could go hand in hand and a well-planned, genteel education could fully develop an individual's potential. Explicit statements regarding gender differences are conspicuously absent from this account, which can be read as an implicit proclamation of intellectual equality between women and men, in a time when emphasis on the complementarity of "two incommensurable sexes" was on the rise.[18]

What about the girls? Is it true that, in Marta Cavazza's words, "female figures played the role of pawns, though … not always passive pawns" in these displays that were often designed by their male family members or political authorities?[19] Cavazza and other scholars have proved otherwise. Maria Gaetana Agnesi and Laura Bassi offer two clear examples of women whose personal determination pushed them to choose a different path of life than what had been planned for them by their families and social circles. Agnesi rejected being exhibited as a prodigy of learning and instead devoted herself to celibate study and piety, while Bassi defied the iconic role allocated to her as the virgin *Minerva docta,* a living allegory of the learned city, in order to create for herself an unprecedented career as a married natural philosopher who taught in public.[20] In Spain, the girls were so young—most

of them were just twelve to fourteen years old—that it is likely they were not personally directing their own lives and educations, although the absence of private writings makes that impossible to determine. María Isidra Guzmán, who was slightly older at eighteen, may have genuinely wished to obtain a doctorate (perhaps she was even inspired by the Italian precedents we have been examining), but how can a historian take her father's petition on her behalf at face value?[21]

As we have seen, the principal goal in the training of these young women was to display their knowledge in public at spectacular events that were emphatically staged as exceptional and thereby positioned their learning as part of the realm of accomplishments that would engage courtly or polite audiences, rather than as something be used for personal or practical ends. Once these female "wonders" stepped out of the limelight, their education did not generally allow them to become adult female intellectuals, who occupied an ambiguous and difficult position, even in Italy.[22] However, their experiences seemed to have helped them to assume more accessible roles, such as those of the devout writer or the Enlightened female patron, patriot, and social improver. Pascuala Caro pursued her intellectual dedication in a respectable way as a nun and religious poet famous locally for her knowledge of scripture. Others fulfilled their responsibilities to their noble families by marrying and raising children, sometimes far from the court (de la Cerda lived in the provinces; Cepeda in Mexico), thus disappearing from public view. Excluded from learned academies, with the exception of María Isidra de Guzmán (who was admitted to the Spanish Academy by royal request), several former prodigies participated in female patriotic societies (a distinctive feature of the Spanish Enlightenment), where they labored to promote social reforms and useful knowledge.[23] None of them left behind learned works. However, most continued to cultivate themselves in various ways, and some subscribed to enlightened journals or promoted the arts and letters as patrons.

At the same time, though, the public celebration and international circulation of these cases, particularly the Italian ones, disseminated powerful examples of the female intellect that may well have inspired other women to pursue their own intellectual dreams. If Diamante Medaglia Faini, a local legend in the small city of Salò, decided in 1774 to give up poetry for mathematics, inspired by the public presence of women in scientific institutions (as well as by the fictional female amateur scientists featured in literature "for ladies"), another poet, María Gertrudis Hore, envied how a fellow citizen of Cádiz, María Rosario Cepeda, was allowed to pursue "such noble studies," when she herself could not, "in spite of my longing."[24] Icons, even when not entirely real, can have unpredictable and inspiring effects.

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Notes

This research has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (Project CIRGEN, ERC Grant Agreement No 787015).

1. Jürgen Overhoff, "Ein menschengemachtes Wunderkind: Emilie Basedow und die Ambivalenzen der philanthropischen Aufklärungspädagogik," *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert* 45, no. 1 (2021), 11–27; Paddy Holt, "Performing in a different place: The use of a prodigy to the Dublin Philosophical Society," *British Journal for the History of Science* 53, no. 3 (2020): 371–88.

2. Marta Cavazza, "Between Modesty and Spectacle: Women and Science in Eighteenth-Century Italy," in *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour*, ed. Paula Findlen, Wendy Wassyng Roworth, and Catherine M. Sama (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 275–302; *Alma Mater Studiorum: La Presenza Femmenile dal XVIII al XX Secolo* (Bologna: Clueb, 1988).

3. Mélanie Traversier, *L'harmoie de verre et miss Davies: Essai sur la mécanique du succès au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 17–32. See too Waltraud Maierhofer's essay in this cluster and Ann Bermingham, "The Aesthetics of Ignorance: The Accomplished Woman in the Culture of Connoisseurship," *Oxford Art Journal* 16, no. 2 (1993): 3–20.

4. *Gaceta de Madrid*, 5 May 1800, 365.

5. Élisabeth Badinter, *L'infant de Parme* (Paris: Fayard, 2008), 33.

6. *Examen público, catechístico, histórico y geográfico, a que expone Don Juan Picornell y Gomila … a su hijo Juan Antonio Picornell y Obispo* (Salamanca: Andrés García Rico, 1785). See too Tim Zumhof and Nicole Balzer's essay in this cluster.

7. Cavazza, "Between Modesty and Spectacle," 281–83.

8. *The Contest for Knowledge: Debates over Women's Learning in Eighteenth-Century Italy*, ed. Rebecca Messbarger and Paula Findlen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Paola Bertucci, "The In/Visible Woman: Mariangela Ardinghelli and the Circulation of Knowledge between Paris and Naples in the Eighteenth Century," *Isis* 104, no. 2 (2013): 226–49.

9. *Exercicio literario, que presenta al público la Señora Doña María Rosario Cepeda* (Cádiz: Manuel Espinosa de los Monteros, [1768], n.p. See also Juan Antonio González Cañaveras, *Relación de los exercicios literarios que la Sra. doña Maria del Rosario Cepeda y Mayo … actuó los dias 19, 22 y 24 de septiembre del presente año* (Cádiz: Manuel Espinosa de los Monteros, 1768).

10. Massimo Mazzotti, *The World of Maria Gaetana Agnesi, Mathematician of God* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

11. *Relación que hace un amigo a otro de la célebre Literaria función que en el día 7 de Abril del presente año 1763 huvo en la Ciudad de Valencia, en la Casa de los Excmos. Señores Condes de Parcent, executada por sus Excmos. Hijos D. Joseph y D[a] Cayetana de la Cerda y Cernecio* (Valencia: Joseph Estevan Dolz, 1763).

12. *Gazeta de Lisboa* 40 (4 October 1784); *Gaceta de Madrid* 82 (14 October 1785), 669–70.

13. *Exercicio literario*.

14. See the contemporary sources in María Jesús Vázquez Madruga, *Doña María Isidra Quintina de Guzmán y de la Cerda, "Doctora de Alcalá": Biografía* (Alcalá de Henares: Ayuntamiento de Alcalá, 1999), 159–267.

15. Bertucci, "In/Visible Woman"; Cavazza, "Between Modesty and Spectacle"; *The Faces of Nature in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Gianna Pomata (Berlin: BWV-Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2003).

16. *Examen a que se presentará Doña Pascuala Caro y Sureda, hija de los señores marqueses de la Romana el día ... de abril de 1781* (Valencia: Benito Monfort, 1781).

17. Diego Clemencín, *Discurso leido en la abertura del examen público de las señoras doña Josefa y doña Joaquina Giron y Pimentel, y de los señores d. Francisco y d. Pedro, sus hermanos, hijos de los excelentísimos señores Duques de Osuna* (Madrid: Cano, [1797]).

18. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 152.

19. Cavazza, "Between Modesty and Spectacle," 301.

20. Mazzotti, *World of Maria Gaetana Agnesi,* 144–51; Paula Findlen, "La Maestra di Bologna: Laura Bassi, una donna del Settecento in cattedra," in *Eredi di Laura Bassi: Docenti e ricercatrici in Italia tra età moderna e presente,* ed. Marta Cavazza, Paola Govoni, and Tiziana Pironi (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2014), 63–94.

21. Petition dated 15 April 1785, in Vázquez Madruga, *Doña María Isidra,* 163–64.

22. Lorraine Daston, "The Naturalized Female Intellect," *Science in Context* 5, no. 1 (1992): 209–35.

23. Elena Serrano, *Ladies of Honor and Merit: Gender, Useful Knowledge, and Politics in Enlightened Spain* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022); *Society Ladies and Philanthropy during the Spanish Enlightenment: La Junta de Damas de Honor y Mérito, 1787–1823*, ed. Catherine M. Jaffe and Elisa Martín-Valdepeñas (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2022).

24. Paula Findlen, "Becoming a Scientist: Gender and Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century Italy," *Science in Context* 16, no. 1-2 (2003): 59–87; *Copia y recolección de los papeles, que en prosa, y verso han dirigido, algunos doctos ingenios de esta ciudad, en debido aplauso del desempeño que en sus actos literarios de los días 19, 22 y 24 de el mes proximo pasado, executó la señora Doña Maria del Rosario Cepeda* (Cádiz: Imprenta Real de Marina, [1768]).