Debating Sex and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Spain

Eighteenth-century debates continue to set the terms of modern day discussions on how 'nature and nurture' shape sex and gender. Current dialogues – from the tension between 'real' and 'ideal' bodies, to how nature and society shape sexual difference – date back to the early modern period. *Debating Sex and Gender* is an innovative study of the creation of a two-sex model of human sexuality based on different genitalia within Spain, reflecting the enlightened quest to promote social reproduction and stability. Drawing on primary sources such as medical treatises and legal literature, Vicente traces the lives of individuals whose ambiguous sex and gender made them examples for physicians, legislators and educators for how nature, family upbringing, education, and the social environment shaped an individual's sex. This book brings together insights from the histories of sexuality, medicine and the law to shed new light on this timely and important field of study.

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Contents

Illustrations

Figures

Map

Preface

Weeks ago a friend of mine revealed to me why she had developed such an interest in astrology. She said, "You know, I wanted to understand my family." After years of study, she finally knew why her sister was domineering, obsessive, and moody. She sympathized with her brother who had been struggling with problems of addiction. She even could finally get to accept her own tendencies towards repressing feelings and always trying to bring peace in family situations where resolution was hopeless. I was a little bit disconcerted. How could astrology offer her the answer to such complex human behaviors and relations? She explained to me:

> In astrology there are houses, which are supposed to be the most important part of anyone's chart. Then you have the planets. Where they are positioned when one is born and the planets' own relation to each other allow different aspects of one's personality to manifest. Aspects mean tension, which is created between the planets. Then the signs are also important, along with many other things.

Not to get her wrong, she emphasized that the study of astrology was complex and that in spite of the limitations of the horoscope chart, one "could grow into one's sign," meaning that one's habits can help changing some innate predispositions marked by one's astrological chart. Yet, when my friend finally was able to put it all together she found out why her sister, a Virgo with an Aquarius rising sign, wanted to be in control of absolutely everything in her life. When her sister was born the moon was on Gemini, which made her display an extremely temperamental behavior, swinging to extremes. My friend said all this very convincingly. I did believe that her astrology research had brought her peace of mind although I was skeptical how much truth was behind her discoveries. Regardless, it is important for me to retell this episode here to illustrate how while we all acknowledge and understand that human behavior and lives are the complex result of many different components, from physical and emotional to social and environmental, at the same time many of us need to find a one-step solution that explains it all. This is what my friend found in astrology. It allowed her to find order in her life and

her family relations. The three siblings had been born out of the same parents and received the same education, yet they all displayed different, almost opposite personalities. Apparently, she did not have to worry so much about the rest and ever since my friend seemed to have been able to accept her family and move on.

The stories I am going to tell in this book happened more than two centuries before my conversation with my friend about astrology, but they share a striking similarity. Both, past and present, focus on finding order, certainty, and clarity, where there is none. The center of my narrative happens around the anatomical discoveries at the turn of the eighteenth century in Europe, which ignited an unprecedented interest in physical and anatomical explanations of the division of the sexes. Anatomical discoveries provided an opportunity to organize society in an orderly and predictable way. The body, just like a machine, was made of distinctive separate organs fulfilling a specific function, and so was society as well organized in ways one could name and recognize. Bodies that represented the ideal – and natural – order of the world had to be clearly separated in their sexual mapping and needed to behave in certain ways. Ultimately the basis for this order lay in the division of the sexes and the control of reproduction. The problem came with bodies that because of their ambiguous anatomy or behavior did not fit within this natural order. The conflict that arose between the desire for order grounded on anatomical differences of the sexes and the presence of individuals that could not be included in this order (individuals that jeopardize sexual reproduction) characterized not only the eighteenth century but also modern understandings of sex and gender in the Western world.

Key to achieving order and stability was in finding ways to make those uneasy exceptions to the rule fit universal explanations. This was not a clear path, even for those who wanted to find that order. Things and ideas move back and forward and even the representatives of the institutions, physicians and lawyers, hesitated themselves when trying to find the solution to the problem at hand. Order seemed difficult to come by. In Spain, the challenges of giving order to one's world were clearly expressed in the political life of the country in the eighteenth century. Political unrest in Spain started with the Spanish War of Succession (1701–14), while the intermittent warfare with England and France colored the rest of the century. Throughout these decades, stability was at the very best a product of people's hopes and fantasies; the tangible reality was constant struggle and change. A parallel needs to be drawn to the human body and its ability to change before challenges. As Rebecca Jordan-Young so well expressed it in her *Brain Storm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* and her analysis of the contradictions within

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' scientific arguments on sexual difference, differences among men and women are a matter of degree. This author, who combines her interest in science with social theory, invites us to rethink gender and sexual formation and evolution in terms of "development" rather than "essences," and in terms of "processes" rather than "states." Equally, Oliver Sacks' extensive work on the malleability of the brain to constantly adapt to even trauma shows us how life as it happens daily and hourly remains something that is indeed changing constantly, sometimes in unexpected ways.

The processes that Jordan-Young talks about or the malleability and adaptability of Sacks' cases all should lead us towards viewing the subject as multifaceted, constantly changing and adapting, and the mere definition of man and woman as an illusion human beings have themselves created. Think of the growing public visibility of transgender individuals in the past two decades, which makes us all face the reality of the changing and unfixed aspects of sex and gender, both culturally and socially constructed and lived. Why, if all around us is pointing at impermanence, temporality, change, and mutability, do most of us fall into categorizing and dividing: women versus men, nature versus culture, young versus old, life versus death? This book does not pretend to offer an answer to all these questions, which have puzzled many writers and will continue to do so. Instead, I want to look at the history of this struggle: between the human need to find order through division and difference and the reality of a world that, by bearing more sameness than disparity, jeopardizes this project of finding order and universal laws.

The place of my narrative is Spain. Many times Spain has been ignored or neglected in the scholarly debate on the changes and transformations that the eighteenth century brought. I do not want to dwell on the reasons for such lack of works devoted to this important period in Spanish history. Recently, the Voltaire Foundation and its Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment have published a few titles that address this issue beautifully. Jesús Astigarraga, for instance, takes the bull by the horns, so to speak, and by "revisiting" the Spanish Enlightenment unearths all the dust and the jewels that seem to have been buried with it. He sees the Spanish Enlightenment as much more "pragmatic, utilitarian and applied" than the French or British Enlightenments, which in turn helps us to further explore the Enlightenment as enlightenments in lower letters and certainly in the plural. By focusing on Spain, and looking at how the major European scientific discoveries and changes impacted the theory and practice of anatomy, I do subscribe too to this group of scholars who intend to vindicate the Spanish Enlightenment and analyze its contribution

to the general European debate. I also want to bring some light to the debate on the history of science in Spain, arguing that Spaniards were able to share with their European counterparts not only scientific discoveries but the implications of such discoveries in shaping their societies. Yet, despite the singularity of Spain, and because of its distinctive political and cultural framework, this is a European story as writers across nations in eighteenth-century Europe shared similar inquietudes to those of their Spanish counterparts.

I found the seed for this project in the summer of 2005 in a lengthy document housed at the Archivo Histórico Nacional in Madrid. I was then working on a project on notions of sexuality in the eighteenth century. The documents I was consulting were not particularly relevant to the topic at hand. The wrong call number in one of the order slips allowed for a bundle of criminal cases to fall on my lap. Not to waste the time of the archive's worker who had delivered the bundle (*legajo*) to me, I decided to read some of the criminal cases included in the volume. That is how I encountered the case of Sebastián Leirado López, whose criminal trial has become an important case study for this book. Leirado's case is a fascinating example of the struggle characteristic of the eighteenth century and the European Enlightenment: fighting uncertainty and unpredictability by trying – sometimes in vain – to impose order and predictability. The fortuitous finding of this document changed the course of my project. The rest, as they say, is history.

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