The Enlightenment has often been characterized as a drive among political, social, and cultural elites to bring about fundamental reforms in their respective fields of influence. Motivated by trends in rational philosophical thinking and eager to raise the “standards” of the arts in their country, Neoclassic theorists in Spain, as was the case all over Europe, called for an end to what they deemed purposeless exaggeration of style of the Baroque period. It was also a time, as a proliferating number of studies demonstrate, when gender increasingly conditioned many aspects of public life in Spain. While these two issues of aesthetic renovation and the role of women in society seem unrelated, there remains little doubt today that considerations of gender are not necessarily peripheral to our understanding of any aspect of eighteenth-century Spain:

Gender debates are not merely a window through which scholars today can view Enlightenment principles at work, but rather that these debates were central to reconfiguring Spain as an enlightened nation. In the eyes of those who witnessed it, redefining gender identities was critical to Spain’s political, social and economic modernization. (Smith 7)

This article proposes that aesthetics was another area in which gender was influential. An examination of the aesthetic pronouncements in a number of overtly theoretical texts as well as seemingly-unrelated petrarchanesque poems suggests that two recurring motifs and age-old symbols of the artistic endeavor—the mirror and the female body—also influenced preceptive considerations of literature and the visual arts. As throughout the rest of the history of artistic theory and criticism, the mirror appears as a common metaphor in numerous aesthetic pronouncements in Neoclassic Spain, but, as James Wimsatt points out,

1 See Bolufer, Fernández-Quintilla, Kitts, Lewis, and Smith.

2 See Chapter Three of Schlig for a more thorough analysis of the mirror metaphor in neoclassic literary aesthetics in the Spanish tradition.
the common assumption [...] is that the figure is serviceable for describing accuracy in representation—a ‘faithful’ mirror, a ‘distorting’ mirror—and that is the extent of its significance. This assumption does not do justice to the individual uses of the image nor to the physical object known as a mirror. There is much more to mirrors, and usually involved in mirror metaphors, than faithfulness in reflection. (128-29)

This is especially true when the image of the female body appears framed in the mirror. A feminist reading of eighteenth-century texts based on Freudian psychology suggests that the derision of images produced by, or in, “objective” mirrors not only serves to articulate a justification for the improvement of reality though art, but also reveals the insecurities provoked by what is seen. The social and moral implications of men—because artists were assumed to be men—creating and looking at images of the female body as a timeless artistic symbol of beauty are especially important when the latter is positioned before the mirror to create a framed space, much like a work of art to condemn vanity, and more often, express frustrations related to unrequited love and sexual insecurities.

The laws of optics that govern the so-called objectivity or faithfulness of the reflections of mirrors do not take us far enough to consider that

there are no visual facts without values leading them to us by the nose. And as there are no ‘innocent images,’ there are no ‘innocent eyes.’ The eye constructs meaning according to a person’s ‘mental set,’ in looking, and the visual image presented to us has been made in this way too. (King 132)

In the end, psychology aids the arts, history and other social sciences in making sense of the importance of gender to every aspect of life in eighteenth-century Spain.

Just as M.H. Abrams found with the English literary tradition in The Mirror and the Lamp, one also sees that references to the mirror as a symbol of strictly objective visual imagery helped numerous Neoclassic theorists from Spain to illustrate their views—especially with regard to theater. In La poética, o Reglas de la poesía en general y de sus principales especies, Ignacio de Luzán lamented that “las comedias, espejo de la vida humana, en vez de enmendar y mejorar las costumbres de los hombres, las han empeorado, autorizando con sus ejemplos mil máximas contrarias a la moral o a la buena política” (127). Similarly, in his translation of Nicolas Boileau’s 1674 “Art Poétique” Juan Bautista Arriaza also found the analogy fortuitous:

Al nuevo espejo cada cual que mira
Se ve con gusto, o no se reconoce;
Del cuadro fiel de la avaricia rie
El mismo avaro que sirvió a la copia;
O los aires de un necio bien trazados,  
Satisfecho el modelo los aplaude.  (Cueto 67: 124)

Francisco Martínez de la Rosa used the mirror to contrast implicitly lacking comedies with more profoundly useful tragedies:

Su fiel espejo ofrece a nuestros ojos  
Y con donosas burlas nos cautiva.  
Otro cuadro, otra acción, otros actores  
Ocupan ya la escena: Al fiero Atreo,  
Al triste Idomeneo  
Sucedan el Hipócrita, el Avaro;  
El ridículo vicio al negro crimen;  
Y al lúgubre terror y sentimiento  
La burlona sonrisa y el contento.  (45)

We see here that “mirror-like” objectivity would contribute to the audience’s potential inclination simply not to recognize its own errors and, hence, not derive any useful lesson. The mirror, however, does not hold the same kind of meaning for Leandro Fernández de Moratín in “La comedia nueva o El café,” but he nevertheless uses the symbol to lament the troubling state of theater, saying: “en vez de ser el espejo de la virtud y el templo del buen gusto, será la escuela del error y el almacén de las extravagancias” (116).

In more general aesthetic deliberations, the mirror served to highlight the idealizing function of art when representing nature. An artist’s goal, as Esteban de Arteaga argues in La belleza ideal, was not to portray nature as it was, but rather as it could, or should, be:

Nadie negará que una rosa mirada en un espejo no sea más parecida a la que nace en los jardines que la pintada en un cuadro o la bordada en una tela, aunque uno y otro lo hayan ejecutado los obreros más hábiles. Ni cabe duda en que una dama hermosa hallará un retrato más fiel de su hermosura mirándose en la superficie del mar o en un estanque cuando está sosegado y limpio, que en las pinceladas más expresivas de un Apeles o de un Ticiano; pero con todo eso, nadie antepondrá la semejanza refleja del mar o del espejo a la que resulta de la habilidad de un pintor excelente. (13)

Arteaga does not deny the superiority of resemblance to the original afforded by mirror reflection, whether by natural or other means, yet the resulting image does not hold the same value as the work of an artist. The so-called quality of an imitation was not judged primarily on its faithful correspondence to ‘real’ models, but rather on its ability to create an ideal image of nature that served to affect its public in some predetermined
manner.

In this text, however, one also discerns a suggestion of feminine narcissism in what is otherwise a theoretical statement on aesthetics. While not directly of interest to Arteaga, in this context the allusion to the narcissistic female gaze would seem to suggest an undermining of the enlightenment goal of encouraging virtuous behavior. In “En elogio de un pintor de mucha habilidad en retratar,” Francisco Gregorio de Salas explicitly presents the theme of narcissism in what is otherwise a condemnation of simple artistic imitation:

Es tan cabal el cotejo
Que en retratar has hallado,
Que tu pincel ha llegado
Donde no pudo el espejo.
Y si al mirar su bosquejo
En una fuente tan fiel,
A manos de amor cruel
Murió Narciso, ¿qué hiciera
¡Oh gran pintor! si se hubiera
Asomado a tu pincel?
Al ver tu grande destreza,
Creo que por agradarte.
Ya se ha sujetado al arte
La misma naturaleza. (Cueto 67: 529)

A survey of the instances in which neoclassic theorists refer to mirrors, symbolic or real, reveals a generalized condemnation of the objective representation of reality and an espousal of openly idealized portrayals that do not correspond in any supposedly “faithful” manner to the elements found in the physical world as a whole. Since a mirror reflects all aspects of visible reality, from the perfect to the imperfect, it was not an ideal model of literary representation and thus often implicitly rejected by aestheticians. Notwithstanding, one also senses beyond strictly aesthetic concerns a certain moralistic apprehension: Salas suggests that the superiority of art would have served to check the vanity of the type that José Cadalso warns against in “Al espejo de Filis:”

Cristal, como eres liso, puro y llano,
No sabes lo que importa el fingimiento;
A Filis, enseñando su hermosura,
Igualaste lo altivo con lo bello. (Cueto 61: 256)

Here an apparently male observer signals the moralistic dangers of losing sight of the distinction between image and reality. This is further developed by Diego de Torres Villarroel in “A Filis, enamorada de sí misma:”
Viendo ayer su belleza en el brillante
Cristal de un arroyuelo suspendido,
De sí misma sintió su pecho herido,
Y con rabia lloró el dolor amante
Miróla amor, y dijo: «Oh desdeñosa
Ninfal Padece la venganza dura
Que corresponde a tu beldad ingrata;
Pues contra tu hermosura poderosa
Es sólo poderosa la hermosura;
De hermosa muera quien de hermosa mata». (Cueto 61: 59)

In this portrayal of feminine conceit depicted by a male poet, a beautiful woman becomes casualty of the mirror’s passive impartiality and, by extension, her own vanity. In the end, portraying beauty was certainly praiseworthy but representing haughty pride was not.

Further consideration of these texts also exposes frustrated male observers of female beauty and brings to light the age-old association between mirrors and women that began as early as the fifth century B.C. in Greece, when primitive bronze mirrors themselves often took the form of the female body.\(^3\) Heinrich Schwarz explains that in the Middle Ages the mirror served in art as a symbol of the Virgin’s purity (98) but later became associated with sinful pride (106). Jonathan Miller speculates that the confusion that arose in relating mirrors with both the “vice of Vanity” and the “virtue of Prudence” contributed to the “equivocal reputation” of mirrors” (172), which, in turn, as the poems under scrutiny here attest, led to the confusion between the reflector and the reflection. “The woman at her toilette has always attracted the wrath of censors and the scorn of misogynists. To them her polished beauty hides a heart of stone and her flirtatiousness inevitably leads to her husband’s ruin” (Melchior-Bonnet 22).

Tellingly, these male responses to mirror reflections of women mimic the Western tradition of female portraiture in which, while the female body is reduced, as Lloyd explains, to “surface beauty” (350) and transformed from “individual woman into mere symbol determined by male desire […]” (347), the reaction of the male viewer is one of “fear, of a shocked and unwilling realization that the alterity of the woman cannot be subsumed” (347). A brief comparison between mirror reflection and the visual arts permits us to understand better the implications of the poets’ frustrations with the reflections of women, for “the mirror shares, with the art of painting, an emphasis on the worth of the image, resemblance, and simulation, all of which are intertwined with the theme of looking at one’s

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\(^3\) See Congdon.
self. The visual arts are thus inseparable from any study of the mirror” (Melchior Bonnet 3). Most ironically, however, this lack of objectivity is perhaps what most binds the visual arts to mirror images:

There is no objective mirror. The subject is inhabited by a desire that emerges just when he’s least expecting it, in such a way that the spectacle of his reflection […] shows him a strange and often disquieting alterity. The shadow of sin, of the irrational, and of the mysterious impulse threatens identity and the face-to-face encounter with a forbidden desire that runs the risk of madness or death. (244)

Melchior-Bonnet, knowingly or not, echoes contemporary feminist theorists who have looked to psychology to support their reinterpretations of the history of the (often nude) female figure in art. It is no surprise that the portrayal of the female body, long dominated by men, has been guided by a paradoxical heterosexual pleasure in looking that conceals certain sexual insecurities. In her landmark “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey summarizes the issue:

Ultimately the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (21).

In response men have learned, as Lynda Nead argues, that “through the procedures of art, woman can become culture; […] she is framed, she becomes image and the wanton matter of the female body and female sexuality may be regulated and contained” (11).

And just as the painting in essence becomes a framed space in which the male painter tries to control the troubling female body, so too is addressing her reflection in a mirror, rather than directly communicating, a means of limiting the threat to a male observer’s own diffidence. In light of this, Cadalso and Villarroel do not just see reflections of virtue or vice nor of physical beauty, but rather they encounter their own sexual motivations.

This is also certainly evident in Juan Meléndez Valdés’s ode “El espejo,” in which the apparent objectivity of optical reflection causes grief for the male observer:

Toma el luciente espejo,
Y en su veraz esfera
Ve, Dorila, el encanto
De tu sin par belleza.
¡Ay! Tú al espejo puedes
In contrast with the previous texts in which the poetic voices either express general alarm or directly address the mirror, here the male subject's frustrations are explicit as he warns the female object (who is also the subject of her own gaze) that their perceptions of the same sight, her mirror image, differ considerably. The same tone also surfaces in Cadalso’s “Al espejo de Filis” wherein the poetic voice once again addresses his concerns to the mirror:

Si entonces tú sus fuerzas la ocultarás
Mí daños evitarás a este pecho,
Primer cautivo que en él de ella tuvo
Encanto y cárcel con dorados hierros. (Cueto 61: 256)

The emotional reactions articulated in these texts, whether they be the desperation of Meléndez Valdés and Cadalso or the spite seen in Villarroel’s sonnet (“De hermosura muera quién de hermosura mata”), distance us from the mirrors with which Luzán, Arteaga and Salas emphasized strictly aesthetic concerns. It is also obvious that these poems reveal much more about the male observer than the observed female.

Tellingly, the women of these texts are voiceless, but the evident anxieties expressed or implied by the male poetic voices intimated the potential empowerment of women, whether as artistic models or simply as objects of male desire. While John Berger has argued that the mirror often served “to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight” (51), Stephen Kern posits that

neither the male artist nor the male viewer monopolizes active looking [...]. The male artist chooses his female model and directs her pose, but once the contact between the two is struck, they collaborate for the most effective artistic forms [...]. And whether she remains mute and anonymous [...] or talkative and demanding [...], in the finished artwork her eyes are present while the man’s are absent. That presence valorizes her vision and consciousness whether the artist glamourizes her body for erotic enjoyment, reinvents her body for aesthetic appreciation, or naturalizes her body with moral intent. (125)

Such would also seem to be the case when men observe women who look
at themselves in the mirror. In this context the male observer, like an artist, loses his protagonism and becomes but a bystander to a narcissistic gaze that excludes any meaningful role for men (Starr 13). This, in turn, leads to a break in the unquestioning idealization of the female body. These texts do not manifest any kind of overt, or even implied, feminist activism, but the words of the male poetic voices provide another perspective to gender relations in a time when women were increasingly willing to play a more active role in public and private life.

The publication in 1726 of Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro’s “Defensa de las mujeres” resulted in a sustained debate in Spain on the place of women in society that permeated all aspects of public life.4 While at the beginning of the century the medieval notion that women, more than anything else, represented a dangerous temptation for otherwise virtuous men prevailed, the nature and role of women were gradually, but inconsistently, reconsidered in light of a new awareness of gender5 and as a result of more reasoned thinking, as is evidenced by increased participation of women in the intellectual life of the times. The consequent change in the public behavior of women, described by Carmen Martín Gaite in Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España, however, soon became a topic of concern as a new feminine self-assuredness surfaced in the public sphere. Martín Gaite explores the concepts of marcialidad and despejo, which she summarizes as “franqueza, falta de encogimiento, mirar a los ojos, no ruborizarse [...] [E]l que una joven no sintiese impedimento ni coacción ante un hombre, que le pudiese hablar con desenvoltura, levantando tranquilamente los ojos del suelo, era lo característico del despejo” (99-100).6 This apparent lack of modesty was frequently (and hypocritically) condemned in a still-traditional, or chauvinistic, Spain, and the theme of female vanity often permeated

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4 Sally-Ann Kitts provides a detailed account of the debate that arose in the wake of Feijoo’s Defense and that lasted throughout much of the eighteenth century.

5 Thomas Laqueur explains that “sometime in the eighteenth century, sex as we know it was invented” (149). In short, science came to the realization that women were a distinct gender than, rather than a lesser version of, men.

6 The most famous representations of this new model of conduct are Francisco de Goya’s famed Maja desnuda and Maja vestida. Janis Tomlinson asserts that the former is “not merely a nude, but a nude who transgresses her idealized locus within the painting to confront the viewer” (120). Rebecca Haidt observes that Goya’s work embodies a “struggle over an urge to possession by looking […] and an urge to resistance by looking back […]” (Embodying Enlightenment 79). In both paintings the Maja, who does not symbolize any sort of classical beauty, returns, and thus undermines the male gaze of both artist and observer.
considerations of friendship, marriage, economics and, as is argued here, even aesthetics.

Vanity, of course, implicated a cultivation of appearance, and so, as Margarita Ortega López explains, the mirror formed the basis of the elaboration of feminine imagery (399-400): “Las escenas de toilette, de vestidores con peluqueros o de visita a los modistas, se habían hecho bastante populares entre la sociedad más acomodada, tanto como el rito ante el tocador o el espejo o el abrochado de corsé que algunas mujeres solicitaban a sus acompañantes [...]” (402). In poetry, Meléndez Valdés describes with excitement such a space in “El gabinete:"

¡Qué ardor hierve en mis venas!  
¡Qué embriaguez! ¡qué delicia!  
¡Y en qué fragante aroma  
Se inunda el alma mía!

7 Robert McCormack sees love and friendship as “almost antonyms in the Enlightenment” (153). Citing Aristotle’s “Ethica Nicomachea,” he argues that, more so than love, the platonic relationship between friends was in keeping with Enlightenment ideals [...] since it was useful as well as pleasurable (147). Rebecca Haidt also makes reference to Aristotle in her study of the three correspondents in Cadalso’s Cartas Marruecas and concludes that there was no place for women in the ideal friendship: “In their mutual recognition as ethical allies, they embody one of the text’s fundamental propositions: that the friendship of virtuous men—whether Greek citizens or Spanish hombres de bien—has been and should be one of the most natural bases for human and political good” (163). David Gies also examines friendship in Cadalso, taking interest in Tediato’s complaints in Noches lugubres: “¡Amigos! ¡Amistad! [...] Todos quieren parecer amigos; nadie lo es. En los hombres, la apariencia de la amistad es lo que en las mujeres el afeite y composturas. Belleza fingida y engañosa [...]” (324). Here, false friendship is equated with female vanity—surface imagery—rather than a more meaningful “mágico poder consolador y curativo” (Gies 157), an alternative to “las amistades sexuales que dejaron residuo de desengaño en su corazón [...]” (166).

8 Martín Gaite identifies a clear distinction between love and marriage in eighteenth-century Spain: “Uno era el campo de la pasión, de la mentira, de la tempestad; el otro de la templanza y la virtud [...]. El amor era deseo de libertad, de salir, de quemarse; el matrimonio sumisión, mesura, virtud. El amor, en una palabra, se opone a la virtud” (155).

9 Many women’s need to distinguish themselves led them to follow foreign fashions and, logically, demand imported fabrics. This apparently insatiable appetite for luxury was considered a threat to domestic textile production. See Bolufer for a fuller explanation of the economic ramifications of the desire for objects of luxury, and Haidt’s article “The Name of the Clothes” for a succinct analysis of theatrical portrayals of the phenomenon.
Este es de amor un templo
Doquier torno la vista,
Mil gratas muestras hallo
Del númen que lo habita.
Aquí el luciente espejo
Y el tocador, do unidas
Con el placer las Gracias,
Se esmeran en servirla. (Cueto 63: 117-18)

In spite of any dismay about the accompanying attitude (not revealed in this text), physical beauty was of interest to potential husbands and other suitors (the post-marital cortejo). In Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos’s fictional “Diálogos sobre el trabajo del hombre y el origen del lujo,” a marquesa remarks that the well-established roles of men and women create a dilemma in which women are forced to act in a manner that elicits both the desire and contempt of men:

Los hombres […] hallan en sus estudios, en sus destinos, en sus mismos entretenimientos […] la necesidad de despreciar o la ocasión de moderar la afición del ornato. Pero, ¿qué hará una joven acostumbrada desde niña a estimarse y sobresalir por su adorno y vestido? ¿Qué hará cuando, al entrar al mundo, ve que este cuidado ocupa todo su sexo y es materia a la estimación o desprecio de los hombres? (149)

The woman in the process of preparing herself was not accepted by society like the finished product, and the mirror, also an object of luxury in eighteenth-century Spain, contributed to the polemic. In an untitled chalk drawing from the late 1790’s, Francisco de Goya depicts a woman who stands before a mirror that returns an image of a snake curled around a crutch. José López-Rey sees the drawing, which contains symbols of time, original sin and physical decay, as a depiction of “the ageless, unremitting sinful nature of woman, and Time as the devastating enemy of her beauty” (I: 69). There is little doubt that this unflattering portrayal of a woman

10 Mónica Bolufer identifies Jovellanos’s named marquesa as the French writer Anne-Thérèse de Marguenat-de-Courcelles, the Marquise de Lambert, who presents a similar argument in her 1727 Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes.

11 Alice Frothingham tells us that until the early nineteenth century in Spain, only the royal palaces and the homes of the most wealthy had mirrors. The first retail glass shop opened on the Puerta del Sol in 1760, but mirrors were priced exceedingly high to compensate for inevitable breakage during manufacturing and shipping.

12 The mirror image in this drawing is cast by a reflective surface that, while it most readily resembles a mirror, could also be a painted surface. This ambiguity evokes
looking at herself in the mirror also speaks implicitly about the male artist’s aversion to the gaze of the opposite sex. Fear or scorn evolves into explicit ridicule in the artist’s better-known *Capricho* (number fifty-five) entitled “Hasta la muerte,” in which we see “an old hag busy before her mirror with the obscene gestures of a macabre coquetry [...]” (Melebior-Bonnet 215).

Be it in painting or literature, mirrors create the same kind of framed spaces as artistic portrayals and therefore can serve the same purpose of containing the threat of woman as a constant reminder of sexual difference. Neoclassic theorists often adopted the mirror metaphor of art in order to symbolize an unfavorable objectivity that works often provided for their audiences because they failed to improve upon nature. Just as in theoretical pronouncements, neoclassic lyrical poetry also reveals a dissatisfaction with the images produced by mirrors, but the implications, as we have seen, are more social and psychological than aesthetic. While M. H. Abrams has argued that “the theorist who held that art reflected nature was committed to looking ‘out there’ rather than into the artist, for the subject matter of a work” (35), any reference to mirrors inevitably implies a subjective experience. “Simple reflection [...] is not all one gets from a mirror, and verbal reflectors provide images at least as pregnant with meaning as vitreous reflectors” (Wimsatt 136-37). Reflection often provokes introspection, and so we better understand the anxieties exposed in Meléndez Valdés’s “El espejo” as the poetic voice complains to Dorila of the mirror that causes both pleasure and discomfort:

> Ayer en él buscaba
> Tu imagen, y en vez de ella,
> Vi abatido mi rostro,
> Mis ojos sin viveza,
> Así tú en el espejo
> Consultándolo encuentras
> A Venus y sus Gracias;
> Yo un retrato de penas. (Cueto 63: 98)

As the mirror loses its idealizing function and becomes a reflector of the male observer’s inner demons, the distinction is blurred between the reflector and the image of the woman that is reflected. The reflection of the woman, rather than the framed reflecting apparatus most directly influences the onlooker, and so points to the longstanding conception of woman herself as a mirror of man, perfectly illustrated by Cervantes’s Don Quijote, who observes: “es asimesmo la buena mujer como espejo de

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Salas’s conjecture about Narcissus’s reaction to a painted likeness rather than his mirror image.
cristal luciente y claro; pero está sujeto a empañarse y escurecerse con cualquiera aliento que le toque” (336). These words, however, betray a latent chauvinism that assumes women are powerless before men, whether or not their intentions are honorable. In the end, though, the protagonist of the image of the speechless woman, again, seems to be male, as is evident when Cadalso’s poetic voice addresses his concluding lamentations directly to the mirror, rather than his female companion, imploring:

¡Ay! No le digas más las perfecciones  
Que en su hermosura deposita el cielo,  
O pide a las deidades que de bronce  
Pongan un corazón en este pecho.  (Cueto 61: 256)

Metaphoric mirrors often served Neoclassic theorists such as Luzán, Arteaga, Arriaza and Salas by underscoring inaccuracy, fallibility, and deceit, but in the same contexts they often also exposed unresolved issues related to relations between the sexes. One also must consider that, more than aesthetic failure, it is the paradoxical threat in the pleasure of viewing the female body, further complicated by the evolving circumstances of women in Spain, that frustrates the representation of female beauty in the poems by Cadalso, Torres Villarroel and Meléndez Valdés. Notably, women are never given a voice in these texts, and so they continue to exist in “patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (Mulvey 15). This perspective is further reinforced when one considers the heterosexual male gaze: there is no reciprocity, and intimate contact is avoided in order to diminish the possible dangers of meaningful egalitarian relationships. We know, though, that rather than simply let men dictate the norms of female appearance for their own benefit, women began to empower themselves and indeed often used their physical aspect to improve their social standing. The mirror, even as a manifestation of the unbalanced history of the sexes, was an essential ingredient in this transformation; “les permitía disfrutar del secreto placer de la contemplación narcisista, gustar y gustarse, seducir y verse en el espejo de la mirada de otros, provocando el deseo masculino o la admiración y envidia de su sexo” (Bolufer 208). More significantly, though, this suggests that “the mirror no longer be a distorting imposition. Women are not obliged to reject the mirror or see it as a prison in a patriarchal cultural tradition” (La Belle 185).13 The heterosexual male experience continues to

13 Upon being formally admitted into the Real Academia in 1998, Ana María Matute explained: “Escribir, para mí, ha sido una constante voluntad de atravesar el espejo, de entrar en el bosque” (35). The mirror, rather than returning a potentially
be the subject of these poems, but the reactions of the male spectators to women who observe themselves in mirrors serve to understand, at least from a patriarchal point of view, the social instability that marked the beginning of the slow emancipation of women in modern Spain.

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limiting visual image of the author, is a portal to introspection and, consequently, opportunity.
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