This article studies the relationship between gender and poetry writing as it was understood by Mexican poets and critics of the late nineteenth-century. From 1867 on they were witness to a renaissance in Mexican literary and intellectual life, which included a significant increase in writing and publishing by women. In this period, influential men of letters encouraged their peers to produce an explicitly masculine verse, one connected to formal politics and Mexican patriotism. However, both male and female poets also sought inspiration from a different Muse: that of female domesticity, and the seclusion, sentimentality and emotion they associated with it. This ideal of domesticity created constraints for Mexican women who wished to write, constraints which they both accepted and challenged in verse and in prose.

Este artículo estudia cómo los poetas y críticos mexicanos decimonónicos entendieron la relación entre género y la escritura de poesía. De 1867 en adelante fueron testigos de un renacimiento en la vida intelectual y literaria de México, el cual incluyó un crecimiento importante en la escritura y obras publicadas por mujeres. Paralelamente, en esa época, hombres letrados influyentes alentaron a sus coetáneos a producir una poesía explícitamente masculina, vinculada a la política formal y al patriotismo mexicano. Sin embargo, los poetas mexicanos, hombres y mujeres, también buscaron inspiración en una Musa distinta: la de la domesticidad femenina, así como el retiro, el sentimentalismo, y la emoción asociados con ella. Este ideal de la domesticidad creó restricciones para las mujeres

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This article will examine how late nineteenth-century Mexican poets and literary critics understood the relationship between gender and poetry writing. A brief survey of their times is first necessary. In 1867 they were witness to the end of a lengthy period of internal conflict and external military aggression in Mexico. At this point, the last of the French occupying forces had been driven from Mexican soil, and the country's Liberal faction had emerged triumphant in its clash with Mexican Conservatives and the Catholic Church. A relatively stable phase of modern nation-building was inaugurated in Mexico with the Restored Republic—for many contemporaries, at long last.

The national enthusiasm that marked the early years of this period was echoed in the world of arts and letters as well. Indeed, the last third of the century produced a renaissance in Mexican literary and intellectual life. “The country felt a new blood coursing through its veins,” remembered the celebrated poet Juan de Dios Peza. It was a moment when “the poets, who had hung their harps on willows of sorrow, took them up again with joy and played new songs of hope and happiness upon them.”¹ For Mexican literary men (literatos), the opportunity to make up for lost time had finally arrived.² A number of new artistic and schol-

¹. Juan de Dios Peza [1852–1910], Memorias, reliquias y retratos, México: Librería de la Vda de Ch. Bouret, 1900, p. 229. All translations of Spanish-language citations are by the author of this paper; for poetry citations, the original Spanish is also reproduced.

². For a discussion by a contemporary of the disadvantages Mexico had suffered over the nineteenth century in developing its literary and intellectual life, and the opportunities presented by the 1867 restoration of the Republic, see the essay by the novelist and journalist José Tomás de Cuellar [1830–1894], “La literatura nacional,” in Jorge Rueda de la Serna, ed., La misión del escritor: Ensayos mexicanos del siglo XIX, México: UNAM, 1996 [1869]. The contemporary man of letters Ignacio Altamirano [1834–1893] also noted in this regard that during past times of conflict in Mexico, many literatos “had hung their lyre on willows abroad, or had cast them aside to take up the sabre. A profound silence reigned in the republic of letters.” Ignacio Altamirano, “Introducción a ‘El Renacimiento’,” in J. L. Martínez, ed. La literatura nacional, Tomo I, México: Editorial Porrúa, 1949 [1869], p. 217.
arly societies and literary and learned publications were soon established in the nation’s capital. Literary salon—the veladas literarias—were increasingly popular; typically held in the home of a well-regarded man of letters, they served as a forum for the unveiling of the latest poetic works. Poetry was, to be sure, the acknowledged “genre of genres” of the time and found a wide audience among the literate.

The prominent literary men of the day, however, were not taken with the pursuits of literature and poetry alone. Many of them were also figures in the public arena por excelencia, inhabiting the interconnected worlds of journalism, statecraft, and law in Mexico. Moreover, some could also boast of a background as men of war, having served in Mexico’s several internal and external conflicts in the twenty years prior to 1867. As such, these men remained profoundly concerned with the longstanding project of Liberal reform, directed in large part toward breaking the privileges of Mexico’s traditional corporations and particularly those of the Catholic Church.

These roles were not independent of one other, and, in fact, many literatos also performed as poets in the Mexican political arena. Thus, important affairs of state would be incomplete unless they were marked by the reading of a new composition: one such occasion was the 1872 inaug-

3. These were neither the first organizations nor publications of this kind in nineteenth-century Mexico. In the past, however, they were usually short-lived, and few survived the tumultuous years of the 1850s and 1860s. For a survey of the various literary organizations formed in the nineteenth century, see Alicia Perales Ojeda, Asociaciones literarias mexicanas; siglo XIX, México: Imprenta Universitaria, 1957. For periodicals, see María del Carmen Ruiz Casteñeda, Indice de revistas literarias del siglo XIX: Ciudad de México, México: Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, 1999. Also useful are two narrower surveys: Miguel Ángel Castro and Guadalupe Curiel, Publicaciones periódicas mexicanas del siglo XIX: 1856–1876, México: UNAM, 2003; and Marcelo Abram Lauff and Yolanda Barberena Villalobos, El estadio: La prensa en México (1870–1879), México: INAH, 1998.


guration of the Colegio Militar in Mexico City, celebrated with a lengthy patriotic work by the prolific poet and Liberal statesman Guillermo Prieto.6 Another was the ceremony honoring the 1859 Martyrs of Tacubaya, which was held that same year, with President Benito Juárez in attendance. As reported in the literary press, to conclude the observance “a number of young poets occupied the platform[.] . . . [D]istinguishing himself by the beauty of his composition, Juan de Dios Peza was awarded with a salvo of applause.”7 The place of the literary man as a man of public affairs is perhaps best captured, however, by the poet Agustín Cuenca in his 1872 homage to the Liberal martyr Juan Díaz Covarrubias:

Tu eras del Derecho, tú ibas á su lado
You were one with the Law, you walked by its side

Con tu arpa de poeta, tu espada de soldado[.]8
With your poet’s harp, and your soldier’s sword[.]

6. Guillermo Prieto [1818–1897], “Poesía leída por el C. Guillermo Prieto en el Bosque de Chapultepec, el 8 del presente, en la solemnidad con que el Colegio Militar celebró su inauguración, conmemorando las batallas de 8 y 13 de Septiembre de 1847,” El Federalista, Tomo II, Núm. 11, Septiembre 22, 1872, p. 167–170.


8. Agustín F. Cuenca [1850–1884], “Palma: A Juan Díaz Covarrubias,” El Federalista, Tomo II, Núm. 8, Septiembre 8, 1872, p. 140. Given the emphasis on Mexico’s Liberals here, readers may wonder what role Conservative or Catholic writers played in this literary revival. Many were, in fact, welcomed into the new intellectual milieu of the Restored Republic, most notably the critic Francisco Pimentel. But, for various reasons, Liberal men of letters played a more important role in this period. First, with the defeat of the French intervention and the monarchy of the Second Empire—a regime backed by the Church and the Conservative camp—the Liberals undoubtedly held the political and intellectual initiative in Mexico. Moreover, this period saw a generational shift take place: the Liberal letrados were generally younger (in fact, several prominent Catholic writers passed in the early years of the Restored Republic) and attracted an even younger generation to them. (See Martínez, “México en busca de su expresión”; Francis Borgia Steck, “Literary Contributions of Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” The Americas 1:4, April 1945, p. 457; Luis González y González, “La ronda de las generaciones,” in Obras, Tomo I, México: El Colegio Nacional, 2002, p. 348–378.) Lastly, the Liberals may have been formed by a more dynamic intellectual tradition compared to that of their clerical counterparts. As John Lynch notes, the Catholic Church in the nineteenth century “did not have the intellectual tools to confront the liberals, utilitarians and positivists.” The education of the clerical intelligentsia at this time was dogmatic and rote compared to that of its secular contemporaries, and as a result, the Vatican initiated a thoroughgoing yet belated reform of its educational institutions in this period. (John Lynch, “The Catholic Church in Latin America, 1830–1930,” in Leslie Bethell, ed., Latin America: Economy and Society, 1870–1930, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 315.) Indeed, David Brading describes the antecedent Mexican Conservative tradition as being characterized by “intellectual mediocrity” outside of the historian Lucas Alamán. (David A. Brading, The Origins of Mexican Nationalism, Cambridge: Centre of Latin American Studies, University of Cambridge, 1985, p. 76; for a
Numerous contemporaries championed this patriotic—if not martial—image of the poet. Yet this oft-repeated portrayal—one echoed by later scholars—can be deceiving. It strongly associates poetry writing and performance with traditionally masculine arenas of Mexican society, such as formal politics and military service, creating an image that stresses the “virilization” of Mexican creative expression in this period.  

The principal focus of this article, however, is on another side of this story. Male poets and critics in this period also frequently paid homage to a different Muse: that of domesticity and the sentimentality and emotion they associated with it. They believed these virtues could be found in the best work produced by Mexican poetisas—female poets—and were virtues they often aspired to express themselves. This emphasis on the importance of domestic life and its creative effects would also appear in the poetry and criticism authored by Mexican women, albeit not celebrated as unambiguously as it was by men and, at times, questioned as well. To develop this argument, this article will cover three areas. First, it will discuss the ways that Mexican male poets praised the creative effects of domesticity and even envied women’s seemingly privileged access to this Muse. Thanks to its roots in the home, women’s poetry writing was believed to have grown from a domain of leisure and inspiration that was ostensibly the furthest removed from public life.  

differing position concerning the realm of literature, see Steck, “Literary Contributions of Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Mexico.”  

9. Jean Franco, Las conspiradoras: La representación de la mujer en México, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994, p. 131. Jose Luis Martínez adds that Mexican writing in this period “walked decidedly on the path of nationalism” as promoted by the prominent literato Ignacio Altamirano, whose views (discussed further below) represented “the doctrine for an entire period.” (Jose Luis Martínez, La expresión nacional, México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993, p. 196, ix; see also p. 335.)  

10. A discussion of the roots of the profound importance that Mexican Liberals attached to the family and feminine domesticity is beyond the scope of this article, but will be the subject of a future study by the author. Suffice it to say that in their vision of an economically and politically Liberal society, the nuclear family was an institution they viewed as crucial to maintaining social stability, particularly in the context of eliminating corporate institutions and the undermining of longstanding bases of social cohesion such as the Catholic Church.  

11. Note that “ostensibly” is used deliberately here. Numerous authors have commented on the increasing emphasis on and valorization of domesticity for nineteenth-century Mexican women, but this did not mean that women were effectively imprisoned in the home. Indeed, in her study of women in Mexico City for the years 1790–1857, Silvia Arrom demonstrates that many women of all social classes did not necessarily adhere to this domestic ideal. (Silvia Arrom, The Women of Mexico City, 1790–1857, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985, p. 98, 111–122, 253, 261–263.) For a broader critique in this vein of the uses of the public-private distinction, see Amy Stanley, who identifies it as “a
scholar José María Vigil, the man most associated with promoting women’s poetry in this period, thus commented favorably on “the atmosphere of romantic seclusion in which her [the Mexican woman’s] life progresses.”¹² The literatos hoped to breathe in this atmosphere as well; in spite of their highly touted public role, they also sought an escape from it through poetry.

Second, this article will discuss the ways in which women poets and critics in Mexico also highlighted their domesticity. Yet some women writers maintained a guarded if not critical relationship toward it as well. This view was largely due to the growing recognition that the ideal of domesticity was employed not only to extol, but also to limit their creative and intellectual endeavors. As one woman pointedly asked in El Federalista, a widely read Liberal publication: “Should a woman devote herself to the arts when a true calling is recognized in her? Or should she, on the other hand, dedicate to the arts her moments of leisure, and live the saintly and unacknowledged life of the domestic home?”¹³ This author came down in favor of the latter course, as did many of her contemporaries. Nonetheless, Mexican women writers’ careful questioning of the boundaries of domestic life, and its ambiguous relationship to creative expression, would appear in both poetry and prose.¹⁴

Third, although a small but increasing number of women were lit-


¹⁴. In this regard, the arguments made here can serve to qualify critic Jean Franco’s assertion that women in the late nineteenth century were relatively absent from literary life in Mexico. Compared to women writing in the nationalist or modernista vein elsewhere in Spanish America, “there are no parallels to these women in Mexico,” Franco argues. She adds that “traditionally strong in times of war and civil strife, Mexican women were slow to challenge the domestication of women and often fearful of taking a step into areas where their decency would be put into question.” (Jean Franco, Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 93.) Most sig-

belief system, a rhetoric, . . . an ideology, that often managed, and obscured, the contradictions of market society.” (Amy Dru Stanley, “Home Life and the Morality of the Market,” in Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway, The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, p. 81.) Notwithstanding the lack of a correspondence between the ideal of domesticity and reality, this ideal, whether as a belief system or an ideology, was held to some degree by a majority of Mexican men and women in the period under study. It, moreover, had recognizable effects, including on Mexican literary and intellectual life, which this article seeks to explore. A useful discussion of the “feminization of domestic space” in nineteenth-century Mexico is found in Gali Boadella, Historias del bello sexo: La introducción del Romanticismo en México, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2002, p. 71–93.
erate, and poetry published by women became more common, these developments were limited in an important way: women did not perform their work. Unlike their male counterparts, women poets did not read their poetry for the broad public or even the narrower literary public. This distinction was significant because poetry, at this time, was not merely a written genre; it was also fundamentally an oral one. Thus Francisco Pimentel, perhaps Mexico’s leading critic in this period, dismissed one nineteenth-century writer as incapable of being considered “a true poet” because he “did not endeavor to appear before the public as a poet.” Women writers, for their part, were simply not afforded this opportunity. But their challenges—cautious as they were—to the limits on women’s creative expression in this period would also begin to challenge the limits to their participation in Mexican literary life more broadly.

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significantly, Franco perhaps overlooks the periodical literature produced by women to be discussed here, a literature that was potentially more extensive than that of other Spanish American nations in the period under study; see Janet Greenburg, “Toward a History of Women’s Periodicals in Latin America: A Working Bibliography,” in Seminar on Women and Culture in Latin America, ed., Women, Culture, and Politics in Latin America, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.


17. The time period over which this article examines these questions (1867–ca. 1890) can be defined in not only political terms—from the emergence of the Restored Republic—but also in literary and intellectual terms. During this period, a formal program of literary nationalism still prevailed over the emergent cosmopolitan orientation of what would become turn-of-the-century Mexican modernismo. José Luis Martínez identifies this transition as taking place around 1890, marked symbolically by Altamirano’s departure for Spain as a diplomat; he would die abroad in 1893. See Martínez, “México en busca de su expresión,” p. 323–331. Secondly, this period was one of Liberal political optimism, where the
Poetry’s place of honor in Mexican public affairs was secure in the late nineteenth century. As mentioned previously, poetry was an integral component of ceremonial events of state and civic celebrations. Moreover, it had also played a part in the internecine conflicts of Mexico’s recent past. One prominent literato would later recall the days of the French intervention. “Those days of enthusiasm, when the French army marched on the capital, and when the lyre of our balladeers [cantores] animated the people to march to the fields of battle.” One of these patriotic “cantores” was undoubtedly Guillermo Prieto, whose satirical composition “Cangrejos” (“The Crabs”)—a series of anti-Conservative and anticlerical couplets—was sung by Liberal soldiers on the march and by the gangs of workmen that demolished Church buildings and monasteries in the capital during the heyday of the Reforma.

The literary men of this generation had thus spent many years living through or participating in Mexico’s internal conflicts and wars. Returning to Agustín Cuenca’s homage to the young martyr Covarrubias, the poem further adds that:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Y al són de los disparos, la turba soberana</th>
<th>And at the sound of gunfire, the sovereign throng</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Te vio tirando el arpa tu acero desnudar.</td>
<td>Saw you cast aside your harp, and unsheathe your sword.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Ignacio Altamirano, the archetypal Mexican political literato of his day, certainly fit this profile. Born in 1834 into an indigenous family in the nation’s south, he only learned Spanish when he left home to attend secondary school. He later gained prominence and notoriety as a Liberal journalist and intellectual—“the Marat of the puros [radicals],” according to his Conservative opponents. The sponsor of a number of short-lived literary circles in the 1850s, Altamirano gave up this pursuit with the outbreak of civil war and, later, the French intervention. After lead-

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21. José Luis Martínez, La expresión nacional, p. 146.
ing the mounted troops that retook Mexico City from the French, he used his back pay as a military officer to found one of the first and most influential literary publications of the Restored Republic, *El Renacimiento* (*The Renaissance*). Altamirano also served in a number of official posts in this period, including Supreme Court Justice, and maintained a ubiquitous presence in Mexican intellectual life up to his departure for Spain as a diplomat in 1889. He was, in short, a tireless advocate of Mexican arts and literature and was widely regarded by his peers as Mexico’s “president of the republic of letters.”

The *maestro* Altamirano, as he was often called by the younger generation, also had a great deal to say about the direction Mexican poetry should take in this new period, as expressed in a range of articles, letters, and speeches. Although he admired authors who lost themselves in the “dense and gentle [*duelo*] waves of the poetic sea,” for the maestro, there also existed a pressing need in Mexico for patriotic work that reflected the history, landscape, and culture of the Mexican people. Thus the highly sentimental, introspective, and amorous tenor that characterized much contemporary verse should not be pursued by the youth of the new generation. On the whole, Altamirano was viewed by his contemporaries as calling for a reorientation of the Romantic tradition that prevailed in Mexico’s literature and poetry. For the poet Luis Urbina,

22. Various literary and learned publications would soon follow *El Renacimiento*, including *El Semanario Ilustrado, El Artista, El Libre Pensador, El Eco de Ambos Mundos*, *El Federalista, El Búcaro*, among others.

23. The title of “Presidente de la República de las Letras” was coined by the poet and critic Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera [1858–1895], who argued that this designation reflected the “the unanimous vote of the Liberal writers.” (Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, “Ignacio M. Altamirano,” in E. K. Mapes, ed., *Obras: Crítica literaria*, México: UNAM, 1959 [1889], p. 359.)


25. As Pedro Henríquez Ureña notes, in Latin America “the Romantic program was still in force” in the 1860s and beyond. (Pedro Henríquez Ureña, *Literary Currents in Hispanic America*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1945, p. 139, see also p. 142.) Altamirano’s own literary orientation, however, could best be described as a hybrid one. His contemporaries, on the one hand, clearly saw the Classicist in him: According to the poet Luis Urbina, for example, the maestro “despised, as if they were his political opponents, exaggeration, overabundance, disproportion, asymmetry. He cultivated and possessed a sense of the harmonious and balanced.” His approach was defined by “refinement, composure, a preference for aesthetic simplicity.” Concerning Mexican literature, he “introduced it to the eternal models, the Greeks and Romans, and said: this is the way.” (Luis G. Urbina, *La vida literaria de México*, Madrid: Imp. de los hermanos Sáez, 1917, p. 190, 191-192.) Yet Altamirano was also a champion of Romantic themes, what Henríquez Ureña described as “the conquest of the landscape, the reconstruction of the past, the description of customs.” (Henríquez Ureña, *Literary Currents*, p.142.) Altamirano was also an admitted admirer of the German Romantic Friedrich Schelling and, in particular, his book *On Naive
his influence was such that Mexican literary expression was “cleansed of sentimentalism and a lyrical falseness,” and thus the maestro’s times thankfully produced writers that were “not contaminated by a whining Romanticism.”

Altamirano clearly viewed this literary challenge in terms of gender. He thus strongly encouraged Mexico’s young poets to set aside “the effeminate lyre” by which some had “repeated the monotonous themes of love, pleasure, and fantastic sorrow.” Such feminized themes were an inappropriate if not barren Muse. Indeed, amorous and sentimental poetry was “a spring that seems to have already run dry,” and although “poets continue to sing of their loves in every key and employing every form . . . what is difficult, what is uncommon, is that they be able to say anything new.” Mexican writers, he believed, had to abandon the “hermaphrodite literature” that had resulted from excessive French and Spanish literary influence. The maestro argued more specifically that the literary youth of Mexico should not be seduced into writing poetry aimed at women’s fickle hearts and tastes; he thus reminded his acolytes that “it cannot be forgotten—oh youth!, you who could cast a spark that sets the soul of the people ablaze, prefer to extinguish it against the cold and ungrateful heart of an indifferent woman, who will forget you as soon as the very first ass laden with saddlebags of gold is presented to her.”

In short, the Mexican poet should write a masculine verse, with Mexico itself as his inspiration, and he should write for the public, not for women. It was the latter, according to Altamirano and his partisans, that produced a sentimental “whining Romanticism,” the fruit of an “effeminate lyre” that should be abandoned.

Altamirano’s views were not universal, however. The question facing Mexican poets was what to do in this long-awaited time of relative

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27. Romanticism and Romantic poetry already had significant and longstanding feminine associations; for an useful discussion of these questions, see Gali Boadella, *Historias del bello sexo*, esp. p. 25–28, 265–286.
peace. Was their ideal to write poetry with their swords drawn? As true as they were to their Liberal convictions, in poetry these men often looked for something beyond the life of public commitment and political dispute they knew so well. A tension existed between the political role of poetry and the responsibilities of Mexican public life, and poetry as a source of solace, an escape from the world’s demands on men. In this context, the ideal of women’s domesticity—and the sentimentality associated with it—was an attractive beacon for them.

Domestic life was widely regarded by literatos as the source of women’s creative inspiration, believed to stem from the pursuit of leisure and contemplation, independent of public affairs, that such an existence afforded. In citing Ovid, the Roman poet, Francisco Pimentel echoed the feelings of many of his peers concerning the requirements for creativity:

Muy mal fluyen los versos si al poeta

Faltan ocio, retiro, y mente quieta.

Such conditions—leisure, seclusion, and a placid mind—were believed to prevail for Mexican women. The Spanish writer and expatriate Emilio Castelar, commenting on the work of women poets in Mexico, thus argued that “I always seek in the heart of the poet a sanctuary where I can shelter myself far from society and the world.” This condition led to the bounty of emotion, inspiration, and the evocation of inner life that provided women with a distinctive poetic voice.

Jose María Vigil, the aforementioned champion of women’s poetry, echoed this sentiment. In a commentary on Isabel Prieto de Landázuri, "Easterling, Gender and Poetry, 1867–ca. 1890"}

32. In part, this was due to the fact that Altamirano’s own development as a writer was somewhat novel. The maestro greatly enjoyed the image of the poet as former military man: he thus described Mexico’s literary renaissance as the result of “the improvised warriors unbuckling the swords of battle” after years of conflict and turning their efforts to poetry and the arts. Elsewhere he writes of Mexican poets having left “the field of battle” to return to “the peaceful fields of the imagination.” (Cited in Alicia Perales de Mercado, “Asociaciones literarias en la época,” in Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, ed., La vida y la cultura en México al triunfo de la República en 1867, México: INBA, 1968, p. 111, n 14; Ignacio Altamirano, “Revista literaria y bibliográfica,” in Martínez, ed., La literatura nacional, [1883], p. 10.) To a degree this image fit—in the case of himself, the martyred Coavarribias and a pair of other important figures to be discussed below. But in the main, this image was a fiction: most Mexican poets of this era had no idea how to use the sword. Meaning that, although they certainly were good Liberals, they had not been military men. (See González y González, “La ronda de las generaciones,” p. 355–356.)


perhaps the most prominent woman poet of the day, Vigil notes that thanks to her domestic seclusion, "she had free reign, not only to enrich her intelligence and develop herself on a foundation of the most solid virtues, but also to maintain herself far from the cold realities of life, feeding her imagination with the pure and fantastic dreams of a profoundly delicate and tender soul."35 She undertook her work "without any of the exigencies of the real world being strong enough to distract her noble soul from the world of magnificent ideas and feelings in which she was accustomed to living."36

Other poetisas were similarly praised. According to Juan de Dios Peza, the work of the young star Josefina Pérez was a product of "the moments of calm that the sublime priesthood of motherhood permits, as well as the other private duties of a tranquil home."37 The poet Juan A. Mateos said of her work that "when we see that all this poetry emerges like incense smoke from the hearth of the temple of the home, when these songs arise from the holy lips of a mother, still young and beautiful, who shares her tendernesses with a husband, and with children who can now listen to her; then we feel a profound respect for this angel of the family, who lays her inspirations like dew on the brow of her children, and who lights the purest light in her evenings at home."38 Peza concludes his study of Perez's work by citing the French historian Jules Michelet, who notes that "there are women so idolizing [idólatras], so engulfed in the contemplation of their child, that they remain the entire day kneeling in front of their children's cradle." This image, for Peza, is not a slight, in fact, "such are our Mexican mothers, to our good fortune, and such is the inspired poetess [poetisa] who today devotes to her children the fruit of her thoughts."39

Juan de Dios Peza’s praise of Josefina Pérez was sincere in another sense. Although he did not shy away from nationalist themes or his public responsibilities as a poet, Peza’s own true love was writing highly sentimental poetry dealing with domestic life.40 This aspect of his work likely made him the most popular poet of his day, according to contemporaries.

40. See, for example, Peza’s poetry collection Hogar y patria, Paris: Casa Editorial Garnier Hermanos, 1891.
Thus his admiration for Pérez—for how she “devotes to her children the fruit of her thoughts”—has to be understood as coming from a poet who sought to do the same. The home was in part his Muse, and Peza, like many of his peers, portrayed it as a place of refuge for men from the difficult and contentious life outside it. Take, for example, the conclusion of the poem “Con mis hijos” (“With my children”):

¡El hogar es un templo! los pesares
Que da en su derredor la turba impía
Se convierten llegando á sus altares
En gérmenes de paz y de alegría.
Amarse en el hogar, lejos del rudo
Embate de la envidia y los rencores,
Es tener siempre invulnerable escudo
Y un bálsamo en los íntimos dolores.\footnote{Dios Peza, “Con mis hijos,” in Hogar y patria, p. 86.}

The home was, therefore, a sanctuary from the sorrows, the rancor, and the envy found in the wider world. What is more, these ills come from an explicit source: the “turba impía,” the impious mass or mob that lay just outside the sanctity of domestic life. Most notably, unlike in Agustín Cuenca’s poetic homage to the martyr Covarrubias—with its “turba soberana,” the sovereign mass that witnesses the poet give up the harp for the sword—here, the mass is not a political entity to which the poet provides an example, but rather a source of ills to be countered by retreating into the domestic realm.

Domesticity, and women’s enjoyment of its virtues, was thus also celebrated by contrasting it directly to the travails endured by men in public life. Such is the perspective in “Romance,” an 1867 composition by Mexico’s nineteenth-century poet laureate, Guillermo Prieto. In this work, Prieto playfully makes the case that from a young age the intellectual faculties of men and women develop differently—and even unfairly for men—due to their dissimilar social roles. On the one hand, women maintain the perception that the world reserves “for man the riches / for man the employment” (“para el hombre la riqueza / para el hombre los empleos”) and moreover that “the man is the king of the world” (“el hombre es el rey del mundo”). This, however, is a lie:
Yo digo que éas son farsas
inventados con astucia
por el enemigo sexo
para alejar las envidias
de los tesoros inmensos
que disfrutan las mujeres[.]

I say that these [claims] are a sham
cleverly invented
by the enemy sex
to cast off the jealousies
of the immense treasures
that women enjoy[.]

Indeed, while a young man must endure schooling to prepare him for his lot in life, the young woman enjoys “idleness / with all its fascinations” (“la pereza / con todos sus embelesos”). Besides, the day will soon come when

[. . .] vendrán galanes [. . .]
enamorados y tiernos
y le darán serenata
con eufónicos requiebros[.]

young men will come
enamored and affectionate
and they will serenade her
with harmonious flattery[.]

Meanwhile, men are forced to bear the responsibilities of masculinity; thus the poem asks: “When are they [women] subject / to the harsh moment of the duel?” (“Cuando a ellas se les sujeta / al duro trance del duelo?”). The poem concludes with a young man begging Prieto’s assistance in evading the leva—forced military conscription—and given his circumstances, wishing he were a woman, even if it meant bearing twins and being perpetually subjected to sentimental poetry.

Others echoed this perspective by referring to the world of formal politics in particular. Thus, according to José María Vigil, the poetisa Isabel Prieto de Landázuri could undertake her creative work “in spite of a society concerned nearly exclusively with political questions, ...” preoccupations that were, of course, the exclusive province of men. Indeed, women’s poetic voices could emerge and develop protected from the deleterious effects that the public political world had on poetry. Vigil strongly makes this case in an eloquent address to the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua (Mexican Academy of Language) on Isabel Prieto’s work:

At a time when our deeply aggravated passions roared, spurred on by fratricidal battles; when the impure breath of discord penetrated even into the serene domains of literature, in search of weapons of combat, often transforming the

golden lyre of Apollo into the hammer of Hercules; when the riches of our sumptuous language were exploited—a language seemingly made to express the harmonious feelings of souls tempered in the fire of sublime love—to produce the implacable accents of anger and vengeance, to dress in terrifying forms the dark sentiments that sprung from the ovens of political hatreds, . . . [at this time] was heard, like the faraway echo from an unknown mansion, a voice, profoundly gentle, impregnated with the mysterious aromas of feeling, which could lead hearts deeply wounded by the hand of our painful reality to remember: that beyond this clouded atmosphere agitated by revolutionary tempests, the splendid regions of the infinite extend, in which live, bottomless and eternal, the sources of truth and beauty, which we carry imprinted in our souls as infallible promises of our future destiny. That woman, gentlemen, that glory of our letters, the honor of her sex and a precious ornament of Mexican society, was Señora Doña Isabel Prieto de Landázuri.48

Thus, for Vigil, creative expression was undermined when the golden lyre of Apollo was transformed into the hammer of Hercules for use as a “weapon of combat.” Woman’s poetic voice, however, could reach out to those bruised by the “hand of hard reality” and point the way to the “splendid regions of the infinite,” where they could find truth and beauty. In the new times of relative peace, this was man’s creative destiny.

Given these attitudes, many Mexican literatos did not follow Altamirano’s advice to write poetry that “sets the soul of the people ablaze.” Indeed, in many cases, they continued to write poems that sought to set the hearts of women ablaze. An obvious guilty party in his day was undoubtedly Manuel María Flores, Mexico’s highly popular impassioned poet of love. His principal work, entitled Passion Flowers (Pasionarias), delivered the amorous verse one would expect, along with a litany of dedications: “A Ramona,” “A Guadalupe,” “A Remedios,” “A Clementina,” “A Rosario P.,” “A Rosario H.,” “A Eugenia,” “A Eulalia,” and so on.49 According to one admiring contemporary, the poet Luis Urbina, Flores was “a man sick with the illness of Eros,” and “his Muse trembled like a priestess of Bacchus in heat.”50 Juan de Dios Peza remarked that as soon as the literary press would publish his works, “all the bachelors in love would memorize them, and all the passionate and intelligent women would re-


peat them in the depths of their bedchambers.” The stern master Altamirano also made note of this phenomenon, grumbling that “the ladies learn his verses by heart, a privilege they concede to no one.”

Indeed, from the perspective of Altamirano’s earlier call to the nation’s poets, Flores’ work had to be utterly hopeless. Yet aside from his poetry, he was a model Liberal man of letters. He had been part of the maestro’s literary circle before the French intervention, and like Altamirano, he later enlisted as a military officer and spent time as a prisoner of war under the French. Following the conflict, he became a Congressional deputy and Liberal journalist and continued his poetic career. Altamirano later recalled that his initial impression of the young Flores in the late 1850s was rather unfavorable: “A young man, ... dark skinned [moreno], pale, with large black eyes and curly hair in abundance, and a rather sad and sickly appearance ... Undoubtedly this young man was a misanthrope[.]” But Altamirano was not such a curmudgeon as to deny Flores’ poetic gifts, and the youth was welcomed into the maestro’s circle. Years later, in his critical judgment of Flores—he wrote the prologue to Pasionarias in fact—Altamirano, always the gentle critic, praised his work—but not for Flores’ interest in love, but because “he could admire a virgin that did not appear in the attire of a hundred dead or decadent civilizations, but rather dressed in the new enchantments of our robust nature [nuestra robusta naturaleza].” The source of Flores’ creative strengths, in other words, was his Mexican Muse.

Flores, for his part, paid his respects to the maestro by including a composition in his collection respectfully dedicated “Al Señor Ignacio Manuel Altamirano.” The title of the poem is—rather strikingly—“Orgía” (“Orgy”). It begins:

Ven cortesana! ... Abrásmame en delicias! ... I seek the storms of pleasures, Tropicales, frenéticas caricias Con que reanime mi cansado sér. 56

Come courtesan! ... Surround me with delights! ... From which I might revive my tired self.

55. Altamirano, “Prólogo,” in Pasionarias, p. xi. And no one, including Altamirano (as well as Riva Palacio and Peza), when speaking of Flores, could resist citing his most famous line: “Bésame con el beso de tu boca” (“Kiss me with the kiss from [of] your mouth”).
The heat soon rises even further, and lovemaking eventually ensues—marked by a suggestive series of ellipses—but the poem concludes with profound feelings of guilt and uncertainty. Indeed, the male poetic voice recognizes that in his mad adoration, he has become a slave to woman:

Y á Dios negué mi culto, mi creencia
And to God I denied my worship,
my belief

Y ante ella—miserable!—me prostré.[.] And before her—o miserable one!—I prostrated myself.[.]

The poet thus communicates to his master the pleasures and anguish of living the life and, one could add, producing the poetry of an amorous libertine, a hopeless adorer of women. Given Altamirano’s well-known views on the merits, or lack thereof, of sentimental verse directed to women, Flores’ guilty poetic confession to the maestro was a significant one. Flores would not, however, change his ways.

Altamirano’s public admonitions would not prevent another prominent literato of the times from indulging in a more tragic poetic passion for women. Manuel Acuña was regarded by his peers as a promising young writer and was a frequent attendee at the discussion circles held in Altamirano’s residence. He also collaborated with Altamirano on various Liberal and artistic periodicals, participated in a number of literary societies in the capital, and authored a fair amount of patriotic and, at times, pointedly anticlerical verse.58 He would have been, in short, a model didactic Liberal poet from Altamirano’s perspective and was apparently highly favored by the maestro.59 But over time, an unattainable love interest of Acuña’s increasingly—and in the view of some, obsessively—came to occupy his personal and poetic attention. The young poet’s desperate wish became that she would come live with him and his mother, in domestic bliss, back in his provincial hometown of Saltillo:

¡Qué hermoso hubiera sido
How lovely it would have been
vivir bajo aquel techo,
to live under that roof


[...]
los dos una sola alma,
los dos un solo pecho,
y en medio de nosotros,
mi madre como un dios!60
[...]
the two of us as one soul,
the two of us as one breast,
and between us,
my mother, like a god!

Here domesticity and the family is not only revered, but in the form of the mother, also deified. Even he who was among the most doctrinaire of Liberal poets was thus still drawn to the ideal of retiring into love and domestic life and the celebration of this in verse.

Not long after, mired in a state of despair, Acuña committed suicide in 1873 at the age of twenty-four. Other than the death of Juan Díaz Covarrubias, his death was likely the most painful loss of a young man to the literary fraternity of his generation.61 Following Acuña’s death, the widespread perception was that a promising writer had taken his life after being cruelly rejected by a woman—Rosario de la Peña—whom he had wooed both personally and in his poetry. Her culpability would become part of the folklore of the times, although she made some attempts to defend herself against the charge of having precipitated Acuña’s death; later biographers have also offered more balanced explanations.62 Nonetheless, she became infamously known by contemporaries and to posterity as “Rosario, la de Acuña.”

Altamirano was reportedly devastated by the death of the young poet, one of his sons, as so many young literatos then were.63 The matter would not end there, however: the following year, Altamirano’s long-standing intellectual mentor, the brilliant polymath and Liberal statesman Ignacio Ramírez, fell desperately in love with the same woman. Ramírez had recently lost his wife, and although poetry was not his strength—he had written little of it—he began courting her publicly (and unsuccessfully) in adoring, when not awkward and self-deprecating, verse. Some contemporaries regarded his behavior as the unseemly pursuit of a younger woman by an older man—and as a loss of dignity for

61. For a bibliography of the contemporary obituaries and extensive commentary on Acuña’s passing, see López Zamora and Márquez Narváez, eds., Manuel Acuña a través de la crítica literaria, p. 240–264.
62. See, for example, the study by one contemporary, José López-Portillo y Rojas, Rosario la de Acuña: Un capítulo de historia de la poesía mexicana, Saltillo: Colegio Coahuilense de Investigaciones Históricas, 1977 [1920].
63. Literary legend has it that the maestro, distraught upon learning of his suicide, raced to de la Peña’s home to rebuke her. The filial metaphor in reference Altamirano’s acolytes was often used by contemporaries; see, for example, Justo Sierra’s [1848–1912] comment in “Estudio preliminar,” in Batis, Índices de El Renacimiento, p. 26.
the latter. What Altamirano’s opinions were of this episode is not known; he remains silent on the issue and its associated poetry in his posthumous biography of Ramírez, for example. But given Altamirano’s stated positions and the circumstances, one can venture that both the Acuña and Ramírez affairs reinforced his view that a man’s poetry should not be directed toward what he already regarded as woman’s “cold and ungrateful heart.”

Playing one’s sentimental “effeminate lyre” could take even more varied forms among contemporary poets. Indeed, at least one prominent Mexican man of letters—wishing to address Altamirano’s dreaded themes “of love, pleasure, and fantastic sorrow”—wrote as a woman in order to satisfy this interest. Vicente Riva Palacio, having served as a military General, congressmen, state Governor, and Supreme Court justice, was also editor and author of the most influential work of Mexican history produced in his day (México a través de los siglos—Mexico Across the Centuries) and recognized by his peers for his eclectic body of writing. A hero of the war against the French, he was given the sword of the defeated Emperor Maximilian after the latter’s execution at the Cerro de las Campanas in 1867. The contemporary poet Luis Urbina, in his literary history of this period, argued that Riva Palacio closely followed Altamirano’s dicta and was a man “uncontaminated” by the overly sentimental Romanticism of the past.

Yet, in 1872, having already published poetry as Riva Palacio, the General began to write as Rosa Espino—“Rose Thorne.” Rosa was an opportunity to produce poetry of the most dramatically emotional and anguished sort, in a style that had not previously appeared under his own name. The maestro Altamirano was not especially fond of this work, at least not from men. Yet as Rosa Espino, the General’s poetry soon came to be celebrated by the members of the Mexican literary fraternity as an example of the best of women’s creative writing. One example of Espino’s

64. On this aspect of Ramírez’s [1818–1879] life and work, see López-Portillo y Rojas, Rosario la de Acuña, p. 61-88. Rosario de la Peña ultimately became the lover of Manuel M. Flores, discussed previously, until the latter’s death in 1885.
65. Altamirano first met Ignacio Ramírez as the latter’s student in 1850. See Ignacio Altamirano, Ignacio Ramírez: Biografía, Toluca, México: Gobierno del Estado de México, 1977 [1889].
67. Urbina, La vida literaria en México, p. 192, 194.
68. By all accounts, Espino seems to have been taken for an actual poetisa; Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, for example, praised her works in a published letter for their “delicately and exquisitely written” nature. (Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, “La Academia Mexicana,” in Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera, Obras: Crítica literaria, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1959 [1884], p. 257.)
rather maudlin compositions is “Quejas” (“Complaints”), which is sampled here:

¿Qué te hice? ¡Tal rigor! . . .
Mi pobre alma se consume.
¿Por qué he perdido tu amor?
¡Ay! Que se agosta la flor
Cuando pierde su perfume.

[. . .]
Á veces quiero morir,
Pero es perder tu recuerdo,
Mas, si olvido he de sufrir,
Entre la muerte ó vivir
No sé cómo más te pierdo.

[. . .]
¡Adiós! Mi triste querella
No turbará tu memoria;
Alumbre pura tu estrella
Y no dejen ni una huella
Mis lágrimas en tu historia.69

What did I do to you? Such severity! . . .
My poor soul consumes itself.
Why have I lost your love?
Oh! How the flower withers
When it loses its scent.

At times I wish to die,
But this would be to lose my memory of you,
And if I must suffer in forgetting,
Between death or living
I know not how I would lose you more.

Goodbye! My sad complaint
Will not disturb your memories;
Let your star shine pure
And let no mark be left
By my tears in your story.

Rosa Espino’s work garnered her at least one notable acclaim: an honorary membership in the Liceo Hidalgo, the Mexican learned society then directed by the distinguished Ignacio Ramírez. As told by the critic Francisco Sosa, at a session of the Liceo, with Ramírez presiding, the Spanish writer Anselmo de la Portilla proposed that Espino be made an honorary member of the society. “Given that in each member of the Liceo she had an enthusiastic admirer,” she was admitted by acclamation, with Sosa—who had transmitted her work to the newspaper El Imparcial—entrusted to provide Espino with her membership certificate. De la Portilla, however, may have been one of the very few in-the-know as to Espino’s true identity. Thus “directing himself to General Riva Palacio, who was present, and without any overt expression [sin hacer demostración alguna], he said: ‘To write as Rosa Espino does, one needs the soul of a woman, and that of a virgin woman. Such tenderness and feeling can never be so expressed by a man’.70 Male literatos, in fact, expected such work, a highly sentimental poetry, if not a “whining Romanticism,” of women poets.

69. Vicente Riva Palacio (Rosa Espino), Páginas en verso, México: Tip. de J. Barbier, 1885, p. 139, 141.
Espino’s identity was revealed to the public in 1885 it seems, with the publication of Riva Palacio’s *Páginas en verso* (*Pages in Verse*). Most importantly, the recognition of his perceived ability to write as a woman was hardly a source of embarrassment or shame for the General. Years later, while serving as a diplomat in Spain, he still held onto Rosa’s honorary membership certificate; signed by Ignacio Ramírez himself, it was prominently displayed in his Madrid office.⁷¹ No word, however, as to where he kept Maximilian’s sword.

* * *

In the 1880s, two publications appeared that played an important role in the development of women’s writing in Mexico: *El Álbum de la Mujer* (*The Woman’s Album*) and *Las Hijas del Anáhuac* (*The Daughters of Anáhuac*). Although poetry by women had appeared in print prior to this,⁷² these periodicals were distinctive in that they were founded and edited by women, included women as not only readers but also their principal contributors, and would survive for more than just a few issues.⁷³

71. Pedro Serrano, “El General” Silueta del excelentísimo señor don Vicente Riva Palacio con varias anotaciones, México, 1934, p. 17. Altamirano also experienced his own case of mistaken gender identity, although it was not deliberate. A collection of Latin American women’s poetry published in Paris and Mexico City in 1875 and edited by a Chilean scholar included a work of Altamirano’s—“A Ofelia”—but under a woman’s name, that of Mercedes Salazar de Cámara, who did not exist. The editor had been tricked. (The book in question is José Domingo Cortés, *Ramillete poético del bello sexo Hispano-americano*, Paris, Ciudad de México: Librería de A. Bouret y Hijo, 1875.) Correspondence concerning the matter, between the critic Francisco Sosa and Altamirano, appeared in the newspapers *El Federalista* and *La República*. Altamirano, for his part, was surprised that the editor could have been fooled since his verses, he argued, “seem highly inappropriate in her woman’s mouth, given their excessive gallantry, one completely of the masculine sort” (“en cuya boca femenil parecen asaz impropios sus versos por su excesiva galantería enteramente del género masculino”). (Ignacio Altamirano, “El libro del señor Cortés y la lira mexicana,” *Obras completas*, vol. XIII, México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1949, p. 70.)

72. On the increasing popularity of women’s poetry in the late nineteenth century, see Lilia Granillo Vázquez and Esther Hernández Palacios, “De reinas del hogar a las escritoras profesionales. La edad de oro de las poéticas mexicanas,” in Belem Clark de Lara and Elisa Speckman Guerra, eds., *La república de las letras: Asomos a la cultura escrita del México decimonónico, Volumen I. Ambientes, asociaciones y grupos*, México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2005, for a useful chronology and discussion; for the earlier part of the century see Gali Boadella, *Historias del bello sexo*, p. 349–377.

73. This periodical would later change its name to *Las Violetas del Anáhuac: Periódico Literario Redactado por Señoras* (*The Violets of Anáhuac: Literary Newspaper Compiled by Ladies*), although we will continue using *Las Hijas* in the text for sake of clarity. For a general discussion of these publications and their contents, see Lucrecia Infante Vargas, “Igualdad intelectual y género en Violetas del Anáhuac: Periódico Literario
Their contents consisted of prose—including historical and biographical essays, moral commentary, crónicas, and literary criticism—and plenty of poetry.

Yet despite the increased visibility of women’s writing, and the praise for women’s creative expression among male authors, boundaries remained in place on both. The ideals of domesticity and woman’s separation from public life were regarded as a source of virtue and inspiration, but they did not always mesh easily with the ambitions of women to write. These very same ideals would, in fact, also serve to limit women’s creative endeavors. Although women of letters frequently emphasized their adherence to these ideals, as a part of their feminine nature and responsibilities, and their Muse, some also tested its boundaries both in their writing and practice.

Domesticity was believed to produce not only sentiment and emotion in women, but also two other important virtues in the eyes of contemporaries: modesty and self-abnegation. A grounding in the “saintly and unacknowledged” realm of the home was what ostensibly maintained these qualities. A poem dedicated to “El hogar” (“The Home”) in El Álbum de la Mujer highlights its importance in this respect:

Aqui respiro Here I breathe
Y olvido el egoísmo emponzado . . . And forget that venemous egoism . . .

An 1884 article on “La abnegación” in El Álbum also makes clear its relationship to gender, noting that “egoism is a quality of men; self-abnegation is, in its essence, that of woman.”

Most significantly, the creative constraints placed on women’s writing were often tied to these feminine qualities. Poetry writing, and cre-


74. A crónica was typically a summary of the past week’s affairs, whether in the arts, theater, or elite society more broadly.


ative expression more generally, were regarded as having a potentially dangerous relationship to feminine modesty and self-abnegation. They had the potential to stimulate egoism in women, thus undermining their reservoir of domestic virtues. Moreover, such egoism could threaten to draw women out of the home entirely. In lettered circles, not surprisingly, perhaps the most widespread criticisms of women’s creative and intellectual endeavors were connected to the vices of vanity, ambition, and pride. At minimum, modesty had to be maintained when women wrote, and according to their male critics, the best women poets did so. The scholar José María Vigil, for example, in his lecture to the Academia Mexicana on Isabel Prieto de Landázuri, noted that “the wish to shine was never awakened in her; that vehement aspiration to glory that in certain souls takes the form of a violent passion, was in every sense unknown in her superior spirit[,]” Indeed, public recognition was so foreign to her personality that “she became ashamed and trembled at the very thought that a base look [mirada profana] might penetrate the chaste mystery of her seclusion.”

Moreover, any evidence of adventuresomeness or novelty in women’s writing could be regarded a sign of immodesty and egoism in the women themselves. The poet Juan A. Mateos, for example, in his critical discussion of the work of Josefina Pérez, comments unfavorably upon “those garrulous lettered broads [viejas filibusteras de las letras], who have attempted at times campaigns of speculation, which have not found good fortune in either the realm of good taste or wholesome criticism [sana crítica].” Such women and the ridicule they attracted in fact caused problems for more worthy women who wished to write: “We have seen ourselves assaulted by so many pedantic and annoying women writers;

77. Some felt that any form of education for women contributed to these vices. According to José María Vigil, some argued that education had the effect of “fomenting insufferable vanities” in women; it remained a question that “divides the thinkers” of Mexico despite Liberal attempts to expand women’s education in this period. (José María Vigil, ed., _Poetisas mexicanas: Siglos XVI, XVII, XVIII y XIX_, México: Oficina Tip. De la Secretaría de Fomento, 1893, p. xvii.)


79. J. M. Vigil, “Isabel Prieto de Landázuri,” _El Ateneo_, Vol. I, No. 2, Agosto 1874, p. 58. Vigil similarly praised Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the celebrated poet of seventeenth-century New Spain, for not having given in to the “temptations” of vanity. (José María Vigil, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” _El Federalista_, Tomo VII, Núm. 29, 29 Noviembre 1874, p. 231, from a lecture given at the Liceo Hidalgo on November 12, 1874.)

having seen the ridicule that has weighed on them, those of merit retreat in fear that they be mistaken for that counterfeit that circulates shamelessly in the market of our literature." 81 Thankfully, notwithstanding such poor efforts, women authors of merit were also in evidence: “in contrast we have those of privileged capabilities, like [the poet] Esther Tapia, herself modest, as is the author of ‘Universal Love’ [Josefina Pérez], and other young women who are beginning their literary experiments with some success.” 82

Moreover, domesticity and its associated virtues could be cited not only to constrain women’s creative endeavors, but also to extinguish them. A discussion of “Las artes en la mujer” (“The Arts in Woman”) in the Liberal newspaper El Federalista, by a woman who declines to give her surname, takes up this issue directly. The article argues that “the woman artist renounces her own happiness and destroys her heart, even if at first the opposite seems to be the case.” Indeed, such is the fate of a woman who “forgetting her domestic duties, devotes herself exclusively to the arts and coverts them into a living.” 83 She who dedicates herself to the arts is in fact “useless in the home” and forgets that “the arts should serve as an adornment for women.” 84 No one, the article goes on to say, should be deceived by the apparent life of acclaim and renowned that some women artists enjoy:

Do you believe that these women artists, so applauded by the whole world, who have traversed diverse and far-flung countries, always coddled by the genius of glory, who have achieved the applause of thousands and have lost count of their triumphs, do you think the aspirations of their souls are satisfied?

Do you think that those heads crowned with flowers and laurels are not devoured by the fever of ambition, and that under those dresses of silk and velvet there do not beat hearts filled with vanity and terrible pain?

Do you think these women artists are happy?

Ah! Do not believe it; a women dedicated to the arts is a victim of the world and its miseries; among the flowers of her crown and the laurels that blanket her path she finds large and piercing thorns, and when she lays her weary head to rest, she does not enjoy a restful sleep, but rather one populated by terrifying phantasms and insane visions that rob her of peace and serenity. 85

82. Cited in Juan de Dios Peza, “Prólogo a las poesías completas de Josefina Pérez de García Torres,” in Juan de Dios Peza, Memorias, reliquias y retratos, p. 304.
Here, ambition and vanity, both destructive vices for women, will rear their heads when the pursuit of writing and the arts draws them out of the domestic realm and into the wider public, with its associated laurels, applause, and even glory.

Arguments such as these clearly struck at the ambitions of literate women to be—or continue to be—writers and poets. They also contradicted a prevailing characteristic of the male lettered culture in Mexico, captured in Altamirano’s assertion that “true poets” would “think of glory, of the renown that letters provide.”86 How, then, could a virtuous woman find glory as a poet? And how did women writers interact with the contemporary constraints placed on their endeavors? These questions can be addressed in part by looking at the work of two Mexican women of letters who collaborated with, and mutually admired each other, yet responded in different ways: Laurena Wright de Kleinhans and Dolores Correa y Zapata.87

Wright was the editor of Las Hijas del Anáhuac and the frequent author of learned and historical essays on a range of topics for this magazine; Correa y Zapata also contributed to the production of Las Hijas, while maintaining a prolific output of poetry. In some respects, the two women were an unlikely pair: Laurena Wright was, according to one admirer, “a free thinker who has crossed swords with all forms of obscurantism,”88 whereas Correa y Zapata was a pious Catholic and is perhaps best described as a conservative-minded social critic. Wright was undoubtedly one of Mexico’s few prominent woman intellectuals and was unambiguously about her partisanship on behalf of women’s creative and intellectual endeavors, whereas Correa y Zapata often echoed the prevailing attitudes of her day concerning feminine domesticity and wrestled with its implications for these endeavors—ones in which she was herself engaged. Their differing relationship to the contemporary norms and constraints around gender and writing can thus help illustrate the thinking among women of letters of the times.

Laurena Wright was born to a North American father and a Mexican mother, and as a young woman, her first Muse was not hearth and home,

86. Altamirano, “Revista literaria (1883),” in Martínez, ed., La literatura nacional, Tomo II, p. 45.
but rather the French intervention in Mexico. Her earliest poetic works, circulated among family and friends, were written in response to this conflict. These compositions, according to one male contemporary, first “highlighted her limitless patriotism, and the virile bursts [arranques] of her genius.”89 Her patriotic poetry—something very uncommon for a woman—was published starting in the early 1870s in El Federalista, one of the principal Liberal periodicals of the day.90 Moreover, her “virile” work seems to have been regarded as something of a challenge to men: according to another male commentator, “the vigor of her intellect surpasses that of many writers who consider themselves to be very male [se juzgan muy varones] when they write.”91 Even prior to her launching Las Hijas del Anáhuac, she had already been named an honorary member of a number of literary and learned societies in Mexico. According to a biographical essay in Las Hijas, Wright was devoted to, along with her writing and editorial work, “her grand ideal, the emancipation of women.”92 She would, in fact, later write La emancipación de la mujer por medio del estudio (The Emancipation of Women by Means of Learning) in 1891, perhaps Mexico’s first feminist tract.93

Laurena Wright, not surprisingly, received both criticism and praise from contemporaries for her prominent literary and intellectual efforts. Both, moreover, found their way into verse. Refugio Barragán de Toscano, the well-regarded novelist and poet from the state of Jalisco, was one example.94 In an 1886 poetry collection published in the prestigious “Parnaso Mexicano” series, Barragán made her criticisms of Wright public,

90. See, for example, her two homages to independence hero Miguel Hidalgo, as well as to Juan Díaz Covarrubias. (“Hidalgo,” El Federalista, Tomo IV, Núm. 13, 28 de septiembre de 1873, p. 180; “Juan Díaz Covarrubias,” El Federalista, Tomo IV, Núm. 15, 12 de octubre de 1873, p. 201–202; “Hidalgo,” El Federalista, Tomo V, Núm. 17, 10 de mayo de 1874, p. 200.) Ironically, immediately preceding the first of Wright’s patriotic poems on Hidalgo was one by Rosa Espino, the female pseudonym of Vicente Riva Palacio discussed previously. Titled “Death and the Butterfly,” it was a poetic meditation on mortality, by means of a conversation between a butterfly and the Angel of Death who emerges from a grave.
93. Laurena Wright de Kleinhans, La emancipación de la mujer por medio del estudio, México: Imprenta Nueva, 1891. Sadly, this book is extremely rare: the WorldCat online catalog lists only one library in the world with a copy.
94. Refugio Barragán de Toscano [1845–1916] is now acknowledged as the first Mexican-born woman novelist, with her 1886 work La hija del bandido o Los subterráneos del nevado. Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer, the editor of El Álbum de la Mujer, published a novel in Mexico in 1885 (El suplicio de una coqueta), but she was Aragonese
by highlighting the perceived contradictions between her domestic life and her intellectual pursuits. The poem in question, with Wright’s name as its title (albeit misspelled), begins as follows:

LAURENA WRIGHT [sic] DE KLEINHANS
(UN RECUEUDO A MI QUERIDA AMIGA,
LA SRA. REFUGIO ÁVILA DE LÓPEZ)

Hay una vida mas grande  There is a life far greater
Que la que dá el pensamiento: Than that which thought provides:
La vida del sentimiento  A life of feeling,
Del cariño y del amor;  Of love and tenderness;
La vida pura y honrada  A life honorable and pure,
Que siempre bella parece: Whose beauty is always apparent:
Blanquisima flor que crece  A flower so white, which grows
Nacida en el corazón.95 From its birthplace in the heart.

The poem affirms that a life “of love and tenderness” is superior to that of thought; the understanding here, of course, was that Wright had committed herself to the latter. The composition continues, with its target being further reminded that in the home,

Allí es donde vos, señora,  It is there, madam, where you
Sois reina, vestal y dueña,  Are vestal [chaste], queen, and hostess,
Y vuestra alma sólo suena  And where your soul resonates
Con su materna afición[].96  With maternal affection alone[].

Laurena Wright should, in other words, expect to play the role of queen in the home, where her heart might focus solely on maternal affection, as opposed to outside of it, as was undoubtedly required of a magazine editor. In this work, Barragán thus takes a well-regarded woman writer to task for having strayed too far from the domestic world, due to her interest in the world of thought and ideas. Also implied in this poem, with its emphasis on the “honorable and pure” and “vestal” life of the home, was that Wright’s public role was a potentially dishonorable one for her. Given the prevailing norms of the day for women, such an implication was a highly critical and pointed one.97

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97. Wright had the opportunity to reply in her biographical-critical survey of Barragán’s work a couple of years later, but was very charitable to the “inspired and proper
In the face of criticisms of this kind, Wright’s supporters among women would be sure to emphasize her virtues as wife and mother. A regular cronista for El Álbum de la Mujer, for example, remarking on the recent successes of Wright’s daughter as a student and violinist, would also praise Wright for her role, noting that “the poetess [poetisa], prior to being a poetess, is a mother.” Wright’s aforementioned biographical essay further pointed out that “far from representing the type of woman of letters [literata] that some writers, perhaps with good reason, have caricatured, she personifies that of the tender and abnegated wife for whom the concerns of the home are her principal and most pleasant duty.” And Dolores Correa y Zapata, in another contemporary review of Wright’s career, assured mothers that they had nothing to fear for themselves or their daughters in being exposed to Wright’s work: “Tender and loving mothers, do not fear that you might find yourself facing the stern and scowling brow of a cold priestess of science. Laurena is also the angel of a home.” In making this case, Wright’s supporters may have also been attempting to fill a noticeable gap: after all, it seems Wright very rarely made reference to her own family in poetry or prose, as did many of her contemporaries. This silence on her part was somewhat novel for the times and, on its own, might have drawn the attention of critics.

Laurena Wright’s conception of her responsibilities as a woman writer can be seen most clearly in her responses to the fan mail she received. She would receive messages of admiration and support in the form of poetic compositions from Mexican women—messages that were published in Las Hijas del Anáhuac. The praise for Wright was typically effusive, as in the following fragment from a poem sent by “Sensitiva”:

¡...! sois de la Mexicana
La palanca poderosa,
De la mujer estudiosa
La fuente de ilustración!

For the Mexican woman you are
Her powerful support,
To the scholarly woman
The fount of enlightenment!

Wright would reply to these messages in verse as well; here, she was often explicit about her goals and aspirations for women, topics she
did not typically address in her prose essays for *Las Hijas*. Her method was, as she noted in one response in verse, of “Searching for intelligence / And obeying reason” (“Buscando la inteligencia / Y acatando la razón”).

Indeed, according to Wright, the tasks at hand for women, and the means to carry them out, were principally intellectual in nature:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manifestar el deseo</td>
<td>To carry out the wishes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que nos dicta nuestra mente,</td>
<td>Given us by our mind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expresar lo que se siente;</td>
<td>To express what one feels,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sostener lo que se cree;</td>
<td>To support what one believes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De nuestro sexo abatido</td>
<td>To lament any retreat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deplorar el retroceso,</td>
<td>On the part of our battered sex,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y aspirar á su progreso</td>
<td>To aspire to its progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con anhelo de mujer.</td>
<td>With a woman’s yearning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esto no es obra de genio,</td>
<td>This is not a work of genius,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De virtud, ni de talento;</td>
<td>Nor of virtue, or talent;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es tan sólo el cumplimiento</td>
<td>It is merely to follow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De una tendencia común,</td>
<td>A common tendency,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Es efectuar lo que haría</td>
<td>To carry out what</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todo cerebro que alcanza</td>
<td>Any brain would do, that catches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Un destello de esperanza,</td>
<td>A sparkle of hope,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Una ráfaga de luz.</td>
<td>A flash of light.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What Wright calls for, and what women seek, is something that “any brain” would—it is neither exceptional nor requires “genius, . . . virtue, or talent.” Women seek, in fact, a rather “common” process: “To carry out the wishes / Given us by our mind.” The limitations placed on these aspirations were what Wright challenged in her poetry. In her reply to another supporter she describes how such change will hopefully arrive:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Con la esclava del pasado</td>
<td>With the slave of yesterday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lanzándose al porvenir</td>
<td>Leaping into the future,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para guiar y redimir</td>
<td>To guide and redeem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Las nuevas generaciones[.]</td>
<td>The generations to come.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And to a young and admiring aspiring poetisa Wright offers words of encouragement, noting that she would one day be part of a distinguished women’s literary and intellectual milieu, one only in its infancy at present:


These were surely messages of intellectual emancipation—and ones that ignored contemporary concerns with feminine modesty and reserve, as well as women’s relationship to hearth and home. Indeed, as Wright argued in *The Emancipation of Women by Means of Learning*, the arts and education could take “woman’s soul, yearning for advancement,” away from the world of “obscurantism and seclusion.” However, such learning was something that had “always been closed” to women, resulting in a “oppressed and uncultured mass, relegated to the dark corners of the home, and the austere prisons that are the convent.” Such a criticism of female domesticity—and its counterposition to the arts, literature, and knowledge—was among the sharpest publicly made in Wright’s times.

Dolores Correa y Zapata, although on record as a defender of Lauraena Wright, would take a course different from that of her controversial contemporary. She was born into a family that included intellectuals, Liberal activists, and poets, and was educated at home, due to the absence of any schooling for girls in her home town in the state of Tabasco. As an adult, she would address this problem herself by founding a school for girls and, later, upon moving to Mexico City, would occupy various government posts related to women’s education for the remainder of her life. 


106. Wright de Kleinhans, *La emancipación de la mujer por medio del estudio*, p. 20.


108. A similar argument is made by Josefa Massanés [1811–1887], a Spanish writer, reprinted in *El Álbum*. In her poem “Resolución,” she describes life in the home as “Forbidden to write, / To think and to read, / One’s only friend is to sow, / To murmurs, or to sleep.” (“Anatema a escribir, / Al meditar y leer, / Amigo sólo coser, / Y murmurar, o dormir.”). In this case, domesticity and leisure are not portrayed as the fount of inspiration that many male writers made them out to be; in the absence of reading, writing and thinking, domestic seclusion was, in fact, a fount of boredom. (Josefa Massanés, “Resolución,” *El Álbum de la Mujer*, Tomo I, Núm. 7, 21 de Octubre de 1883, p. 107.)
life. Her goal was, as she put it, “to give the women of our country an education equal to that of men.” For Correa y Zapata, however, equality in education did not necessarily imply formal equality in other senses; in her view, domesticity, family, and the feminine virtues associated with these remained important for women, even as authors and artists. The tension among these, and the challenges they posed for women, were themes that Correa y Zapata often turned to in her writing.

Such is the case in her article “Los ambiciosos” (“The Ambitious”), which appeared in Las Hijas del Anáhuac in 1888. On the one hand, Correa y Zapata argues that women should first and foremost seek to “sacrifice all human ambitions to the ambition for glory which most dignifies [enaltece] woman: to make her family happy.” Yet just because women could attain their most virtuous glory through their domestic responsibilities did not exclude the path of creative endeavor as another potential source of glory for women:

A Spanish writer has said that women who have an ambition for glory are seen as hungry dogs who leap for a bone placed too high for them to reach.— Needless to say, we do not share the galant opinion of this illustrious writer, but without lacking in modesty, we believe that women can be granted the right to aspire to glory and the possibility of achieving it. It is understood that we use this term as the glory associated with the soul, due to the noble and gentle nature of women. It would be laughable, for example, [to seek] the glory that comes with the trophies of victory, boasting, like Napoleon, laurels soaked in the blood of the vanquished. Rather we are captivated, and fly on wings of admiration before the genius of the woman artist, whether with the sonorous harmonies that spring from the pressure of her delicate fingers, impregnated with the sweetness of sentiment; or her skilled paintbrush, which reproduces a magical portrait of nature, adorned with the fantastic creations of her dreamlike imagination.

Women could thus seek glory and acclaim, which derived from an "admiration in the face of the genius" of their creativity. As she notes, this genius specifically stems from the “noble and gentle nature of women,”

110. For biographical information on Dolores Correa y Zapata, see Laurena Wright de Kleinhans, “Dolores Correa y Zapata,” Las Violetas del Anáhuac, Año I, Tomo I, Núm. 46, October 21, 1888, as well as a longer and updated entry in Wright de Kleinhanss Mujeres notables mexicanas, p. 394–402.
113. For a similar argument, see Eva, [sic] “La misión de la mujer,” El Búcaro, 1873.
their “sweetness of sentiment” and “dreamlike imagination.” A boundary is also clearly drawn separating these gifts and their achievements from the sort of glory that could be attained by men. Women could wear laurels, Correa y Zapata argues, but never ones bloodied by the fruits of political or military victory. There need not be any concern that women would seek to wield the sword, as a Napoleon—or a Mexican man for that matter—would. This argument is, in fact, echoed by Laurena Wright in *The Emancipation of Women by Means of Learning:*

You may remain calm, those you [men] who, fearing the loss of some part of your power, attack the emancipation of women with ridicule; she will not take your warships from you; . . . you will never see her put on the conqueror’s helmet, nor the military boots of Frederick the Great. She will take Venus rather than Hercules as her model. It is not the material side of your throne that she wishes to scale; it is the other, the higher, the more difficult perhaps, . . . the intellectual side.  

But if men alone were to wield the sword, or put on the conqueror’s helmet, then they could not abandon it, even in writing poetry. Correa y Zapata’s sympathies for traditional gender norms were not directed toward women alone. If men were to hold a monopoly over the public political arena, then Correa y Zapata would insist they do justice to this responsibility. Thus she thus took Mexican male poets to task for their attempted literary retreat from public life, doing so in verse:

*De veras me causa y me aflige*  
*Ver que ponen algunos á la moda*  
*Esa vieja y fatal monomanía*  
*Que han tenido los poetas de más voga [sic],*  
*De decir que dicha verdadera*  
*La soledad no más la proporciona*  
*Porque es la sociedad horrible caos[.]*  

115

The work continues, speaking also to those male poets who would go one step further and attempt to escape from humanity entirely, somehow retreating into the natural world:

*Si yo pudiera hablar en voz tan alta,*  
*Que pudieran oírme esos señores,*

Que aseguran así con tanto aplomo
Those that affirm with such aplomb

Que el hombre debe huir siempre del hombre
That man should always flee from man

Porque es la humanidad la peor especie
Since humanity is the worst species

De los seres que existen en la orbe,
Of being that exist on the earth

Y que solo se encuentra la ventura
And can find its goodness only

En medio de las selvas y los bosques,
In the midst of jungles and forests

Les dijera con calma: Señoritos:
I would calmly tell them: my dear Gentlemen

Aclaremos partidas y razones;
Let’s get our story straight;

Vosotros que tenéis almas tan bellas,
You who have such beautiful souls,

Sentimientos tan puros y tan nobles,
Sentiments so noble and pure,

Pensamientos tan grandes y elevados,
Thoughts so elevated and so great,

Tan buenos y sensibles corazones,
Such good and sensitive hearts,

Respondedme tan sólo una pregunta:
Answer me but one question:

¿sois panteras, sois tigres, ó sois hombres?117
are you tigers, are you panthers, or are you men?

Hence those poets who felt that “man should always flee from man,” away from society and into solitude, if not into the world of nature—these poets were not exactly men. Men belong in the “chaos” of society, and, moreover, this is where their poetry should be directed.

The focus of women’s poetry was also an issue Correa y Zapata wrestled with. This tension clearly emerges in her poem “Las dos liras” (“The Two Lyres”), which directly contrasts the creative expression of men and women.118 The poem is divided in two: the first half deals with “La lira de él”; the second, with “La lira de ella.” In the former, narrated in a male poetic voice, the man’s lyre secures glory for him, but he relies on women as a Muse:

LA LIRA DE ÉL

Ella que forma del amor su historia
She who makes her story from love

Y que tan sólo en el amor delira,
And who only in love delights

Henchido siente el corazón de gloria
Feels her heart swell with glory

Cuando escucha los cantos de mi lira.
When she listens to the songs from my lyre.

Y yo bendigo el amor de su historia,
And I bless the love of her story,

116. Note that the diminutive “Señoritos” is used here to imply mild contempt.
118. Initially appearing in Las Violetas del Anáhuac, this poem was later reproduced in José María Vigil’s Poestisus mexicanas.
Thus the world of women, characterized by love and sentiment, inspires the man’s lyre and brings him glory. Meanwhile, the glory that a woman might experience, the man says, will come from hearing the notes he plays. The subsequent story of the woman’s lyre, told in a woman’s poetic voice, differs by restating the tense relationship between the ideas of modesty and acclaim:

**LA LIRA DE ELLA**

If you hear tell of a sweetly vibrating
Lyre, which, ignored by all,

Imortal cadaver in its tomb,
Like a cadaver, useless in its tomb,

Always carried hidden in my soul,
It is not for any dream of ephemeral triumphs,

Or an ambition for useless laurels,
Nor do I dedicate my songs to the world

As if the world’s opinion mattered to me;
It’s that if I exchange my songs for applause,

And I accept this applause with smiles,
It is because I want you to know my worth

When they applaud the notes from my lyre.

Despite its sweetness, “la lira de ella” is disregarded by all. The woman poet plays her lyre, but denies that she does so to seek “ephemeral triumphs” or “useless laurels” or to obtain recognition from the wider world. She might receive acclaim in the form of applause—repeated here

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three times—and smile in response to this, but this response is simply so that the one to whom she addresses these lines—a man, one can assume—may know her worth. This man, moreover, is clearly not a critic, a part of “the world’s opinion,” but rather an intimate, a lover.

A sense of tragedy often pervades Correa y Zapata’s work when discussing women’s creative and intellectual aspirations.\(^1\)\(^2\) This tragedy was born of the conflict she perceived between women’s own nature and traditional responsibilities, and the pull of their worldly literary ambitions. She appears to have been genuinely conflicted or uncertain regarding the virtues of women’s poetic expression and the “laurels” and “glory” it might bring. This uncertainty is perhaps most visible in the brief essay “My verse,” which served as the introduction to her 1886 collection of poetry *Trails and Sketches* [*Estelas y bosquejos*]. On the one hand, regarding women’s love for poetry, Correa y Zapata would note that “at times I have doubted whether it is a good or an evil for woman.”\(^3\)\(^4\) Indeed, she went so far as to describe music and painting as “the fine arts more appropriate to my sex.”\(^5\)\(^6\)

Yet Correa y Zapata would write verse nonetheless, albeit while affirming that “it has never crossed my mind to make a profession of poetry or literature”—rather, writing was something she pursued only in her “moments of idleness.”\(^7\)\(^8\) Such statements notwithstanding, she would also assert that “there is not a woman who does not feel, who does not carry within her, poetry.”\(^9\)\(^10\) Of women writers, she would note that in her childhood, “I owed more pleasant hours of distraction to the untutored [incorrecta] but heartfelt pen of more than one woman, than to the classic books by eminent authors.”\(^11\)\(^12\) It seems that although Correa y Zapata was uncertain as to whether writing and poetry might be good or evil for women, she continued to write and, indeed, also believed that she had benefited from it.

What course, then, should women follow? How could they reconcile their more worldly ambitions—and the potential pitfalls associated with them—with their gender? Correa y Zapata provides one normative answer, a cautious one, in a short poem dedicated to schoolgirls:

121. This sense of tragedy is even more pronounced in the case of women’s pursuit of science and other forms of secular knowledge traditionally dominated by men, although these arguments by Correa y Zapata are outside the present scope of this article. See, for example, “La mujer científica,” in Dolores Correa y Zapata, *Estelas y bosquejos: Poesías*, p. 80 and her commentary on the same poem on p. 5.


123. Correa y Zapata, “Mis versos,” in *Estelas y bosquejos*, p. 3.

124. Correa y Zapata, “Mis versos,” in *Estelas y bosquejos*, p. 3.


It is worth comparing this work, and its advice to the next generation of women, to that put forward by Laurena Wright. The latter poet held out hope for the intellectual growth and emancipation of women and called on them to “with boldness excel” in these pursuits, thus escaping from “obscurantism and seclusion.” Correa y Zapata, however, advised her young readers seeking laurels to look for them in “God, family, conscience, and duty”—in other words, by more traditional means. They should avoid the conflicts and the “bitterness” associated with seeking “chimerical glories” in the wider world.

In all this, Correa y Zapata was no less articulate or thoughtful than Wright. She clearly believed that the literary and intellectual road to laurels and acclaim for women often led to frustration, bitterness, or tragedy. Yet she never clarified how such arguments might have related to her own rather atypical life experience, as an educator, government official, writer, and poet. Was she ever alluding to herself and to the consequences of her own endeavors? As a woman writer, she remained ambivalent, or conflicted, as to the glory that letters could provide, yet she also never attained the “glory that most dignifies woman,” as she described it. For all her praise for the role of wife and mother, she, whether by choice or misfortune, would remain unmarried and childless over the course of her life.

The two women, however, also shared a particular poetic orientation, one that would have been notable in their day. Unlike the male versifiers that Correa y Zapata had mocked as “tigers, or panthers,” men who fled their social responsibilities as poets, both women chose to write for a didactic purpose, focusing on the responsibilities and decisions facing women. Unlike General Riva Palacio’s “Rosa Espino,” and many other women poets, they eschewed the prevailing practice of sentimental verse. Their work typically did not focus on what Barragán, Wright’s poetic critic, referred to as the “life of feeling, / of love and tenderness.” In fact, the Romantic woman, according to Correa y Zapata, was characterized by “vice, an excess of sensibility, making woman a inoffensive character.” Society was regrettably “useless for her.”

Wright described her own approach as “searching for intelligence / and obeying reason” and in The Emancipation of Women would argue to her female readers that men “have given your heart the freedom to feel, but not given your intelligence the freedom to think.”

Given their poetic outlook—favoring the social and didactic over the emotive and sentimental—Wright and Correa y Zapata could arguably be described as literary followers of the maestro Altamirano himself. Indeed, unlike so many of Altamirano’s often disobedient sons, both of his unacknowledged daughters explicitly chose to set aside their “effeminate lyre” and its associated “whining Romanticism.” While their immodest approach likely earned them both a place on the list of “garrulous lettered broads” so disdained by some contemporaries, they nonetheless continued to write poetry with a broader purpose, animated by their respective visions for Mexican women.

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Reading the fruits of “la lira de ella” was certainly more common for literate Mexicans by the 1880s than ever before. Yet hearing its notes was not. Women’s public performance of their work ran the risk—even more

128. Correa y Zapata, “Mis versos,” in Estelas y bosquejos, p. 5.
129. Wright de Kleinhans, La emancipación de la mujer por medio del estudio, p. 24.
130. Evidence establishing a link between Ignacio Altamirano and these two women, or even commentary on each other’s work, has yet to be discovered by the author of this article. Altamirano did read El Álbum de la Mujer; according to passing mentions in his correspondence, and seemed to keep abreast of the women’s poetry published in the press. (See, for example, Ignacio Altamirano, Obras completas, vol. XX, p. 214, 217, 223, 361, Obras completas, vol. XIII, p. 70.) More generally, the maestro’s literary circles and discussions were limited to men. Wright de Kleinhans and Correa y Zapata, however, were undoubtedly familiar with the body of Altamirano’s writings and arguments.
than writing—of undermining the feminine virtues of modesty and self-abnegation. The question of performance was not a trivial one for poets, because verse was not just meant to be written and read, but also spoken and heard. To be a “true poet”—as Francisco Pimentel noted—required the oral performance of one’s work to one’s peers or the public. One of the principal sites of poetry performance at this time was undoubtedly literary veladas; these places were where, according to Altamirano, “one hears the sublime accent of the ode, the vibrant voice of the warrior’s song, the sighing notes of verses of love, the smiling voice of the parody.” But gatherings of this kind very rarely included women as poets.

There were many reasons for this, of course. Popular attitudes were often unfriendly to those forms of oral expression by women seen as transgressing gender boundaries, and in this area, the boundaries were fairly narrowly defined. That women should be seen and not heard is not an unfair summary of these views. Contemporary expressions or proverbs provide some examples of prevailing attitudes. One is from a

131. With a largely illiterate population limited to “sermons, martial music, and verses” (Cosío Villegas, *Historia moderna de México, vol. IV, El Porfiriato: La vida social*, p. 678), that an emphasis on oral performance existed in Mexico is not surprising. Francisco Pimentel’s lengthy survey of the novel in Mexico, for example, was not focused solely on the novel; it was titled *Novelistas y oradores mexicanos*, and the majority of its pages critically examined Mexican orators dating back to the colonial period. (Francisco Pimentel, *Novelistas y oradores mexicanos*, in Jacinto y Fernando Pimentel, eds., *Obras completas del d. Francisco Pimentel, Tomo V*, México: Tipografía Económica, 1904.) Indeed, when men of letters praised their contemporaries, their oratorical skills were often identified as one aspect of their greatness; thus General Riva Palacio reminds his readers that when it comes to poetry, “do not read Prieto, hear him” and so witness the “the roar of hurricanes” and the “fearsome thunder of the tempest.” (Riva Palacio, *Los ceros: Galería de contemporáneos*, p. 138.) For a description of Ignacio Ramírez’s celebrated talents as an orator, see Ignacio Altamirano, *Ignacio Ramírez: Biografía*, Toluca, México: Gobierno del Estado de México, 1977 [1889], p. 87–89. Note that the period under study also largely precedes the arrival of recorded music and the telephone in Mexico: everything anyone ever heard was live and in person.


133. With a pair of notable exceptions to be discussed below. In general, the literary press of the period records few instances of women giving public addresses in literary or intellectual settings. See, for example, Refugio Aguirre del Pino, “Academia de Música de J.N. Loreto: Escuela Normal de Preceptores, Discurso pronunciado por la Serriñota [sic] Refugio Aguirre del Pino, en la 71° reunión de esta academia, la tarde del 11 de Abril de 1875,” *El Federalista*, Tomo VIII, Núm. 16, 25 Abril 1875, giving an extremely rare speech; Satur L. de Alcalde, “Discurso de la Sra. Satur L. de Alcalde, leído á su nombre,” *El Federalista*, Tomo VIII, Núm. 10, 7 Marzo 1875, where her speech honoring Quintana Roo is read by a man; Eloisa Agüero, “Poesía de Guillermo Prieto, leída por la Sra. Eloisa Agüero, en la fundación a beneficio de las víctimas de los terremotos de Jalisco,” *El Federalista*, Tomo VIII (2), Núm. 11, 12 Septiembre 1875, where she reads a poem, but not her own: that of Guillermo Prieto.
popular adage published in the literary newspaper *El Precursor*, which simply reads: “the serpent, after having seduced woman, lent her his tongue.”\(^{134}\) Other examples can be found in Ignacio Altamirano’s collection of traditional Mexican proverbs.\(^{135}\) One of these reads as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ni mujer que hable latín} & \quad \text{Neither a woman who speaks Latin} \\
\text{Ni hombre que hable como gachupín} & \quad \text{Nor a man who speaks like a Spaniard.}
\end{align*}
\]

Educated speech by women—speaking Latin—is equated here with a man speaking like a *gachupín*, a derogatory term for a Spaniard; in other words, neither is seen as desirable. Another of the proverbs states:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{No fíes de indio barbón} & \quad \text{Have no trust in a bearded Indian} \\
\text{ni de gachupín lampiño} & \quad \text{or a clean-shaven Spaniard} \\
\text{de mujer que hable como hombre, de hombre que hable como niño.}\(^{137}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Here, a woman who “speaks like / a man” should be as little trusted as other oddities: a “bearded Indian,” a “clean-shaven Spaniard,” or a man who speaks as a child does. Again, women’s speech was expected to remain within explicit boundaries.

These popular attitudes regarding women’s oral expression were found among literatos as well. One case is that of the poet Juan A. Mateos,\(^{138}\) who published a regular crónica in *El Búcaro*, a literary periodical from the 1870s directed toward women. Writing in jest in one of his columns, he makes note of a troublesome new scientific invention: “The ugly sex [*sexo feo*, i.e., men] has just received some momentous news that has filled it with consternation: a talking machine has just been invented!”\(^{139}\) Mateos explains why this new technology is such a cause for alarm:

Husbands are furious, raising the cry that they already have their hands full with their women, and now there is this machine, as if her tongue was not enough of a racket to deafen their ears. These gentlemen are certain that their wives will take hold of the aforementioned machine, and then there will be no other op-

\(^{134}\) “La mujer (Pensamientos),” *El Precursor*, Año 1, Núm. 18, 15 Febrero 1875, p. 283.
\(^{135}\) Among his many interests, the maestro was also an avid chronicler of traditional and folkloric Mexico.
\(^{138}\) Mateos, as we have already seen, had little patience for “garrulous lettered broads.”
tion but to take flight, to desert, to flee, hide, disappear; because if just one machine, which is woman, can cause such mischief [diabluras], what might happen if she were to have another organ for expressing the labyrinth of her ideas?¹⁴⁰

In the end, Mateos appeals to his male readers—in a women’s literary magazine—to try to be more tolerant of their spouses’ talk. Yet this tolerance still had its limits:

Allow her to speak, to chit-chat, to vent, to have the machine: endure her, given that she tolerates you all; but do not allow your mother-in-law to seize control of this terrible apparatus, or your sister-in-law to become adept at its operation, no; because then [. . .] they will end up making you deaf. [. . .] Keep it for the fair sex, [but] give to your spouse and . . . kill yourself thereafter!¹⁴¹

The arena in which women poets would surely experience the creative constraints associated with these attitudes was in the veladas. One such event from the 1880s provides a useful window into the prevailing gender norms around the performance of poetry, as well as contemporary challenges to these norms. The velada was held in the home of General Riva Palacio (recently unmasked as “Rosa Espino”) and was reviewed by the poet and critic Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera for the periodical El Partido Liberal. The same event was also reviewed by an anonymous author in El Álbum de la Mujer, likely the editor Concepción Gimeno de Flaqueur or a close collaborator. The two accounts are useful for the details they provide of the velada itself and, more importantly, for the differing perspectives of two notable male and female participants.

Both agreed that the Riva Palacio velada was a very successful affair. According to the anonymous report in El Álbum, “a party in the home of Riva Palacio is an event in the annals of the life of the spirit. As did the Medicis in Florence, Vicente Riva Palacio gathers together all those highly regarded in the sciences, the arts, and letters.”¹⁴² Moreover, by this time, women were regularly in attendance at such events and even played some role in the proceedings: at different points in the evening’s program, women either played the piano or sang.¹⁴³ One poet, according to Gutiérrez Nájera, “celebrated with elegant and sonorous verses the graces of that precious half of humanity.”¹⁴⁴ Then, following a num-

¹⁴¹ Mateos, “Revista de la semana,” El Búcaro, 1873, p. 98.
ber of poetry performances by men, the event concluded with Concepción Gemeno de Flaquer reading “La tempestad” (“The Tempest”), a poem by Antonio García Gutierrez.

According to Gutiérrez Nájera’s subsequent account in El Partido Liberal, Flaquer’s reading was exceptional. She was, he effusively reported, “able to give the verses a soul of fire.” Indeed, “it seemed that in passing through her lips each verse took on wings.” Flaquer, meanwhile, was undoubtedly aware of the power and importance of speech: as she noted in her study of the women of the French Revolution a few years later, “to speak [tomar la palabra], was to dominate.” If nothing else, she was certainly not choosing to highlight her feminine modesty with her fiery delivery. But Gutiérrez Nájera’s fulsome praise was qualified in nature; as he noted of her reading, “even the most prosaic [of men], the men of statistics, wished that night to be poets so as to have the honor that their poetry be recited by Madam de Flaquer.” In other words, Gutiérrez Nájera’s interest was focused on Flaquer’s abilities as a passionate reader of the work of others and the inspiration it could provide to men. From Flaquer’s perspective as a writer, this acclaim or glory was limited: after all, she did not read her own work, but someone else’s—a man’s.

This reaction can be adduced from the subsequent pointed criticisms raised of the whole affair in El Álbum de la Mujer, written from the perspective of the woman poet and artist. The festivities could certainly be favorably compared to the French salons of the seventeenth century, argued the anonymous cronista. But lest anyone forget, at the latter events women of letters played an important role: “Do not believe that in this [seventeenth-century] temple of knowledge goddesses were lacking; where women are not to be found, then humanity cannot be well-represented; in this celebrated salon of the gay science, Charlotte de Montmorency, Mme. de Sablé, Mlle. De Scudery, Mlle. De Montpensier, all shone, and far too many others to list.” At Riva Palacio’s distinguished velada, however, despite a number of women being in attendance, none appeared as artistic creators in their own right: they all sang, played, or read works composed by others, and more specifically, by men. The columnist challenges her readers on this issue, arguing that: “I am certain that the Mexican woman loves arts and letters, and not only loves them, but also cultivates them. Beautiful portraits exist in Mexico thanks to her brush, and in music there are innumerable Mexican

women that excel . . . The Mexican woman has a temperament that is
disposed to her taking up creations of beauty with enthusiasm, and is
also herself a creator."148 The author further adds that

this association between women and wise men [in the French salons] seems to
have been hidden [censurada] from General Riva Palacio, by whom I don’t know;
undoubtedly by some sullen misanthrope who disdains the very idea of inviting
women to literary festivities; all new ideas are generally attacked without
studying the benefits they bring, because it is much easier to fight than to ana-
lyze. The Mexican woman does not disavow either arts or letters: if to this day
she has not appeared in Athenæums, Academies and literary gatherings, it is be-
cause they have not counted on her as an organizer of such festivities.149

In its cautious and indirect criticism of the General, therefore, El Álbum
notes that women had yet to be included as either full participants or
organizers within the various male-dominated arenas of Mexican liter-
ary and intellectual life. Strictly speaking, however, El Álbum and Fla-
quar, were mistaken. Both minor and prominent cases contradicted her
argument, of which she was undoubtedly aware. In particular, there were
two notable examples from the recent past of women who had partici-
pated rather visibly in the male literary world.

The first was Dolores Guerrero, who arrived in Mexico City in 1850
to great fanfare at only seventeen years of age. Already admired for her
poetry, she had moved to the capital with her father, a recently elected
senator. Significantly, “Lola” Guerrero did not restrict herself to the realm
of the home: she attended the gatherings of capital’s prominent literatos,
and soon became a popular figure in their circles. Her work was published
and celebrated, and one of her poems was even set to music, becoming
highly popular among the chic youth of the capital.150 And yet in spite of
her fame, Guerrero met an unfortunate fate. According to the poet Luis
Ortiz, in his account of Guerrero’s short life, “the poetess suffered a sin-
gle failed affair [desengaño], and was disgraced [fue desgraciada]!”151
Following her tragic loss, she returned to her native Durango, “mortal-
ly sad,” and died not long after, apparently of a broken heart.152 “Poor girl!”

148. Vestina, “Crónica mexicana,” El Álbum de la Mujer; Año IV, Tomo VI, Núm. 2,
149. Vestina, “Crónica mexicana,” El Álbum de la Mujer; Año IV, Tomo VI, Núm. 2,
150. Luis G. Ortiz, “Dolores Guerrero,” El Federalista, Tomo II, Núm 21, 8 de Di-
ciembre de 1872, p. 324; Juan de Dios Peza, “Una poetisa mexicana,” El Álbum de la Mu-
jer; Tomo II, Núm. 22, 1 de Junio de 1884, p. 319.
151. Ortiz, “Dolores Guerrero,” El Federalista, Tomo II, Núm 21, 8 de Diciembre de
1872, p. 32.
152. Dios Peza, “Una poetisa mexicana,” El Álbum de la Mujer; Tomo II, Núm. 22,
1 de Junio de 1884, p. 319.
adds Ortiz, “she was in fact quite disgraced, and our hand holds back from tracing the sad story of a flower poisoned by betrayal at the very morning of its life.” Dolores Guerrero would undoubtedly become the unspoken poster child for what could befall a young woman of literary talent who rises to public renown, leaving the security of domestic life.

A second case, more recent and more successful, was that of the aforementioned Josefina Pérez. Another teenager highly regarded for her poetry writing, she moved to Mexico City from her native Jalapa in 1867. She became, like Dolores Guerrero, a young star, and she even read her work—a novel event—at the new Liceo Mexicano, presided over by the elder statesman Ignacio Ramírez. According to Juan de Dios Peza,

all the most regarded literatos and poets, Ignacio Ramírez, Manuel Altamirano, Luis G. Ortiz,Guillermo Prieto, Joaquín Tellez, Manuel Acuña, Agustín F. Cuenca, and many others greeted her arrival [at the capital] by dedicating inspired songs to her, celebrating veladas in her honor in our best Lyceum [the Liceo Hidalgo]; offering her an album with the best examples of the flowers of Jalapa and the immortal flower of our Parnassus [that is, a book of dried flowers, containing poetry written by the aforementioned men]; invited her to write in the most reputable publications and read her work in the most interesting circles and the most famous gatherings of the country.

The contributions to the famed “album of dried flowers” from her admiring literatos were also published in the literary press. Josefina Pérez did not meet a tragic fate and eventually married, becoming “de García Torres,” and despite her public literary profile, she was praised by contemporary men of letters for her feminine modesty and reserve.

Given these cases, what does one make of Concepción Gemino de Flaquer’s sweeping criticisms of the veladas and of women’s place in

154. Her work was well-regarded enough in posterity to appear in 1893 in José María Vigil’s Poetisas mexicanas.
157. Vicente Riva Palacio, “Á Josefina Pérez (En su Álbum),” El Eco de Ambos Mundos, 1873, p. 159; Guillermo Prieto, “Á Josefina Pérez (En su Álbum de Flores Secas),” El Eco de Ambos Mundos, 1873, p. 86-89. Note that such an album was apparently a common possession for elite women. They wrote their own poetry in it and asked their guests (and perhaps poetically inclined ones in particular) to write a few words in them as a gift or a message for posterity—hence the title of the periodical El Álbum de la Mujer.
158. This despite the fact that Pérez engaged in a dialogue of sorts in the literary press with male literatos that appears fairly unconventional for a woman of her day. One
the Mexican literary world? If nothing else, they reveal an unwillingness to accept whatever progress might have already been made. Josefina Pérez’s stardom had apparently not changed much, or certainly not enough to register in her critical assessment of women’s place in Mexico’s world of letters. Despite women’s occasional appearances to date, for Flaquer these were not something to celebrate, but rather something to deem insufficient. Moreover, she was willing, and able, to raise this criticism in print. For its time, these steps were significant ones.

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In spite of their occasional objections to their place, women poets and writers ultimately found only qualified admission into the small but lively literary milieu of this period in Mexico. The regard they were able to obtain was often connected to a strong belief in the creative power of their domesticity, which ostensibly provided them with a fount of emotion and inspiration that men of letters praised and, at times, envied. This interest in the feminine domestic realm stemmed in part from the importance that Liberals attached to the family and women’s role within it, but also from literatos’ own frustrations with Mexican public life and their desire to be independent of it. They thus frequently shied away from the repeated admonitions of Ignacio Altamirano to write a masculine, patriotic verse and instead continued to pursue the sentimental themes “of love, pleasure, and fantastic sorrow.”

Yet such praise for women’s poetry notwithstanding, the ideal of domesticity also served to limit women’s creative and intellectual endeavors. Some contemporaries believed these pursuits would lead women to disregard their responsibilities to household and family; the arts, therefore, should, at most, serve as an “adornment” for women. Moreover, certain qualities associated with the domestic ideal—particularly feminine modesty and self-abnegation—would also conflict with women’s aspirations to write. Indeed, although women poets were often praised...
for their modesty and reserve, creative expression among women—and the “gloria” that might come with it—was also regarded by contemporaries as promoting egoism and ambition in women and thus dangerously undermining their domestic virtues. For women poets one notable constraint related to this perspective was the contemporary proscriptions on women’s speech and, by extensión, women’s public performance of their poetry.

Moreover, in spite of the acclaim from some for their achievements in the arts, overt disdain for women’s capacities was also never far away. Juan de Dios Peza, for example, in his introduction to the work of Josefina Pérez, favorably cites the following commentary from the poet Juan A. Mateos—of the talking machine joke—on women’s creative work:

We will state with the rude frankness that characterizes us that we do not believe in woman. She may have a great deal of talent, a privileged imagination, great learning which delights distinguished society, she may fly like the lark and the swallow, but on few occasions will she reach the highest summits of knowledge and genius. For this reason we bow before these marvelous exceptions, which will always glorify human intelligence. 160

To be sure, reaching the “highest summits of knowledge and genius” would always be a Sisyphean task for women if, as Laurena Wright noted, they were believed to be capable of feeling, but not thinking.

The period under study here, however, also saw the beginnings of a challenge by Mexican women authors and poets to these attitudes. This stemmed in part from the increase in their visibility as not just poets, but also prose writers and editors of magazines such as Las Hijas del Anáhuac and El Álbum de la Mujer. In these roles, certain women tested the prevailing gender norms around creative expression. Concepción Gimeno de Flaquer confronted the limits on women’s participation in the arena of public performance, as well as their participation in literary and intellectual life more broadly. Laurena Wright de Kleinans made similar arguments concerning women’s exclusion from the arts and learning in The emancipation of women. Moreover, the work of women writers like Wright and Dolores Correa y Zapata challenged the assumption that sentimentality and a “whining Romanticism” were the only possible poetic or creative voice for women. They may have been seen as “garrulous lettered broads,” but the refusal of both to make domestic life their explicit Muse was itself a novelty—and an implicit challenge to prevailing attitudes about women’s writing. For Wright, in particular, cre-

ative and intellectual development was the path to women’s emancipation, not as something fit only for those blessed with “genius, . . . virtue, or talent,” but something “any brain” would seek once it witnessed “a flash of light.” This path could take women out of the “dark corners” of domestic seclusion. Even so, however, for this generation, the opportunity to achieve the status of “true poets,” if not “gloria,” had not fully arrived.