

# Luxury, Consumption and Desire: Theorizing the *Petimetra*

*Rebecca Haidt is an Associate Professor of Spanish at Ohio State University. She has a book forthcoming on Fray Gerundio de Campazas; and her book Embodiment: Knowing the Body in Eighteenth-Century Spanish Literature and Culture (St. Martin's Press, 1998) was awarded the MLA's Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize for outstanding book in the field of Latin American and Spanish literatures. The present study is part of a larger project on petimetras and cultures of luxury consumption in eighteenth-century Madrid.*

In the second half of the eighteenth century, as Spanish royal administrations increasingly offered protections and subsidies to domestic manufacturers, educated thinkers debated themes—such as imports and internal trade—which they saw as linked vitally to the spread of luxury. “Luxury,” notes Berg, “once associated with the preservation of social hierarchies, and its limitations with Christian economic ethics, became associated [in the eighteenth century] with the expansion of markets, wealth and economic growth” (68). Accordingly, in eighteenth-century Spain the problem of *el lujo* (defined by the *Diccionario de Autoridades* as “exceso y demasía en la pompa y regalo”) held both moral and economic implications: though Spanish critiques associated luxury’s excesses with a variety of ills ranging from economic decline to imbalance of trade to depopulation, “todos los escritos, en mayor o menor medida, se refieren a las graves consecuencias que tiene [el lujo] en el orden moral” (Martínez Chacón 36). Economic works of the 1770s to 1790s urged both targeted investment in industry and labor, and condemnation of the social repercussions of spending on imported luxury goods.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the growth of industry and trade increased the availability of domestic *and* imported goods, and (especially in urban centers such as Madrid and Barcelona) fostered consumer awareness of a burgeoning marketplace in luxury items such as fans, ribbons, fabrics and feathers—wares desired chiefly by women. Indeed, numerous contributions to the debates on luxury targeted *women’s* spending on imported fashions and “frivolous” accoutrements (such as ribbons) as

particularly deleterious to the economic health of the nation. Period critiques of women's spending frequently featured the *petimetra*, a satirical figure that "simbolizaba en diversos sentidos la amenaza que el lujo no controlado hacía pesar sobre el orden social" (Bolufer 186). The *petimetra* was a fashion-crazed female resistant to norms of thrift, diligence and modesty prescribed for persons gendered "feminine." At the beginning of the century the figure was aristocratic (Martín Gaité 88-89); but as the century progressed *petimetras* often were depicted (in theatrical pieces such as *tonadillas* and *sainetes*) as *criadas* and laborers' wives. Whether upper- or lower-class, however, the *petimetra* is much more than a vain female. This becomes apparent when one situates the figure in the context of material culture and eighteenth-century cultures of consumption.<sup>2</sup> In my reading, I have found that most texts "about" *petimetras* are also texts "about" women desiring to buy *things*. That is, the *petimetra* is indeed vain, but she is a vain *consumer* who seeks fashionable items in a marketplace of luxury goods. Her ability to appear what she is not through cultivation of an artificial and purchased exterior references period tensions generated by fashion's capacity to blur established boundaries of class and gender. In this essay I want to theorize the *petimetra* as figurative of cultural anxiety around female agency in the eighteenth-century urban luxury marketplace.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I will argue that the problem represented by the *petimetra* in eighteenth-century Spanish texts is that of the female consumer whose primping and spending (that is, whose purchases and coordination of shoes, frills, fans) amount to unlicensed decisions about the use of resources—a husband's money, her physical energy, the time she should devote to housework—and thereby threaten the stability

and conformations of families, communities and nation.

Thus at the close of his 1762 play *La petimetra*, Nicolás Fernández de Moratín literally strips the *petimetra* of her carefully-constructed exterior when the *petimetra* Jerónima, who has spent the play pretending to be rich and fashionable, must remove the *bata* she had borrowed from her modest (yet well-dowered) cousin María and (as the stage directions inform us) "*queda muy ridícula*" (146).<sup>4</sup> Her pretentious suitor don Damián is mocked as well: "Si a él quitaran lo prestado, / sin duda que pareciera, / por la desnudez de entrambos, / matrimonio de Adán y Eva" (ll. 2837-2840:146). Moratín's analogy of the threadbare condition of the *petimetra* and her *prometido* to the nudity of Adam and Eve is humorous—the exposed couple have no more possessions to their names than did that long-ago duo—yet pointed, for *La petimetra* is a text that would teach readers a moral lesson: the *petimetra* is exposed as an imposter, a woman bereft of domestic skills and thus unprepared to assume the responsibilities and duties of marriage and membership within a wider community.<sup>5</sup>

Jerónima's divestiture presents not (only) the scandal of a woman devoid of virtue but the spectre of fashion itself, for fashion, as depicted in *La petimetra*, is (with its shifts and caprices, its capacity to mask and its drain on resources) a force that converts individual consumer capital—money and physical energy—into illusion alone, an "hojarasca" (Cavaza 10) that jeopardizes Spain's economic and political health. The judge and military advisor Felipe Rojo de Flores's fulmination against fashion's bringing-together of "tantos cabos," countless disparate and frivolous things, as an effect that "alucina el endimientto, y le impide sus funciones para que se emplee en negocios

grandes y magníficos" (11) serves to illustrate a larger premise rendered starkly in Moratín's stripping of *la petimetra*: the idea that the energies of Spaniards must be channeled toward "negocios grandes," must be directed toward proper and constructive occupations, rather than toward the expense and waste that is fashion.

In fact *La petimetra* is one of numerous eighteenth-century economic, political and literary texts treating women's spending on fashion as not only morally unsalubrious but prejudicial in concrete ways to Spain's security.<sup>6</sup> In the following sections I will take Moratín's play as the centerpiece of a constellation of texts through which to trace elaboration of the *petimetra* as a key trope in eighteenth-century Spanish discourse against luxury. While writers such as Pedro Rodríguez, Count of Campomanes and the economist Manuel Romero del Álamo treat a range of topics (such as depopulation, commerce and tax exemptions for manufacturers) in their critiques of luxury, invocation of the *petimetra* in plays such as Moratín's and Ramón de la Cruz's serves the particular purpose of figuring the exhaustive effects of luxury spending, for through the medium of the *petimetra* money, materials (such as textiles) and physical labor become illusion or "hojarasca." Indeed, the *petimetra*, with her refusal to engage in household tasks and her squandering of resources, embodies women's consumption as a contested site in anti-luxury discourse, for she enacts a conflict in which female spending (e.g., women's expenditure of desire and money) is cast as unproductive and therefore antithetical to (what was argued by many Enlightenment authors to be) activity undertaken for the "common good" which would ensure "application" of the individual through the careful administration of time, money and physical ef-

fort. The *petimetra's* pursuit of fashionable foreign finery and her constant cultivation of her appearance channel money and potentially productive physical energy into ephemeral instantiations of appearance, thereby sapping the resources of husbands, fathers and state. The *petimetra* is a trope in which such threats to the economic interests of the nation crystallize in the figure of the female consumer unable or unwilling to govern her desires.

## Desiring Women

In the *jornada tercera* of Moratín's *La petimetra*, Jerónima returns from a shopping trip to the *calle Mayor*. The variety of goods and the attractions of the latest styles have so excited her that she is "cansada" and "molida" (ll. 2204-2205:129), and as she collapses into a chair she recounts what she has seen: "Vaya, vaya, / que está la calle Mayor con tanta gala y primor / que casi pasa de raya" (ll. 2211-2214:129). Jerónima's virtuous cousin María had declined to shop and instead stayed home where, in the *petimetra's* absence, she was proposed to by the wealthy and meritorious don Félix who (though initially interested in Jerónima) has realized that the choice of a spouse should be based on more than a fine appearance. Indeed, when María queries Félix about his previous attentions to the *petimetra*, he responds "Que tal cosa / no me nombres te suplico" (ll. 2104-2105: 126). Within the world of the home, of domestic obligation, Jerónima has no womanly, "human" place—unlike the industrious María, Jerónima is "cosa." It is entirely fitting, then, that when Jerónima returns from her trip to the *calle Mayor* she can think only of what she has seen, her energies having been consumed by not housework but the intense activity of her desire for *things*.

To Moratín's readers one clear difference between the *petimetra* and María would have been Jerónima's *ociosidad* (idleness). Jerónima has a certain amount of discretion in her use of time—and does not employ it well, converting what could be effort applied toward useful ends (sewing, instructive reading, attention to others' needs) into the pursuit of personal interests and pleasures. In fact, Moratín's *petimetra* exemplifies the problem of urban female idleness ranging across classes, from the *nobleza* to the poor. From the time of Cicero onward, idleness was considered the enemy of virtue, a vice with links to many others. "The fear of idleness in Europe up to the eighteenth century was so strong," observes Vickers, "that *otium* could only be accepted if strongly qualified as *honestum*, a leisure which yielded 'fruits'" (153). And from the time of the codification of the seven deadly sins through to the eighteenth century in Europe, the remedy for *ociosidad* was the fruit of *work*—especially work with the hands (Vickers 110). During the Enlightenment, the *ociosidad* of various classes of women (e.g., *solteras* without protectors or independent means; orphans) was addressed as a pressing problem by reformers who founded schools and awarded prizes for *aplicación* in areas such as sewing and weaving (Demerson 165; López de Ayala 34). "Aplicación," however, did not refer to *all* types of work. It excluded, for example, domestic service. A sizeable percentage of women employed in eighteenth-century urban centers worked as servants (the *catastro* of Ensenada of 1752 states that 70% of the working women in Santiago de Compostela, for example, were employed as *criadas* [Rial García 63]; Sarasúa reports estimates that in 1757 domestic servants represented 31% of the Madrid population and, in 1787, between 35% and 40%

thereof [72]). However, Enlightenment reformers viewed servants as "unproductive" in that their work did not generate riches or "fruit" for the nation (Sarasúa 74). Thus Campomanes cautioned in his 1775 *Discurso sobre la educación popular* that *la ociosidad* was especially problematic among urban women and exhorted city women to lead "una vida activa y atareada, en lugar de la flojedad voluptuosa" (215). He proposed a number of occupations fitted to the proper occupation of urban females, such as lacemaking, button making, fan painting, and preparation of "otras materias de las artes, que constan de partes flexibles, y cosas semejantes" (216). Above all, Campomanes urged, "voluptuously idle" women need to learn "la distribución constante del tiempo" (217). In recommending constant and well-monitored work for women, Campomanes is heeding his own words uttered earlier in the *Discurso*, to wit, that "todos los que no promuevan la ocupación de las gentes, no conocen el interés verdadero del público, ni el de su patria" (78).

Moratín's *petimetra* not only embodies the antithesis of Campomanes's patriotic painting and lacemaking, but also epitomizes the scandal of luxury decried by Rojo de Flores in his 1794 *Invectiva contra el lujo*. Rojo rails against the time wasted by upper-class women on shopping, clothes selection and dressing. He laments:

... todo estudio y ansiosa diligencia en el adorno del cuerpo, ocupa una preciosa parte del tiempo en pensar dónde se han de comprar los materiales, cuál ha de ser el color más propio, el bordado de qué calidad... en cuánto tiempo, y por cuántos oficiales se puede hacer este u otro vestido compuesto de tantas o cuántas piezas. (9)

In their uncurbed desires for luxury, privileged urban women spend more time thinking about their appearance and shopping than about working for the good of the nation through marriage and childrearing. Writing in the *Memorial literario* in May 1789, Manuel Romero del Álamo asked readers to imagine “cuántas [mujeres] se tropiezan por las calles perdidas por” luxury’s incitement of desire, “que podrían haber sido muy útiles a la población, colocadas en matrimonio, si no hubiera nacido el lujo que las forzó a vanidades” (102).

When Campomanes writes that “hay el mayor número de mujeres ociosas” in “las poblaciones de mucho vecindario” (217), he is pointing to both a great strength and a great weakness of teeming commercial centers such as Madrid. The heavy concentration of artisans, merchants, financiers, importers and laborers made it possible to do good business; yet the same plethora of wares and services fed consumption, the practice of which occupied the time of upper-class women who, though a prime target in the marketing of imported luxury goods, were exhorted nonetheless to otherwise (that is, productively) employ their days. For urban women of various classes, avoidance of *la ociosidad* included performance of tasks such as sewing, cooking and childrearing, and also, whether in the home or in the shop, the manufacture of goods such as embroideries, sashes, and “los adornos femeniles de todo aquello, en que no entran piedras preciosas, ni metales; cuyos géneros se llaman *de calle mayor*” (Campomanes 216).

As Campomanes’s comment indicates, not only “feminine” adornments but precious metals and jewels were available in the *calle Mayor*, along which (in addition to the *calle de las Postas*) the *gremio* of *mercaderes de joyería*, one of the *cinco gremios*

*mayores*, had been granted the lion’s share of commercial privileges. Each of the five *gremios* was powerful in its own way, though two of the most important were the *gremio de mercaderes de paños* (whose shops were located in and around the *Plaza Mayor* and part of the *calle de Toledo*) and that of the *joyeros* (the others being the *mercaderes de seda*, the *mercaderes de lencería*, and the aligned *mercaderes de mercería, especería, y droguería*). The *calle Mayor* thus was a synecdoche of luxury shopping during the eighteenth and preceding centuries in Madrid,

... no sólo... la avenida céntrica preferida en sus paseos por las damas de alcurnia, caballeros, etc., y, en general, de todo el pueblo ocioso, sino que en ella [sic] se encontraba la mayor parte de los comercios mejor surtidos en vestidos y artículos de lujo. (Capella y Matilla Tascón 48)

As the *Ordenanzas que han de observar los cinco gremios mayores de la villa de Madrid* (1741) stipulated, though the *mercaderes* of the *cinco gremios* were granted specific and limited rights of “venta comunicable” among their stores (so that some of the *merceros* or *drogueros* of the *calle de las Postas*, for example, could sell items such as “todo género de instrumentos para música” and “todo género de perlas falsas de Roma” equally with the *joyeros* of the *calle Mayor* [25-26]), the *mercaderes de joyería* sold some of the finest and most delicately worked goods of their kind: taffeta parasols, bejeweled buttons, snuffboxes of precious woods, perfumed gloves, dressing tables, veils, fans, fabric flowers and other adornments for the hair, china ware, mirrors, watches, boas and tippets of feathers, furs, gauzes or velvets, etc. (20-23).

In tarring the *calle Mayor* with the brush of feminine desires for costly and at-

tractive goods, Moratín was writing within a long-established, particularly *madrileño* discourse. As early as 1622 in the *entremés* “Las aventureras de la Corte” Alonso Jerónimo de Salas Barbadillo details the mutual deceptions employed by a group of women in and around the fashion and jewelry centers of the *Plaza Mayor*, the “calle que llaman de la ropería” and the “calle Mayor” (277).

In Baptista Remiro de Navarra’s *Los peligros de Madrid*, published in 1646, the reader is thus warned in the sixth *peligro*, “De la calle Mayor”:

... en todas las partes hay peligros de gastar con mujeres, pero en la calle Mayor más que en ninguna. Allí, un paso de las tiendas... donde hay tocados, medias, dulces y tan innumerables cosas, es mentar la sogá, mentir la vida. (68)

Capella and Matilla Tascón further observe:

Como las mujeres eran las que sentían principal atractivo, y es lógico, por aquellos comercios de joyeros y sederos, es frecuente que al referirse a ellas los literatos de nuestro Siglo de Oro mencionen... aquellos establecimientos (47).

By the mid-eighteenth century, then, Moratín and contemporaries were able to utilize what had become a secure Spanish *topos* in invective against luxury, that of the *calle Mayor*, to develop an enlightened critique of women’s desires. Ramón de la Cruz’s *La oposición a cortejo* (1773) features a mother who, on a visit to Madrid, explains to a *petimetra* friend that she has brought her daughter along so as to “enseñarla las calles, / la etiqueta y el gobierno / de las visitas, las modas, / botellerías, coliseos, /

tiendas de calle Mayor / y calle de Postas, templos / de más concurrencia” (364). A mother in the manuscript *sainete* “La bella madre” uses one of her own daughters as a servant and claims that she was driven to such economizing by the need to spend in the *calle Mayor*: “Como una está alcanzadilla; / porque aunque en los interiores / de casa haya economía, / están en la calle Mayor / las cosas tan por arriba.” A simple mention of the *calle Mayor* sufficed to communicate to viewers or readers that the characters associated with it were given to disorderly desires for things. In Luis Álvarez Bracamonte’s *Copia perfecta... de el petimetre por la mañana* (1762), for example, one of the few named streets along which the feminized *petimetre* heads is the “Calle Mayor de la locura” (10).<sup>7</sup>

Campomanes was disgusted with the proliferation of bright, imported things available along *la calle Mayor*: the Chinese caps, Persian flowers, Belgian bonnets, “pedrería, y cosas que llaman *de calle mayor*... [son] supérfluas y ridículas en gran parte, y perjudiciales cuando entran de fuera” (57), evidencing Spain’s imbalance of trade. “¡Qué invenciones / para sacar el dinero / y dejarnos sin calzones / encuentran los extranjeros!” (80) cries a character in Ramón de la Cruz’s *La petimetra en el tocador* (1762). It was a commonplace in anti-luxury discourse that in Madrid’s commercial center, foreigners took advantage of Spaniards’ preferences for imported goods. “Todos saben,” observed the author of the 1788 *Discurso sobre el lujo de las señoras, y proyecto de un traje nacional*, “que las gasas, encajes, bordados y estofas delicadas, sobre que principalmente estriva el lujo de las señoras, son géneros que nos vienen de fuera del Reyno” (19). Indeed, in Cruz’s *El chasco de los aderezos* (1765), a woman in a shop rejects some accessories because “[N]ada que se

haya en Madrid [i.e., that is not imported] / es de moda ni es de fama" (209). The author of the "Reflexiones sobre el discurso político-económico del lujo de las señoras," noted that Spain's imbalance of trade and insufficient domestic production capacities were due entirely to "el capricho de nuestra nación, al que le parece despreciable todo lo que no viene de montes o mares allá" (118).

However, such criticism references actual legislative measures targeting the problem of consumer preference for imports: in 1728 a law barring the import of "tejidos de algodón y lienzos pintados extranjeros;" one in 1770 mandating the "absoluta prohibición de la entrada y uso de muselinas en el Reyno;" and in 1779 one forbidding the introduction of "vestidos y ropas hechas fuera del Reyno" (*Novísima Recopilación* IV,ix, tit. XII), are a few of many legal actions undertaken during the century that not only indicate protectionism of regional manufacturing strengths (such as Barcelona's in cotton textiles, or Valencia's in silks) but also acknowledge the urgency of legislation targeting consumer demand for foreign specialty goods. The proliferation of imports evident along the *calle Mayor* and in other Madrid shops generated Enlightenment calls for reform in consumer behaviors such that women's spending on textiles, adornment and clothing would place "the interests of the nation"—that is, consumption favoring domestic commerce and manufacturing—above their own desires.

### "La hojarasca"

What was needed, therefore, was to convince Spaniards of the prejudicial effects of luxury spending in such a way as to rein-

force traditional moral instruction about vices (e.g., idleness and vanity) while teaching readers to think about the problem as one affecting the common good or the good of the nation. The *petimetra* is crucial to this attempt, for she is both a female—a stock locus of vanity in the Christian moralist tradition—and a woman whose desire for things would squander resources that better could be spent toward satisfying the needs of family and community. Ultimately enlightened texts of political economy and literary satires such as Moratín's invoke the *petimetra* to persuade readers that fashionable consumption converts material goods, precious time and physical labor into mere illusion, producing only temporary and useless alterations of façade.

Jerónima's day is a continual process of energy expended for the sake of a momentary change in her appearance. For most of *La petimetra* she is either at the *tocador* or getting dressed, occupied by the question of what to wear, the depilation of her skin, the styling of her hair, and squabbles with Ana, her maid, about a speck of dirt on the mirror. During that altercation, Ana forces Jerónima to admit that she is a masterful hairstylist.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Ana points out that she bears primary responsibility for Jerónima's ability to appear other than what she is, due to her constant mending, altering and trimming of the *petimetra's* garments:

porque otra ninguna habrá  
que pueda poner decente  
con menos costa a su ama,  
pues de cualquier trapo viejo  
formado un vestido deajo,  
digno de la mejor dama,  
que los vestidos de hoy día  
no son de coste, señora,  
porque sólo se usa ahora



hojarasca y policía;  
 y los pocos que tú tienes  
 (ahora que solas estamos)  
 bien sabes que siempre andamos  
 mudándolos. (ll. 352-365:74-75)

Ana points to the incessant thought and effort required for the production of Jerónima's façade: "de cualquier trapo viejo / formado un vestido deajo;" "siempre andamos mudándolos."<sup>9</sup> The penniless *petimetra* must produce an illusory appearance of wealth, brilliance and *buen gusto* through the constant alteration of "trapos." She accomplishes this by borrowing clothing from María (the "vestidos de su prima" [l. 2385:146] that are stripped from her body at the close of the play) and through the switching of ribbons and trim "porque parezcan distintas / ya guarniciones, ya cintas" (ll. 367-368:75) on her "bata," (l. 370) "basquiña" and "falla" (l. 371). As Ana points out, Jerónima's prized exterior, the result of two women's considerable investment of time and work, amounts to "hojarasca y policía:" to display of something "inútil y de poca substancia" (as the *Diccionario de Autoridades* defines *hojarasca*) and the ability to manage that paltry substance through the appearance of taste and cleanliness.

Earlier in the action Jerónima refused to wear a ribboned *cofieta* suggested by another maid, Martina, claiming "que me la puse ayer, / y hoy ponérmela es delito" (ll. 240-241:72) and asking haughtily "¿dónde has visto tú / que una mujer de mis prendas / use dos veces seguidas / una cosa mesma?" (ll. 244-247:72). When Martina points out that everyday use of a thing is offset by that item's "buen gusto" (l. 258), Jerónima scoffs "no hay gusto en el repetir" (l. 260). But a central theme of *La petimetra* is precisely repetition, or the repetitive motion under-

taken by Jerónima in the name of fashion; the labor—the continual altering, shuffling and shifting of decorations, trim and garments—required to maintain the illusion of "buen gusto." "[E]s que, como fatigada / estoy de haberme vestido, con el afán que he tenido / estoy algo sonrosada" (ll. 1793-1796:116) she claims to one of her suitors; for the *petimetra* dressing is an all-consuming activity that stretches across the three *jornadas* of the play. Indeed, when her uncle asks about a meal that the *petimetra* was to have cooked, María informs him that Jerónima is still dressing and cautions "si tú aguardas que lo guise / en tu vida comerás" (ll. 1414-1415:106). In the *tercera jornada* when Jerónima—scheming about all the things she will be able to buy and show off once she catches a rich husband—proclaims "ahora sólo me falta / componerme más y más" (ll.2527-2528:137), it becomes clear that the *petimetra* does nothing *but* repeatedly "componer[se]," a constant expense of time and effort toward production of something no more useful, durable or beneficial than the arrangement of pleats on a gown (137).

Lamenting the laborious and constant process of hairdressing to which she submits herself in her claim on social prerogative, Jerónima wishes aloud that she could be as carefree as her maid, for those of a lower class style their hair less frequently: "Válgame Dios, quién pudiera / ser cualquiera de vosotras, / que de mes a mes se peina / y con todo está decente" (ll. 779-782:86). But, she sighs, "[e]ste trabajo lleva / la que tiene obligaciones / como yo" (ll. 783-785). Don Félix reassures her that "es fuerza / que las mujeres de modo / se rindan a la tarea / cotidiana de adornarse / como conviene a su esfera" (ll. 785-789:86). Not having realized yet that the *petimetra* is a bankrupt imposter, Félix believes that



Jerónima's "esfera" is indeed that of a monied *dama* who can and, to meet the social demands of her circle, should expend a certain amount of time on the cultivation of an elegant appearance. But of course, Jerónima's "obligaciones" are not those of a wealthy illustrious woman; the "trabajo" of choosing garments, fans and combs, of having her hair pulled and pushed by a maid, of arranging the folds of a gown serves only to create the *appearance* of merit.

Ana's comment about contemporary dress ("sólo se usa ahora / hojarasca y policia") references a central theme in *La petimetra*, which is the problem of illusory appearance.<sup>10</sup> The maid Martina scorns Jerónima's affection for don Damián, who (unknown to her) feigns a *mayorazgo* but in reality is a poor clerk wearing cast-off clothing:

mucho galón,  
que ayer lo desechó el amo,  
mucha vuelta con festón,  
buena media y buen zapato,  
sombbrero fino, y la capa  
con tanto terciopelazo  
...  
y todo esto, ¿en qué se funda?,  
en que soy Don Damián Pablos,  
...  
acribillado de trampas  
a puro pedir prestado  
y andar engañando bobas  
con fingidos mayorazgos. (ll. 198-  
203:70)

The servant Roque is incredulous at don Damián's attentions to Jerónima:

¡y que estés enamorado  
de esa infeliz pobretona,  
que no tiene ni ha tenido  
nada, y tú tienes creído  
que es una gran señorona!

...  
y, aunque anda tan a lo majo  
por encima, y pulidito,  
no lo creas, pobrecito,  
que está la maula debajo". (ll. 2627-  
2630:140)

The contrast between appearance and "reality" is central to the text's teachings. The illusion crafted by both don Damián and Jerónima through the wearing of second-hand and borrowed finery is base deception, given that such adornments are insubstantial ("y todo esto, ¿en qué se funda?") and mask hidden vices ("acribillado de trampas / a puro pedir prestado / y andar engañando"; "no lo creas, pobrecito, / que está la maula debajo"). Their appearance is so ephemeral that, as María informs Jerónima, "a mí el ir contigo / me da temor y vergüenza, / porque todos son fantasmas, / postes, visajes y muecas" (ll. 498-501:78).

Indeed, as don Félix points out, Damián and Jerónima are such "fantasmas," are so invested in the illusory appearance they have crafted, that they cannot be distinguished from one another; they have no "original:" "yo estoy dudando cuál / de los dos original / es, o cuál de los dos copia" (ll. 1593-1595:111). Félix decides to court María, as (besides the fact that Jerónima has no dowry) "se debe escoger, / por el vicio o por la fama, / desenvuelta para dama / y honesta para mujer" (ll. 1600-1603:111). For a wife ("mujer"), he would choose a woman who is honest ("honest"), that is, visibly "original." At the end of the play, Damián refuses to marry Jerónima "por ser quien es" (l.2817:145), that is, because the person she appears to be is something illusory; and Jerónima demands that Damián marry her, resigning herself, in doing so, to having "sombra de marido" instead of a husband with his own clothes and earnings (l.

2820:145). The “fantasma” *petimetra* and her “sombra” suitor exemplify the illusion of an elegant appearance created through an *hojarasca* of borrowed velvets, flimsy fans and cheap ribbons.

The problem figured by the *petimetra* is that of fashion and luxury as bemoaned by Rojo in his *Invectiva*: “todas las fruslerías y relumbrones de luxo son realmente plataformas aparentes de uso momentáneo, cuya materia no puede tener otra aplicación” (12). After a review of fashions in dress from those of the Romans to the latest styles of the eighteenth century, Rojo summarizes fashion as a force rooted in “la suma facilidad, e insubstancia de los hombres, y sus inútiles deseos, a unos objetos tan instantáneos” (105), reiterating the language used by Moratín in his critique of the *petimetra*. Like fashion itself, the *petimetra* is constructed through a worthless assemblage of “objetos... instantáneos” that satisfy desires only momentarily, like the items with which Jerónima spends the day: fans, ribbons, watches, flounces, capes, handkerchiefs. The longed-for things implicated in luxury consumption and fashionable spending “son realmente plataformas aparentes” for the construction of an exterior alluring but belying a lack of substance. Rojo, like Moratín, would have readers see past the illusion of adornments, dress and the appearance of wealth:

¿... no excitan las más altas consideraciones, las óbvias noticias y experiencias haciéndonos patente que unas piedras toscas, sin mérito en su fondo, unos metales oscuros y otras heces de la tierra llegan por medio de la elaboración a ser el encanto de nuestras potencias, y uno de los constitutivos de nuestro adorno y distinción? (7)

The *petimetra* figures the urgent problem of the “encanto de nuestras potencias” that leads to unproductive spending in the name of luxury and fashion; the expense of effort, money and time that in the end amounts only to the satisfaction of women’s “inútiles deseos.”

### Expensive Desire vs. Useful Productivity

Dozens of *sainetes* by Ramón de la Cruz utilize the *petimetra* to figure the problem of women’s expense of time and resources toward the satisfaction of desires divorced from a larger, “constructive” purpose. Through the *petimetra* these plays expose the disobedience of women to spousal and masculine authority with particular focus on consumer habits. The *petimetra* not only wastes her husband’s money, but exhausts *sueldos*, *caudales* and even entire community holdings as she privileges personal caprice over the interests of family and state. In the examples I will discuss here, the *petimetra* embodies what enlightened authors in anti-luxury writings portrayed as a conflict between activity satisfying individual or selfish needs, and activity targeting the common good or the “good of the nation.” As an unproductive female who squanders energy and precious time on the momentary tending of her body, the *petimetra* models that “flojedad voluptuosa” decried by Campomanes and is the antithesis of the woman whose *aplicación* manifests patriotic love of the public interest.

Toward the end of Cruz’s 1772 *Cómo han de ser los maridos*, two boys and two girls walk onstage “mal vestidos” and ask their father whether he has purchased cloth to make them new clothing, and shoes and stockings so that they might not go bare-

foot (201). The children inform their father of the dishonor and shame they suffer at school: “Mire usted que ir no podemos / nosotras a la maestra; / que las descalzas nos dicen”; “nos llaman los pelones / y aunque el maestro les pega” (201). Anguished by their pleas, the father turns to the gaggle of fashion agents— a hairdresser, a *modista*, a *petimetre*—who have been crowding his home, contracted by his *petimetre* wife, and announces his refusal to permit further flouting of his authority: “¿será justa la despena / en semejantes locuras / como mi mujer intenta / y ustedes también apoyan? / ¿Los maridos que consientan / tal desorden qué merecen?” (201). The *petimetre* has been spending household money on hairstyling, fashionable clothing and accessories instead of purchasing useful and necessary objects for her children. Accordingly the husband proclaims “Yo quiero que esto [i.e., his money] se invierta / en vestirlos y educarlos” and asks rhetorically “¿qué dirán cuando vieran / a la madre muy peinada, / muy galana y *petimetre* / y desnudos a sus hijos?” (201). What will people say about the scandal of the *petimetre* in his home? Ultimately, asserts the husband, “[n]inguno deja a sus hijos / mejores fincas ni rentas / que el buen ejemplo y crianza” (201): the most important thing to have provided his children, beyond material necessities such as shoes, is good parental example. Of course, he has failed at this, having permitted his wife to pursue her pleasures and spend his money to satisfy her whims. When the husband finally asserts his control over the overspending *petimetre*, another character comments approvingly, “Hoy los maridos aprendan, / por espejo de casados / lo pondría si pudiera” (201): the first step toward salvaging his household and setting an example to his children is that of directing his wife’s energies away from excess consumption and

toward useful ends.

The husband is not alone in his struggle to contain the damage wreaked by the *petimetre*: “Si las casas recorrieran / cuánto encontrarían de esto” (201) observes a character in *Cómo han de ser*; “conozco mil *petimetras* / que por peinarse, sus ropas / las venden y las empeñan” (201) comments another. The key question posed by Cruz’s *sainetes* featuring the luxurious *petimetre* is, how can men (and therefore the nation) prosper when saddled with the problem of women’s desires for frivolous expenditures? In *El pueblo sin mozas* (1761), Cruz depicts a group of men who express a desire to be “un pueblo sin mujeres” so as to avoid conflicts around “exceso” (43). According to one of the men, it is not women *per se* that are disturbing (“No es mala la mujer, ni a tal la igualo”) but rather the miseries brought about by their desires: “las cosillas que trae, esto es lo malo” (43); “que para sus miriñaques / no hay caudal ni puede haberlo” (45). When the men seem about to vote to retain women in their midst, a character reads aloud a “lista de lo que necesita una dama de moda para equiparse antes de darse al público,” which includes:

... el peinado, las flores... la bata o casaca; corbata o pañuelo... los pendientes; el sofocante o collar; el brial... la basquiña; las sortijas; los guantes... los brazaletes; los vuelos, no olvidando la cofieta, manteleta o capotón... el abanico... el reloj. (45-46)

Ultimately, the men move against allowing such a “laberinto de embelecocos” (46) in the *pueblo*. In Madrid, notes a character in the 1762 *La academia del ocio*, the town is ruled by “la señora moda, a quien fomenta / el genio raro de las damas locas” and fashion has become so costly “que no la alcanza el

sueldo de un marido / y tiene que buscar a un cirineo<sup>11</sup> / que le ayude a llegar a este deseo / y otros de su mujer” (57). In *El tío Felipe* (1762), a town plans festivities which would include a *tarasca*, and a character draws an analogy between the cost of the figure’s construction and that borne by husbands in satisfaction of their wives’ desires to dress well:

Ahora,  
si ha de llevar manteleta  
de gasas y cabriolé,  
vuelos de blondas, rosetas,  
collar de marlÍ y su bata  
para salir con decencia,  
hay tarasca que consume  
marido, muebles y hacienda. (87)

Cruz answers the question of the *petimetra* negatively: whether in the *pueblo* or in the *Corte*, women’s desires for things ultimately will strip men of control of their money, “muebles y hacienda.”

Indeed, women’s spending exhausts not only husbands’ resources, but those of entire settlements. In Cruz’s *La civilización* (1763), a character recounts the damage wrought in a nearby town by women’s desires for fashionable fabric:

en un lugar aquí cerca  
que estaba rico ha seis años  
trajo un vestido de tela  
un hidalgo a su mujer;  
y estuvieron todas muertas  
de envidia hasta que las unas  
vendieron [portions of their estates  
and possessions]  
...  
de tal manera,  
que si usted ve ese lugar,  
es una corte pequeña  
en el trato y el adorno,  
pero cocinas, bodegas  
y trojes, son el más triste

retrato de la miseria. (100)

A town that once was rich is now “retrato de la miseria” due to women’s envious desires for “tela,” specialty fabric, as opposed to traditional Spanish wool. Though the town “es una corte pequeña” through the introduction of luxury, that fine appearance has been achieved at a tremendous cost: the selling of estates and possessions. The true engines that would drive community prosperity, “cocinas, bodegas / y trojes,” have been laid waste solely due to the ravaging force of women’s desire to spend on fashionable fabric.

The *petimetra*’s longing for luxuries can even kill, as depicted in Cruz’s 1774 *El marido sofocado*. Don Juan Bueno is overwhelmed by his servants’ constant comings and goings to “la calle Mayor” for purchases such as “broches / y un abanico” (434) and “diez docenas de pares de zapatos / de castor, terciopelo y rasoliso” (434) that would satisfy his *petimetra* wife. Though his lawyer tries to reassure him by pointing out that, with only “seis mil reales,” he has achieved heroic feats through having managed “sin cirineo que os ayude”<sup>12</sup> to appease her prodigious desires for things worth at least “treinta mil” (435), nonetheless don Juan collapses at the end of the action, victim of his wife’s “soberbia” and spending (440). However, in *Sanar de repente* (1773), Cruz portrays a husband who resists the force of female consumer agency. “Yo tengo de hacer mi gusto” the *petimetra* wife proclaims, “y has de gastar cuanto tengas” (397). “Pero no / con mi dinero, aunque mueras” responds her husband (398) after literally tightening his purse strings, upon which she collapses, vowing to die: “¡Me muriera de un sofoco / si mi gusto no se hiciera! /... / Pues mira, infame, por ésta; / que ya me voy a morir / sólo por darte que

sientas" (398). When an *oficial* whispers in the *petimetra's* ear that he will buy her a gown, treat her to dinner and take her to a dance (401), she immediately rises from her deathbed (as the stage directions instruct) "*risueña y despejada*" (401). Unlike Juan Bueno, however, her husband will tolerate no disobedience. As the *petimetra* is about to depart for the ball, he confronts her by asking "¿[q]uién la licencia te ha dado?" (403) and refuses to permit her to leave. When she insists, he throws her out of the house (403), upon which his servants and children cry "¡Viva!" (403). The lesson is clear: the husband who gives in to his wife's "gusto" loses his money, his home, his life; the husband who asserts his authority and refuses his wife the satisfaction of her whims retains not only *caudal* and *casa*, but the respect of family and community.

"¿Qué funestas consecuencias son las que nacen del lujo?", asked the *ilustrado* Joseph Isidro Cavaza in his 1786 *Conversación política sobre el lujo*; "¿cuántas familias por él están arruinadas? ¿cuántos vasallos perdidos? y ¿cuántas mujeres son el escarmiento y risa de las naciones?" (26). Overspending wives are at the center of the national problem of luxury, according to Cavaza:

[p]or mucho que trabajen los maridos para ganar el sustento a costa de vigiliás, y desvelos, no lograrán nada, si sus mujeres les devoran cuanto pueden adquirir, condescendiendo con los caprichos de sus portes y vestidos. (26)

The author of the *Discurso sobre el lujo de las señoras* observed that expenditure on clothing and luxuries destroys families "por el capricho de las madres o de las hijas" (13), and lamented the straits in which live the husband or father "que no tiene para pagar los empeños que le hacen contraer su mujer

o sus hijas, los cuales no solo exceden muchas veces a sus rentas, sino también a su crédito" (13-14). Yet the best and most practical solution, according to reformers such as Campomanes and Cavaza, was not necessarily that found by the husband in *Sanar de repente*. Rather than advocating the expulsion of disobedient female consumers from the house of the nation, Enlightenment theorists of women's *ociosidad* sought to convince readers that the problem's solution lay in women whose *aplicación* to useful work and whose judicious distribution of their time resulted in "provecho" for family and country.

Nonetheless, without monies expended by the consumers figured by the *petimetra*, certain commercial sectors such as clothing importers and dressmakers might not have flourished. In the debates over the role of luxury spending in the overall stability of the domestic economy, most eighteenth-century Spanish theorists echoed the view held by the author of the *Discurso sobre el lujo de las señoras*, who was in favor of that aspect of expenditure "que favorece a nuestras fábricas y manufacturas" (19). All authors agreed, in fact, that consumption of *domestic* goods was best. As Romero del Álamo reminded readers of the *Memorial literario* of June 1789, the key to growth is preference of domestic goods to imports, for the *real* production zones of national health are domestic artisanry and agriculture, stimulation of which will bring "de tropel las felicidades en... las innumerables sumas que en el día se arrojan del reino por las compras forasteras" (244). Significantly, in the *sainetes* examined here, female consumers' activities are oriented largely toward foreign luxury goods and are depicted as unproductive, despite the fact that women's spending on clothing and imported finery was an important contributor to certain as-

pects of urban commerce. *Sainetes* such as *El marido sofocado* portray female purchasing agency as unleashed in its violation of social constraints (e.g., the authority of husbands) and its privileging of individual pleasure over national interests (e.g., domestic textile production, utility), and mark women who would buy as excessive presences in the very markets fed, in fact, by their consumption. On this view, the scandal of the *petimetra* is that of the female urban consumer whose energies and presence in the marketplace support contested commercial sites (such as the retailers of imported luxury goods in shops on the *calle Mayor*) instead of relinquishing control over spending and, thus, economic growth to appropriate masculine authorities.

And according to enlightened authorities, the solution to the problem of women's *ociosidad* and consequent misguided agency in the marketplace was the sensible distribution of time through individual *aplicación*. Yet as Romero del Álamo observed, not all persons may be:

útil[es] y beneficiosa[s], sin la  
 calidad de bien aplicada[s] en  
 aquellos ejercicios que contribuyen  
 a mantener con comodidad de los  
 individuos, conservando las buenas  
 costumbres en la sociedad civil. (*Memorial Literario*, July 1789:367)

Appropriate vehicles for womanly *aplicación* were sewing, cooking, tending to family needs, and housework. To this end, the *petimetra* emblemized the avoidance of domestic tasks deemed proper to women. In Cruz's *La Academia del ocio*, a *petimetra* is criticized for not knowing how much cloth is needed to make a shirt (62). One of Jerónima's worst qualities is her ignorance of cooking and sewing, according to the servant Roque, who informs Damián that

the *petimetra* "ni sabe coser un punto / ni sabe echar sal a un huevo" (*La petimetra* ll. 1279-1280:102). "Si esta ha de ser tu mujer," sneers Roque,

¿sabes tú qué sabe hacer?  
 ¿si es humilde y hacendosa?  
 Ahora bien, yo la pregunto,  
 dígame esta niña, ¿cuál  
 se llama punto pascual,  
 cuál es de sábana el punto?  
 ¿cómo se pone un guisado?  
 ¿cómo se arrima una olla?  
 ¿cuántos cachos de cebolla  
 se echan en un estofado?  
 Vaya, que no sabe nada  
 de esto, ni ella lo ha estudiado. (ll.  
 2632-2644:140)

To be useful to their husbands (and, by extension, to their families and to the nation) women should "estudiar" the preparation of stews and a variety of stitches, rather than spend time and energy on seeking pretty things in the *calle Mayor*. In Cruz's *Los propósitos de las mujeres* (1763) a repentant *petimetra* addresses her peers and urges them to forego the pleasures of "el aliño personal" and "el carácter sin sustancia / de petimetras" (115) for domestic duties and obedience to husbands: "Desde hoy, desde hoy, es preciso / la economía, la casa, / la dirección, el esposo" (115). Homemaking, judicious household economy and deference to masculine authority are the "ejercicios" appropriate to women that will maintain civil society; along with childbearing and the production of population, the "precious jewel" of the State (Romero del Álamo, July 1789:367).

With women so usefully employed, Rojo suggests that men may channel:

las rentas y sueldos sobrantes... a  
 dotar huérfanas que se coloquen con

docencia y aumenten la población  
 medio de su situación decadente... y  
 socorrer viudas cargadas de hijos que  
 sean con el tiempo útiles al estado.  
 (12)

Were a wife to spend her time gainfully (instead of desiring “muselinas, blondas, cofias, lazos, gasas... y relojes”), offered Cavaza, she would appreciate “el que su marido vaya ahorrando para poner su tienda, o precaver las incomodidades, y curar las enfermedades, a que vivimos sugetos” (9). The useful arts such as agriculture and commerce “nada contribuyen” to the health of nations “sin aplicación de los individuos,” echoed Romero del Álamo (June 1789:256). This includes women, according to Campomanes. After providing examples of women’s contributions to farming, fishing and commerce in various regions of the country, Campomanes points out that urban females too can combat “la flojedad” (despite cities’ lack of opportunities for “tiring” labors) (207-208) through “las operaciones manuales” (211). Campomanes proposed that working urban women might produce “utilidad” (211) through activity such as “todo lo que pertenece a coser cualquier género de ropas, vestidos o adornos;” “los hilados de todas las materias, que entran en los tejidos;” “los bordados;” etc. (216). Rather than desiring the purchase of such items, reasons Campomanes, women should be employed industriously in producing them, as ultimately all of such “obra de manos” (214) provides “un general beneficio al Estado” (216).

The key to combatting the problem of both working- and upper-class women’s *ociosidad* is “la distribución constante del tiempo” (Campomanes 217): the *petimetra*’s wasteful lingering at the *tocador* and excessive spending on luxuries depict precisely

that inconstant distribution of time attacked by Enlightenment authors who proposed parameters within which women might instead channel their energies into productive activities beneficial to the nation. Divested of her finery at the end of *La petimetra*, Jerónima is “ridícula” not only because she has been forced to undress, but because without her borrowed clothes she has nothing, her constant attention to fashion—her primping, her trip to the *calle Mayor*—having robbed her of time better devoted to study of useful skills and domestic knowledge. Had Jerónima not gone shopping and instead followed the example of her hardworking cousin, she would not have been denuded by the play’s close. But in that case she would not have been *petimetra*, a trope of the threat posed by women’s desires for consumption in period debates around luxury’s exhaustion of Spanish resources.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The discourse against luxury would continue into the nineteenth century; Galdós’s novel *La de Bringas* is one well-known example of a text probing the moral implications of uncurbed desire for spending on luxuries. For more on nineteenth-century treatments of luxury, see: Aldaraca; and Jagoe.

<sup>2</sup> Good recent studies of eighteenth-century European cultures of consumption are found in Berg and Clifford; Bermingham and Brewer; McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb; and Sargentson.

<sup>3</sup> Martín Gaité touches only briefly on the implication of *petimetras* in luxury consumption, as part of a discussion of strained class relations between servants and artisans on the one hand, and more privileged consumers on the other (92-95). Bolufer briefly but succinctly discusses the *petimetra* in the context of critiques of women’s luxury; see her pp. 186-91 especially.

<sup>4</sup> All citations from *La petimetra* are taken from the Gies and Lama edition.



<sup>5</sup> As Bolufer points out, the figure of the *petimetra* “se oponía al ideal de la mujer volcada en las exigencias de la vida doméstica” (200).

<sup>6</sup> The literature on the eighteenth-century debates on luxury is too vast to summarize here. For more on Spanish discourses on luxury, see: Aldaraca chapter 3; Bolufer chapter 4; Demerson chapter 8; Herr chapter 3; and Martínez Chacón. For the general European background, see: Berry.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the *petimetre*, or “fop,” see Haidt, chapter 3; Martín Gaité; and Subirá.

<sup>8</sup> Ana’s defensiveness reflects the fact that hairdressing was central to the work performed by an eighteenth-century personal servant. Indeed, as hairstyles became more complicated and laborious, hairdressing “pasó a ser un trabajo cada vez más cualificado, que no cualquier criado podía hacer con el gusto sofisticado que se exigía” (Sarasúa 92). Martín Gaité’s observations on the class tensions between *criadas* and *señoritas de moda* are of interest in this regard. See her pp. 92-95.

<sup>9</sup> As Sarasúa notes, the constant need to re-fashion items of clothing led to heightened demand for domestic servants who could cut, sew and embroider (207). Roche’s work on the enormous expense posed by clothing to eighteenth-century consumers illuminates the importance of Ana’s alterations of the *petimetra*’s dress and petticoat: garments were extremely costly, and most consumers—especially those without significant resources, as is Jerónima’s case—had to make them last a long time. See *The People of Paris*, chapter 6, and *The Culture of Clothing*, chapters 6 to 8 especially.

<sup>10</sup> See Cañas Murillo’s discussion of the theme, pp. 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> A reference to the *cortejo*. For more on the *cortejo*, see Martín Gaité.

<sup>12</sup> Again, a reference to the *cortejo*.

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