



CHAPTER 2

Discussing Gender, Discussing Modernities in the Global Enlightenment: The Many Lives of a Spanish Defence of Women in Europe and America

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MOVING IN TIME AND SPACE

Between November 1810 and August 1811, the many followers of *The Lady's Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex* were offered, in ten instalments, “A Defence of Women translated from the Spanish of Geronymo Feijoo” by a mysterious “Elenir Irwin”. Few, if any, of its readers (female or male) would have known that Feijoo was a Benedictine monk and professor of theology, who had died in 1764 at the age of almost 90, having penned the text in question back in 1726. The *Defensa de las mujeres* was part of his *Teatro crítico universal de errores comunes* (Critical Theatre of Common Errors, 1st ed., 1726–1739, printed in quarto format), an immensely successful eight-volume

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collection (nine with the 1740 supplement). The 118 essays of this work challenged all kinds of prejudice and superstition in fields ranging from politeness to national character and skin colour; from medicine, music and remedies for love to politics. The *Teatro crítico* was aimed at a broad, educated readership and its style combines erudition with humour, with the former element toned down over the years, resulting in texts of greater fluency and clarity.¹ The *Defensa de las mujeres* is the last and easily the longest of the sixteen essays in Volume I (66 vs an average 20–30 pages). One of many polemics that would mark its author’s consistently controversial career, it divided public opinion in Spain as well as rocking the country’s intellectual circles. As a cleric, Feijoo did not question male political and domestic authority which, he stated, was determined by Providence. He did however reject the idea that this had anything to do with women’s natural inferiority, dismantling the foundations of this widely shared notion with argumentation and examples aimed at lay and learned readers alike. In his view, both popular superstitions and academic scholarship, including the much-revered Aristotelian and Galenic theses, together with new ideas about the greater sensitivity of female “nerve fibres”, were all wrong. With great lucidity, he exposed them as philosophical and scientific theories constructed ad hoc in order to justify social prejudices. By way of counter-argument, he asserted women’s capacity to rule and their moral excellence. He also—and more significantly—defended intellectual gender equality by presenting both rational, empirical arguments on the sexless nature of the soul and more traditional examples of learned women from Spain, France, Italy and Germany, adding the case of Sitti Maani Gioerida della Valle (c.1600–1621, the Syrian Christian wife of Roman traveller Pietro della Valle) to prove that “women’s literary glory is not confined to Europe”.²

The translation in *The Lady’s Magazine* in 1810–1811 was not the first to appear in English, yet its author and the journal’s editors still believed it would appeal to their readers. What did they see in this essay, almost a century after its original publication? To answer this, we need

¹ On Feijoo’s congenial relations with his readers, see Lafuente and Valverde (2003), García Díaz (2019).

² Feijoo (1726, I, 367–68). On Feijoo’s “feminism” and his similarities and differences with Poulain de la Barre and other authors, see Bolufer (2005, 2016a), Serrano (2021). On Baroque portraits of Sitti Maani (whose remains arrived in Rome in 1626), see Baskins (2012).

to see translation not only as the rendering of a text into a different language, but as its rewriting, appropriation and circulation in a different cultural—and often temporal—context, by different actors (translators, patrons, reviewers, printers), for different readers. This crucial insight has been developed by literary criticism, translation studies and, more recently, intellectual and cultural history, and the history of science, but has not yet inspired extensive research on how transnational and transatlantic circulation shaped debates on gender.³ To date, a small number of studies have dealt with translations of one (generally French) work into one other language; little is known about the fate of works originally published in languages other than French, and multiple translations are rarely compared.⁴ As for the matter of temporality, this has scarcely been analysed at all: prompt or late translations are just noted in passing as an indication of early or delayed reception. Translations, however, tell complex stories that are not about unilateral “reception”, but about different communities of knowledge and practice reframing and resignifying texts across languages, cultures and times.

Feijoo's writings were widely disseminated in his own day to both lay and learned readerships, especially—but not exclusively—in the (peninsular, Atlantic and Pacific) Hispanic world. His works ran into numerous editions, including fifteen complete and five partial editions of the *Teatro crítico* and eleven of the *Cartas eruditas* (Erudite letters) before 1787, with 200 reprints and even indexes and dictionaries to facilitate consultation.⁵ Their print runs were large, in some cases up to 3000 copies, exceptional in Spain at the time, and the works were present in countless Spanish, American and European institutional and private libraries (Arias de Saavedra 2016). Feijoo's friends and sympathisers Martín Sarmiento, a fellow Benedictine, and José Mariano Gregorio de Elizalde, former

³ For an overview of historical approaches to translation, see Burke and Po-chia Hsia (2007); on the eighteenth century, see Oz-Salzberger (2006) and Stockhorst (2010).

⁴ See, for example, Dubois-Nayt et al. (2016). On translations from or into Spanish, Portuguese and Italian, see Bolufer (1998, 70–73, 81–86), Bello Vázquez (2013), Anastácio (2018), Findlen (1995), Fabiani (2009).

⁵ Pérez-Rioja (1965, 285–305). After 1787, reprints of the *Teatro crítico* waned and there were no new editions until the mid-nineteenth century, although Feijoo's works continued to be present in private libraries and an abridged version was published in 1804. The bicentenary of his birth was marked with due solemnity in 1876, with critical consideration given to both the man and his thinking—including his defence of gender intellectual equality—by, among others, Emilia Pardo Bazán.

rector of the Real Universidad de México, were not exaggerating when they wrote that his books had crossed borders and reached “the farthest reaches of America, in both kingdoms [Spanish and Portuguese], and of Asia and the Philippines” (Checa Beltrán 2016, 418; Feijoo 1726–1740, IV). The portrait of a 57-year-old Feijoo, seated at his desk, a well-appointed library in the background, first appeared in Volume VI of the *Teatro crítico* (1734), and was subsequently reproduced in many other editions, though not in any of the translations (González Santos 2003, 162–73) (Fig. 2.1).

Feijoo was very conscious of his own image, and of his role as an intellectual, above and beyond scholarly polemics, in influencing public opinion. He was aware of the international scope of his fame, about which he wrote with apparent modesty, “I see my name flying in glory (an undeserved joy, I confess), not only around Spain, but throughout almost all the nations of Europe” (Feijoo 1734, V, “To the reader”). He also took an interest in the translations that were helping spread his fame far and wide (Feijoo 1774, 152–156). The *Defensa de las mujeres* itself was published in other languages more than ten times, either separately or as part of unabridged, excerpted or anthological translations of the *Teatro crítico* or one of its volumes: it appeared in French in 1743, Italian in 1744 (two different versions) and 1777, Portuguese in 1746 and English in 1760, 1768, 1774, 1778, 1780 and 1810–1811.⁶ Even those who had not read it might have been aware of its contents thanks to widespread reviews.

The ways in which this essay was translated, discussed and used say much about the various settings in which it appeared: “national” contexts defined by the different languages in which it was rewritten and read, but also particular geographic territories, social circles (aristocratic, literate, ecclesiastical, middle-class or even popular; male or mixed) and intellectual and personal networks. As we shall see below, the specific interests of these various communities had their own impact on the broad debates that were, to a greater or lesser degree, part of the European (and American) culture of the time—those dealing with gender, with the social identity of men of letters, and with the roles attributed to different nations in modern civilisation. The translations of the *Defensa de las mujeres*,

⁶ In Germany, only partial editions of one or more essays of the *Teatro crítico* (most on medicine, never the *Defensa de las mujeres*) were published: one in 1766, and several others much later, in 1789, 1790 and 1791.



Fig. 2.1 Portrait of Benito Jerónimo Feijoo. Engraving by Juan Bernabé Palomino (1781) after a lost oil portrait by Francisco Antonio Bustamante (1733 or 1734). Biblioteca Nacional de España

understood as intellectual acts but with social and commercial dimensions too (as we can see from the various formats in which it circulated), enable us to observe gender discourses in action on an interconnected scale, from the local to the national, transnational and global.

FRANCE: BETWEEN ERUDITION AND MONDANITÉ

The first Spanish edition of the *Teatro crítico* was warmly received in France, where it was reviewed in the *Mercur de France* as early as 1731—and interest soon honed in on the *Defensa de las mujeres* in particular. Its theme was particularly relevant in the French context, where defending female aptitude in the face of misogyny was neither a purely rhetorical attitude nor an abstract philosophical position, but a living tradition rooted in the cultural practices of the aristocracy and literary society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mixed salons—often presided over by women—and exclusively male academic, literary and scientific academies were communicating vessels, linked by relationships based on friendship, protection and patronage, and governed by a shared elitist code of *politesse* and *honnêteté* which ascribed to women an aesthetic, moral and intellectual authority (Lilti 2005; La Vopa 2017). The debate between the sexes was entwined—not without tension—with the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, which pitted those attached to Classical ideals against those advocating a culture linked to the art of conversation and civility, and in which the role of women was recognised and valued: a notable example of the crossover between Cartesian rationalism and *mondanité* is the feminism of François Poulain de la Barre (*De l'égalité des deux sexes*, 1673; *De l'éducation des dames*, 1674), of which Feijoo was indirectly aware, through Pierre Bayle (Bolufer 2005, 2016a). As Anthony La Vopa (2017) has shown, these male–female connections and friendships were part of the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment, but also a source of anxiety about the feminisation of the male mind, a fear that haunted educated men of the period. Unease about these patterns of mixed sociability and their respective models of femininity and manliness would only increase in the last third of the century, with Rousseau defiantly declaring the independence of (male) intellectuals from *salonnières* and proclaiming domesticity as the true empire of women.

Feijoo was himself an intellectual cleric, but also a sociable man who was closely connected to the circles of power and knew how to deploy the language of gallantry in his dealings with the noble ladies of his

acquaintance and, through them, the local elites (Feijoo 2019, 341–55). In the *Defensa de las mujeres*, however, he strove to portray himself not as a courteous man concerned with pleasing women, but as an impartial philosopher (Feijoo 1726, I, 354). The ways in which his work was interpreted in French literary circles reveal its ambivalent nature but also, and more importantly, the identity dilemma facing many men of letters as they chose a role: that of scholar in the masculine space of the academy or monastery; that of worldly intellectual capable of socialising in mixed environments; or—increasingly—that of commercial writer struggling to engage with wide readerships (Darnton 1987; Chartier 1996; Badinter 2018). Some joined the aristocratic networks of patronage and mixed sociability, others proclaimed their membership of communities of scholars who claimed to be above ties of dependence, while a third group cultivated a wider and more varied reading public, all three groups looking at one another askance. Many individuals, however, shifted between these different positions and allegiances, albeit not without hesitation.

At the same time, French writers and intellectuals strove to present the defence of women in the debate between the sexes as a mark of their nation's glory, the pinnacle of refined and gallant modernity, even though the *querelle des femmes* was a Europe-wide and centuries-long polemic (Dubois-Nayt et al. 2016). The reception given to the first volume of the *Teatro crítico* is a case in point (Fig. 2.2). It was translated into French between 1742 and 1743 by Nicolas Vaquette d'Hermilly (c.1714–1778), who had lived in Spain and translated other texts from Spanish and Portuguese, as well as contributing to periodicals and anthologies such as the *Bibliographie parisienne* and *Lettres orientales* (1754). In his preface, the translator laments the French public's lack of interest in Spanish culture, adopting, significantly, gendered conventions on national character that associated French taste with a lack of seriousness typical of women, but also of worldly culture, while considering the weightier erudition supposedly preferred by Spaniards as manly.⁷ He himself, a reasonably successful man of letters, assumes a dual role. He defines himself as a *Sçavant* (a scholar) who despises the worldly *semi-Sçavants* and aspires to instruct rather than entertain. At the same time, however, his publication strategy was designed to appeal to his readers' tastes, with

⁷ On Spanish and French national stereotypes, see some of the essays in Andreu and Bolufer (2023).

a commercial vision that Feijoo himself recognised. Vaquette issued the *Teatro crítico* not in bound volumes, but in monthly or fortnightly instalments so that people could acquire the essays they wanted and create their own personalised collection, and in an attractive duodecimo format, easy to carry and read anywhere. Vaquette's version is faithful to the original, but includes explanatory notes in line with what he saw as his readers' expectation—in the case of the *Defensa de las mujeres*, he added further biographical details about the “learned Frenchwomen” listed by Feijoo (1743, 101–3, 106).

The periodical *Mémoires pour l'histoire des sciences et des beaux-arts*, run by Jesuits since its creation in 1701 and better known as the *Journal de Trévoux*, covered the translation of the first volume of the *Teatro crítico* and published extensive commentaries on each essay. Writing about the *Defensa de las mujeres*, its editors praised Feijoo's efforts to break down prejudices and his impartial rather than gallant approach:

A great number of authors have praised women, and have done so with wit and politeness, but no one before Father Feioo [sic] has done so with more wisdom and less partiality. It is no Panegyrist dazzled by the beautiful qualities of his Heroines who comes to insipidly praise their attractions, extol their graces, and lavish them with a thousand frivolous compliments, it is a Philosopher, a Historian, a Critic, a Cleric, a Spaniard, who wants to disabuse men of the idea that they are superior to women, and to avenge women for all the evil men have spoken of them.⁸

The Jesuits behind the *Journal de Trévoux* thus claimed Feijoo, a great supporter and user of the publication, as one of their own: not a dilettante aristocrat or an abbé fond of female company, but an intellectual positioned (as a scholar, cleric and Spaniard) at a triple remove from the sycophantic attitude they associated with the worldly culture of mixed society. Unlike Vaquette and the *Journal's* publishers, the Abbé Desfontaines's *Observations sur les écrits modernes* (1735–1743) fluctuated between categorising Feijoo in the scholarly field suggested by his status as a cleric and a text full of erudite information, and in the worldly sphere. In 1743, this periodical marked the publication of Vaquette's translation by printing an article about Feijoo and what it calls the *Éloge des femmes*. There was praise for Feijoo's seriousness of purpose and tone

⁸ *Mémoires* 1743, LXXXVI, 2770–91; qt. 2770–71.

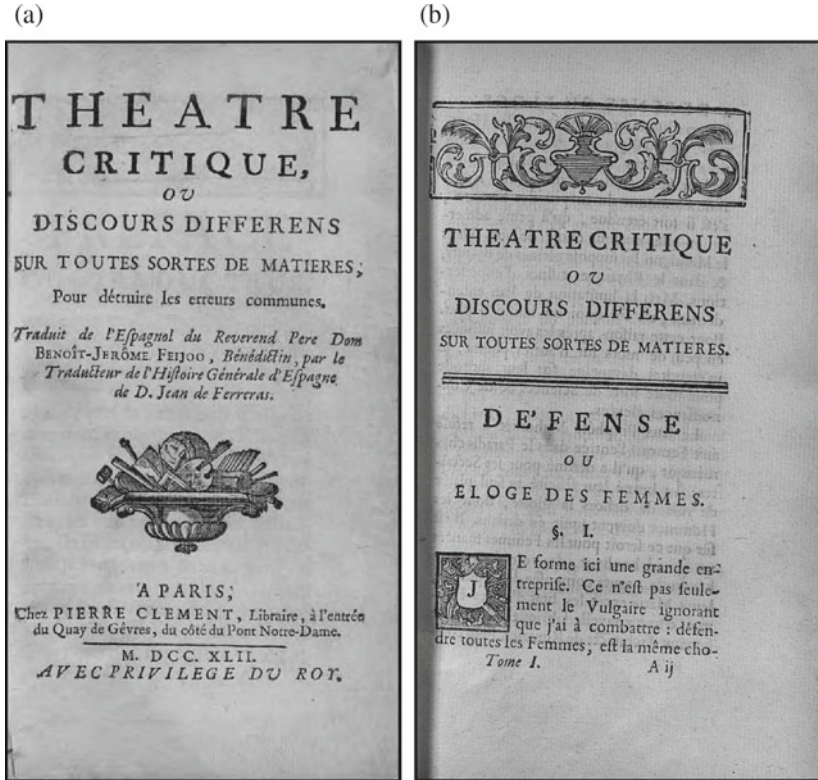


Fig. 2.2 [Nicolas Vaquette d'Hermilly]. *Theatre critique, ou Discours differens sur toutes sortes de matieres por détruire les erreurs communes traduit de l'Espagnol...* Paris: Pierre Clement, 1742–1743. Biblioteca de Asturias “Ramón Pérez de Ayala”

(“Had a man of the world undertaken this work he would have scattered it with amusing moments, but since it is a man of religion who has done so, the reader should not be surprised by his earnest tone.”),⁹ but also for his ability to charm the ladies: “Don Feijoo neglects nothing which

⁹ *Observations*, XXXI (24 November 1741–16 February 1743), letter 464, 313–25; qt. 314.

may prove pleasing to women; he pays court to them in all kinds of ways" (322).

Vaquette's *Teatro crítico* translation was judged far more severely by the *Journal Étranger* which, under the direction of the Abbé Prévost, extended its coverage of Spain from the usual reviews of Golden Age literature to take in contemporary works as well. Between May and August 1755, it published an extensive extract from the *Teatro crítico* in several instalments, together with an introduction (70 pages in all) in which the *Defensa de las mujeres* is discussed in terms of rivalry between national cultures.¹⁰ The *Journal*'s introduction emphasises the superiority of French writers as regards a subject on which they had supposedly passed judgement far earlier, and with greater insight. It condescendingly admits that Feijoo's essay has some originality and that it has led Spain to begin to question the assumption of female inferiority and thus move closer to the civilised nations:

It would be a matter of regret, *for the honour of France*, should the first idea of such a gallant enterprise have fallen into the mind of a foreigner; but, thanks to Nature, which has not allowed French men to be surpassed in any matter of discernment or amiability, Women have long been indebted to them for having come to their defence.¹¹

The translation and discussion of the *Defensa de las mujeres* in France therefore brought to the surface the tensions experienced by its writers, between salon, academy and literary market, and, more broadly, the anxieties generated by the culture of *politesse* and gallantry, one minute extolled as the height of European civilisation and proof of French cultural hegemony, the next denigrated as frivolous, feminised and feminising.

BRITAIN: THE LONG SHADOW OF THE BLACK LEGEND

In eighteenth-century Britain, Feijoo was better known than any other contemporary Spanish writer, running Cervantes and *Don Quixote* a close second. A number of essays from the *Teatro crítico* were translated, individually or in groups, as well as a wide-ranging selection published in four

¹⁰ *Journal Étranger*, May 1755, 189–226; July 1755, 208–37; August 1755, 247–50.

¹¹ *Journal Étranger*, May 1755, 189–90; my emphasis.

volumes. The essays on medical matters sparked particular interest, but so did the *Defensa de las mujeres*, at a time when “the place of women in the moral, intellectual, and social life of the nation was discussed and debated as never before” (O’Brien 2010, 19; see also O’Brien 2009; Knott and Taylor 2005). From the late seventeenth century onwards, religious and political controversies, the rise of polite sociability and commercial society, and philosophical and scientific developments had fuelled intense discussion of women’s obedience and rights in domestic government, their position under common law and their status as rational subjects (by figures such as Mary Astell, Lady Mary Chudleigh, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Bernard Mandeville, among others). Poulain’s *De l’égalité* had been translated in 1677 and again in 1758, and freely adapted by a still mysterious “Sophia” in 1739 (*Woman not Inferior to Man*, reprinted 1743 and 1751). All this happened within a booming print culture where women had crucial roles as writers (some enjoying great fame and commercial success), translators, printers and readers, with gender, genre and class boundaries (and those between high and low literature) relatively permeable in the mid-eighteenth century (Levy 2010; Clarke 2000). Feijoo’s *Defensa de las mujeres* gained early recognition in bluestocking circles and in other assemblies bringing together literary men and women, including figures such as novelist Samuel Richardson and Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), the eminent classicist and translator who was something of a national institution, both of whom were admirers of Spanish literature.¹² Conduct-book writer Hester Chapone (1727–1801), who did not read Spanish, asked her friend Elizabeth to send her various passages in translation and expressed her surprise that “a Spaniard should think so favourably of women. One would imagine by their manner of treating them, that they had as mean an opinion of them as the Turks” (Chapone 1807, 9 September 1750, 36–40). Her words echo the clichés found in travel narratives and philosophical essays that (influenced by the Black Legend about Spaniards’ cruelty, religious fanaticism and ignorance) suggested Spanish women were subject to despotic confinement and oppression, under the double weight of the Islamic legacy and Catholic superstition and obscurantism (Bolufer 2016b).

Beyond those cultivated circles in which Feijoo’s essay could be read in Spanish or French, a wider readership gained access to it when it was

¹² In 1738, Carter published an imitation of Francisco de Quevedo (Clarke 2000, 43). In 1752, Charlotte Lennox, another bluestocking, published *The Female Quixote*.

first translated into English in *The Lady's magazine, or, Polite companion for the fair sex* (1759–1763), with a title that trumpeted the author's fame and sought to stir public interest: "A Defence of Women, from the original Spanish of the celebrated Feijoo. Never attempted in English before". It took up more than 50 pages, published over a year and divided into fourteen monthly instalments, between January 1760 and February 1761. An abridged version, it omits some erudite sections of the original (notably the long Latin quotations and extensive references to illustrious women) in order to address the polite, but not scholarly readership targeted by the journal. The translator's only explicit intervention echoes commonplaces about Spanish backwardness and lack of civilisation. Misogyny, condemned by Feijoo in his contemporaries worldwide, is presented as a Spanish national sin: "We may see by this, the Spaniards are not very polite in their opinions of the ladies" (Feijoo 1760–1761, Jan. 1760, 196).

The first self-standing English translation came a few years later, in 1768. *An essay on woman, or physiological and historical defence of the fair sex* was an anonymous 227-page volume in octavo dedicated to "Mrs. C... of Somersetshire", a woman of the local gentry who may have instigated, commissioned or paid for its publication (Fig. 2.3). Her full name is not revealed, but her identity and that of other ladies of the county ("Mrs. Rowe [probably Elizabeth Rowe, 1674–1737] and the Misses Minisse"), praised in the dedication as "a publicly known Somersetshire quadrumvrate, of females eminent for intellects", would have been obvious to her contemporaries.¹³ The translator made two key additions to the work. The first of these was an extensive note, based on the authority of Lady Montagu, which rejects the idea held by Feijoo and other European authors that Islam excluded women from Paradise (Feijoo 1768, 5–7); the second, more significant addition, stemming from a feeling that Feijoo had ignored the number and merits of British or English female scholars, past and present, was a ten-page tribute to five such women: Lady Jane Grey, religious poet Elizabeth Rowe, scholars Elizabeth Carter and Constantia Grierson and historian Catherine Macaulay (Feijoo 1768, 192–201). The "illustrious women" genre, a European tradition associated with the *querelle des femmes* since the fifteenth century, had declined in England, but enjoyed a revival after the publication of George Ballard's

¹³ Feijoo (1768, V–XIII).

Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain who have been celebrated for their writings or skill in the learned languages, arts and sciences (1752). Rather than being a relic of the past, it was a device useful in both legitimising the education of women and constructing Britishness, in a period in which Britain prided itself as a nation on its ability to produce, in Ballard's words, "more women famous for literary accomplishments than any other nation in Europe", even if harbouring mixed feelings about them (qt. by Clarke 2000, 3).

Educated female writers or patrons such as Chapone, Carter and the (semi-)anonymous "Mrs. C..." seem to have seen in Feijoo's essay an authoritative demonstration of women's intellectual capacities that correlated with their own aspirations. Male writers who moved in their circles, such as Richardson or the anonymous author of the first translation, either valued it or used it to ingratiate themselves with their female patrons and with British readers, particularly women. Moreover, the fact that the author was foreign enabled translators, critics and readers of both sexes to see themselves as part of a transnational literary community united by its devotion to rational thinking and rejection of vulgar prejudices.

By contrast, *The Critical Review* printed a cutting review of the *Teatro crítico*, using it as an opportunity to lash out at its compatriots' taste for translations and to expatiate on the backwardness and superstition of Catholic Spain. Its review of the 1768 translation presents misogyny as something of the past as far as Britain is concerned, but typical of a country overshadowed by the darkness of ignorance, to which it attributes Feijoo's problems with the Inquisition (which did exist, though for other reasons). The *Teatro crítico* is dismissed as an insipid text that has incomprehensibly caught the interest of British readers, who are reprimanded for consuming such meritless foreign works, instead of the far superior home-grown works on the same subject.¹⁴

Despite the scorn of *The Critical Review*, Feijoo's essay continued to circulate in Britain for many years. The 1768 translation was reprinted in 1774, and in 1778 another anonymous version was published (this one without additional material, be it dedication, preface or interpolation), together with two other essays in the second of three instalments of a selection of the *Teatro crítico* (13 essays altogether) in octavo (Feijoo 1778). Possibly encouraged by its success, two years later translator and

¹⁴ *The Critical Review*, 26 (1768), 364–66.

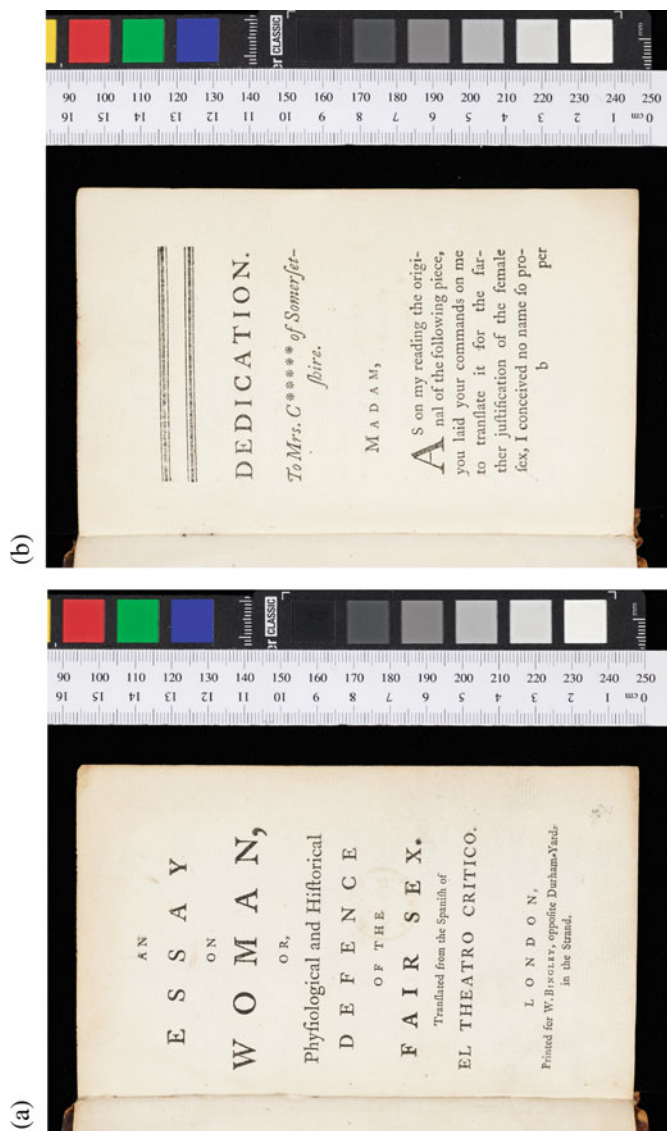


Fig. 2.3 Cover and dedication of *An essay on woman, or physiological and historical defence of the fair sex. Translated from the Spanish of El Teatro Critico*. London: W. Bingley, ca.1768. The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, *Antiq. f. E. 66*

retired Royal Navy officer John Brett (d. 1785) published at his own expense a much larger selection of 28 essays in four volumes, at the respectable price of 12 shillings and sixpence (Feijoo 1780): this is the edition that future US president John Adams and writer Samuel Johnson had in their libraries (the latter possessed a Spanish edition too).¹⁵ At the end of the century, the partial 1778 edition was still for sale in Thomas Payne's antiquarian bookshop near Charing Cross, at a high price (3 shillings and sixpence in 1796, 3 shillings in 1797; Sánchez Espinosa 2016, 467). More significantly yet, it appeared in the catalogues of one of London's main circulating libraries: that of William Lane, a business linked to the Minerva Printing Press, which specialised in Gothic and sentimental literature written by women (Sánchez Espinosa 2016, 467, 472). This shows that the work was still available not only to affluent and educated readers of both sexes (among them Richardson, Johnson, Adams, Chapone and Carter) who either read it in Spanish or French or acquired the four-volume English translation, but also to a wider, more diverse middle class and even popular readership who could borrow an English version from a circulating library.

It is even more telling that another *Lady's Magazine* published a new complete translation in 1810–1811, thirty years later, and fifty years after the first one had appeared in its almost homonymous predecessor back in 1760.¹⁶ *The Lady's Magazine, or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex*, a miscellaneous periodical active from 1770 to 1818, was, in Jennie Batchelor's words, "one of the longest-lived periodicals of the eighteenth century, and the era's most successful women's magazine by a considerable margin" (Batchelor 2022, 2). It was groundbreaking among the many addressed to a female readership because of its wide-ranging cultural content and the particular relationship it established with its male and female readers, actively encouraging contributions from a large number of writers of both sexes, many of them writing under pseudonyms or initials (Batchelor 2011, 2022). Feijoo's essay was added to the textual and iconographic strategies (short biographies, engravings and extracts from the works of women writers) with which the newspaper sought to document the work of female intellectuals, with a transnational vision

¹⁵ Adams's copy is still at the Boston Public Library with the rest of his library (<https://www.bpl.org>) (consulted 18 January 2022). For Johnson, see Green (1965, 58).

¹⁶ *The Lady's Magazine, or, Polite Companion for the Fair Sex* (1759–1763).

that established symbolic genealogies and networks between women of different countries, languages and periods.

According to Gillian Dow, the translator on this occasion (hidden behind a pseudonym) may have been Charlotte Barrett, whose literary relatives included her aunts Sarah Harriet Burney (1772–1844) and the celebrated novelist Fanny Burney d’Arblay (1752–1840).¹⁷ The fact that “Elenir Irwin” created a new version, rather than reproducing an existing one, is explained in part by the need to update both language and style to contemporary tastes. But it also confirms that she, like other women of her time, used translation as an indirect path into the literary world. The successful bookseller A. Dulau & Co., in Soho Square, to whom Sarah Burney seems to have shown her niece’s text, seeking advice, had declined to publish it on the grounds that the title sounded too controversial and Spanish literature was no longer fashionable. However, *The Lady’s Magazine* accepted it, probably realising that the essay’s polemical tone remained relevant and that it was still necessary to work towards the equality of the sexes. Ultimately, as underlined by Batchelor, the translation was an effective way for the contributors to the magazine to make their point about the “systemic marginalisation of women’s contribution to the cultural, intellectual and political life of various nations and cultures” (Batchelor 2022, 235). Its influence, she argues, can be seen in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1817), whose heroine, Anne Elliot, declares that men have long held the pen in their hands, and therefore books questioning women’s intellectual capacities are male-biased, in words that closely echo those of “Elenir Irwin”’s 1810 translation, a faithful version of Feijoo’s own words written back in 1726.

Why did Feijoo’s essay continue to arouse interest in Britain in the early 1800s? As we have seen, some considered his arguments outdated. Others argued that his belligerence was typical of a backward country which, after its past political hegemony and literary splendours, was depicted in British press reports from the Peninsular War with images of brutality and atavism. Others again, including the publishers of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, champions of contemporary Spanish literature, argued ironically in

¹⁷ Dow bases her hypothesis on stylistic similarities between the translation and other writings by Barrett and on indirect information contained in Sarah Burney’s correspondence; I am extremely grateful to her for sharing her work with me prior to publication (Dow 2023).

1801 that Spain had not sunk “beneath an Egyptian darkness of ignorance”, as many believed (June 1801, 532).¹⁸ For the latter, Feijoo’s work was in itself an example of modernity in bringing together both “profound disquisitions and lively speculations” (534), without sharing the irreligion of French philosophy or the immorality of German sentimental fiction.¹⁹

There are three main reasons, in my view, for the new resonance of Feijoo’s writing in Britain at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Firstly, it spoke to the renewed interest in Spanish culture developing in British and more widely European Romanticism. Secondly, his name and work as a Catholic enlightened intellectual served as a reference in times of secularisation and revolution for moderate and conservative authors and readers. Lastly, and of particular interest to my argument, his defence of the equal intellectual capacity of men and women was used by educated women and aspiring female writers, translators, patrons and readers to legitimise their own position and that of their sex generally in such roles. At a time when the rise of a bourgeois respectability predicated on female domesticity was eroding late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century positions that emphasised the rational capacities of women and questioned the paradoxes of liberalism (government by social contract, but arbitrary power of husbands in the home), Feijoo’s combative, erudite and somewhat old-fashioned essay could be seen as giving the increasingly strict norms of female decorum a healthy shake.

THE ITALIAN PENINSULA. CONNECTIONS WITH ARISTOCRATIC AND CURIAL CONTEXTS

In Italy, Feijoo’s works were widely read in Spanish, thanks largely to the close cultural and political relationship between the two peninsulas and to the presence of Jesuits expelled from Spain (from 1767 onwards) and of other Spanish clerics in the Roman Curia. Three different translations of the *Teatro crítico* were published between 1744 and 1782: the Genoese version was complete, but the others did not go beyond the first volume. They were produced in quarto format—the same size as the Spanish

¹⁸ On Spanish literature in British periodicals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see Perojo Arronte and Flores Moreno (2022).

¹⁹ Founded in 1731, this magazine was extremely important to women writers (who contributed to it—Elizabeth Carter, for example) and readers.

publications and larger than the French and English translations, which were in pocket format (octavo or duodecimo)—high in price and quality (good paper, excellent typography, adorned with small engravings). For example, the Genoa edition is a beautiful set of eight leatherbound volumes, with red-edged pages and the title engraved in gold on the spines. Seemingly aimed at an erudite or aristocratic readership, they had small print runs (hence few copies have survived), and achieved only relative success. The three translators are obscure figures, probably clerics, with no other known works to their names: we have no information about Francesco Maria Bisogni, author of the Neapolitan version; Antonio Eligio Martínez, responsible for the Genoese version, may have been an exiled Jesuit, while Marcantonio Franconi, who translated the Roman edition, was a member of the Accademia dell’Arcadia.

The three versions appeared in cities that were prominent publishing centres and had special links with the Hispanic monarchy: Naples (1744), at the time when Charles of Bourbon, the future Charles III of Spain, was King of Naples and Sicily; Rome (1744); and Genoa (1777–1782). These were cities in which women participated in sociability and cultural life, albeit in different ways (Betri and Brambilla 2004). In Naples, female thinkers, translators and aristocratic patrons were key figures in the intellectual circles in which Cartesianism and, by the 1740s, Newtonianism flourished: among their number were Giuseppa Eleanora Barbapiccola, translator of Descartes (1722); Faustina Pignatelli, princess of Colubrano, admitted to Bologna’s Academy of Sciences in 1732; and natural philosopher Mariangela Ardinghelli, who was part of the Prince of Tarsia’s circle, translated various works from English to Italian and acted as mediator between the French Académie des Sciences and Neapolitan intellectuals (Findlen 1995; Cavazza 2009, 232; Bertucci 2013). Genoa’s noblewomen played a central role in the city’s salons and their practices of mixed sociability, as symbolised by the custom of *cicisbeo*—the accepted form of companionship between a married woman and a male friend (Bizzocchi 2005; Betri and Brambilla 2004). In Rome, meanwhile, women from the great noble families, often linked to the Curia, were part of the various networks that revolved around the Arcadia. Founded in 1690 as a private and exclusively male group in the garden of the Franciscan monastery of San Pietro in Montorio, over time the Arcadia developed a double soul: alongside the institutionalised academy there were broader, mixed meetings, whose tentacles infiltrated the social fabric of the city and promoted politeness and “good taste”—with the active

intervention of a female elite—rather than pure erudition (Graziosi 1992, 2004).

The Genoese translation of the *Teatro crítico* is the only one to include a subscription list showing the interest of an aristocratic and ecclesiastical male elite in Feijoo's work: of the 83 subscribers (23 of them clerics), most are from the Republic of Genoa (63), led by the doge (chief magistrate) Giacomo Maria Brignole, while 20 come from other Italian cities (with Rome first, and Parma—ruled by a Bourbon, Duke Ferdinand I—a close second). The extensive translator's prefaces included in virtually all of the eight volumes reveal that Antonio Eligio Martínez was a Spaniard from Andalucía, probably a Jesuit in exile with previous experience in Spanish America. He emphasises the “general acclaim” with which Feijoo's works have been received “almost all over Europe, and in many cultivated provinces of the New World” (Feijoo 1777–1782, vol. V, “Prologo del traduttore”, II). He also advertises his own scholarship and aspirations, in the form of extensive Latin quotations and lengthy reflections on the intricacies of the art of translation. However, his enthusiasm on the success of his work gradually diminishes: initially grateful for its “courteous reception”, in subsequent prefaces he complains bitterly about not having achieved the expected number of subscriptions (and indeed about various cancellations), which ultimately prevented him from fulfilling his ambitious plan to translate Feijoo's *Cartas eruditas* as well.

It is the Roman version of the *Defensa de las mujeres*, however, that establishes a more explicit link with the specific local context in which it circulated (Fig. 2.4). The first and only volume published appeared in 1744, early in the pontificate of Benedict XIV (1740–1758), a learned and reformist pope who appreciated much of Feijoo's work—he cited his essay on church music in one of his encyclicals—and helped a number of female scholars. As archbishop of Bologna, he had supported the admission of Laura Bassi to the city's Academy of Sciences in 1732, working with the civil and academic authorities as they searched for a female figure who would allegorically embody the wise city (*docta Minerva*). After becoming pope, still concerned with Bologna's prestige, he arranged for Maria Gaetana Agnesi to be offered a professorship of mathematics at the city's university, and backed the request of Anna Morandi Manzolini, a renowned anatomical wax-modeller, to retain her post after her husband's death (Cavazza 2016; Mazzotti 2007).

Translating the work of a reputed scholar and cleric offered Marcoantonio Franconi, author of the Roman version, an opportunity to resume

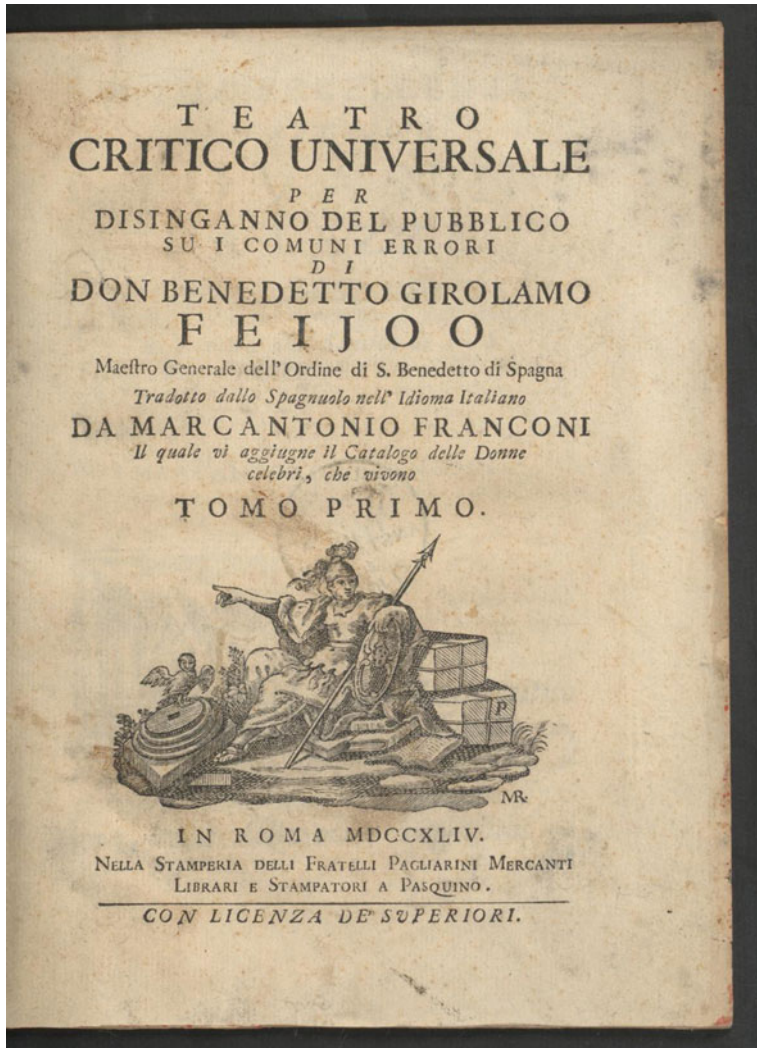


Fig. 2.4 [Marcantonio Franconi, tr.]. *Teatro critico universale per disinganno del pubblico su i comuni errori*. Roma: Fratelli Pagliarini, 1744. Zentralbibliothek Zürich

the defence of women's intellectual and moral capacity. This was a practice which had a long tradition in Italian courts and convents, involving figures such as Isotta Nogarola and Lucrezia Marinella, recognised by Feijoo, and had been represented in more recent times by such examples as Paolo Mattia Doria's *Ragionamenti* (1716), the speeches of Aretafila Savini de Rossi and Maria Gaetana Agnesi in the debate at the Accademia dei Ricovrati in Padua (1729) and Venetian Niccolò Bandiera's *Tratatto degli studi delle donne* (1740) (Guerri 1987; Messbarger 2002; Brambilla 2013). The translation also allowed Franconi and his potential supporters and patrons to create a link between that discourse and the local aristocratic networks, as well as construct an Italian cultural space based on the merits of the peninsula's female scholars by following in the footsteps of Venetian Luisa Bergalli and her anthology of works by female poets, *Componimenti poetici delle più illustri rimatrici d'ogni secolo* (1726). Franconi's additions to his Feijoo translation exemplify this. The translator's prologue and his dedication to the Venetian ambassador Giovanni da Lezze point to the author's renown in international scholarly circles and, in particular, in the Holy City. Above all, however, Franconi's seven-page "Elogio di alcune Donne celebri che vivono" expands and updates Feijoo's chapter on the learned women of the Italian Renaissance with a contemporary cast ranging from Venice to Palermo, focusing in particular on the papal protégée Bassi and on various Roman ladies: wives or widows of noblemen and scholars, or sisters of eminent churchmen, including female members of the Arcadia (Feijoo 1744b, 401–7).

In Italy, then, the *Defensa de las mujeres* enjoyed a limited circulation, restricted to erudite, clerical and aristocratic circles. Within these, its translators' efforts to give the text local relevance become doubly significant. Firstly, they explicitly linked the essay to social networks in which women played a sizeable role and which connected the nobility and intellectuals with the Curia. Secondly, they promoted the Italian cultural scene and its role in modernity by exploiting the fact that (via correspondence and travel narratives), there was considerable awareness across Europe of the exceptional admission of women to certain Italian universities (Padua, Bologna) and literary and scientific academies.

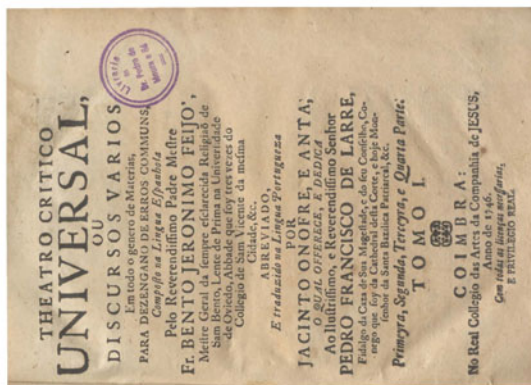
PORTUGAL. EQUALITY VS. COMPLEMENTARITY

By contrast, Feijoo's works enjoyed a very wide circulation in Portugal, aided by the country's geographic and linguistic proximity to Spain, the high level of knowledge of Spanish among its élites, and the various marriages between the Bourbons and the Braganças; indeed Feijoo congratulated himself on this in 1753 in the dedication of his *Cartas eruditas* to Bárbara de Braganza, wife of Ferdinand VI of Spain.²⁰ A two-volume Portuguese edition of the *Teatro crítico* was published by the Real Colégio das Artes in Coimbra and a printing house in Lisbon (Feijoo 1746–1748) as an “epitome”, a substantially shortened and simplified version of the original (Fig. 2.5). The translator Jacinto Onofre (pseudonym of Carmelite friar Antonio Caetano) dedicated it to a canon of Lisbon Cathedral, Pedro Francisco de Larre, but his stated intent was to make the work more accessible to readers of modest means (“for the price at which [Feijoo's books] were being sold deprived many curious readers of his profitable teaching”). It was probably aimed at the middle classes and low clergy, readers who were intellectually curious, but more inclined to follow the main thread of an essay than to dwell on its more erudite references, and for whom an imported edition would have been too expensive. The *Defensa das mulheres* is a fluent, readable summary that reduces the 60-plus pages of the original to ten and captures Feijoo's fundamental ideas, stripping them of all scholarly trappings.

Although the *Defensa de las mujeres* was not published separately in Portuguese, it was well known and wielded an intense and lasting influence on debates about women's intellectual aptitude and education. In Portugal, such writings were published as chapbooks or so-called *cordel* literature, a genre that bridged the gap between academic and popular culture (Marques 2005; Anastácio 2018). For example, the *Espelho Crítico* (1761), published under the pseudonym “Fray Amador do Desengano”, adopts a title similar to that of the *Teatro crítico* but attacks the female vices that result in male misfortune. This misogynist text was countered by two *Cartas apoloéticas em favor, e defensa das mulheres* (1761), both of which draw on Feijoo's essay to compose as erudite, lively and combative a contribution to the debate as the polemics the Benedictine monk had

²⁰ See Piwnik (2003) for more on the dissemination of Feijoo's ideas in Portugal via the circulation in Spanish of his works and those of his defenders and detractors, a Spanish index published in Lisbon, and translations of a few self-standing essays.

(a)



(b)

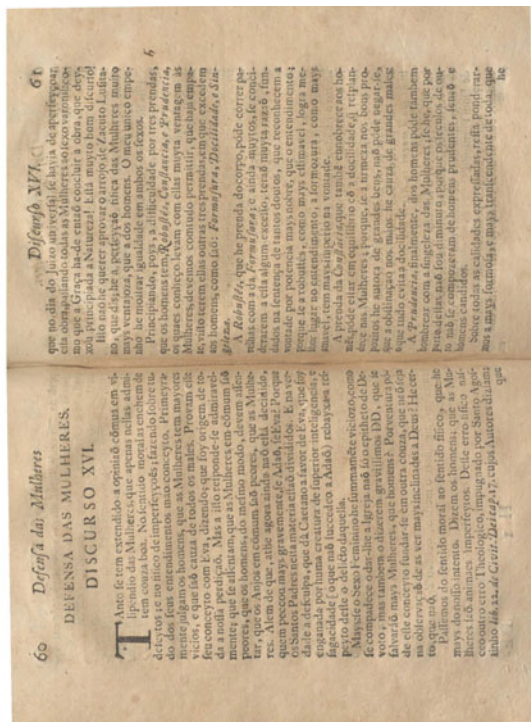


Fig. 2.5 [Antonio Caetano, tr.]. *Theatro critico universal ou discursos varios, em todo o genero de materias, para dezenango de erros communs*, vol. 1. Coimbra: Real Collegio das Artes, 1748. Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra

sustained with his own adversaries in Spain (Torres Feijó 2003). Their author, “Gertrudes Margarida de Jesus”, may have been a nun or, more probably, a male cleric, whose use of the scholarly resources of the original suggests he had access to a complete edition. That would mean the text travelled around Portugal on two parallel circuits, with an abridged Portuguese version finding a wide readership, and an unabridged Spanish version reaching elite and learned circles.

In the last thirty years of the century, the debate became more widespread in Portugal, thanks to an upturn in commerce; the presence of foreign communities; the reconstruction of Lisbon after the earthquake of 1755, which in turn encouraged the new mixed sociability; and the accession of Maria I in 1777, which fuelled the discussion on women’s ability to reign (Torres Feijó 2003; Bello Vázquez 2005). This period saw the translation of various French works presenting the latest ideas about the complementarity of the sexes and female sensibility and domesticity, such as François Boudier de Villemert’s *L’Ami des femmes* (*O Amigo das mulheres*, 1795; reprinted 1818 and 1823) and Antoine-Léonard Thomas’s *Essai sur le caractère, les moeurs et l’esprit des femmes dans les différents siècles* (*Apologia das mulheres*, 1805; reprinted 1818), whose Portuguese versions were dedicated to cultivated and influential women married to politicians (such as Catarina Micaela de Sousa César e Lencastre, Viscountess of Balsemão). In 1790, a *Tratado sobre Igualdade dos sexos* signed by “Hum Amigo da Razao” rejected, like Feijoo, the notion that there was any inequality between male and female intellectual aptitude based on differences in the organs of perception, while also echoing Rousseau’s *Émile* in affirming that women’s happiness lay in alleviating their husbands’ workload and making their existence happy and comfortable. As late as 1805, a fictional woman defended her sex, seconding Feijoo’s ironic assertion that only angels, who were genderless, could be impartial, because men, even self-proclaimed philosophers, acted in bad faith in not recognising women’s abilities (“If the angels were to write, they would grant us equal merit”, L.D.P.G. 1805). New thinking about the complementarity of the sexes did not, therefore, completely displace the assertion of rational equality or the glossing of illustrious women of the past, two central axes of Feijoo’s essay—all three strands were instead interwoven in varying and uneven ways.

CREOLE READINGS

In Spanish America, Feijoo was by far the most appreciated and cited peninsular writer, and America by turn occupied a very important place in his thinking (Fernández Abril 2017). Although he refused an appointment as a bishop in the Indies, he maintained epistolary relationships with intellectuals closely connected to the networks of institutional and ecclesiastical power in both the Viceroyalty of Peru and New Spain (San José Vázquez 2016; García Díaz 2017), and his works could be found in many libraries and private collections owned by male and female *criollos* or American-born Spaniards (Molleda Sabada 2019, 95).

Despite his immense fame in Spanish America, none of the many written tributes to Feijoo and his work explicitly mentions the *Defensa de las mujeres*: I have found just one passage in the *Biblioteca Hispano Americana septentrional* (Northern Hispanic American Library), first published in 1816–1821 by New Spain-born cleric José Mariano Beristain, that expresses gratitude for the way Feijoo had praised the erudition and talent of the “celebrated Mexican nun Sister Juana Inés de la Cruz”, the seventeenth-century poet and thinker whose work circulated widely on both sides of the Atlantic and influenced Feijoo’s own poetry (Beristain 1883, vol. 1, 362). This side of his work does not therefore seem to have been the main source of interest for a predominantly ecclesiastical intellectual elite (Escamilla González 2010) whose members, mostly *criollos*, were attracted by other aspects of his thinking, such as his defence of Americans’ moral and intellectual capacity, as opposed to European theories on the natural inferiority of the New World, a crucial intellectual and political issue in scholarly debates (San José Vázquez 2016; Cañizares-Esguerra 2001). It seems likely that Feijoo’s views on gender intellectual equality did arouse the interest of a wider, lay readership—men and women who frequented mixed *tertulias* (in Mexico City, Santa Fe de Bogotá, Quito) and consumed the periodical press that emerged in the last decades of the eighteenth century, in which the debate on education and the respective roles of men and women in moral and social reform featured prominently (Meléndez 2009). Feijoo’s American readers included women such as Leona Vicario in Mexico City, who made excerpts from his speeches (García 2020, 37–38), the Joaristi family in Zacatecas, who read him together at night (Molleda Sabada 2019, 20), and Lima noblewoman María Josefa Carrillo de Albornoz, whose father recommended the writer to her, as we know from a letter of 29 July

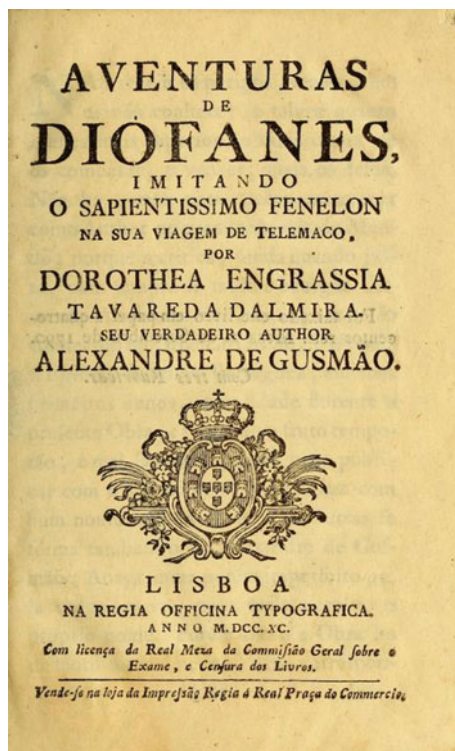
1780 (“I am continuing to read Feijóo, as you suggested”—Martínez Pérez 2020, 374). There seems, however, to be no written trace of the opinions of these or other readers of Feijóo in Spanish America about his ideas on gender difference.

By contrast, we do have two fascinating examples of the way in which Feijóo’s arguments were recycled by two writers born in Brazil, where his work was also well known (Martínez López 1966). The first is Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta (1711–1793), who was born in São Paulo to a Brazilian mother and Portuguese father and moved as a child to Lisbon, where she mixed in court circles. The younger sister of essayist Matias Aires da Silva de Eça, an admirer of Feijóo, she drew on the *Defensa de las mujeres* in her *Aventuras de Diófanes*, published under a pseudonym in 1752 in Lisbon and reprinted in 1777 and 1790²¹ (Fig. 2.6). The female protagonists of this moral and didactic novel in neoclassical style, inspired by Fénelon’s *Les aventures de Télémaque*, severely criticise the frivolity of aristocratic women and the disgraceful neglect of female education. In words very similar to those of Feijóo, Da Silva argues that souls are genderless (“they were created equal, and the disposition of the organs (from which I am told the goodness of the spirit comes) is as advantageous in women as it is in men”) and that it is education which enables or prevents the full development of natural talent (“... because men occupy the universities, in which they would find no place if women were to frequent them, since our souls are equals and we possess the same right to the necessary knowledge”, da Silva Tavares 1790, 79 and 80). She also firmly upholds the right to education from her own perspective: that of a cultivated woman, with life experience and social contacts, entirely convinced of women’s abilities and angered by both the unjustness of men and the lack of intellectual ambition of many women.

The second Brazilian writer to draw on Feijóo’s arguments in favour of women was Feliciano Joaquim de Sousa Nunes (1734–1808). Born in Rio de Janeiro, he travelled to Lisbon in search of a career and published his *Discursos político-moraes* there in 1758. That edition was destroyed and its author sent back to Brazil (where the text was republished in 1851) by order of the Secretary of State Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the future Marquis of Pombal, who considered his attitude

²¹ The first edition (entitled *Máximas de virtudes e formosura*) and the second were signed “Dorotea Engrassia Taveda Dalmira”; the third appeared under a male name, “Alexandre de Gusmão”.

Fig. 2.6 [Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta]. *Aventuras de Diofanes*, 2nd edition. Lisbon: Na Regia Officina Typografica, 1777. Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra



towards the metropolis to be subversive. Sousa seems to have been a self-made man, resentful of a Portuguese administration which denied its American subjects printing presses and universities and convinced of his individual merit as opposed to the privileges enjoyed by the nobility. This adds personal emphasis to his passionate defence of understanding as a natural faculty and may explain his empathy with those women who were demanding their talents be recognised. Sousa vigorously upholds the intellectual equality of “all rational creatures, regardless of sex or status” as evidence that can only be ignored by those blind to evidence and enslaved to unfounded prejudices (Sousa Nunes 2006, 144). In that regard, he quotes Feijoo several times, but intensifying his combative style and drawing on his own reality, taking pride in his American heritage and

arguing with conviction that female aptitude was not restricted to heroines of the past but visible in everyday life. He therefore includes among his examples of learned women several Portuguese women of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and the New Spain-born Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), as well as poet Ângela do Amaral (c.1725–?), a contemporary of his and, like him, a native of Rio.²²

These examples show that, in the sphere of the gender debate too, Feijoo's work was subject to readings and reworkings within the framework of a Spanish and Portuguese American Enlightenment which, far from being a pale imitation of the European Enlightenment, was very much an original and critical response to it.

CONCLUSION: FACES OF MODERNITY

The way Feijoo's essay in defence of the rational equality of men and women echoed around Europe and America throughout the eighteenth century and, in some cases, even into the nineteenth century, does not of course mean it had universal validity: no text has that. It does however mean that the interest his work aroused in Spain even at the end of the nineteenth century cannot be seen as related exclusively to the cultural backwardness of the Iberian world, where ideas that had fallen out of fashion elsewhere lived on. Either of these two readings would mean assuming that a text has a stable meaning—in this case, that the meaning of the *Defensa de las mujeres* remained unchanged since its original publication in 1726, throughout its various editions and translations. On the contrary, the uses to which it was put, both in its immediate environment and in other cultural, linguistic and political contexts, say much about its capacity to challenge new generations, who saw it less as something to be confined to the past and more as a repertoire of arguments to be reinterpreted or reformulated in the light of the present. Its extensive refutation of the Aristotelian principles on which the notion of female inferiority was based ceased to be of interest, due to the obsolescence of the scholastic system, but its examples of learned women continued to be invoked as evidence, and updated to suit national or local contexts. Above all, Feijoo's defence of intellectual equality, even if couched in outdated

²² An overview of eighteenth-century Portuguese and Brazilian women writers can be found in Bello Vázquez (2013).

language, must still have seemed a useful antidote to the new medical and philosophical theories which argued that the sensitivity of the female nervous system meant women had less aptitude for learning.

Many ages coexist within each age. The different readings and uses to which the *Defensa de las mujeres* was subjected challenge the idea of a linear history of thinking on gender difference. From the final decades of the eighteenth century onwards, the cultural and political ideal of complementarity between public and private, based on the idea of a naturally domestic and sensitive femininity, gained increasing hegemony in Europe and the Americas. It was disputed, however, not only on the basis of Enlightenment, radical or revolutionary principles, but also on that of material recycled from various earlier intellectual traditions (rationalism, Puritanism, Stoicism, Augustinianism...). The translations and adaptations of Feijoo's essay over the course of almost a century, and the opinions generated by it, confirm—as does research into physiological discourses of sexual difference and into friendships between educated men and women—that gender models continued to be a subject of discussion, whether in scholarly circles, among lay readers or for the emerging public opinion. While some saw the text as outdated or irrelevant, others (especially women) read it with fresh eyes in a debate that raged on, and thus it continued to be reinterpreted and rewritten in the light of new preoccupations.

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