

1 The Woman Question

In an immense imbroglio I place myself. It is not only against the ignorant commoner with whom I enter contest: to defend all women comes to be the same as to offend almost all men, since rare is he that is not interested in building up his sex at the expense of the other.

BENITO JERÓNIMO FEIJOO Y MONTENEGRO, *Defensa de la mujer*

The prophetic opening lines of Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro's *Defensa de la mujer* (Defense of Women), published in 1726, provoked contemporary readers.¹ Antagonizing and shocking some, persuading and rousing others, Feijoo's landmark essay sparked a heated debate on the nature of women that continued well into the 1730s. Published in the first volume of Feijoo's eight-volume compendium *Teatro crítico universal* (1726–1740), the *Defense* questioned the long-standing view of women as inferior creatures whose nature dictated their lowly station. That the writings of a single monk essentially revolutionized the discussion about women in Spain may seem surprising to modern readers, but scholars have uncovered at least twenty-one direct responses to Feijoo's *Defense*, suggesting his contemporaries found his ideas on women highly provocative.

Feijoo's writings, which often prompted this kind of public debate, came to occupy a central place in Enlightenment discourse.² His *Teatro crítico* can be likened to Diderot's widely read *Encyclopédie* (1745–1772) in terms of both its attempt to take on a broad philosophical agenda and its place as a defining text in the minds of his contemporary readers. Printers issued twenty editions—more than three thousand copies—of the *Teatro crítico* between 1726 and 1787 alone, and the text became an essential point of departure for the aspiring intellectual in Spain.³ As Richard Herr observes, "Only one work rivaled Feijoo's [*sic*] in popularity, and that was the ever-loved *Don Quixote*."⁴ Outside Spain, Feijoo's essay on women became one of his best-known texts in the 1700s. Not only did excerpts with commentary appear in the French periodicals *Mercure de France* and *Mémoires de Trévoux* in the 1730s, but by century's end his work also had enjoyed translation into French and English and partial translation into Italian and Portuguese.⁵

In part because of its popularity, Feijoo's essay on women helped engineer a significant shift in the relationship between gender discourse and women's lives in Spain. As in other European countries, in Spain the role women should play in society had been fodder for discussion for centuries. However, during most of the early modern period, the woman question remained principally theoretical. While writings prescribing women's appropriate station in society solidified traditional views of inequality and submission into the 1700s, these views did not define women's lives. Rather, a wide gap existed between women's lived experience in fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and seventeenth-century Spain and the doctrine of female enclosure and inferiority that dominated early modern Spanish writings.

The publication of Feijoo's essay, however, raised the woman question among a wider circle of intellectuals than had considered it before. The incorporation of more minds—including an unprecedented number of female authors—into the debate over women's place in society helped move these discussions off the page and into real life by building the base for genuine social change. By the time the furor surrounding Feijoo's essay on women fizzled out in the late 1730s, a significant number of Spain's intellectual elite were convinced by the Benedictine's assertion of female equality. As these young reformers began to reimagine Spanish society and create institutions focused on improving the nation, their newfound belief in women's natural equality and potential intellectual capabilities led them to include the female sex in their blueprint for reform.

THE WOMAN QUESTION IN EARLY MODERN SPAIN

To understand the nature of these eighteenth-century debates on women, it is instructive to look back at the development of the woman question in early modern Spain, perhaps beginning with the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabel in 1469, which has long been the starting point for histories of Spain. After all, this historic union created Spain as we know it today, through the unification of the crowns of Aragon and Castile. Less often considered is how the marriage gave the woman question a new force and urgency with the ascension of the strong-willed and intelligent Isabel to the throne. When Isabel took the throne in 1474, discussion on the place of women in society was in full swing throughout Europe. Estimates figure an astounding one thousand works concerned with the nature and role of the female sex were written in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, not counting reprints and translations.⁶

In varying ways, these writings aimed to challenge or shore up the dom-

inant view on women derived from the Bible and the writings of early church fathers. As this existing paradigm explained, women, the descendants of Eve, were at once manipulative and sinful, gullible and frail. While some authors would challenge this notion of women as evil and weak, it would remain the dominant gender ideology in Spain into the 1700s. Nevertheless, texts promoting women's enclosure and praising male rule—two antidotes to women's capricious nature—more likely constituted reactions to, rather than shapers of, women's behavior. Isabel and countless other Spanish women lived more public and more active lives than promoters of patriarchy desired.

In the half century before Isabel's reign, some writers had already begun to seriously challenge the underpinnings of the dominant misogynist discourse. One of the earliest critiques in Spain of the portrait of women as weak and wicked came in Enrique de Villena's 1417 *Doce trabajos de Hércules*. Villena devoted an entire chapter of his work to the merits of women, noting that their natural virtues helped inspire the best in men.⁷ Villena's departure from the prevailing image of Eve corrupting man became a common trope of pro-female writers. Similarly, Juan Rodríguez del Padrón's 1443 *Triunfo de las donas* elucidates women's strengths and argues for female superiority. Along with more mainstream arguments about female chastity and beauty, Rodríguez del Padrón introduced a rather bizarre line of reasoning. He contended that the fact that women's genitalia are more concealed than men's points to their moral superiority.⁸ Rather than argue for female superiority, Álvaro de Luna, in his 1446 *Libro de las virtuosas y claras mugeres*, claimed that society must recognize the many women who behave virtuously. His text, which lists such noteworthy women, revised the negative view of the female sex, which he believed was based on the behavior of a few misguided women. These three works exemplify the variety of defenses of the female sex that fifteenth-century thinkers composed in the face of the predominant anti-female view.⁹ These early defenses focused on reversing the notion of women's inherent weakness and sinfulness, but did little to consider how this reversal might alter women's social roles.

Isabel's first year as queen shows the difficulties not only of negotiating this dynamic and evolving gender landscape but also of capitalizing on the possibilities that the proliferation of pro-female texts provided.¹⁰ Isabel's reign proved a challenge from the start, since her right to succession was highly contested. The dispute over who should inherit the throne of Castile left vacant by the death of Enrique IV in December 1474 involved two main contenders: Enrique's daughter Juana—the rightful heir—and Enrique's half-sister Isabel. A large portion of the nobility, exasperated by Enrique's

rule, rejected Juana. It did not help Juana's case that a prominent rumor made her the illegitimate daughter of Enrique's wife, Juana, and the court advisor Beltrán de la Cueva, earning her the nickname "Juana la Beltraneja."¹¹ Repulsed by a supposed bastard daughter and a cuckolded king, some nobles looked to Isabel to return strong rule to Spain.¹²

Isabel immediately proved that she was up to the task. When she learned of Enrique's death, Isabel took matters into her own hands and staged an acclamation ceremony—without Ferdinand—proclaiming herself the rightful ruler of Castile. Studies of chroniclers' reactions to this ceremony show that her supporters and critics focused on her highly symbolic use of an unsheathed sword in the procession. Her supporters defended her right to use this very masculine symbol of justice by pointing out that she, the sovereign ruler of Castile, needed to restore order at a time when questions over the succession could throw the kingdom into crisis. Meanwhile, her critics blasted her use of the sword as an unacceptable usurpation of Ferdinand's role as both her husband and the king. As Elizabeth Leffeldt explains, "The action seemed to them a foolish display of a wife ostentatiously taking on the attributes of her husband."¹³ Martín de Córdoba, in his 1468 advice manual *Jardín de las nobles doncellas*, which he presented to Isabel on the eve of her marriage to Ferdinand, made clear that the role she should play was very different from that of her spouse. In his account, "the husband/king was father, judge, and sword, while the queen was mother, advocate, and shield."¹⁴ Worried about the weak nature of women, Córdoba warned Isabel to be dutiful and faithful.

This was advice she only partly followed. When Ferdinand and his troops initially retreated from battle against the warring supporters of Juana at Toro in 1474, Isabel publicly dressed him down for his defeat. Often compared to the speech England's Elizabeth I gave to her troops at Tilbury in 1588, Isabel's words dismissed the notion that her female body hindered her from judging the soldiers' performance: "Whether women lack discretion to know, and the courage to dare, and the tongue to speak, I have found that we have eyes to see."¹⁵ Isabel, whose library included writings by Christine de Pizan and other proto-feminist writers, emerged as a strong leader and formidable challenge, even to her husband, Ferdinand.¹⁶ The strength she displayed helped her to counter the image of a weak monarch left behind by the effeminate Enrique.

At the same time, however, Isabel had to take care that her sexuality was not impugned the way Enrique's had been. Isabel's chroniclers emphasized her marriage to Ferdinand and portrayed her as, if not the consummate

wife, the ideal mother. By likening her to the Virgin Mary, Isabel's chroniclers cast the queen's sexualized female body in positive terms and tried to counter the negative portrayal of women that focused on the figure of Eve. As Lehfelddt explains, "Mary had offered the world the ultimate redemption: the son of God. Isabel offered a similar redemption. She gave Castile an indisputable male heir who stood in a direct line to the throne."¹⁷ The careful image that Isabel constructed, as well as the consternation that her presence on the throne produced for some contemporaries, shows that despite developing critiques of traditional views on the female sex, the old misogynistic discourse still dominated views on women in fifteenth-century Castile.

Isabel, however, was not the only woman who successfully negotiated a place of power in this highly patriarchal society. The dynamism of a society in the throes of imperial expansion presented numerous women with opportunities for empowerment. In the southern city of Seville, near the thriving port of Cádiz, for example, the years surrounding 1492 witnessed dramatic demographic change, a flourishing economy, and colonial expansion that thrust Sevillian women into a new, more public role. Partly because of the emigration of many of the city's men to the Americas, women assumed increasing responsibility for crucial family and business decisions. They bought, sold, and rented property; they negotiated marriages for their children; and they even pursued commercial ventures.¹⁸ Andres Navagero, the Venetian ambassador to Spain, remarked on women's shifting place in Sevillian society in 1525, when he described the city as being "in the hands of women."¹⁹ Not surprisingly, women's increased power created anxiety, particularly among the clergy. As Mary Elizabeth Perry explains, "Gender beliefs that women required special protective enclosure seemed to be even more strongly invoked as men's preoccupation with wars and colonizing required women to participate more actively in the life of the city."²⁰ In this case, the proliferation of texts praising women's enclosure actually bespoke women's active presence in public life.

This dynamic environment extended into the colonies themselves, and more than one woman found a degree of liberation in the Americas. Among the most outrageous examples is Catalina de Erauso, a woman who shed the privileges attached to her noble birth, and her nun's habit, and headed to the colonies. Donning men's clothing, Erauso became a fierce warrior and something of a ladies' man. When her cross-dressing was discovered and Erauso was forced to return to Europe, she successfully gained a papal dispensation to wear men's clothing and a regular pension from the king of Spain in grat-

itude for her military service. Erauso's behavior could be forgiven, even celebrated, because it proved male superiority in the very lengths a woman would go to in order to become a man.²¹

A number of women in early modern Spain also found power from within the confines of the convent. Many nuns and abbesses enjoyed economic sway, based on their control over large estates.²² Administering the often diversified properties that these elite institutions held involved mastery of complex financial transactions. Nuns oversaw production on landed estates, sold goods in the marketplace, collected rents on urban properties, served as creditors, collected taxes or annuities based on bestowed privileges, filed lawsuits, and became skilled bookkeepers. Handling many of these affairs took nuns outside the convent's walls. Rather than living truly apart from the secular world, women in convents resided in "permeable cloisters," as Elizabeth Lehfelddt demonstrates in her 2005 study of convents in early modern Valladolid.²³ As founders and patrons of religious houses, aristocratic women—often as widows—forged female communities that became centers of female learning and independence while also demonstrating their wealth and prestige in a highly corporate society.²⁴ And, of course, the Carmelite nun Santa Teresa de Jesús of Avila (1515–1582), who founded seventeen religious houses and wrote numerous spiritual works during her lifetime, helped shape the character of female monastic life throughout Castile.²⁵ Even after the Council of Trent, generally seen as a negative turning point for female religious, women in Spanish convents enjoyed positions of prominence in local communities.²⁶

Some aristocratic women even found religious enclosure a useful position from which to exercise influence over national politics. The most well-documented case of this involves two women related to Philip III who resided at the Convent of the Descalzas Reales in Madrid: Empress María, Philip's grandmother, and her daughter Margaret of the Cross. Along with Philip's wife, Margaret of Austria, who lived at court, these women forged political networks that allowed them to influence Philip's decisions to such a degree that his favorite advisor, the Duke of Lerma, pushed for the court's relocation to Valladolid in 1601, far from the reaches of the Madrid-based convent. The cloistered world of the Descalzas Reales enabled Empress María and her daughter to have extended visits with Philip III and other influential relatives in seclusion, away from the eyes and ears at court.²⁷

While certainly only a small number of women influenced state policy from inside the convent, women successfully negotiated the strict legal and inquisitorial barriers of early modern Spanish society. Noble women, drawing on the limited power over family property that partible inheritance laws

offered, sought to advance their families' power and prestige in the kingdom in myriad ways, from commissioning paintings to arranging marriages.²⁸ *Beatas*, spiritual laywomen affiliated with religious orders, led independent lives away from priests, husbands, and other male watchdogs. Women like Mariana de Jesús and Lucía de Jesús, who rejected their fathers' intentions to marry them off, and María Pérez de Ocampo, who fled her domineering stepfather, found freedom and spiritual fulfillment among other women.²⁹ Non-Christian women, bound to have even less power than their Christian counterparts, also found ways to elude patriarchal control. By preserving religious traditions in the home, including those concerning dress, food, and Sabbath rituals, Jewish women sidestepped the Inquisition's aim to regulate their beliefs. In fact, as the Inquisition thrust non-Christian religious observance out of the public realm, women's role in the home became even more important.³⁰ Extensive research in notarial and judicial archives in the past twenty years has demonstrated how women of varying ranks and classes manipulated the legal system to their advantage.³¹

Women's lived experiences aside, the dominant gender paradigm remained one that made women the charges of men, both their subjects and their defining characteristic. Women's enclosure in either convents or marriage was considered essential to uphold their virginity or virtue and thus, by extension, the honor and reputation of their male relatives. Lotario, a character in Miguel Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, explains, "As the flesh of the wife is one with the flesh of the husband, the blemishes which fall on her or the defects she incurs recoil upon the flesh of the husband, although, as I have said, he may be in no respect the cause of the trouble."³² In Spain, where seven centuries of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim cohabitation resulted in heightened fears about miscegenation, controlling women's reproductive bodies was of critical social importance. Christian families endeavored to keep their family trees "clean," to ensure *limpieza de sangre*, or "purity of blood," meaning no traces of Jewish ancestry in their family trees. As laws excluding those with unclean blood from holding state and church offices codified the importance of racial purity in the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, it would not do to leave women, considered easily duped and naturally lustful, unguarded.

Two conduct books written for women in the sixteenth century illustrate this negative view of the female sex: Juan Luis Vives's *De institutione feminae christianae*, commissioned by the English queen Catherine of Aragon for her daughter Mary Tudor and first printed in 1523; and Fray Luis de León's 1583 *La perfecta casada*. These books are worth looking at in depth partly because of the tremendous circulation they enjoyed, both in their day

and beyond.³³ Vives's and León's texts constituted the chief authorities on women's comportment in early modern Spain and were certain to figure in the limited education of any elite woman. Not surprisingly, both of these texts followed the traditional Christian tale of women as being easily corrupted and prone to evil. For example, in arguing that women should not be teachers, Vives resorts to the age-old condemnation of Eve:

For Adam was created first, then Eve, and Adam was not seduced but the woman was seduced and led astray. Therefore, since woman is a weak creature and of uncertain judgment and is easily deceived (as Eve, the first parent of mankind, demonstrated, whom the devil deluded with such a slight pretext), she should not teach, lest when she has convinced herself of some false opinion, she transmit it to her listeners in her role as a teacher and easily drag others into her error, since pupils willingly follow their teacher.³⁴

La perfecta casada, presented as a wedding present for León's niece María Varela Osorio, concurs in Vives's negative description of women. When León comments on "the good wife" in chapter 1, for example, it is to note that such a woman "is a rare thing."³⁵

Vives and León believed women to be highly susceptible to outside influences and prone to evil, so they stressed the necessity for women to be subject to their husbands. Vives explains, "The woman is still the daughter of the man and weaker, and for that reason needs his protection. And when she is bereft of her husband, she is alone, naked, exposed to harm."³⁶ Likewise, León makes no mistake about the inferior status of wives in marriage when he writes, "The state of the wife, in comparison to the husband, is a humble state."³⁷ Women's humble state relegated them to the home. *La perfecta casada* explains, "As men are made for public, women are made for enclosure; and as men are made to speak and go outside, women are made to enclose and cover themselves."³⁸

Being a good woman not only meant staying at home but also meant managing domestic affairs. Vives, for example, ranked skill in household governance as being among the most important traits of a Christian woman: "If to the two virtues of chastity and great love for one's husband there is added skill in governing a household, then marriages become happier and more harmonious."³⁹ León's manual outlined so many household responsibilities for women that one twentieth-century commentator jibed that the book should be renamed "the perfect prisoner, enslaved by one thousand chores."⁴⁰ For Fray Luis, the relationship between a woman and her home was something special and unique. He explains, "It has to be understood that her house is a body and she is its spirit."⁴¹ Both León's and Vives's texts im-

bued women's domestic responsibilities and private enclosure with importance, perhaps in order to keep women in their place.

The need to enclose women at home stemmed from the need to safeguard them. As Vives explains, "An unmarried young woman should rarely appear in public, since she has no business there and her most precious possession, her chastity, is placed in jeopardy."⁴² For a single woman, Vives explains, virginity is the ultimate virtue; but a married woman need conform to an even longer set of rules. She must be loyal, dedicated, and obedient to her spouse; she must dress appropriately, covering her face in public; she must not allow any man into her house without her husband's permission. While a wife's obedience and dedication to her spouse determined her honor, a husband's honor stemmed from his ability to control his wife and ensure she remained virtuous. Vives expresses this rule in his rhetorical query "But who can have respect for a man who he sees is ruled by a woman?"⁴³ It is interesting to note that Vives's text for husbands, *De los deberes del marido*, fills less than half the pages of his advice book for women and focuses substantially on selecting and governing a good wife rather than detailing how a husband should behave in his own right.

Legal codes reinforced the views expressed in Vives's and León's works. For example, the law made adultery a civil crime for women but not for men, and a husband who found his wife committing adultery could kill her without fear of punishment. For men, bigamy constituted the only comparable crime, and even if a man were found guilty it was the authorities, not a jealous wife, who doled out his punishment.⁴⁴ Clearly, in early modern Spain, wives' and daughters' actions, rather than men's own, determined male honor and reputation. Accordingly, women had to be constantly scrutinized; their behavior, suitably controlled.

While women like Isabel and Catalina de Erauso challenged these rules in their everyday lives, a small group of female authors began to oppose them in print. By far the most outspoken critic of patriarchy in seventeenth-century Spain was the author María de Zayas y Sotomayor (b. 1590), most celebrated for her composition of two novella collections, *Novelas amorosas y ejemplares* (1637) and *Desengaños amorosos* (1647).⁴⁵ An elite woman whose presence in Madrid's literary circles between 1621 and 1647 earned her the respect of first-class playwrights like Lope de Vega, Zayas devoted much of her writing to exposing the flaws inherent in Spain's gender system. Her critique came at a crucial time for women. While the rise of humanism had opened up some opportunities for elite women's education in sixteenth-century Spain, the Counter-Reformation questioned the merits of training women in the classics and further entrenched traditional gen-

der relations.⁴⁶ Zayas lamented women's lack of education and called into doubt the ability of a patriarchal society to truly protect women as it proposed to do. Her collections, published in more than ten Spanish editions and numerous translations and adaptations, were contemporary best-sellers and remained popular into the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Even the English diarist Samuel Pepys had one of Zayas's books in his library.⁴⁸

In her writings, Zayas questioned the notion that women were inherently inferior to men. Through a female protagonist, she contends, "Whether this matter that we men and women are made of is a bonding of clay and fire, or a dough of earth and spirit, it has no more nobility in men than in women, if our blood is the same, if our senses, our powers, and the organs that perform their functions are all the same; our souls the same, for souls are neither male nor female."⁴⁹ Here Zayas's character expresses the view that it was not women's bodies, but their upbringing, that handicapped them. However, in arguing for women's intellectual capabilities, Zayas hesitates to fully commit to a new paradigm of physical equality. She writes, "The real reason why women are not learned is not a defect in intelligence but a lack of opportunity[,] because if, in our upbringing, our parents gave us books and teachers instead of putting cambric on our sewing cushions and patterns in our embroidery frames, we would be as fit as men for any job or university professorship. Since intelligence consists of the damp humor, we might even be sharper because we're of a colder humor."⁵⁰ By claiming both that a proper education would make women men's equals and that female anatomy suggests women's mental superiority, Zayas's text reveals just how difficult it could be to break free from entrenched notions of the sexes, even for a radical-minded author like Zayas.

In addition to arguing for women's education, Zayas also critiques a society that blamed women for men's actions: "Because men preside over everything, they never tell about the evil deeds they do, they tell only about the ones done to them. If you think about it, men are really the ones at fault and women go along with them, thinking they must be right."⁵¹ Her stories of male violence and female victims highlight some of the problems she identified in Spain's honor system. One story, "Mal presagio casar lejos," details the deaths of four wives murdered by their husbands. Victims of false accusations of marital infidelity, these characters suffer cruel and violent deaths. Zayas's graphic text reads like a modern-day crime novel: "Her husband came in through the dressing room door and with her own hair, which was very beautiful, he made a noose around her neck and strangled her. Then he poisoned the little boy, saying that he didn't want a child of questionable background to inherit his estate."⁵² Even more disturbing are

Zayas's depictions of the female victims. For example, in one story, when the main character Camila confides to her husband that she was raped, he poisons her to avenge his honor. The narrator describes Camila's victimized body: "Her whole body [swelled] monstrously: her arms and her legs looked like huge pillars and her stomach distended at least a rod from her waistline."⁵³ Through her gruesome descriptions, Zayas crafted a critique of a social code that victimized women and children by placing their lives in the hands of conniving and cruel men.

By way of solution, Zayas pointed women toward each other. In female friendship and often in the separate world of the convent, Zayas suggested, women could escape the brutality of a misogynistic society. As the literary scholar Lisa Vollendorf explains, "Like other women writers—such as Christine de Pizan, H  lisenne de Crenne, Moderata Fonte, and Margaret Cavendish—Zayas depicts women's friendship and an all-female environment as antidotes to male-dominated society."⁵⁴ This comes through in the ending of *Desenga  os amorosos* when Zayas's main narrator, Lisis, reveals her decision to forego her impending nuptials and enter the convent instead. With this plot twist, Zayas thwarts the convention of her adopted genre, the *maravilla* (enchantments), patterned in the style of Cervantes's 1612 *Novelas ejemplares*. While these stories traditionally ended with a marriage, Zayas has her heroine, Lisis, run off to the convent. According to Vollendorf, "Lisis urges men to change their ways and she urges other women to follow her to safety so they will not meet the same fate as the raped, tortured, and dead women whose stories have been told throughout the collection."⁵⁵

Zayas provides a biting critique of feminine victimization in seventeenth-century Spain. Her pro-woman writings, grounded in a larger trajectory both in and outside of Spain, put into print a challenge to patriarchy that many women voiced in their everyday lives. The solution of female solidarity and seclusion Zayas posited shows just how dire she judged women's situation to be. For many women in Spain in the decades that followed, Zayas's texts provided an important catalyst for action. For example, when Clara Jara de Soto requested permission to print her manuscript *Las tertulias murcianas* in 1790, she explained that her work was fashioned after that of Zayas.⁵⁶ The rejection letter she received from Antonio de Capmany y de Montpalau revealed his dislike of her chosen exemplar: "I certify that in one of the meetings celebrated by the said [Royal] Academy [of History], the member of the Academy to whom it was assigned to examine the work titled *Las tertulias murcianas*, read the judgment that he had formed of its content[s], and he explained them to be some stories that the author com-

posed [using] those of Doña María de Zayas for a model, [stories that,] with less refined style and less imagination, have all the defects of those of Zayas." The list of problems with *Las tertulias murcianas* went on and on: it was neither educational nor entertaining, it failed to observe traditional theatrical norms, it contained weak dialogue, it presented unbelievable and undeveloped characters, and it was driven by an awkward plot.⁵⁷ Not surprisingly, the academy, Capmany explained, saw no utility in publishing such a work. While Zayas's influence on writers like Soto may have been profound, her popularity did not necessarily signify her acceptance among Spain's intellectual elite. It was another, more masculine, voice that would lead Spain's most prominent thinkers to reconsider their views on the female sex.

FEIJOO AND FEMALE EQUALITY

When Benito Jerónimo Feijoo y Montenegro (1676–1764) published his *Defense of Women* in 1726, he sparked anew the debate on women that had begun in Spain centuries earlier. In his essay, Feijoo set out to prove women's moral, physical, and intellectual equality to men.⁵⁸ In doing so, he incorporated the works of recent European theorists into the old *querelle des femmes* (woman question), serving to shift the debate into new terms. As a student and then professor of theology, Feijoo devoted a serious portion of his time to reading foreign books largely unknown in Spain, texts like Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620), Nicolas Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité* (1674–75), and Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697). Shaped by the dismal portrait of his native land found in many European texts, Feijoo set out to improve the level of knowledge in his own country with his *Teatro crítico universal*. From the age of fifty to eighty-eight, Feijoo endeavored through his writings to acquaint Spanish intellectuals with recent mental giants like René Descartes, Isaac Newton, and even Jean-Jacques Rousseau.⁵⁹

Feijoo's *Defense* resonated with a number of these newly influential European thinkers, particularly Bacon. One of Feijoo's major goals in writing the *Defense* was to show the flaws of Aristotelian-based scholasticism. In contrast to this old method of inquiry, in which thinkers generalized truths from speculative reasoning, Feijoo advocated reasoning based in empiricism. He expresses his early emphasis on experiential knowledge in one of his childhood remembrances:

When I was a boy, everyone said that it was very dangerous to eat anything right after the [morning] hot chocolate. My mind, for some reason

which I could not then perhaps have explained very well, was so skeptical of this common apprehension that I decided to make [an] experiment. . . . Immediately after my chocolate, I ate a large quantity of fried salt pork, and I felt fine that day and for a long time thereafter, wherefore I had the satisfaction of laughing at those who were possessed by this fear.⁶⁰

This underpinning of Feijoo's thinking comes through in his argument against women's physical inferiority. First, he sums up the dominant view, which labeled woman "an imperfect and even monstrous creature, affirming that the design of nature in the work of generation always intends a male, and only by error or defect in either matter or faculty produces a female."⁶¹ Here, Feijoo confronts a common belief, since not until much later in the eighteenth century did scientists contend that men and women were actually two different sexes, rather than perfect and imperfect forms of the same sex.⁶²

In Spain, the notion that women's bodies spoke to their inferiority was well established in the writings of the humanist scholar Huarte de San Juan, notably his 1575 *Examen de ingenios*. Feijoo ridicules the idea that women are imperfect creatures by means of a series of rhetorical questions that suggest the inadequacy of the current view. Since nature relies on the existence of both sexes for its propagation, he states, how can anyone say that a female is simply a mistake? And since more females than males are born, he continues, are we to assume that nature is more often incorrect? And how do we explain the birth of supposedly lowly creatures from perfectly healthy and strong parents, he muses. These sorts of observations led Feijoo to dismiss the notion that women were physically inferior.

In addition to attacking this paradigm in the abstract, Feijoo also directed his critique at particular theorists. One of his main victims was the twelfth-century Parisian doctor Almarico, who posited that, if man had continued in a state of innocence, every human would have been born a man from the hands of God himself. Feijoo mocks Almarico, whom he calls "a blind follower of Aristotle," for drawing erroneous conclusions from Aristotle's own diatribes against women. Similarly, Feijoo criticizes Augustine for his belief that "in the Universal Resurrection this imperfect work would be perfected, changing all women into the male sex."⁶³ Here again, Feijoo's critique shows the problems with speculative reasoning and argues for the value of Bacon's empirical approach. With these examples, Feijoo questions both the erroneous beliefs and irrational methodologies of those who supported doctrines of female inferiority.

That Feijoo was reacting to the negative view of women that continued to dominate both within and outside of Spain during the early modern

period is clear throughout the *Defense*. Feijoo continually references the “infinite books” that served as invectives against the female sex, the kind that women like Pizan and Zayas railed against. He points to the hypocrisy of their authors, citing among his examples Euripides, who, Feijoo explains, derided women in his plays but idolized them in private. He also suggests a more nefarious rationale for some authors’ negative views on women: “It may likewise be from revenge, at having met with rejection, for some men have been known to say a woman has bad character only because she would not stain her virtue by complying with his desires.”⁶⁴ By way of example, Feijoo tells the story of an Irish beauty, Madame Douglas, who was labeled a traitor and put to death all because she would not give into the “appetite” of Guillermo Leout. The man scorned can be a forceful enemy of women.

Feijoo does not let women off the hook completely for bad behavior. He writes, “I do not deny the vices of many women.” However, he refuses to accept that women are morally inferior to men. First, he points to male culpability in many cases of female immorality. He adds emphatically, “But, oh! If we were to throw light onto the genealogy of their disorderliness, how many of them will have their very origin in the perfidious impulses of individuals of our sex! Let him who would have all women good, set about converting all men.”⁶⁵ He also refutes the image of wicked women based on the existence of biblical passages that deride women’s lack of virtue. Feijoo explains that such scriptural diatribes against women refer to those who act immorally, not all women in general. After all, he queries, how could the scripture be interpreted as describing all women, when the church itself had declared women “devout,” and important Catholic intellectuals had indicated that more women would be saved than men?

Even as he admits the existence of immoral women, Feijoo launches into his defense of the female sex. A major component of this defense is his attack on the rationale of those who considered women “the cause of all evil.”⁶⁶ Feijoo works to dismantle the two central beliefs that perpetuated this view “inculcated at every pass among even the very lowest of the people that Caba brought the ruin of Spain, and Eve of all the world.”⁶⁷ This first crime attributed to women stemmed from the history of the Muslim invasion of Spain in 711. Spain’s foundation myth begins with Count Julian, the governor of the North African port city Ceuta, who sent his daughter Florinda Caba to reside at the court of King Roderigo of Spain, as was the custom of nobility at the time. While at court, Caba was raped by Roderigo, so she dutifully wrote a letter to her father notifying him of the offense against her. After deceiving Roderigo into sending Caba back to Ceuta, Julian conspired with Muza, an Arabian general, and led an attack on Spain

that brought over twelve thousand Muslim men onto the peninsula, thus initiating the Muslim conquest of Iberia.

To debunk the popular notion that Caba was to blame, Feijoo argues that "Count Julian was the person who brought the Moors over to Spain, without being in the least persuaded by his daughter, who did nothing more than inform her father of the injury done to her. Wretched women, if in the case that they are trampled insolently, they have to keep quiet and fear confiding in their fathers or spouses!" Feijoo shows contempt for those who would blame the victim and instead points the finger at her avenger, suggesting the revenge enacted was excessive. Feijoo's critique of Caba's male avenger had considerable import in a country whose honor system relied heavily on retribution. Similarly, Feijoo dissects the story of Eve, not content to blame the fall of man on female frailty and vulnerability. Rather than pointing to Eve's susceptibility to the serpent, as most of his contemporaries did, Feijoo argues that Adam was actually the weaker party. After all, he explains, it took an angel to con Eve into disobeying God's orders, but only a mere mortal to convince Adam to sin. In short, Feijoo derides those who blamed women for either Spain's or humanity's problems.

Having discredited the general notion that women are flawed beings, Feijoo proceeds with his argument that women are men's equals. Women might not have the same levels of strength, fortitude, and prudence as men, Feijoo admits, but they had other qualities that measured up to these: beauty, gentleness, candor, and above all, modesty. In addition, he argues, their skill in activities traditionally deemed masculine was borne out by history. For example, Feijoo catalogues female rulers, from the fabled Sémiramis, whose firm governance enabled her to rule from Ethiopia to Judea, to Spain's own Isabel, who achieved glory for her country with the discovery of the Americas. That this last triumph was the product of Isabel's, not Ferdinand's, rule, Feijoo leaves no doubt: "It is certain that we would not have achieved it without Isabel's magnanimity having conquered Ferdinand's apprehensions and indolence."⁶⁸

Feijoo's celebration of women's success in politics did not mean he wished to completely overturn the tradition of male rule. He explains, "Nevertheless, the usual practice of nations is more in line with reason, as correspondent to the divine decree, signified to our first mother in Paradise, when subjection to men was imposed on her, and all of her daughters in her name." However, so convinced of women's abilities to govern was Feijoo that he ridicules the fear of female rule:

Only the impatience which the people often levy toward a female government when the laws bring them under it should be corrected, and

likewise that preposterous conceit of our sex, by which, a weak child has been preferred for the sovereign to an adult woman; and the Persians carried this partiality to a ridiculous excess, that on the occasion that a widow of one of the kings was left pregnant, having been advised by the magi that the embryo was a male, they placed a crown on the queen's belly, and proclaimed the fetus king, giving him the name of Sapor, before he was born.⁶⁹

Feijoo ends the section on political women with this story—no analysis needed. For him, the idea that anyone would support the rule of a fetus over a capable woman was absurd.

Not only did Feijoo see women as skilled in politics, but he found them skilled in other traditionally male fields as well. He reminds his reader that women are adept at economics, often better household managers than their male counterparts. He tells numerous stories of their courage and heroism, emphasizing contemporary Spanish examples. His list culminates in stories of the Amazons, those warrior women who, whether or not they truly existed, attest to the strength of women throughout Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Finally, he argues that, contrary to common beliefs, women can keep secrets, even under the most harsh torture.

The last task that Feijoo tackles in his *Defense* is to argue for women's intellectual equality with men. Feijoo announces the enormity and import of this topic in his opening to this section: "Let us now come to the grand battle, which is the question of understanding in which I confess that[,] if reason does not support me, I have little to expect from authority, for writers on this subject (except for a rare one or two) are so wedded to the common opinion, that they almost uniformly speak of female understanding with disdain."⁷⁰ Feijoo explains that these views on women's intelligence were shaped by the fact that men, rather than women themselves, wrote books on the female sex. He remarks, "If women had written them, we [men] would be at the bottom."⁷¹ Feijoo proceeds to discredit the oft-employed argument that women's current state of ignorance reflected their natural abilities. He criticizes the method those who doubt female intelligence used to draw this conclusion: "They see that on the whole [women] do not know other than those domestic employments for which they have been trained, then from there they infer . . . that they are not capable of anything else. Even the most limited thinker knows that the absence of the act does not imply the absence of the power, and thus, women not knowing more does not imply that they do not have talent for more."⁷²

In arguing for women's mental abilities, Feijoo once again rejects physi-

ological explanations of female inferiority. For example, he questions the premises behind the French philosopher Malebranche's theory that women's intellect is limited because the fibers of their brains are softer and more impressionable.⁷³ Malebranche based his conclusions on Aristotle's humoral theory, which deemed women's bodies more moist. Malebranche deduced that women's moist bodies would make their brains softer. Feijoo counters this assumption with the example of ice, which he points out has both moist and hard properties. In addition, Feijoo playfully turns the French thinker's false conclusion on its head. Drawing on other writings by Malebranche himself, Feijoo suggests that a softer, more impressionable brain might actually be better suited to mental operations than a firmer one. After a lengthy proof, Feijoo explains that he does not hold this opinion but simply aimed to illustrate the ease with which this sort of false view could be constructed. He explains:

Every one philosophizes according to his fancy; and if I were to write from adulation, humor, or to display my wit, I could easily, by deducting a chain of consequences from received principles, elevate women's intelligence above our own. But this is not my goal; all I intend is to declare my mind, and I therefore aver, that neither Father Malebranche, nor any other writer hitherto, knows the precise mode or specific mechanism, by which the organisms of the head assist the faculties of the soul. We know not yet how fire burns, or water freezes, though both objects are within sight and touch; yet Father Malebranche, with the other Cartesians, would persuade us that they have seen clearly into all that passes in the most secret recesses of the rational soul.⁷⁴

Feijoo's defense of female intelligence also reveals his own skepticism of Cartesian rationalism. A Baconian at heart, Feijoo questioned the human capacity to deduce scientific laws based on observation.

To evidence women's mental acuity, Feijoo looked to history, thus employing the standard argument used by many texts in the woman-question debate: the list or catalogue. A large portion of his text, more than one-fifth of the *Defense*, is devoted to recording numerous examples of intelligent women, from Italy's Laura Cereta to Spain's own Oliva Sabuco de Nantes.⁷⁵ In detailing the life of Sabuco, Feijoo laments the failure of her contemporaries, particularly fellow Spaniards, to recognize her many accomplishments, and even suggests that she was the true author of some principles of Cartesian rationalism: "It further appears, that this eminent woman, was prior to the celebrated René Descartes in the opinion that the rational soul resided in the brain."⁷⁶ To this list of intelligent women, Feijoo adds a brief

catalogue of illustrious female artists, painters like Sofonisba Anguissola and Irene de Spilimberg, whose accomplishments speak to women's talent in the fine arts.

In closing, Feijoo tackles the ultimate argument against women: that God would not have placed women in subjection to men if they were not lower creatures. Feijoo's response is threefold. First, he questions the feasibility of establishing a definitive meaning of chapter 3 of Genesis, the scriptural passage contemporaries pointed to as proof of God's will, because of the competing versions of the text. However, even if the reader were to accept the scriptural version that supported women's subjection to men, Feijoo states, he still does not see how this proves men's natural superiority. For his second argument, Feijoo contends that the injunction of female subordination came about as a penalty for Eve's role in the fall from grace, not as a result of some natural inequality between men and women. Finally, Feijoo insists that subordination does not necessarily imply intellectual inferiority. He explains that, "even if God originally invested man with an authoritative superiority over women, that does not indicate man's intellectual superiority: the reason is, that though both be equal in talents, it is necessary for the government of the house that one of the two be the head, as otherwise it would have been a scene of confusion and disorder."⁷⁷ While Feijoo could only guess at God's motivations in selecting man, rather than woman, to be at the helm, his text conveys his firm belief that this system ensured order and stability in the household.

That Feijoo did not mean to overturn this order becomes even clearer in the final chapter of his *Defense*. He explains the two main motives behind his text. The first was, simply, to uncover the truth, which for Feijoo was a worthwhile goal in itself. The second motive was to raise the level of moral behavior. If men did not feel they were superior to women, he explains, they would not try to trick and deceive women. Conversely, if women did not consider themselves the inferior sex, they would not be so ready to blindly follow their male seducers. Feijoo envisions that happier marriages would result once people revised their incorrect view of the female sex. Equality would breed gentle husbands and faithful wives, since husbands would no longer degrade their wives for their stupidity and wives would no longer be enticed by the sweet nothings of prospective lovers. With this ending, Feijoo might assuage the fears of his contemporaries that his *Defense* opened the door to a doctrine of female superiority or a world run by women. Feijoo hoped to improve the lives of men and women and ensure moral behavior, but he did not imagine significant alterations in the social order.

Regardless of Feijoo's rather modest hopes, some contemporaries pas-

sionately rejected his *Defense*.⁷⁸ The publication of Feijoo's text provoked a debate, beginning with Laurencio Manco de Olivares's *Contradefensa crítica a favor de los hombres* (1726).⁷⁹ Manco de Olivares's opening anecdote reveals his concern over the kind of female rebellion Feijoo's treatise would engender. Among his reasons for writing his *Contradefensa*, Manco de Olivares explains, "is finding myself insulted and vilified by a woman, being her instrument, not the force of subtle arguments from you[,] most reverend [Feijoo,] with which she would have been victorious with myself shown to be defeated, but the force of blows of the *Teatro crítico*, which emboldened by the vengeful ire of her impulse, she did not stop until it became undone on my head."⁸⁰ Manco de Olivares's response to this fictional beating is a misogynistic diatribe that portrays women as weak creatures incapable of any real accomplishments.

Manco de Olivares employs a range of old-style arguments in refuting Feijoo. A case in point is his reaction to the Benedictine's defense of Eve. In contrast to Feijoo's assertion that it took an angel to beguile Eve, Manco de Olivares relies on the traditional explanation of the fall as the fault of inherently weak woman. Invoking the old arguments of female inferiority that Feijoo was trying to dismantle, Manco de Olivares reminds the reader that, since Eve was crafted in Adam's image, rather than in God's own as Adam was, she was naturally inferior to Adam. Similarly, Manco de Olivares casts doubt on all the historical examples of great women that Feijoo employed in his *Defense*. Of Feijoo's talented female rulers, for example, Manco de Olivares spitefully surmises that they must have taken credit for the accomplishments of their male subjects. And as far as female intelligence goes, he contends that if women truly were capable of more, they would already have accomplished more, including authoring works and achieving university degrees.

Once Manco de Olivares fired the opening salvo, authors on both sides of the debate launched critiques of their own. Feijoo's critics cited numerous reasons to mistrust his assertions. That Feijoo really intended to prove women's superiority to men, rather than their equality, constituted a common concern among his opponents. In his 1734 *Crisol crítico-theológico*, for example, Salvador José Mañer explains with disapproval, "[Feijoo] intends to prove not only that they [women] equal us, but that they surpass us."⁸¹ Mañer suggests that rather than being equal, as Feijoo maintained, men and women had distinct qualities suited to their respective roles in society. Another chief concern of Feijoo's critics centered on the Benedictine's suggestion that women be educated. Jaime Ardanaz y Centellas, for example, rejected Feijoo's proposal in his *Tertulia histórica y apologética* (1727).⁸²

Ardanaz bemoaned his own wife's excessive interest in books and learning after she had read Feijoo's *Defense of Women*. Swayed by Feijoo's ideas on the female intellect, Ardanaz complains, his wife now spent her days quoting Descartes and studying foreign languages. Ardanaz blames Feijoo for turning the perfect wife into an unruly woman whose fancy for learning caused her to neglect her domestic responsibilities. A number of Feijoo's contemporaries worried that the *Defense* would lead to a complete breakdown in male-female relations.

The fear and anger this potential breakdown engendered came out in critics' works. The historian Mónica Bolufer Peruga points out that the pseudonymous Tiburcio Cascajales employed warlike imagery, referring to a "regular army of female knights-errant" and "the authority that controlled the squadrons of beardless faces."⁸³ Like Manco de Olivares and others, Tiburcio Cascajales (pseudonym of Cristóbal Medina Conde) worries about the fierce female rebellion that Feijoo's *Defense* might provoke. These anxieties frequently devolved into satirical asides and sharp jabs aimed at the Benedictine himself. Ardanaz labels the *Defense* a "senseless undertaking," and wonders maliciously about why a pious monk would write a defense of women at all.⁸⁴ Juan Antonio Santareli describes Feijoo in his deceptively titled *Estrado crítico en defensa de las mugeres* as "Narcissus himself, because he is so enamored with his own writing that he hardly forms a clause if a large share of it does not emit self-love."⁸⁵ These sorts of personal attacks reveal the level of anxiety that Feijoo's *Defense* produced in some of his contemporaries.

Feijoo's defenders fired back with equally witty and belittling asides aimed at refuting Manco de Olivares and company and providing further support for Feijoo's assertions. Ricardo Basco Flancas, for example, jumped into the skirmish in 1726 with a text whose very title reveals his position: *Apoyo a la defensa de las mujeres que escribió el R.mo P. Fr. Benito Feijó y crisis de la contra-defensa crítica que a favor de los hombres, y contra las mugeres, dió a luz temerariamente Don Laurencio Manco de Olivares, en dictamen que da de ella a una señora* (Support for the Defense of Women Written by the Reverend Father and Friar Benito Feijoo and Crisis of the Critical Counter-defense in Favor of Men and against Women, which with much Trepidation Don Laurencio Manco Brought to the Light of Day and Presented to a Lady). Written as a dialogue between two men reading Manco de Olivares's work, the *Apoyo a la defensa* refutes the criticisms Manco de Olivares levied against Feijoo line by line. In his critique, Basco Flancas mercilessly mocks Manco de Olivares. Early in the work, he quotes a popular verse whose last line allows him to play on the double meaning of

Manco de Olivares's last name: "Es MANCO el entendimiento." Manco, literally "crippled," here implies defective and faulty: "His understanding is faulty."⁸⁶

Throughout the work, Basco Flancas describes his opponent in unflattering terms. For example, he writes, "I return to confirm my judgment . . . that the author is a poor Vadulaque, who without understanding what he reads, does nothing more than speak loudly."⁸⁷ Basco Flancas interweaves these continual damning references to Manco de Olivares's inability to comprehend Feijoo's ideas with arguments to counter his assertions. In closing, Basco Flancas suggests Manco de Olivares should be incarcerated in an insane asylum, left only with a few listed works: *The Romance of El Cid*, *Doze pares*, *The History of the Marqués de Mantua*, and his own *Contra-defensa*. He proposes that a sign be tacked up on his cell that reads in big letters: "Manco is here without honor,/Because he offended women,/And if he proceeds in this thinking,/His punishment will be greater: . . . /No girl with looks/Will marry such a man,/Since he will have to say to each one/With reason, hand over the club."⁸⁸ This rhyming verse ridiculed Manco de Olivares, turning the critic into a dishonorable man by questioning his very masculinity.

Other proponents of Feijoo provided meatier defenses. The anatomist Martín Martínez, for example, jumped into the skirmish with his *Carta defensiva* (1727), which supported Feijoo's contention that there was no anatomical rationale to suggest women had less intellectual potential than men did. Martínez drew on his knowledge and position to verify Feijoo's assertion that men's and women's brains were physically the same. He writes, "At the least, I, as an Anatomy Professor, can say, the [physical] arrangement that differentiates the two sexes not being instrumental to thought[,] . . . I am led to believe that in aptitude for the Sciences the functions are not unequal since the organs are not different."⁸⁹ Similarly, Miguel Juan Martínez y Salafranca's *Desagravios de la muger ofendida* (1727) provided further support for Feijoo's arguments by listing even more exemplary women whose achievements suggested women's talents and capabilities.⁹⁰

Some authors tried to establish a compromise between Feijoo's *Defense* and Manco de Olivares's invectives. Such was the case with the anonymous *La razón con desinterés fundada*, published in 1727, which scholars have described as a "conciliatory essay."⁹¹ In *La razón*, the author argues simultaneously for women's domesticity and intellectual capabilities. In addressing the question of Eve, the author negotiates between the traditional view that inferior Eve was made from Adam's rib and a novel argument that supports Feijoo's assertion of equality. The author explains that, since Eve came

from Adam's side, not his head or his feet, she was his equal companion, neither his superior nor his subordinate. However, *La razón* did little to halt the ongoing battle between opponents and proponents of Feijoo's *Defense*. That same year, Manco de Olivares composed a second screed, titled *Defensiva respuesta a favor de los hombres* in which he directly attacked Basco Flancas, Martínez y Salafranca, and his other critics. And even Feijoo himself incorporated responses to his critics in his later works. Feijoo's 1729 *Ilustración apologética* suggests his impatience with the ongoing debate. Addressing Mañer's lengthy assertion that men are physically stronger than women, Feijoo sneers, "What time well spent! Who would refute it?"⁹²

As the varied responses to Feijoo's *Defense of Women* suggest, not all Spanish intellectuals were ready to accept women's natural equality as a given. The resurgence of traditional discourses on women in the years following the *Defense* suggests just how threatening Feijoo's propositions were to certain contemporaries. Hoping to channel a growing body of female readers awakened by Feijoo's essay, José Clavijo y Fajardo, for example, suggested Juan Luis Vives's *La formación de la mujer cristiana*, Fray Luis de León's *La perfecta casada*, and François Fénelon's *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687) as guides to proper female comportment.⁹³ Not coincidentally, Vives's work was reprinted in Madrid in 1792 and again in 1793. Similarly, *La perfecta casada* reappeared in Valencia in 1765 and 1773, in Salamanca in 1773, and in Madrid in 1786 and 1799.

While the debate over women's nature and place in society continued throughout the century, Feijoo's text represented a key starting point. The increasing participation of women in Spain's growing world of letters during the second two-thirds of the century remained integrally linked to Feijoo's *Defense of Women* in the minds of contemporaries. Dr. D. Joseph de Rada y Aguirre expresses this connection in his prologue to María Catalina de Caso's 1755 four-volume translation titled *Modo de enseñar y estudiar las bellas letras, para ilustrar el entendimiento, y rectificar el corazón*. Rada y Aguirre's prologue praises Caso's translation and describes the woman as a talented and knowledgeable author. The prologue closes by stating, "If the Reverend Father Master Feijoo were printing now a supplement to the *Theatro crítico*, he would put this woman in the appendix for her erudite and solid treatises of the Defense of Women." By likening Caso to one of Feijoo's celebrated women, Rada y Aguirre showed that the Benedictine's essay remained a significant marker of women's potential and achievement.

The questions that Feijoo's *Defense of Women* raised were far from settled in the eighteenth century, and they were arguably more unsettled than they had ever been in Spanish society. Feijoo introduced Spaniards to a new

mode of inquiry that led them down a path of Enlightenment and reform. As Juan Sempere y Guarinos explained of Feijoo in 1785: "The works of this man produced a useful fermentation, they made us begin to doubt, they made known other books very different from those there were in the country, they aroused curiosity, and they opened to reason the door which had been closed by indolence and false knowledge . . . for they are in the hands of everyone."⁹⁴ Indeed, Feijoo spawned a new generation of thinkers who, skeptical of authorities and armed with empirical reasoning, were open to all kinds of new possibilities, including the possibility that educated women could contribute to the nation's reform. It was not long before this group endeavored to move women's ideas out of the realm of the abstract and to translate them into concrete activities and policies. As Spain's world of letters became increasingly institutionalized, the debate over women's nature and role in society took on a new character. It was no longer a theoretical debate, but one that would have a real effect on Spain's emerging Enlightenment institutions.