FEMINIST STRATEGIES AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN 19TH-CENTURY SPAIN:
PRESS AND FREETHINKING

ESTRATEGIAS FEMINISTAS Y EL AVANCE DE LA MUJER EN LA ESPAÑA DEL SIGLO XIX: PRENSA Y LIBREPENSAMIENTO

ABSTRACT

The aim of my dissertation, entitled “Feminist Strategies and the Advancement of Women in 19th-Century Spain: Press and Freethinking,” is to reexamine the 19th-century history of Spain with regards to the rise of feminism. Historically, the female writers who received recognition in this period were mostly from the upper classes: Fernán Caballero, Rosalía de Castro, and Emilia Pardo Bazán, to name a few. However, there were also other active authors from lower-middle classes promoting education for women and equal rights. They expressed their defense of education and better living conditions for women in the freethinking press. Unfortunately, the contributions of these authors have been largely ignored by critics, mostly because of the difficult access to their writings. The main purpose of this study is to give well-deserved recognition to three female authors, whose works greatly contributed to the rise of feminism in Spain: Cándida Sanz, Rita Arañó and Isabel Peña.

Based on Judith Butler’s concept of “intelligible genders,” we can understand these 19th-century female writers as women who, even following the patriarchal normativity of the traditional Spanish society, also encouraged their female readers to continue to be “domestic,” but not “domesticated.” I argue that these authors used their writing strategically to propose a new model of hybrid woman: a well-educated housewife who would commit to her family while advancing herself by taking control of her reason, free will, and freethinking. I propose that this indirect, and seemingly “harmless” subversion was possible because these new hybrid women found strategic methods to advocate for their rights and gain certain political power without deviating from their society’s mold; without becoming “incoherent” or “discontinuous” gendered beings.

This research takes into account women’s history in 19th-century Spain and acknowledges the works of these brave feminist authors. Ultimately, this investigation invites critics to continue studying the literary and journalistic production of these and other forgotten and important Spanish writers. In the future, my intention is to continue investigating other female authors, such as Trinidad González, Eugenia Estopa, and Dolores Navas, other writers of La Luz del Porvenir, a periodical that was published weekly for almost twenty years.