French Women and the Age of Enlightenment

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Published by Indiana University Press

Spencer, Samia.
French Women and the Age of Enlightenment.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/113358.
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The View from Spain: Rococo Finesse and Esprit Versus Plebeian Manners

A una señorita francesa

La bella que prendió con gracioso reir
Mi tierno corazón, alterando su paz,
Enemiga de amor, inconstante, fugaz,
Me inspira una pasión que no quiere sentir.

—Leandro Fernández de Moratín “Epigramas”

This epigram addressed to a French demoiselle sets the tone for the prevalent view on the French woman in Spanish eighteenth-century literature. The connotation of frivolity, fugacity, inconstancy, levity, and grace places this brief piece—and the French woman it depicts—within the rococo culture, of which the Spaniards had an example in the Bourbon court since the year 1700.

The view presented by the late eighteenth-century playwright Leandro Fernández de Moratín echoes in style and content the earlier description of a French coquette by José Cadalso in his Carlas marruecas (Moroccan Letters), presumably written before 1780. For Cadalso, coquetterie is the favorite pastime of the French women and consists of finding ways to deceive all men who court them. He describes how the coquette has a marvelous time because she has all young men of some merit at her disposal, a fact that truly flatters her self-esteem. Yet, since the French take some matters very lightly—including love—this flirting is not taken seriously, and the young men usually take their incense from one altar to another without giving it much thought.

Similar attributes, such as inconstancy and superficiality—not only in love but also in other matters—appear already in a seventeenth-century assessment of the French character by Carlos García (1617), who claims that “God gave the French nation utmost effort, courage and gentility but accompanied by a remission of variability and inconstancy.” This opinion can be substantiated by literary examples, such as Lope de Vega’s play Anzuelo de Feniza (Feniza’s Bait), in which lack
of firmness in women is deemed of French origin. Lope writes, "I know their condition / every woman who professes / this French passion / is not firm at heart."4

It is hardly conceivable that the French influence in Spain would have started suddenly, as if by magic, in exactly the year 1700. The Spanish aristocracy was cosmopolitan enough to have absorbed some of the magnificent splendor of Louis XIV and his court. In descriptions of seventeenth-century customs, the French, in fact, receive blame for having introduced luxury and fashions conducive to vice and lack of morals. María de Zayas y Sotomayor, one of Spain’s first feminists, in her Novelas amorosas y ejemplares (Amorous and Exemplary Novels, 1637), levels a pointed criticism against the French. In a long poem, inserted in one of her novels, she laments the abandonment of the simple customs of yesteryear. The political element is also present as the French are, above all, accused of having introduced the taste for luxury "after they appropriated the Spaniards’ courage,"5 in other words, their position as a world power.

Although early seventeenth-century Spanish commentators tend to stress the contrast between the French superficiality and levity of character and the Spanish severity and more profound way of thinking, a change occurs toward the end of the seventeenth century. According to an eighteenth-century essayist, Juan Pablo Forner, the Spanish severity gives way to a more lively, gallant, and vivacious style. Forner discusses the influence of Phillip IV’s luxurious court upon the Spaniards’ language and their literary expression. He defines, in fact, the incipient rococo style as he describes how their language became “more rapid, lusty, lively, sonorous, cheerful, gallant, flowery, delicious.”6 These are, no doubt, some of the characteristics that, together with the variability and inconstancy attributed to the French women, identify the opinion both Moratín and Cadalso have of them with the eighteenth-century rococo customs. Helmut Hatzfeld in “Gibt es ein literarisches Rokoko in Spanien?” (“Does a Spanish Literary Rococo Exist?”) connects particularly Cadalso’s writings with the rococo culture, which he discusses as a lifestyle and fashion.7 This rococo mode is presented, rather than defined, in Cadalso’s account of the petimetre (from the French petit-maître) or lindo (the French beau). He talks about a young man of “gallant appearance, gracious conversation, illustrious name, magnificent equipage, courtly behaviour and the right age for love affairs,” who, in addition, dares to use rather questionable language in the presence of his distinguished hostess.8 A similar description could just as well be dedicated to this young man’s female counterpart, a petimetre, whose copying of French fashions and lifestyle the Spanish writer criticizes.
The View from Spain

The eighteenth-century Spaniards' opinion of the French woman is reflected in their reactions to the afrancesamiento, or French influence, upon their own customs. Cadalso's Cartas marruecas—fictitious oriental letters between two Moroccans following the fashion of Montesquieu's Lettres persanes, the Lettres chinoises by marquis d'Argens, and many others—is an eloquent example of this type of criticism. Gazel, who travels in Spain, writes to his old Moroccan teacher, Ben Belay, and describes the most varied aspects of life in Madrid. In his answer, Ben Belay denounces the customs as a source of decadence and summarizes, at the same time, some of the most typical elements of the rococo way of life. In his opinion, "a nation used to delicate tables, soft beds, fine food, effeminate manners, amorous conversations, frivolous pastimes and special studies, directed toward refinement of all the elements of luxury does not pay attention when all this is shown as being signs of approaching decadence." Thus, it is the old Moroccan who condemns the frivolity of life in the Spanish court, contrasting in this respect with Nuño, Gazel's Spanish guide and escort, who is evidently a spokesman of the Spanish aristocracy and, possibly, of Cadalso himself.

Nuño seems to accept the decadence of his time as an inevitable evil, a fait accompli. He shows the Moroccan a letter written by his sister, another petimetra afrancesada—to a certain extent, the Spanish counterpart of the French coquette—who describes her typical daily activities employing language full of "fashionable" half-French expressions. She writes: "Today it did not dawn in my apartment before half past twelve noon [hasta medio día y medio, a direct translation of the French midi et demi]. I had two cups of tea; I put on a déshabillé and a night cap for a tour of the garden; and I read about eight stanzas of the second act of Zaïre [a play by Voltaire]." Aside from representing a typical picture of the idle life—fashion, fine food, and entertainment are her only preoccupations—this letter also demonstrates the complete change that has occurred in Spanish society. In the preceding century, she would have been confined to her home, literally locked up under the absolute domination of her spouse, whose acts were governed by a strict honor code. Now, on the contrary, it is an accepted fact that a married woman may have a cortejo—a young man, obviously her lover, who not only appears as her escort in public but also attends her at breakfast and helps her with her toilet. This explains the presence of a M. Labanda at an early hour in her private quarters. As her letter indicates: "Monsieur Labanda came; I started my toilet; the abbé was not there. I gave orders to pay my modiste. I went to the reception room; a few people entered [entró un poco de mundo, again a direct imitation of the French expression un peu de monde]." The letter reflects the typical function of the Spanish upper-class woman who directs salons,
French Women in Other European Literatures

referred to in Spanish as tertulias. Her husband is usually not visible, but the cortejo is always present, as is often an abbé de salon (this time the abbé was not there), an elegant clergyman of evidently doubtful morals. Sometimes actors or writers may visit her. In the letter, the petimetre speaks of card games (piquete and quince) and of her favorite dishes (crapaudina, a French dish). She tells how the new chef, who is "divine," just arrived from Paris ("viene de arribar," a copy of the French vient d’arriver). She criticizes the theater presentation as detestable but expects the next play will be galant; the actors, however, are deplorable (pitolayables, another of her French expressions).¹⁰

The Spanish salon, however, is criticized in the writings of the time as lacking in refinement and intelligent conversation. The Spaniards themselves are ashamed to be Spaniards due to the triviality and vulgarity as well as lack of manners exhibited in these reunions as compared to the elegant finesse and esprit of the French women in their salons.

This fact is due, in part, to the Spaniards’ "patriotic" reaction against the afrancesamiento (Frenchified customs), which brought about a provincialism and plebeianism in dress, entertainment, and art. In other words, a rather superficial change occurred instead of one based on a more profound influence of the Spanish tradition. Thus, the petimetre afrancesada becomes the maja, and, of course, the petimetre turns into a majo, when everyone—not only actors and actresses adopting the fashion promoted in plays depicting national customs, but even the aristocrats—adopts the provincial attire. In the theater, the sainetes, short one-act plays by Ramón de la Cruz, are the most famous ones for depicting and criticizing these new attitudes of the Spanish society. The same plebeianism also dominates the style of the Spanish tertulias in the eighteenth century and is strongly reflected in the art of the period, such as Goya’s sketches of majas and majos in the Caprichos series, and, above all, his paintings Maja desnuda (The Naked Maja; Madrid: Prado, no. 743) and Maja vestida (The Clothed Maja; Madrid: Prado, no. 744), for which the Duchess of Alba may have served as a model.

In view of this vulgarization of Spanish customs, it is indeed legitimate to ask whether the source of Spanish decadence is really to be sought in France. Foreign travelers in Spain seem to be of a different opinion and are invariably scandalized by the generality of low morals.¹¹ Carmen Martín Gaite, in her book on the amorous and marital customs of eighteenth-century Spain, Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España, notes that cortejo in particular should be seen as a Spanish custom originating as a reaction against the strict sixteenth-century honor code and, thus, as a natural consequence of the Spanish woman’s earlier confinement and total alienation from social life, although either French or Italian influence is usually cited as a source
of this custom. If, however, foreign influence is to be taken into account, the origins of cortejo can be traced to the Italian cicisbeo, a custom introduced by the Venetian tradesmen who, during their long absences on business, wanted their wives to be entertained. This expression appears in Spain as chichisveo before the term cortejo is used. The French coquetterie, on the other hand, is distinct in that it involves an element of finesse and frivolity as well as a more sophisticated mode of courting: elegant fashions, intelligent conversation or causerie, and an aspect of deceit as the coquette enjoys the company of several admirers without ever becoming seriously involved. According to Carmen Martín Gaite, even the term coquetería was, in the eighteenth century, not yet generally accepted as a Spanish word due to the affectation it implied. The image of the French woman as the rococo coquette, on the other hand, appears repeatedly in Spanish literature of the second half of the century.

Cadalso and other contemporaries of his criticize not so much the French customs and the French woman of the rococo period as the Spaniards’ vulgarized imitation of this lifestyle, evident in their pseudo-French language and their ostentatious fashions. The fact that this imitation is, above all, superficial and concerned with external appearance and luxury has been noticed by an earlier writer, Diego de Torres Villarroel in his Visiones y visitas de Torres con Don Francisco de Quevedo por la corte (1727-1728), also known as Moral Dreams. He says the Spaniards always wanted to imitate everything and “without consulting their reason, in love with the superficial, accepted certain extravagances as an improvement.”

The social criticism leveled by Torres is presented in the guise of dreams during which he visits Madrid in the company of Don Francisco de Quevedo, whose Suenos (Dreams, 1627) are evidently his model. When Torres describes the life of his time, his judgment corresponds closely to seventeenth-century morality; and his literary expression echoes the sharp baroque contrasts between good and evil, between moral and corporal beauty on the one hand and ugliness and vice on the other. In the late eighteenth-century authors, however, the outright condemnation of the French moral license is absent; and the tortuous baroque exuberance is replaced by more gracious, softer, and lighter tones, as well as diminutives. An expression like mi tierno corazón (my tender heart) would have been unthinkable for a baroque Spaniard.

José Cadalso, educated in France, favors the French intellectual influence and seems not to be disturbed by the fact that in the letter of the young petrimebra she includes in the list of her daily pastimes readings of Voltaire’s Zaire, which, in a more traditional Spanish view, would have been condemned as a heresy.
A more conservative Spanish opinion is to be found in an early twentieth-century account of Spanish aristocrats residing in the eighteenth-century French court. Father Luis Coloma, a Jesuit, in Retratos de antaño (Portraits of the Past), calls Paris the center of corruption, “the university of the seven deadly sins,” dominated by two luminous figures: Voltaire and Mme du Barry. In other words, the intellectual world represented by the heretical deism and women of doubtful morals govern the social life. In a sharp contrast to this entourage, the author presents the figure of Doña María Manuela Pignatelli de Aragón, Gonzaga, Moncayo y Caracciolo, Duchess of Villahermosa. She had been educated in a convent and, at the age of fifteen, married the duke of Villahermosa, who took her to the French court. There, she had to confront problems created by the vicious world for which she was unprepared. 16 She, nevertheless, maintains her integrity despite her husband’s neglect and love affairs. In this description, the innocent young Spanish girl with a religious education has to confront the sophistication and malice of the women in the French court.

If, however, we were to judge only by the literary image of the rococo coquette, or by the somewhat biased account of a Jesuit, our view of the Spaniards’ opinion of the French eighteenth-century woman would be unfair. It is therefore interesting to see that a person who actually lived in France for some length of time or someone who was familiar with the literary talents of French women offered a very different view. Such persons, in fact, tried their best to destroy the myth of excessive liberality sustained by writers who hardly even had the opportunity to get to know French women. The contrary view is best expressed by Ignacio de Luzán in his Memorias literarias de París (Literary Memories of Paris, 1751), in which he depicts the French woman as modest, well educated, and especially concerned with educating equally both her sons and daughters in modesty and good manners. Luzán writes that people who only pass through Paris occasionally or who only contemplate it from afar necessarily have an erroneous opinion on the liberality of this great court. Only with difficulty will these people believe what he affirms regarding the women’s modesty. The positive image, nevertheless, becomes evident when their activities are closely observed “in the churches, in the streets, in the houses, in their conversations, in the dances, at the tables, and in the theaters.” The women’s modesty, at least in public, is, according to Luzán, “like a general system of the nation, with only rare exceptions.” 17

Another interesting observation deserves to be mentioned: Luzán has noticed how foreigners sometimes use a language that embarrasses the ladies and causes them to appear frightened and surprised at having to listen. This constitutes yet another proof of the fact that the French women’s liberality is an opinion people outside France have of them rather than in the country itself (p. 50).
For Luzán, there are other reasons for the liberality of customs in Paris—liberal, in his vocabulary, implies licentiousness—which he prefers not to discuss. If, in fact, such a liberality does exist, the reasons for it are not to be sought in the women's lack of modesty. He reaches these conclusions after discussing women's education, which he considers to be as good as the education men receive (pp. 46–47). Luzán, author of the Poética (1737) and himself an educator, states that in Paris one can find women well instructed in geography, history, philosophy, and even mathematics (p. 47). He attributes this to the fact that all girls have the opportunity to learn how to read, write, and calculate in the parochial and convent schools. These rudiments of knowledge grant them the opportunity to continue educating themselves at home through readings that are available to them. Luzán understands that this interest in a wider knowledge is typical not only of the nobility but also of the daughters of artisans and the like. He mentions several books published for this specific purpose, such as Des études convenables aux demoiselles, which includes an introduction to French grammar, orthography, rhetoric, poetry, universal history, geography, mythology, and "many other useful instructions written utilizing a clear and easy method" (p. 48). Further examples are L'Art poétique à l'usage des dames, rhetoric for women, and Newton's philosophy for women. He singles out the marquise du Châtelet as having defended Newton's philosophy against a great mathematician, M. Mairan. Furthermore, several women writers deserve Luzán's special attention: Mme de Bocage, author of a tragedy the Amazons and a poem "The Lost Paradise," written as an epilogue to Milton; and Mme de Graffigny, author of Peruvian Letters, another example of exotic letters common in the eighteenth century (p. 49).

The principal issue addressed by Luzán is the necessity of providing equal educational opportunity for boys and girls, a situation already existing in France, where both books and teachers were available for this purpose. In Spain, on the other hand, the traditional convent education failed to teach girls anything beyond domestic skills, not even how to read and write. The old, well-established belief, linked to the notion of original sin, still persisted; it maintained that knowledge for women was not only unnecessary but also dangerous because women did not possess the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong or the will to combat vice.

Luzán's observations reflect not only his awareness of the sharp contrast between the prevailing views on women's education in France and those in Spain but also the knowledge of issues under discussion at the time. Although the debate on the supposed inferiority of the female intelligence was still raging throughout Europe—and France was no exception—the concern for providing women an adequate lay education beyond the traditional convent school was
brought up in France as early as the seventeenth century by François Poulain de La Barre, in *De l'égalité des deux sexes* (Paris, 1673). Poulain’s radical view was that “women would be perfectly capable of holding posts in the Church, army, judicature, and so on, normally reserved for men,” according to Jean H. Bloch in “Women and the Reform of the Nation.” This view, based on the thesis that a woman’s intellect could in no way be inferior to a man’s since sexual differences were physical, was not yet generally accepted. The more moderate opinion of Fénelon in his *Traité de l'éducation des filles* (1687) was to become the authority for eighteenth-century views on girls’ education. The importance of women’s preparation for their role in the family and in the society was stressed. Although “Fénelon placed emphasis primarily on extensive religious and moral education” (Bloch, p. 3), he also promoted extensive reading for women. The concept of the virtuous and enlightened woman prevailed in most eighteenth-century writings on the subject of female education (Bloch, p. 4). The Revolution brought about a new concept of the woman as *citoyenne* (citizen), whose education was important for the good of the nation (Bloch, p. 7). Bloch points out, however, that conservative views surprisingly coexisted with the new ideas in the works of many women writers, who tended to echo, for example, the rather traditional stand of Rousseau, who “denied women any public or professional role” (Bloch, p. 5).

In France, where the Church had not been able to prevent the publication of the *Encyclopédie* or of other writings of the *philosophes*, women had access to knowledge, especially toward the end of the eighteenth century. The situation in Spain was antithetical, since all foreign books had been banned for several decades and most of the latest advances in scientific knowledge were omitted from the educational program because they were considered harmful to the Church’s doctrine. The education of girls was scarcely regarded as worthy of mention, for a woman’s intelligence was still considered as barely surpassing that of a beast. Fray Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, famous for his writings encouraging progress in all fields, had written a *Defensa de las mujeres* (Defense of Women) in 1725, an essay in which he defended the intellectual capacity of women and refuted erroneous opinions with arguments similar to Poulain’s in France some five decades earlier. Yet the traditional opinion still prevailed toward the end of the century. When Josefa Amar y Borbón, an exceptionally enlightened woman writes her *Discourse in Defense of Women’s Talent and Their Capacity for Government and Other Positions Held by Men* (1786), she still had to contend with defending the female intelligence and utilized Feijoo’s eloquent arguments. She did so, however, adding an unusual personal interpretation because she explained original sin not as a propensity toward vice, but as a desire for knowledge, since “curiosity...
is a sign of talent” (p. 407). In her essay, written in support of Spanish women’s access to the Sociedad económi
cca de los amigos del país de Madrid—an economic and patriotic society dedicated to promoting scientific and economic progress—she defended women’s ability to deal with matters of national economy and politics. She lamented the fact that in her world women were still denied not only the possibility of holding positions commensurate with their knowledge and skills but also their right to instruction. She stated:

The men, not satisfied after having reserved for themselves positions, honors, compensations for their work, in other words everything that could excite the studiousness and dedication of women, have also deprived the members of our sex of the satisfaction of having an enlightened mind (p. 402).

Thus, the Spanish woman in this enlightened age, far from seeking professional vindication, had to fight for her basic right to learn to read and to educate herself for her own personal pleasure. Josefa Amar’s own case was obviously an exception; through her connection with the Sociedad económi
cca, she had access to books that otherwise were prohibited and that only members of this and other similar societies were allowed to import. Also, she evidently had a sensible father—a physician—who shared much of his knowledge with his daughter. Josefa Amar’s major treatise on the education of women, Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres (Discourse on the Physical and Moral Education of Women (1790), attests to the advanced medical knowledge of its author.22 Some of her ideas about domestic matters such as infant care, children’s clothing and health, breastfeeding, and the like are surprisingly modern. The issues she presents reflect, at the same time, an intimate knowledge of the existing literature on the subject of girls’ education. Due to censorship, Spanish writers of the time could not always openly identify their sources, particularly when they quoted the French philosophes. The issues Josefa Amar addresses, such as the legal situation of women, the supposed innate characteristics of women, and the prevailing marital customs, link her to the encyclope
dists.

The philosophes, for example, had introduced the idea of combining the most desirable aspects of bourgeois marriage with the customs of the nobility. Adhering to this ideal, Josefa Amar advocates better understanding and mutual cooperation between the spouses. In this context, she cites John Locke’s Some Thoughts Concerning Education (pp. xxv-xxvi), a work considered representative of the encyclopedists’ position.23 Another of Josefa Amar’s principal sources is Fénelon’s L’Education des filles. Thus, in spite of her striving toward a situation in which the enlightened woman could contribute to both private and
public happiness, Josefa Amar—like many of the French women writers of her time—still maintains a fairly conservative stand. For her, anything beyond the woman's traditional place in the home is still unattainable. This conservatism is also reflected in her recommendations regarding readings suitable for young women. She thinks that novels that deal excessively with love should not be given to young girls. Although the French, according to her, often consider that good morals can be taught by reading novels, her own opinion is that the immorality in such novels would set forth a bad example (p. 192).

On the whole Josefa Amar y Borbón's opinions reinforce Ignacio de Luzán's earlier views on the excellence of the French woman's education and her intelligence. In her writings, she affirms her admiration for the French women who have acquired literary fame. In her essay on women's talent, she mentions the marquise de Sévigné, the comtesse de Lafayette, and Mme Dacier (p. 409), whose translation of Homer she also cites (p. 436). In her treatise on education, she again points out the great number of French women who have excelled in literary endeavors (p. xxiii), particularly Mme de Bocage [sic], who is well known for her poetry and her letters on Italy (p. xxx).

The last chapter of Josefa Amar's Discourse on the Education of Women deserves special attention because it is an annotated bibliography of writings dealing with the education of women from Greek antiquity to her own day. Even today, it constitutes an interesting starting point for any research on the subject. Besides extensive erudition, this bibliography shows Josefa's interest in French women writers. The author mentions the marquise de Lambert who, in her Réflexions nouvelles sur les femmes and Lettre sur la véritable éducation (Paris, 1727), wrote that "women have more taste and understanding for culture and propriety of style than men" (pp. 336-337). Another curious entry is Emile chrétien ou de l'éducation by M. de Leveson, which she lists as "contrary to Rousseau's Emile" (p. 340). Besides the well-known authorities, such as Locke and Fénelon, already cited, she mentions Projet pour perfectionner l'éducation by abbé de Saint-Pierre (p. 338), and a book entitled De l'éducation phisique [sic] è [sic] morale des femmes (Brussels, 1779), listed by her as anonymous (p. 341). The identical title might suggest similarity of views with her own Discourse. As works of special importance, she also mentions Fénelon's Aventures de Télémaque (p. 343) and Adèle & Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation by the marquise de Genlis (p. 345). This bibliography deserves more comprehensive comments, which are not within the scope of this study.

The better education and intellectual superiority of the French woman could not completely overshadow the claims of excessive liberality in the minds of the conservative Spaniards. They had to admit, however, that the French rococo coquette had finesse and esprit...
not equalled by her Spanish counterpart in spite of certain efforts toward refinement of taste. Lack of education leads to an imitation of trivialities and a vulgarization of manners as the provincial patriotic reaction against everything foreign brings about the plebeian manners and the degradation of nobility. The modesty and good education of the majority of French women, therefore, was appreciated by Spanish eighteenth-century educators and writers who had serious intentions of improving the level of women’s education in Spain and needed, for this purpose, a model worthy of their esteem.

**NOTES**

1. *Obras. Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* 2 (Madrid: Atlas, 1944), p. 606. The epigrams are not dated but Leandro Fernández de Moratín (1760-1828) started his literary production in 1779. All translations from Spanish to English in this study are mine.

   To a French Girl

   The beauty, who with her gracious laugh
   set my tender heart on fire and altered its peace,
   enemy of love, fickle, fleeting,
   inspired in me a passion, which she herself did not want to feel.


12. Martín Gaite, p. 15.


17. Ignacio de Luzán, Memorias literarias de París: actual estado y método de sus estudios (Madrid: Gabriel Ramírez, 1751), pp. 51-52. Subsequent references are included in the text.
21. Josefa Amar y Borbón, “Discurso en defensa del talento de las mujeres, y de su aptitud para el gobierno, y otros cargos en que se emplean los hombres,” Memorial Literario, no. 32 (Madrid, 1786). See also the same text re-edited by Carmen Chaves McClendon in Dieciocho, 3 (1980):144-161. Subsequent references to the first version are included in the text.
22. Discurso sobre la educación física y moral de las mujeres por Doña Josepha Amar y Borbón, Socia de Mérito de la Real Sociedad Aragonesa y de la Junta de Damas Unida a la Real Sociedad de Madrid (Madrid: Benito Cano, 1790). Subsequent references are included in the text.
24. About the importance of the marquise de Lambert and her salon for the intellectual life in Paris at the beginning of the eighteenth century, see Clinton, p. 285.
25. For further comments on abbé de Saint-Pierre’s book, see Bloch, p. 4.
26. Bloch, pp. 11-12, refers to this book as a work by Reballier and states, “Reballier put the argument in even stronger terms by insisting, as Poulain had done one hundred years before, on women’s natural rights to knowledge.”
27. See Bloch, p. 12.