Printers and booksellers in eighteenth-century Portugal knew that the works which sold best were the *folhetos de cordel*. These were short booklets in *quarto* format, printed on cheap paper, sold at markets and in the streets by networks of blind men. The itinerant selling of printed materials other than the book was not a recent invention: all sorts of publications, less expensive than books and less demanding in terms of reading competence, had thrived in Europe ever since the printing press was introduced. They provided some financial stability to printers and booksellers in an economically fragile market that was extremely dependent upon patronage and the support of political and ecclesiastical powers. The itinerant form of distribution and the low price of these *folhetos de cordel*, or chapbooks, made them very popular, and thus a vehicle well-suited to the spreading of texts and ideas.

The *folheto de cordel* format made available publications which did not require much reading (like calendars, illustrations, prayers or portraits of saints), but also works which were especially suitable for collective reading or collective use, like the lyrics of fashionable songs, theatre plays and even *librettos* of Italian operas, which were regularly translated into Portuguese and adapted, as printers claimed then, *ao gosto português* [to the Portuguese taste]. The *cordel* soon became an important medium: it reached a much wider and more diversified audience than the book, and was used by individuals close to the centres of power and legitimization as a tool for civic and ideological intervention in the cultural field.¹

In eighteenth-century Portugal, both the Court and the Church exerted an attentive surveillance over the circulation of written materials (both manuscript and printed) through censorship. The censorship system inherited from the mid-sixteenth century consisted of three bodies — the Inquisition, *Desembargo do Paço* [King’s Court] and *Ordinário* [local bishop] — and it was still active in the first half of the century. It was replaced in 1768 by the *Real Mesa Censória*


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The Querelle des femmes in 18th-Century Portugal

[Royal Board of Censorship], but suffered major reforms in 1789 and 1792. Surveillance reached its peak in the 1760s, when the official newspaper Gazeta de Lisboa was closed down (in 1762), and six years later all periodicals were suppressed (in 1768). The prohibition was lifted only in 1778, shortly after Queen Maria I came to throne. Although socially devalued, and circulating at what could be regarded as the margins of the system, during this period the cordel was used as a sort of visible, alternative showcase capable of integrating and publicizing the ideas and the texts which animated social debate. It was in the form of folhetos de cordel that most of the Portuguese ‘enlightened’ debates took place. This was the case with Luís António Verney’s book, Verdadeiro Método de Estudar, published in 1746 and immediately banned; it started a polemic that can be traced in folhetos de cordel which continued to appear, for and against Verney’s views, over the next twenty years. The same can be said in the case of the polemic known as the Filósofo Solitário, which started in 1776 and continued for more than a decade, or of those polemics which are of more interest to us in this paper, centred upon the qualities, flaws, behaviour and abilities of women.

Although the issue of women became especially visible in Portuguese eighteenth-century cordel literature, one cannot say that this was a new subject. The enduring presence of topoi related to the praise and criticism of women in Western European written culture can be traced back to the late Middle Ages, when around the years 1361–62 Boccaccio wrote, in Latin, his De mulieribus claris. This repertoire of famous women enjoyed a wide circulation; it was almost immediately translated into several languages and was continually reproduced when the printing press spread. The work consisted of 106 biographies which, with one exception (the Queen of Naples, to whom Boccaccio also dedicated the work), narrated the lives of feminine characters taken from classical mythology and antiquity. The women were chosen not only for their virtuous conduct but in some cases for their contemptible crimes. Boccaccio presented them all as exceptional cases, capable of moving common ordinary women to moral reflection on behaviour to imitate, and on vices to avoid. It is worth pointing out that this catalogue of women did not include women saints or women martyrs (whose excellence might be attributed to supernatural intervention), and that among the most celebrated virtues were heroism, intellectual achievement and the exercise of power, more traditionally associated with masculinity.

2 For a brief survey on the matter see Graça Almeida Rodrigues, História da Censura literária em Portugal (Lisbon: ICALP–Biblioteca Breve, 1980).
3 For a description of this quarrel see Maria Lucília Gonçalves Pires, 'Introdução', in Luís António Verney, Verdadeiro Método de Estudar: Cartas sobre a Retórica e a Poética (Lisbon: Presença, 1991); a bibliography of the folhetos related to this polemic was published by A. A. Banha de Andrade, 'Bibliografia da Polémica verneiana (Livros portugueses e espanhóis)', Brotéria, 49 (1949), 210–32. A. A. Banha de Andrade is also the author of the important description of the sequence of events leading up to the polemic: ‘A polémica do Verdadeiro Método de Estudar’, in Grandes Polémicas Portuguesas, ed. by Vítorino Nemésio (Lisbon: Verbo, 1963), pp. 281–90.
5 For a synthesis of the questions raised by this work, see Virginia Brown, ‘Introduction’, in Giovanni
If we consider broadly the reception of *De mulieribus claris*, it becomes clear that not only did it establish a precedent, but it also offered a model for the discussion of feminine roles, one that has been re-used, adapted and often reinvented in the centuries that followed. The form inaugurated by Boccaccio spread, diversified and inspired the production of bio-bibliographical catalogues which included women considered to be virtuous, saintly, or simply cultivated, sometimes contemporary to the catalogue’s compilers. Some of the masculine discourses about women that were circulating in Portugal between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries are also structured in this form (for instance, the works by Cristovão da Costa, Frei Luís dos Anjos, Diogo Manoel Ayres de Azevedo and Damião Froes Perym).6

But the discourses in praise of illustrious and/or virtuous women circulated in parallel to misogynous discourses on women’s flaws, weaknesses and limitations. These can be traced back to antiquity, and had been recuperated in the early Middle Ages in the context of the attempts by the Church to promote celibacy among the clergy.7

In the early fifteenth century, the defence of the intellectual abilities and spiritual autonomy of women took the form of a debate, when Christine de Pisan compiled and dedicated to the queen of France the work *La Cité des dames*, in which she compiled the letters she exchanged with a masculine interlocutor (Jean de Montreuil) expressing contrasting views on the derogatory statements on women formulated in the popular medieval narrative, *Le Roman de la Rose*. Some of Pisan’s arguments, like the idea that the intellectual inferiority of women is a consequence of the lack of education available to them, would become *topoi* of the discourses in favour of women circulated in the centuries that followed. One can say that the polemic generated around *Le Roman de la Rose* has provided a model for the defence of, and attack on, the characteristics attributed to men and women in dialogical terms — a model which has been re-used, down the ages, in various regions of Europe.8

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6 Cristovão da Costa, *Tratado en loor de las mujeres y de la Castidad, Onestidad, Constancia, Silencio, y Justicia: Com otras muchas particularidades, y varias Historias. Dirigido À la Serenissima Señora Infanta Donna Catalina Daustria por Christoval Acosta affricano* (Venetia: Giacomo Cornetti, 1592); Frei Luís dos Anjos, *Jardim de Portugal em que se da noticia de algúas Sanctas, & de outras mulheres illustres em virtude, as quais nascerão, ou viuerão, ou estão sepultadas neste Reino, & suas cõquistas* (Coimbra: Nicolao Carvalho, Coimbra, 1626); Diogo Manuel Ayres de Azevedo, *Portugal Ilustrado pelo sexo feminino, notícia historica de muytas heroínas Portuguezas que florecerão em Virtude, Letras, e Armas, Tomo I. que escreve, e offerece a Maria Santissima Senhora Nossa Seu Author Diogo Manoel Ayres de Azevedo, Ulixibonense* (Lisbon: Officina de Pedro Ferreira, 1734) and Damião de Froes Perym [Frei João de São Pedro], *Theatro heroino abecedário histórico e catalogo das mulheres illustres que florecerão em armas, lettras, acções heroicas e artes liberais* (Lisboa Occidental, na Officina da Musica Theotonio Antunes Lima, 1736–40).


8 For a panoramic overview see also *Die europäische Querelle des Femmes. Geschlechterdebatten seit dem 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Gisela Bock and Margarete Zimmermann, Querelles, Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung, 2 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997). For the impact of Christine de Pisan’s work on
The discussion of contrasting opinions on the abilities and social roles of men and women has surfaced at different times in different places in Western Europe between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and is known by the expression, *querelle des femmes*, the dispute about women or ‘the woman question’. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in areas as diverse as France, Germany, Great Britain, the Italian Peninsula and Spain, around a thousand works were published on these topics.

This phenomenon can be understood not simply as the consequence of a momentary conflict of ideas but rather as the visible sign of latent changes happening on the level of the mentalities: as Joan Kelly has pointed out,⁹ the social changes Europe was undergoing in this first moment of the ‘quarrel’ — on economic, political, philosophical and cultural levels — profoundly affected the perception of the feminine condition, and of the roles women should play in society. These changes placed women of the higher ranks of society, who had been educated in close contact with the erudite culture proposed by the ideals of Humanism, in the paradoxical situation of being denied the possibilities of action and influence to which their education could have given them access.

A first attempt to find traces of this debate in Portugal, in the early modern period, was made by Tobias Brandenberger in 1997.¹⁰ However, although this author signalled the presence of the topics related to misogynistic attacks on women in two poems of the *Cancioneiro Geral* compiled by Garcia de Resende in 1516,¹¹ and although he underlined the proximity of the dialogical structure used by João de Barros in his *Espelho de Casados* (published in 1540) to depict the advantages and disadvantages of marriage with the texts related to the ‘women’s quarrel’ tradition, he found no evidence of a coherent body of texts clearly related to it.¹² He also emphasized the fact that even if the discussion of the merits and flaws of men and women often surfaced in sentimental novels,
theatre plays and satirical poems, it rarely appeared as the main subject of Portuguese works of this period.13

At the core of the ‘quarrel’ is the distinction between sex and gender, i.e. between the sexual differentiation inherent to biology (and sanctioned by the biblical text) which could condemn women to an inescapable and unchangeable fate, and the vision according to which part of this differentiation is linked to the social construction of sexual roles, and is therefore changeable and can be resisted or opposed. This framework of ideas allows us to understand the intensity of the resurgence of this same debate in the eighteenth century, when discussions about the well-being of people, human perfectibility through education, the origins and nature of inequality between men, and the role of the institutions destined to rule society, became central to the thought of philosophers and rulers.

In the case of Portugal, it is only in this last period that clear manifestations of the ‘women’s quarrel’ can be found, since there are no previous known texts which present themselves as an explicit response, nor as a deliberate combatting of the prevailing misogynous discourse.14 The means chosen by Portuguese women authors to express their points of view was precisely the folheto de cordel. This had the potential to reach a large number of readers; it also allowed for anonymity and ensured relatively high speeds in the dissemination of texts. The quantity of booklets that were published in this way and can be related to this discussion — especially given the significant number of reprints they had, over more than three decades — led Regina Tavares da Silva to speak about the existence of ‘uma autêntica Guerra de sexos em papéis volantes’ [a real sex war in flying papers].15 The many reprints of folhetos de cordel of this kind16 until the first decades of the nineteenth century illustrate both the success these works had, and their warm reception by the public.

14 We follow here Élianne Viennot when she suggests: ‘On pourrait même dire qu’une “véritable” querelle des Femmes a lieu seulement lorsque des auteurs des deux sexes y participent’ [One could say that a ‘true’ women’s quarrel only happens when authors of both sexes participate in the discussion] (p. 83).
16 See, for instance, the polemic expressed through the following folhetos: Conselhos que dá um brasileiro veterano a todos os seus Patrícios, que chegarem a esta Corte. Em que lhes mostra as cousas, de que se hão-de livrar, para em tudo acertarem, e viverem com sua honra. Advertências saudáveis contra o género femenino, que é o que mais arruína, como primeira causa dos nossos trabalhos todos, etc. (Lisbon: na Off. Francisco Sabino dos Santos, 1778); Discurs que fizeram duas senhoras portuguezas, depois de lerem o papel dos Conselhos que deu um Brazileiro a todos os seus Patrícios, que viesssem a esta Corte: a que elle chamava Advertencias saudáveis contra o género Femenino. Dialogo entre Marcina, e Delmira. Por M. D. (Lisbon: Typografia Lacerdina, 1805) and [Anonymous], Resposta à Impugnação, que tiveram os Conselhos do Brazileiro. &c. &c. &c., sl. n.d.
The first polemic on the subject was started in 1715 by a woman author (or, at least, by someone assuming ‘a marked feminine voice’\(^\text{17}\)) signing herself as ‘Paula da Graça’.\(^\text{18}\) She was reacting to the reprint, in 1713, of a folheto de cordel written in verse form and attributed to the sixteenth-century author Baltasar Dias. This latter text was probably published for the first time around 1540, although the earliest surviving version is the one printed in 1640 by António Álvares, under the title Malícia das Mulheres [Women’s Malice].\(^\text{19}\) Dias’s poem consists of ninety-two quintilhas (five-line stanzas) in the traditional redondilha verse of seven metrical feet, using the rhyme scheme abbab, a form often used in the popular songs of the time.\(^\text{20}\) It is written from the point of view of a man who gives advice to another on the dangers and inconveniences of marriage. In order to support the idea that marriage is a source of unhappiness to men, the author tells an anecdote (an exemplum) about two wives who lay a plan to fool their husbands and make them look ridiculous. This story leads him to conclude with references to ancient authors who had spoken against women (Terence, Marcus Aurelius, Cicero, Diogenes and Ovid), whom he cites in parallel with the book of Genesis in support of the view that women are ‘imperfect beings’. The text ends with a list of women’s flaws (they mistreat their husbands, answer back to them, eat all of their husbands’ food, treat men as slaves, and so on) presented as proof that the best decision for a man is to remain single.

This poem, which — according to Maria de Lurdes Fernandes — reproduces ‘traditional misogynous arguments taken from ancient, medieval and sixteenth-century texts’,\(^\text{21}\) enjoyed an extraordinary longevity. No copies are known from the sixteenth century, but the reprints in 1640, 1647, 1659, 1738, 1759, 1761 and 1794 are proof of the popularity it enjoyed in the following centuries.\(^\text{22}\) The time gap between the moment of production and the moment of the written response by Graça is significant of the possibilities of re-use of its basic points in different social contexts, and of the possibility of reconfiguration of previous arguments and texts in the long duration of the ‘quarrel’.

Paula da Graça called her text: Bondade das Mulheres vendicada e malícia dos Homens Manifesta [Women’s Goodness vindicated and Men’s malice Manifest],

\(^{17}\) Despite the impossibility of assessing the real identity of the authors writing anonymously or using pseudonyms, Élianne Viennot speaks of the attribution of the texts of the Querelle to ‘une voix nettement marquée au féminin’ (p. 83). I follow her conceptual proposal in this respect.

\(^{18}\) On the hypothesis that this is a pseudonym, see Fina d’Armada, Livro feminista de 1715: o primeiro grito revolucionário (Rio Tinto: Evolua Edições, 2008).

\(^{19}\) [Baltasar Dias], Malícia das Mulheres. Obra novamente feita, e chamada Malicia das mulheres, porque nela se tratão muytas sentenças, & autoridades acerca da malicia, q’ há em algumas dellas; & assim trata, como duas mulheres enganarão seus maridos graciosamente (Lisbon: Domingos Carneyro, 1659).


\(^{22}\) Maria de Lurdes Correia Fernandes, ‘Cartas de sátira e aviso’, p. 167.
and wrote a prose introduction where she acknowledges the large diffusion and acceptance of Dias’s poem. She also presents herself to Minhas leitoras [my women readers] as an advogada [advocate] for her sex, and proposes to write the ‘apology’ of feminine virtues:

Minhas Leitoras: Muito anos há que vejo correr um papel impresso, que se intitula Malícias das Mulheres, sem que até ao presente houvesse uma que se dispensasse a contradizê-lo com uma justa Apologia da nossa notória inocência. Pareceu-me inequidade que se fossem multiplicando à nossa revelia, contra nós, tantas sentenças quantas são as aprovações que aquele famoso Libelo acha entre as pessoas do povo. E por isso, agora me resolvi a contrariá-lo e a reconvidá-lo. Suponho que este arbitrio vos será tão grato quanto aquele papel vos será molesto; e que não deixareis de convir em que eu, como pessoa tão conjunta e igualmente interessada, me arrogue o ofício de vossa procuradora.

[My lady readers: for many years now I have seen going around a printed booklet with the title Women’s Malice, without anyone until now taking the trouble to contradict it with a fair Defence of our obvious innocence. It seemed to me an iniquity that there should be multiplying in our absence, against us, as many judgements as there are approbations that this famous Libel finds amongst the common people. And so I have now decided to contest it and revisit it. I suppose that this decision will be as agreeable to you as that paper is troubling to you; and that you will not fail to agree that I, as a person so connected and equally interested, will take upon myself the duty of being your representative.]

The result of this endeavour is a poem of advice to a woman about the dangers of marriage, with the same metre and stanza structure as Dias’s text, although slightly shorter (seventy-two stanzas as against ninety-two). In this piece, the subject of discourse represents herself as an elderly lady, thus invoking age as a guarantee of authority. She criticizes Dias’s style, and refutes his positions one by one.23 In her perspective, the exemplum presented in Malícia das Mulheres only shows the ‘basbaquidade’ [silliness] of the fooled husbands. She goes on devaluing the importance of the tricks played on the two men by their wives, representing them as amusing jokes. To the list of women’s flaws in Baltasar Dias’s text, the Bondade das Mulheres counterposes a list of the ills visited upon women by their male companions (jealousy, contempt, infidelity, cruelty, severity, ungratefulness), which is followed by a list of feminine virtues, taking up the arguments already popularized by the ‘quarrel’s’ tradition: heroism is frequent in women; the soul is neither masculine nor feminine;24 if Eve has

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23 Paula da Graça, Bondade das Mulheres vendicada e malícia dos Homens manifesta. Papel métrico, e apologético, em que se defende a feminina inocência, contra outro em que injustamente se argüe a sua maldade, com o título de Malícia das Mulheres. Composto pelo zelo de PAULA DA GRAÇA, natural da Villa de Cabanas, e assistente nesta Corte (Lisbon: Na Officina de Pedro Ferreira, 1741) [1st edn 1730].
24 This is in fact a variation of the maxim coined by Poullain de la Barre (1647–1725): ‘L’Esprit n’a point de sexe’. François Poullain de la Barre, De l’égalité des deux sexes, discours physique et moral (Paris: Jean Dupuis, 1673).
tempted Adam, Mary has redeemed all mankind; only a woman stood by Christ when he was condemned by Pilate; if women were allowed the same education as men they would be as able to participate in intellectual life in the same manner they do; and so on. The conclusion, however, is not a simple condemnation of marriage, for although Graça presents celibacy as the ‘estado mais perfeito’ [the most perfect state] she seems to limit her condemnation to bad marriage when she refers to ‘Esse tão tirano estado | De viver com um marido | Cruel e mal inclinado’ (stanza 69) [that state of tyranny which consists in living with a cruel and ill-disposed husband]. This is a relevant shift, for it introduces into the debate a ‘modern’ nuance in accordance with the efforts made by the Catholic Church after the Council of Trent (1545–63) to present virtuous marriage as a possible path to salvation.  

Paula da Graça’s refutation seems to have suggested a model for the participation of Portuguese women in this discussion. One should note that her text (as well as Dias’s) continued to be available to the public in successive editions. This might explain why, almost a century later, the controversy on women’s ‘malice’ and/or women’s ‘goodness’ resurfaced in three texts which continued to dialogue with Malícia das Mulheres, and Bondade das Mulheres vendicada. Two of them were attributed to women, although the identities of their authors were hidden behind initials or pseudonyms.

Bondade das Mulheres contra a Malícia dos Homens: Relação Comica, e Historica, para Divertimento de quem a comprar [The Goodness of Women against the Malice of Men: A Comic and Historical Relation for the Amusement of those who buy it], by L. D. P. G., appeared in 1805. A reply to it, the Malicia dos Homens contra a Bondade das Mulheres: Embargos que os Homens põem á primeira parte [Malice of Men against the Goodness of Women: caveats Men put to the first part] signed by M. D. M. C. D. M. A. E. C. came out in the same year. Although written in prose, they resume the Dias/Graça debate, by explicitly quoting their texts and by wielding the same arguments advanced by those authors.

In Bondade das Mulheres contra a Malícia dos Homens the anonymous author addresses the ‘senhoras’ [ladies], speaking as a woman (using the pronouns ‘nós’ / ‘nosso(a)’ [we, our(s)], and so on), and inverts the sense of the interpretation of the various ‘proofs’ of ‘women’s malice’ advanced by Baltasar Dias. She says, for instance, that it was Eve’s generosity and love for Adam that inspired her to share the forbidden fruit with him after the serpent persuaded her to eat it,

and suggests that Eve and Adam were both to blame for disobeying God. In a similar way, the wickedness attributed by Dias to heroines of Antiquity and of the Bible (like Helen of Troy, Semiramis, Dido, Bathsheeba) is considered to be a distortion of the real, innocent or justifiable acts they performed. According to this point of view, Helen was a victim of Paris’s harassment, Semiramis’s husband was a tyrant who deserved to be killed, Bathsheeba was violated by David, and Virgil distorted the real behaviour of Dido when he wrote the Aeneid. In essence, according to the anonymous author of this folheto de cordel, men have misinterpreted women’s acts in order to hide their own flaws. Women are equal to men in holiness, courage and erudition, and even exceed them in piety and as peacemakers. As a conclusion, it is said that if men and women share similar weaknesses and sins, these cannot be attributed to feminine ‘nature’.28

The reaction to this did not take long, for in the same year Malicia dos Homens contra a Bondade das Mulheres appeared, contradicting this view. This anonymous paper consisted of a discourse (also in prose), assumed by a man who announced his intention to ‘undo’ the praise of women and the arguments in their favour put forward by the previous booklet. Again, he goes back to the book of Genesis and to the same classical and biblical exempla invoked by the previous participants in the debate. Eve is blamed for listening to the serpent instead of her husband, Adam, and her actions are interpreted as a consequence of her feminine nature. The cases of Helen of Troy, Bathsheeba, and others are presented as proof of the corrupt, imperfect or treacherous features inherent to all women, while the virtues and honourable intentions attributed to them by the author of Bondade das Mulheres are dismissed as exceptions. Finally, the author concludes that a good woman is something extremely rare. This time, the debate seemed to stop there.

However, in 1812, a paper called Defeza do bello sexo ou resposta ao papel intitulado ‘Malicia das Mulheres’ dada por huma Senhora da Província a huma sua Amiga [Defence of the Fair Sex or Answer to the Paper entitled ‘Malice of Women’ given by a Country Lady to a Lady Friend of hers] was published.29 Although less than seven years had passed since the last resurfacing of the ‘quarrel’ in the cordel, the context of production had changed dramatically, due to the involvement of Portugal in the Napoleonic wars. Again, and unlike the two anonymous booklets mentioned above, this is a poem adopting a ‘popular’ form and tone, written in eighty-five quatrains in the same redondilha metre used by Baltasar Dias and Paula da Graça. It is also a discourse assumed by a feminine persona who calls herself a ‘Country Lady’.

28 The author writes: ‘Finalmente, com tantas e tão manifestas razões, nada tem que nos arguir que neles não ache a nossa vigilância que censurar. [...] É esta também a defensa, que em nome de todas pude dar, para que vejam que não é tão digna de censura a nossa natureza’ [Finally with so many and so evident reasons, they have nothing to blame in us that cannot be censored by us. [...] This is also the defence that I could make, in the name of all women, or order to show that our nature is not so blameworthy].

29 Defeza do bello sexo ou resposta ao papel intitulado ‘Malicia das Mulheres’ dada por huma Senhora da Província a huma sua Amiga na seguinte Epístola (Lisbon: Imprensa Régia, 1812).
After a first décima (ten-line stanza with the rhyme abbaaccddc) dedicated to the reader, where it is said that everything that follows was ‘dictated by reason’ and ‘written down by truth’ (‘A razão foi quem ditou | A verdade, a que escreveu’), the text proceeds as a letter to a friend, to whom the author describes the distress caused by war and by the actions of Napoleon (the ‘monster of Corsica’). In response to her friend’s request for a comment on Baltasar Dias’s Malícia das Mulheres, the ‘Country Lady’ (‘uma Senhora da Província’) proceeds by appreciating (and condemning as wrong) the style, the subject, the references to classical authors, the use of an ‘insulso e porco’ [meaningless and dirty] exemplum, and even the arguments presented by Dias.

The discussion departs from Dias’s model, however, when the author enumerates the evils caused to women by men in the course of childhood, in young age, as adults and in old age, and underlines a number of supposed offences to the laws of heaven and to the rules of society men are guilty of. Finally, the debate becomes more and more centred on theological and ethical issues, when the author explains that women are part of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind, and are therefore essential to the world. As a conclusion, it is suggested that both men and women should concentrate in excelling on the path of virtue, and the friend to whom the letter-poem is addressed is advised to love God, love her neighbour, be virtuous, respect the law and be truthful in all her actions.

Parallel to Paula da Graça’s publication and to the prose continuations of the debate mentioned above, a new polemic on a similar subject would ruffle the cordel market in 1761: an author disguised under the pseudonym of ‘Frei Amador do Desengan’ proposed to ‘reform’ women’s behaviour, again using the folheto de cordel as a means to do so, through the publication of Espelho Crítico no qual claramente se vem alguns defeitos das Mulheres fabricado na loja da Verdade pelo irmão Amador do Dezengano, que pode servir de estímulo para a reforma dos mesmos defeitos [Critical Mirror in which some of Women’s Flaws can be clearly seen Fabricated in the Workshop of Truth by Fray Lover of Disenchantment, which may serve as stimulus for the reform of the same flaws]. Here, whoever was writing under the pseudonym of Fray Amador do Desengano accuses women of causing unhappiness around them and proclaims his intention of exposing women’s flaws to the public, by mentioning three of them: ignorance, inconstancy and beauty. To prove his view that these three ‘feminine characteristics’ are the cause of misery and sin, the author resorts to the same method already used by his predecessors of accumulating exempla from classical authors. The number and variety of the quoted auctoritates exceeds significantly the previous texts mentioned here, in a display of erudition supported by rhetoric, in a tone which resembles the clerical sermons of the period. Similarly, the main goal of the text seems to be moral, as one can deduce from the conclusion, aimed at the reform of women’s ways and, indirectly, of men’s behaviour:
O fruto que aqui desejara que todos tirassem, era que as mulheres fossem mais comedidas em seus ornatos, e os homens mais acutelados em suas vistas. Elas mais discretas para o bem, e ignorantes para o mal, e constantes no que for para honra e glória de Deus.

[The lesson that here I had wished that everybody draw was that women might be more restrained in their embellishments, and men more cautious in their intents. That they [women] be more discerning towards the good, and ignorant towards the evil, and constant in what might be to the honour and glory of God.]

Fray Amador do Desengano was refuted in the same year in the same manner and form by Gertrudes Margarida de Jesus, in two Cartas apologéticas em favor, e defensa das Mulheres [Apologetical Letters in Favour and in Defence of Women]. In her first letter, Gertrudes Margarida de Jesus answers the accusations of ignorance and inconstancy and emphasizes that she will do so ‘with the same weapons’ that offended her sex. The result is an overwhelming display of erudition both in terms of auctoritates and exempla, and of historical and literary references. Gertrudes de Jesus’s main arguments are mostly traditional. For instance she states, at the outset, that if women were allowed to study they would be as knowledgeable as men, and that the mere existence of men who are just as inconstant as women demonstrates that this is not a feminine quality. Nonetheless, the way she supports her argumentation is, to a certain extent, a novelty. As was pointed out by Elias Torres Feijó, the sources of significant parts of Gertrudes’s text are contemporary works: mostly Theatro Heroíno, signed by Damião Froes Perym (pseudonym of Fray João de São Pedro) and Teatro Crítico, by the Spanish enlightenment philosopher Benito Feijoo.

The same procedure is visible in Gertrudes Margarida de Jesus’s second letter, entirely dedicated to refuting Desengano’s accusation of the harmful consequences of women’s beauty. Fray Amador’s reasoning is dismissed by Gertrudes when she demonstrates that ‘men can draw evil out of good things’ (‘os homens tiram mal do que é bom’) and pervert the real meaning of beauty. This is the point of departure for a philosophical dissertation on the proximity of beauty and goodness. To conclude, the author recalls having heard that her antagonist had complained that most of the exempla quoted in her first letter were foreigners. In order to contradict him, Gertrudes Margarida finishes her
argument with a list of Portuguese heroines. Her last sentence is a quotation in Latin, 'Omnia sub correctione S.R.E.', and, in a last touch of irony, she expresses the hope that Desengano’s knowledge of this language will be sufficient for him to understand it...

The choice of the folheto de cordel as the medium for the repertoire of themes associated with the discussion of gender roles in general, and of women’s roles in particular, was quite long-lasting in Portuguese society. Indeed, one can say that it has accompanied some of the most decisive moments in the history of Portuguese women’s access to a visible, legitimate and significant place in the public sphere. Thus, for instance, close to the end of the century, when the presence on the throne of a widowed and psychologically fragile queen, D. Maria I, caused apprehension in some sectors, the topoi associated with the querelle des femmes — such as the involvement of women in state politics and women’s right to education — emerged again in the cordel, in 1790. We see this in the anonymous chapbook celebrating the ability of the feminine sex to exercise power, entitled: Tratado sobre a Igualdade dos Sexos, ou Elogio do Merecimento das Mulheres oferecido, e Dedicado às Ilustres Senhoras de Portugal por um Amigo da Razão [A Treatise on the Equality of the Sexes, or Eulogy of Women’s Merit Offered and Dedicated to the Illustrious Ladies of Portugal by a Friend of Reason].

In this case, the discourse is assumed by a ‘Philosopher’ who calls himself ‘a friend of Reason’ (‘um Amigo da Razão’) and claims to be guided only by ‘reason’ and ‘exact ideas’ in order to be truly objective in his judgment of women’s merits and demerits. In his opinion, women are similar to men in all respects and should therefore be treated as equals. He notes that both sexes have the same obligation to be virtuous, and that men and women share the duties imposed upon them by ‘Nature and by reason’ (‘os deveres que a Natureza e a razão impõem’). According to this ‘friend of Reason’ the arguments imputing weaknesses, flaws and incapacities to women, as well as the justifications usually presented to prove the inability of women to rule and to serve in public offices, could also be used against most men. Impediments like the difficulty in keeping secrets, physical weakness, lack of knowledge and lack of ‘capacity’ of the soul are dismissed as either untrue (in the cases of secrecy, and of ‘incapacity of the soul’) or as depending on education. Basically, the arguments used by this late eighteenth-century ‘philosopher’ continue to coincide with the accusations made by Christine de Pisan and those brought up in the seventeenth century in the wake of Descartes’s philosophy, namely, that educated women are as intellectually fit as men, and that the qualities of the soul are not dependent on the sex of the individual.


33 See Adeline Gargam, ‘La Révolution cartésienne: une première voie de libération intellectuelle pour la femme’, in Les Femmes savantes, lettrées et cultivées dans la littérature française de Lumières...
The procedure followed by the anonymous author of this paper is also not new, for he proves that there was always a significant number of ‘strong women’ capable of discernment and courage, by recalling a list of exempla taken from classical sources and from contemporary catalogues of virtuous women (he openly quotes Feijoo). From his comments on these ‘heroines’ — which include among them the ruling Portuguese queen, who had been widowed in 1786 — he deduces that women are ‘at least’ equal to men, and should have ‘their place in public office just like them, especially in the case of the access to the throne’. Although no known replies to this pamphlet were published in the cordel, its mere existence is significant evidence of the importance of these booklets as a means of conveying to a large audience the controversies agitating Portuguese society. In this case, the endeavour in favour of the presence of a woman in power was not very successful, since D. Maria was removed from the throne two years later and pronounced incapable of ruling on grounds of madness.

In 1822, the year Brazil proclaimed its independence from Portugal and the first Portuguese Constitution was approved, when the discussion of women’s right to vote was at its peak, the same tradition resurfaced again in a new folheto, signed with the initials R. F. C., called Dedução Filosófica da Desigualdade dos Sexos, e de seus Direitos Políticos por Natureza [A Philosophical Deduction on the Inequality of the Sexes and of their Political Rights by Nature], in which the ‘natural incapacity’ imposed upon women by their biology is invoked as a motive for their exclusion from voting. In his argumentation, the author of this pamphlet reuses the now centuries-old argument of feminine nature: the impossibility of women’s having a say in public affairs or serving in public office is determined by the fact that they are physically weaker than men and must devote themselves continuously and exclusively to motherhood and to domesticity.

In short, even if it is possible to identify in the written production of Portuguese women during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries sporadic attitudes of resistance to the prevailing misogynous discourse, we have no Portuguese texts written by women which can be framed in the context of the so-called ‘women’s quarrel’ prior to the eighteenth century. The
folhetos de cordel mentioned here, however, reveal a knowledge of the topoi and commonplace arguments gathered by the intellectual tradition of this long-lasting debate developed through the centuries. They propose a distinction between the elements pertaining to sex from those pertaining to gender and, consequently, a reorganization of philosophical knowledge and ideas on women according to a feminine point of view; they use examples of educated and powerful women of the past to stress the limitations imposed on the women of the present; they take a stand in favour of women’s education and present women as human beings capable of autonomy in the processes of learning, in the creation of knowledge, and in the conscious use of reason.