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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Archives and Libraries Consulted	viii
Introduction	1
1. Post-Independence Transformation in Buenos Aires	23
2. <i>Defensa del bello sexo</i>	59
3. <i>Doña María Retazos</i> and <i>La Matrona Comentadora</i>	83
4. <i>Cartas sobre la educación del bello sexo por una señora americana</i>	113
5. <i>La Argentina</i>	139
6. <i>La Aljaba</i>	166
Conclusion	192
Bibliography	200
Index	215

Post-Independence Transformation in Buenos Aires

‘La existencia social de las mujeres es aún demasiado vaga e incierta.’¹

The 1820s marked the second decade of revolutionary change in Buenos Aires. With modified and disputed expectations and demands for men and women, the decade was characterised by the rapid transformation of society and culture. The texts which are the subject of this study exemplify these cultural processes in that they engage with the issues of political and social reform, foreign influences (in particular British influences), and, most importantly, the relationship between the personal conduct of women, both in public and in private, and emerging national culture. This chapter will explore how the revolutionary project fostered modernity in several areas as part of a conscious rejection of Spanish colonial systems and associated underdevelopment, an objective that necessitated the exchange of views on the social positioning of women.

The emergence of the Argentine nation was preceded by dramatic power struggles, and state formation was a lengthy and complex process. Independence did not automatically produce a nation-state, and republicanism did not prove easily implemented. This was the case throughout Spanish America yet ‘[f]or the new Argentine State, which was for half a century to remain an inchoate confederation, the substitution [of colonial rule] proved to be desperately difficult’.² As Nicolas Shumway describes, ‘expelling the Spanish proved simple compared to the task of building a new nation consisting of all the remaining provinces under institutional government’.³

¹ Bernardino Rivadavia’s speech on the foundation of the Buenos Aires Sociedad de Beneficencia, in *Instituciones de la Sociedad de Beneficencia y Asistencia Social (1823–1952)*, I (Buenos Aires: Archivo General de la Nación, 1999), p. 13.

² José Luis Romero, *A History of Argentine Political Thought*, trans. Thomas F. McGann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1963), p. xi.

³ Nicolas Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 51.

Indeed, the term ‘Argentina’, although in use, did not become the official name of the nation until 1826, and a lasting national constitution would not be agreed and introduced until 1860. This fifty-year delay in political consolidation is linked to the fact that patriotism meant different things to different people in what was a vast and still partly unexplored region. Revolutionary allegiance allowed for variations in focus and scale among military and political leaders. As Ricardo Rojas observed in his 1916 essay on *argentinidad*:

Todos los hombres de nuestra emancipación hablan de ‘patria’, pero no se refieren concretamente a nuestra patria actual: es para Funes, la ciudad nativa; para Moreno, el virreinato; para Gorriti, las provincias unidas; para Monteagudo, toda la América.⁴

The roots of the national question, and indeed the regionalism which blocked national consolidation, are pertinent to this study because independence in Buenos Aires gave rise to new political sensibilities and the need to appear politically sophisticated to the international community. Political legitimacy and foreign support demanded, it was believed, a completely new and modern reformulation of society involving changes in the system of government, new institutions, and the application of concepts such as elections, self-governance, civil liberty, and free trade. Print culture was a central part of such statecraft. This cosmopolitan mindset was most associated with the city of Buenos Aires, where the liberals ‘who lived facing Europe, [...] were anxious to import the latest, most modern ideas from abroad, to wrench their embryonic nation into modernity whatever the cost, and to make it a showplace of European civilization’.⁵ Part of this planned new identity was a familiarity and ease with modern European movements such as the debate regarding slavery. Hence in 1813 it was decreed that children born of slaves in Buenos Aires would be free.

Discourses such as abolitionism emerged from the European liberal tradition, which (rhetorically at least) stood broadly for freedom, equality, the rights of citizens, and constitutional representative government. These ideas did not have immediate practical democratic implications in post-independence Buenos Aires; freedom was largely constructed as collective liberty as opposed to individual emancipation and principles of equality were

⁴ Ricardo Rojas, *La argentinidad. Ensayo histórico sobre nuestra conciencia nacional en la gesta de la emancipación 1810–1816* (Buenos Aires: La Facultad de Juan Roldán, 1916), p. 17.

⁵ Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina*, p. 79.

applied selectively. Universal suffrage was not an immediate concern and extending the franchise to women was not even considered. However, a modern form of the woman question was a product of the ‘Pandora’s box’ of liberal ideas that were debated in Europe.⁶ The woman question was not a universalistic discourse; it should not, therefore, be assumed that all women, regardless of class or race, were included in this discussion because the women it referred to belonged in their majority to elite groups (meaning those from professional or governing families). Nevertheless, the construction of a modern society in Buenos Aires demanded some engagement with the question of women’s rights and responsibilities, just as many other social issues had to be reassessed. The ideal social role for elite women subsequently became a point of contention in post-independence Buenos Aires. This role could be metaphorical as well as practical. As Francine Masiello writes, ‘in the early years of the Republic, Argentina’s women fulfilled a symbolic and civic function in nation-building, serving as evidence of the cosmopolitan success and liberal thinking of the country’s leaders’.⁷

The purpose of the following sections in this chapter is to demonstrate the links between political events and the woman question in Buenos Aires.⁸ Specific attention will be paid to the independence movement, the changing social roles of women associated with the political elite, the creation of the Sociedad de Beneficencia, the presence of the British and the French, educational reform, and the expansion of publishing and the book trade.

The Independence Movement

For most of the colonial period Buenos Aires was located on the periphery of the Spanish Empire, which favoured Lima, and was denied its natural advantages as a port city at the mouth of a large navigable river by Spanish colonial trade restrictions. In 1776, in order to revitalise the economy, Charles III created the new Viceroyalty of the River Plate with Buenos Aires as its capital.⁹ The huge viceroyalty occupied a quarter of the land of the South

⁶ Ana Aguado, ‘Liberalismo y ciudadanía femenina en la formación de la sociedad burguesa’, in *La trascendencia del liberalismo doceañista en España y en América*, ed. Manuel Chust and Ivana Frasquet (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, 2004), pp. 211–31 (p. 215).

⁷ Francine Masiello, *Between Civilization and Barbarism: Women, Nation and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p. 20.

⁸ The historical survey will end with the first period of Juan Manuel de Rosas’s office as the governor of the province of Buenos Aires (1829–32).

⁹ Mark D. Szuchman, ‘From Imperial Hinterland to Growth Pole: Revolution,

American continent. The opening of the port in Buenos Aires to trade greatly increased commerce in the region and the city began to prosper. This prosperity would continue into the independence era; in 1816 eighty foreign ships entered the port, and by 1823 the number had increased to three hundred and thirty-six.¹⁰ Due to its opportune geographical situation Buenos Aires usually dealt with foreign affairs on behalf of the whole viceroyalty.

The English Invasions of Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807 helped bring the colonial period to a close in the region. Buenos Aires was forced to form its own military forces without assistance from Spain, which gave the population a sense of their own strength and ability to defend themselves. Whilst local militias successfully resisted the British siege, Viceroy Rafael de Sobremonte fled with the viceroyalty's funds. This was seen as cowardly and disloyal by the population and, as a result, Sobremonte was overthrown. In his place a Frenchman, Santiago de Liniers, came to head the Cabildo (city council) having led the resistance against the English. He swore loyalty to Ferdinand VII and enjoyed popular appeal but was nevertheless replaced by Spaniard Baltasar Hidalgo de Cisneros, who was imposed by the Junta Central in Spain (the seat of support for Ferdinand VII in exile and resistance against Napoleon). Cisneros would be Buenos Aires's last viceroy. In May 1810, when news reached Buenos Aires that the Bonapartists had occupied Andalusia, a Cabildo Abierto (assembly) was called to name a provisional governing junta of wealthy representatives. Speaking for the whole viceroyalty, the Junta called for the resignation of Cisneros. Thus from 1810 onwards the porteños tended to regard Buenos Aires as synonymous with Argentina. It was to avoid domination by Buenos Aires that one area of the viceroyalty declared independence the following year, breaking away to form the Republic of Paraguay.

By 1813 the River Plate region had begun to acquire some of the hallmarks of a national culture, such as its own flag, national holidays and a currency. The words to the current Argentine national anthem 'Oíd, mortales el grito sagrado', were composed in 1813 by poet and politician Vicente López y Planes and were first sung at the salon of Buenos Aires high society figure Mariquita Sánchez de Thomson, who will be discussed below in the section on the Buenos Aires Sociedad de Beneficencia.¹¹ A decree of 1813

Change and Restoration in the Río de la Plata', in *Revolution and Restoration: The Rearrangement of Power in Argentina*, ed. Mark D. Szuchman and Jonathon C. Brown (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), pp. 1–26 (p. 3).

¹⁰ Alejandro E. Parada, *El mundo del libro y de la lectura durante la época de Rivadavia* (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1998), p. 29.

¹¹ María Cristina Arambel-Guiñazú and Claire Emilie Martin, *Las mujeres toman la palabra: escritura femenina del siglo XIX*, I (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2001), p. 203.

proclaimed the anthem to be ‘la única marcha patriótica’¹² and that same year a pyramid was built to commemorate the revolution.¹³

Formal independence from Spain was declared at the Congress of Tucumán in July 1816. Juan Martín de Pueyrredón was appointed Supreme Director and Buenos Aires was made the seat of government and the capital city of the United Provinces of the River Plate. David Bushnell and Neill Macaulay sum up the developing sense of cultural and political superiority in Buenos Aires:

Buenos Aires [...], with close commercial and other ties to western Europe and the United States and possessing a disproportionate share of the wealth and brains of the country, felt destined by nature to ‘civilize’ the more isolated and backward interior.¹⁴

Solidarity with the other provinces, however, was not always of paramount importance to the Buenos Aires government. That same year (1816) the Portuguese invaded the Banda Oriental seeking to gain control of the ports on the River Plate estuary. The Buenos Aires governors did not lend support to the plight of the province. This initial lack of assistance helped to spread political polarisation in the region from then on.

Post-Independence

The various constitutions drafted before 1819 proposed strong central government based in Buenos Aires. Pueyrredón left power in 1819 due to the rejection of the Unitarian centrist constitution of that year by the Federal League, which was headed by José Gervasio Artigas from the Banda Oriental, bringing the national union assumed in 1816 to an end. Pueyrredón was replaced by José Rondeau but stability proved impossible. There were fifteen governors of the province of Buenos Aires during 1820 alone,¹⁵ and

¹² Luis Ricardo Fors, *Índice cronológico de los trabajos ejecutados en la Imprenta de los Niños Expósitos de Buenos Aires durante los siglos XVIII y XIX y que existen en la Biblioteca Pública Provincial de La Plata* (La Plata: Taller de Publicaciones, 1904), p. 48.

¹³ Tulio Halperin Donghi, ‘Argentine Counterpoint: Rise of the Nation, Rise of the State’, in *Beyond Imagined Communities: Reading and Writing the Nation in Latin America*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén and John Charles Chasteen (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 33–53 (p. 42).

¹⁴ David Bushnell and Neill Macaulay, *The Emergence of Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 119.

¹⁵ Alexander Caldcleugh, *Travels in South America, During the Years 1819–20–21: Containing an Account of the Present State of Brazil, Buenos Ayres, and Chile*, I (London: John Murray, 1825), p. 369.

INDEX

- Ackermann, Rudolph, 113, 115, 121–125, 135–6
- Adams, John, 68 (See *Woman*)
- Addison, Joseph, 15, 61, 90, 143, 145, 146–147, 151, 162–163, 164, 165, 183, 197
- La Aljaba* 1, 12, 13, 16, 63, 78, 90, 140, 142, 144, 148, 151–154, 155, 158, 165, 166–191, 193, 195–197, 198
- Angelis, Melanie de, 116–117, 170
- Angelis, Pedro de, 116, 140, 144, 148, 170
- La Argentina*, 1, 12, 13–14, 15–16, 90, 97, 139–165, 166, 172, 178, 193–194, 195, 197–198
- Assembly of women, 92, 105–107
- Auza, Néstor Tomás, 13, 15, 93–94, 139, 142–143, 148, 172, 174
- Banda Oriental, 8, 27, 31, 37–38, 48, 57, 140–141, 166, 167, 168–170, 187
- Blanco White, José María, 121–123
- British culture, 45–48, 59, 68–73, 81, 82, 106–107, 113–114, 119, 120, 126, 131, 132, 135, 136, 137, 138, 146, 147, 168, 184, 193, 194, 196–197, 199
- British and Foreign Bible Society, 50–51
- Cantillon, José Antonio, 1, 59, 60, 82, 195 (See *Defensa del bello sexo*)
- Cartas sobre la educación del bello sexo* 1, 12, 63, 113–138, 158, 171, 193, 195–197, 198
- Casamayor de Luca, Isabel, 20, 41
- Castañeda, Francisco de Paula, 1, 6, 12, 57, 83–112, 161, 165, 166, 190, 193, 195, 196, 197, 198, (See *Doña María Retazos* and *La Matrona Comentadora*)
- Catholic Church, 30–31, 32, 73–74, 75, 77, 87–90, 104, 108, 110, 111, 112, 114, 134–135, 138, 155, 165, 175, 178, 189–190, 191, 194–195 (See Castañeda)
- Charity, 181, 187, 194 (See *Sociedad de Beneficencia*)
- Comparative History, 60–68, 128–129
- Conduct Literature, 117–120, 133, 135, 171, 176–178, 180–181
- Dayet, Melania, 116–117, 170
- Defensa del bello sexo por una señora americana*, 1, 12, 59–82, 193, 194, 195, 197, 198
- Delauney, Fanny, 116–117, 170
- Doña María Retazos*, 1, 13, 84, 86, 93, 96, 99–104, 195
- Echeverría, Esteban, 8, 40
- Education
- Educational reform, 48–54, 85
 - Education for girls, 40–41, 42–44, 49–52, 130–137, 167, 178–181, 183–184, 191, 195
 - Lancaster method, 50–51, 85, 109
 - Physical education for girls, 115, 134
- Federalism, 2–3, 12, 28–29, 31–32, 86, 88, 92, 97, 100, 103, 111, 112, 143, 146, 156, 158, 165, 186, 187, 196
- Feijóo, Benito Jerónimo, 10–11, 49
- Fernández de Lizardi, José Joaquín, 97–98
- Franqueza, 129, 177–178, 196–197
- French culture, 4, 6, 19–20, 39, 45, 47, 80–81, 110, 117, 119, 126, 132, 171, 179, 184, 187, 190, 193
- Greece (Ancient), 76, 171, 185
- Guerra, Rosa, 14, 42–43, 144–145, 170
- Home, Henry, 61, 63–64
- Independence from Spain, 17–18, 23–27, 34, 41, 84–85, 87–88, 111–112
- Irigoyen, Manuel de, 1, 97, 139, 140–141, 146–147, 151 (See *La Argentina*)
- Literacy, 6–7, 8–10, 50, 53
- Luxury, 159–160, 188–189
- Manso, Juana, 43
- Mármol, José, 8
- Masiello, Francine, 13, 92, 173, 174–175

- La Matrona Comentadora*, 1, 95, 96, 105–111, 195, 197
- Millar, John, 61, 64–66, 78
- Miscelánea de Damas*, 20–21
- Montesquieu, 11, 49, 61, 62–63, 128–129, 188
- Montevideo (See *Banda Oriental*)
- Mora, José Joaquín de, 1, 115–117, 170
(See *Cartas sobre la educación del bello sexo por una señora americana*)
- Orientalism, 67, 75–76, 80, 82
- Pamphlet literature, 21, 90–91, 93, 95–96, 97–98, 112
- Peineta, 158–159
- Petimetra, 159–160
- Race, 11–12, 64, 78–79, 104, 164, 173, 179, 184–185, 190, 193
- Religion (See *Catholic Church*)
- Republican motherhood, 18, 181, 191, 196
- Rivadavia, Bernardino, 29–31, 38, 40, 43–44, 46, 50, 51, 52–53, 56, 58, 86, 88–90, 113, 116, 120–121, 122, 124, 126, 138, 156, 193, 194
- Rome (Ancient), 76–77, 82, 105, 171, 174, 181, 185, 187, 197
- Rosas, Juan Manuel de, 12, 32, 86, 139, 140–141, 144, 186, 193
- Rosende de Sierra, Petrona, 1, 14, 144, 151, 166, 167–170, 176, 185–186, 193, 195 (See *La Aljaba*)
- Sánchez, Mariquita, 26, 37, 40–41, 161, 187
- Sarmiento, Domingo Faustino, 3, 8, 61, 97, 122, 179
- Satire, 90–91 (See *La Argentina, Doña María Retazos* and *La Matrona Comentadora*)
- Scott, Joan Wallach, 1, 12
- Slavery, 11–12, 24–25, 43, 135, 184–185
- Smith, Adam, 64
- Sociedad de Beneficencia, 39–44, 113, 114–115, 124, 126–127, 167, 187, 194–195
- Soltero, 89, 90, 145, 151, 161–163, 165
- Spanish culture, 10–11, 39–40, 47, 66–68, 80, 81, 91, 98, 131, 133–134, 136, 137, 138, 147–148, 153, 160, 169, 172, 175, 179, 183, 187, 193, 196, 199
- Staël, Madame de, 20, 40, 51
- Steele, Richard, 15, 90, 143, 145, 151, 162–163, 165, 197
- Tertulia culture, 36–37
- Thompson, James, 50–51
- Translation, 19–20, 70–71, 115–116, 135, 197
- Unitarianism, 2–3, 28–29, 31–32, 88, 97, 104, 140, 146, 157–158, 165, 186, 187, 196
- Uruguay (See *Banda Oriental*)
- Utilitarianism, 52, 137, 183–184
- Varela, Juan Cruz, 7, 8, 20, 41, 42, 57
- Wars of independence (See *Independence from Spain*)
- Wollstonecraft, Mary, 68–70, 75–76, 91, 117–118, 127
- Woman*, 59, 68–73, 194, 197
- Women, the debate on, 10–12, 18–21, 33–39, 55