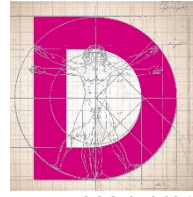


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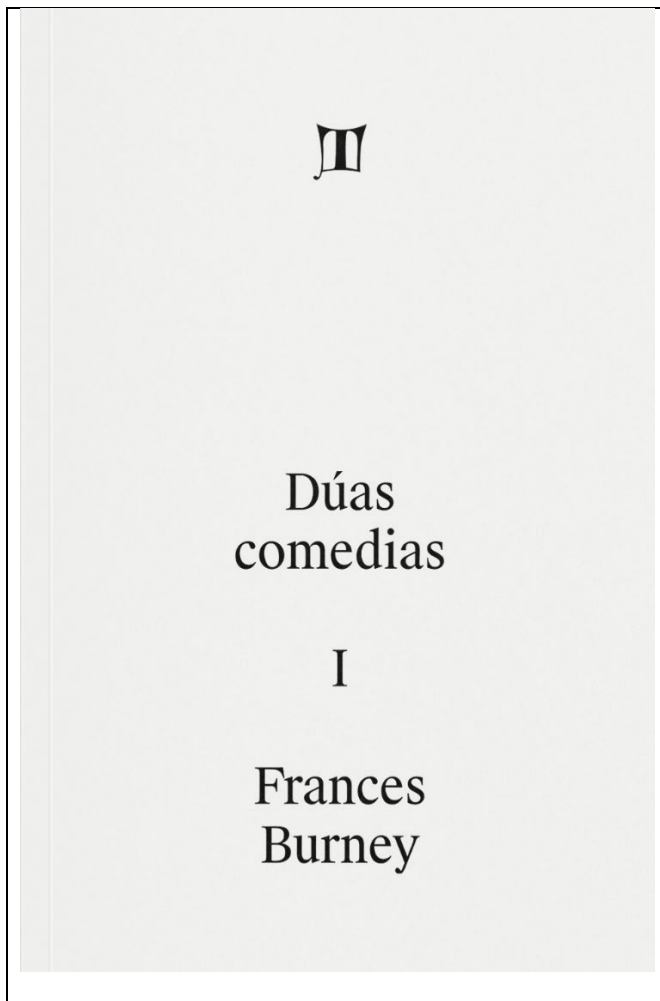
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BOOK REVIEW: *DÚAS COMEDIAS*
RESEÑA DE LIBRO: *DÚAS COMEDIAS*

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Introduction: María Jesús Lorenzo Modia

Translation and notes: Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez

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The role of Frances Burney (1752-1840) as a playwright remained—at least until recently—a mystery, not only in Spain but also in the UK, as many of the works made by women in theatre from the 17th to the 19th century were overshadowed by those of their male peers. Burney’s plays were not found until 1945 and they were neither represented nor published until the 1990s, so in a way “[Burney] paid a price, in the form of deference to the ideal of female propriety” (Rogers, 1994, p. xi).

Nevertheless, literary translations have favored the spreading of Burney’s dramatic works, leading to her texts reaching different cultures. In the case of the Galician language, the University of A Coruña has devoted a series of issues to the translation of many theatrical works, including two of Burney’s comedies, which were published under the Biblioteca-Arquivo Teatral Francisco Pillado Mayor collection.

It is of paramount importance to mention the valuable contributions made by both Carmen María Fernández Rodríguez and María Jesús Lorenzo-Modia to the revival of Frances Burney in Spain and, specifically, in Galicia. The doctoral thesis written by the former and supervised by the latter (2007) planted the seed to what would later become the awakening of Burney’s literature to a new readership. Moreover, their Spanish translation of Burney’s comedies (2017) has received academic appraisal (Jarazo Álvarez, 2018; Sanz Gallego, 2019; Tomé Rosales, 2018; Míguez Ben, 2019), and so has the Galician version, with a review written by María Fe González Fernández (2022). This reviewer provides a brief commentary of the book introduction and makes some observations regarding the actual translation. Nonetheless, the main focus of the present review will have to do more with thematic aspects of the two comedies.

Dúas comedias (2022) is a bilingual edition divided into two volumes. The first one contains an introduction by Prof. Lorenzo-Modia, as well as the English and Galician versions of *The Witlings* or *O club do enxeño* (1779) aligned side-by-side. The same goes for *A Busy Day* or *Un día a toda présa* (1802), which occupies the second volume.

As for the first section of the book, Lorenzo-Modia presents a compelling introduction to Burney’s plays. The scholar calls attention to the value held by the Galician translations of important works. Many of said translations were carried out by María Fe González, who brought to a Galician readership works by Jane Austen, Aphra Behn or Mary Wollstonecraft (Lorenzo-Modia, 2022, p. 12). Still, Lorenzo-Modia points out that, when it comes to women in translation, there is still a long way to go, so she leaves room for not only the possibility of Burney’s texts reaching a wider readership, but also of having other writers’ works translated into this language (p. 12).

Furthermore, Lorenzo-Modia provides an insight into the literary, cultural, sociopolitical and economic context that Burney lived in, since events such as the Industrial Revolution and the supremacy of the British Empire were highly influential to her works, as will be dealt with below. This academic also offers a segment of this introduction to mentioning the names of female authors and dramatists who had quite a prolific activity, but, in some cases, were not given the recognition they deserved until centuries later.

There is another subsection devoted to Burney’s life and literary achievements like, for instance, being considered the founder of the so-called *novel of manners* for

Evelina (1778). The text was a milestone not only because of that, but also because of Burney's ability to elaborate a satirical representation of the gender inequalities of her time (Lorenzo-Modia, 2022, p. 16). Burney's focus, however, was not only on writing novels; it seems that, up until a few decades ago, her dramatic works were neglected not due to scholarly disinterest but because they were unknown.

Burney's turbulent relationship with her family not only shaped her literary works, but also determined her career path. For her becoming a playwright was impossible due to the pressure of her close circles—mainly her father and his friend Samuel Crisp—who dissuaded her from seeing her dream become a reality. Of course, not only did her family's coercion convince her against this, but also societal expectations and prejudices regarding the role of women in drama (Lorenzo-Modia, 2022, p. 25). In this sense, critics such as Peter Sabor question what would have happened if Burney had been able to pursue a career in the playhouse, arguing that she could have changed literary history (Clark, 2013, p. 148). Frances Burney, therefore, obeyed her father's orders and quit being a playwright, as women were not destined to live off that profession¹.

Furthermore, as pointed out by Lorenzo-Modia (2022, p. 26), Burney's theatrical production was also heavily influenced by her job as Keeper of the Robes at Queen Charlotte's court, which lasted for five years and only exacerbated the writer's frustrations and feelings of alienation (Clark & Francus, 2013, p. 4). Right after that, she met who then would be her husband, Alexandre Jean Baptiste Piochard D'Arblay, thus becoming Madame D'Arblay. Another event that shaped Burney's life was her breast cancer, specifically her terrifying experience getting a mastectomy made without anesthetics, which can be read in *A Mastectomy: Letter to Esther Burney* (1812). Thus, Burney's account of the event makes her daily experiences as a woman living in the nineteenth century much more excruciating. It is also worth mentioning that Burney's novel *The Wanderer* is considered her most political novel, as can be read as an anti-nationalist piece of literature (Lorenzo-Modia, 2022, p. 28).

The following subsections in the introduction are concerned with aspects related to the two comedies by Frances Burney, i.e., a study of their structure and main themes. Lorenzo-Modia provides an extensive bibliography that may be of great interest to both readers and researchers alike. This thorough introduction supports the reading of *The Witlings* and *A Busy Day*, and presents thematic concerns as relevant as those of feminism and colonialism to present-day Galician readership.

In *The Witlings* or *O club do enxeño*, protagonist Cecilia Stanley suffers from public scorn when she loses her estate and her engagement to Beaufort is, consequently, in danger. Beaufort's aunt, Miss Stanley, denies the marriage and warns Cecilia that there is no future for poor girls like her in London. This shows that money can save and ruin someone's life, as Cecilia is all of a sudden unable to marry the one she loves and is doomed to either flee or start looking for a job in an attempt to survive. In a sense, this is similar to Burney's own experience working in Queen Charlotte's court, where she was faced with the difficulties suffered by women who were not bathed in privileges. This

¹ In this sense, it should also be noted that Burney's family members, including her father, had a habit of calling her *Fanny* which—even if they claimed to use it as a family term—shows that no one in her close circle actually took her seriously as a writer.

play, therefore, is quite critical of society, since it depicts the challenges and economic setbacks that single women went through at that time. The text is also concerned with a satirical portrayal of a frivolous and pedantic aristocracy, which advocated for obsolete ideas such as that of arranged marriages, with financial equality between the two parts being one of the main requisites of said marriages. The generational quarrel between Lady Smatter and Cecilia establishes the latter as the heroine of the story, as she is the one opposing to the established societal canon. In spite of Lady Smatter's threats, Cecilia refuses to stay quiet and submissive, as society would expect her to behave, as being too loud of a woman went against patriarchal norms. What makes the character of Cecilia so refreshing in terms of the 18th century literary canon is precisely that boldness of character, that desire for independence and choice in her romantic relationships. Therefore, it is through the character of Cecilia that Burney condemns the androcentric ideologies characteristic of both the society and the literature of the time.

As for *A Busy Day* or *Un día a toda prisa*, it focuses on the character of Eliza Watts, a girl who goes back to her birthplace, the city of London, after growing up in India. Once she arrives, she reunites with her family; this time, however, Burney does not only mock the attitude of the aristocracy, but also that of the Watts family merchants, who gathered a fortune after the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the British Empire. Thus, the Watts try to blend in with the higher classes, chasing an image that is inaccurate to reality and their background. In this way, Burney criticizes the hypocrisy of these merchants that are so obsessed with bragging and building a facade of opulence that they only manage to make a joke out of themselves.

A key thematic element present in this play is the portrayal of the unfairness that the British colonies were subjected to. Eliza's confident and fearless personality can be appreciated when she defends her black servant Mungo and fights back against her family's racist comments, thus treating him as she would like to be treated. This scene is important because it implies an acceptance of black people instead of turning a left ear to her family's ignorant attitudes. Since Eliza has experienced first-hand the injustices inflicted on racialized people, she feels more and more distanced from her parents. Even though the play is written as a comedy, Burney is clearly quite critical of colonialist attitudes, which, contrary to stereotypes, are not only present in the higher social classes.

Having mentioned some of the thematic aspects of both plays, it can be seen in what ways the translation of Burney's texts is extremely valuable. It allows for a Galician readership to get to know the work of a writer whose activity as a playwright —until not so long ago— was pretty much unknown not only Spain but also in the UK. In fact, neglecting the writer's work as a playwright would imply missing an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to the activity of women writers in 18th and 19th century England. Research projects as the one carried out by Lorenzo-Modia and Fernández Rodríguez shed light on the accomplishments that women writers had throughout history, but were not given the full recognition. Furthermore, feminist stories of empowerment and colonialism as the ones depicted by Burney are still crucial and relevant to this day. The author's defiance of the literary canon should be highlighted, as she went against the prevailing androcentric and racist ideologies. The last implication that is also worth mentioning is that the Galician translation of Burney's dramatic texts may hopefully lead

to future theatrical representations of the plays which, unfortunately, Burney never go to see happen. Nevertheless, projects like this one open a hopeful door for future projects and a potential revival of Burney's theatrical works at a global scale.

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