

## LA CAUSA DE LAS MUJERES EN GRAN BRETAÑA A TRAVÉS DE SUS TEXTOS

Author: Lidia Taillefer de Haya, editor.

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**Concepción Parrondo Carretero**

[parrondo1@gmail.com](mailto:parrondo1@gmail.com)

*Universidad de Málaga – España*

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### **Abstract**

Being a publication of works by not-so-well-known female writers in Great Britain, *La causa de las mujeres de Gran Bretaña a través de sus textos* represents a novelty in the field of feminism. The following review offers a generalized view of its layout, as well as the accurate translations of original texts, through a critical reflection of the selected works presented in the book. The collection brings a new approach to the origins of feminism by offering Spanish-speaking readers the opportunity to delve into the minds of those who not only defended the feminist cause in Britain, but pointed the way forward for other women around the world.

**Keywords:** feminism; translations; original; Spanish-speaking readers.

### **Resumen**

Siendo una publicación de obras de escritoras no muy conocidas, *La causa de las mujeres de Gran Bretaña a través de sus textos*, representa una novedad en el campo del feminismo. La siguiente reseña ofrece una visión generalizada de su diseño, así como de las traducciones fidedignas de los textos originales, mediante una reflexión crítica de las obras seleccionadas que aparecen en el libro. La colección aporta un enfoque nuevo sobre los orígenes del feminismo ofreciendo a lectores de habla hispana la oportunidad de adentrarse en las mentes de aquellos que no sólo defendieron la causa feminista en Gran Bretaña, sino que indicaron el camino a seguir a otras mujeres del mundo.

**Palabras clave:** feminismo; traducciones; original; lectores de habla hispana.

## LA CAUSA DE LAS MUJERES EN GRAN BRETAÑA A TRAVÉS DE SUS TEXTOS. A REVIEW

In the United Kingdom as well as the United States of America publications on texts for the defense of the Woman's Cause have been abundant since the emergence of Women Studies in the decades of the nineteen sixties and seventies. Yet Lidia Taillefer's publication brings to the table a novel approach to the reading of English female writing. Firstly, *La causa de las mujeres en Gran Bretaña a través de sus textos*, henceforth *La Causa*, focuses exclusively on the study of British women writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, whereas previous publications on the topic, as far as English-speaking authors are concerned, directed their eyes indiscriminately towards not only British, but also American female writers.

Similarly, other editors centered on women-sympathizing texts to include many and various nationalities, but never before has a publication shown such degree of specificity and speciality as *La Causa* does. Furthermore, publications prior to this one highlighted the literary work of only a handful of women, Virginia Woolf among them, leaving out of the scope of analysis other female writers' works worth reflecting upon. Taillefer herself makes it clear that the texts gathered in her collection are not limited to those of the best-known writers, such as Virginia Woolf or Florence Nightingale, but they extend to a number of not-so-well-known female writers who addressed gender-generated issues arising during Great Britain's suffragist movement<sup>1</sup>.

Lastly, because of the magnificent work performed in the translation of such texts, the recognition of these admirable women writers goes beyond the frontiers of an English-speaking world to occupy a visible place in the world of the Spanish-speaking academia as well as that of a general public interested in the origins of feminist writings. The originality of Taillefer's efforts resides in the fact that her volume offers a comprehensive selection of authors, to whom this book gives credit, whose work had been so far practically unknown to a broad readership, not to mention to the Spanish-speaking community. In addition, while previous publications have dealt with a multiplicity of literary genres, centering in some cases mainly on poetry, *La Causa* concentrates on the less canonical; that is, the ones represented by letters, diaries, memoirs and essays, thus elevating feminism to a more explicit, intimate at times, plane.

In the first lines of the introduction, Taillefer offers a clear explanation as to the reasons for publishing this selection. She specifies that her project centers on the origin of the women's movement in Great Britain for being this the country leading the fight for women's equal rights in the West<sup>2</sup>. It

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] los textos aquí recogidos no se limitan a los más conocidos de Florence Nightingale o Virginia Stephen Woolf, sino a muchas ‘defensas’ sobre cuestiones de género que aparecieron durante el sufragismo en Gran Bretaña” (Taillefer, 2019: 11).

<sup>2</sup> Este trabajo se centra en el origen del movimiento de las mujeres en Gran Bretaña, por ser el país que lideró la lucha por la igualdad de los derechos de las mujeres en Occidente” (Ibídem: 9).

is time that a publication of this sort may render tribute to these courageous pioneers in the Cause. Setting the basis for a historical context on which to place the works offered in this collection, the introductory section of the book provides a bird's eye view on the works of the fifteen female authors and the two male authors that constitute such collection.

The presence in the collection of two male authors is not without purpose, as they add a tone of plurality and diversity in unfurling early English women-writing to a Spanish-speaking readership. For, in spite of the literary anonymity of most of the fifteen women writers showcased in this work, their contribution to the feminist cause deserves due credit. Underscoring the contemporary feel that the texts still affords, the introduction draws a general picture of the contents of the publication. Due to its historical contextualization, the presented works are organized in chronological order, thus establishing a sense of direction and guidance for the reader to follow. *La Causa* also explores the feminist cause from different perspectives, such as the field of education (Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler); literature (Anne Isabella Thackeray, Olive Schreiner, and Virginia Stephen Woolf); philosophy (Harriet Hardy Taylor Mill); sociology (Harriet Martineau); politics (Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Emmeline Goulden Pankhurst, Christabel Pankhurst and Ray Mary Costelloe Strachey); and medicine (Florence Nightingale, Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson), covering, therefore, the major areas where social reforms were essential for the development of the Woman's Cause.

Upon closing this section, a timeline precedes the sixteen chapters of the collection, serving as a guide for the understanding of both the socio-historical context and personal circumstances under which the selected pieces were written. Such timeline also sheds light onto the origins and development of the feminist movement not only in Great Britain, but also in other parts of the world, thus offering the whole picture of some aspects to feminist writing that otherwise would have passed unnoticed. With scrupulous detail are historical events listed, from the publication in France of the first feminist journal (1808) to, also in France, the enactment of a law guarantying gender equality in accessing electoral lists and political posts (2000).

Already in Chapter 1, the reader's attention is directed to the zest and enthusiasm with which the women writers in this collection embarked themselves onto the feminist cause. For instance, the introductory pages to Harriet Hardy Taylor Mill (1807-1858) present her as a woman of great spirit who lived her life according to her own convictions and values, very much ahead of her time. Supposedly a co-editor and co-writer of some publications with her second husband with whom she had had an scandalous adulterous affair for years<sup>3</sup>, Taylor Mill's frame of mind on matters such as marriage and women's education were looked upon as radical, for she vouched for women to have

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<sup>3</sup> "A pesar de que John Stuart Mill llega a afirmar que escribió en colaboración con Harriet Hardy Taylor todas las obras a partir de 1840, ella no consta como coautora de *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) ni de *On Liberty* (1859)" (Taillefer, 2019: 25). Despite the fact that John Stuart Mill stated that he wrote in collaboration with Harriet Hardy Taylor all of his works from 1840 onwards, she does not figure as co-writer either in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) or *On Liberty* (1859).

custody rights as well as attain a public position in society. The selected work, translated by M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Silva Ros, deals with women's emancipation, while offering the reader the opportunity to get to know a very uncommon feminist mindset for the time period. Milder in her approach to the Woman's Cause yet equally determined to stand for the rights of women, Florence Nightingale's (1820-1910) excerpt of her unpublished work, *Cassandra's* Part II, accurately translated by Carmen M<sup>a</sup> Pastor Ayala, addresses women's equal rights in a passionate and vehement, yet subtle and ironic, tone that allows her to voice her complaints about the 'feminization' of women.

Nightingale's text unfolds articulate, direct and down-to-earth in an effort to reach out to mass audiences. Stating the obvious with a clear, simple language to narrate anecdotes, offer examples, and formulate questions that require no answers, *Cassandra* Part II's translation faithfully conveys the message found in the original text; that of vindicating and subtly claiming a more visible and recognizable female position in society. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon's (1827-1891) activist tone seizes the reader's attention entirely. A tinge of scandal and unorthodox lifestyle dominates the introductory lines to her selected text, instilling in the reader the irremediable curiosity of 'wanting to know more.' A firm advocate of educational, political, economic and legal reforms for women, this writer preached by example, for she led a most unconventional lifestyle; she published articles in newspapers and used a pseudonym to voice her concerns, while protesting about the injustice she witnessed beyond Great Britain's frontiers.

The excerpts of choice for this collection, magnificently translated by Anne Effinger, expose women-discriminating legislature of the time. Addressing even the most unquestionable practices, such as the loss of a woman's maiden name upon marriage, Bodichon's style becomes unflinching and blatant in order to open the reader's eyes to society's 'normalization' of the status of inferiority of women. Advocating for higher education for women, the Blackwell sisters, Elizabeth (1821-1910) and Emily (1826-1911), never married, something indeed unconventional of the times. For the Blackwell sisters, life's accomplishments were set in the public domain where they could experience personal and professional fulfillment. Their writings praise and encourage women's pursuit of higher education, more specifically in medicine, to serve society as a whole. Speaking of social work and dedication, *La Causa* brings to the table one of the most intricate feminine figures of the time, Josephine Elizabeth Grey Butler (1828-1906).

Devoted to reforming legislation, Butler managed to have laws against women's rights repealed. Profoundly concerned about women's health, Butler fought against Victorian double standards by which sexual immorality was accepted in men and harshly criticized in women. Being Butler's education Victorian, she considered serving others an aspect of femininity<sup>4</sup>, however she firmly believed that only women themselves could attain women's emancipation. It does not come as a surprise that Butler's excerpts included in this collection transpire Butler's duality between liberalism and feminism. The choice feels appropriate and most fitting for Taillefer's purpose of

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<sup>4</sup> "[...] Butler consideraba como un rasgo femenino el servir a los demás" (Taillefer, 2019: 86).

presenting the reader with a diversity of feminist texts. Translated by Anne Effinger, such texts reveal the determination of women like Butler in exposing gender inequality. Of a slightly different tone than others, Butler's texts unfold objective and impartial, providing a degree of objectivity which may have played a crucial role in her political achievements.

The appearance of John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) feminist essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869) in this selection credits male contribution and participation in claiming equal rights for women. Such essay clearly defends equality in society for both genders. Translated by M<sup>o</sup> Teresa Silva Ros, Mill's essay appeals to the citizen's common sense in understanding that any type of subordination, be that as it may female or male, would be wrong. Of a less passionate or articulate tone than others hereby already presented, *The Subjection of Women* unveils as a form of male adherence and solidarity to the Cause.

If the collection gathers early feminist writings by women whose behavior constituted a role model for the time period, it also shows examples of a more activist approach on the Woman's Cause. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836-1917) joined suffragists to demand women's vote in the English Parliament. The first English woman doctor, Anderson would never leave the field of medicine, writing to defend the right for women to obtain medical degrees. The selected text constitutes a reply to Henry Maudley's stance on sex and education. Translated by Salomé Yélamos Guerra, "Sex in Mind and Education: A Reply" (1874) unfolds as a rebuttal, point by point, of Maudley's premises under which he defends that both genders cannot be equally educated on the subject of sex. Anderson's text makes use of syllogistic dialectics to objectively and firmly debase her opponent's arguments. The translation has been faithful to the original inasmuch as it retains its defiant, yet sensical, tone. Anne Isabella Thackeray (1837-1919), also known as Lady Ritchie, was a zealous defender of the status of single for women in society. Turning her eyes towards the literary tradition, Thackeray reveals as highly critical of the fact that single older women were left to their own devices, while pointing out to the difficulties of being unmarried and female. The excerpt of choice, translated by Carmen M<sup>a</sup> Pastor Ayala, deems such women as heroines while examining English literary texts of both male and female writers. In a literary commentary style, Thackeray makes her point, as she assertively defends the harsh life women would stand up to on a daily basis.

*La Causa* includes not only the works of middle- or upper-middle class women fighting for their rights, or of those whose lifestyle were less than socially desirable at the time; but also those of writers who, despite having been born within poverty, became the most fervent defenders of women's rights. Harriet Martineau was one of them. Firm in her conviction that education for women of all classes was the only possible way out of inequality, Martineau was a most active feminist. However, it is surprising, notes Taillefer, that her high-quality work has not been afforded scholars' recognition

and acclamation<sup>5</sup>. The text presented in Taillefer's selection, translated by Carmen M<sup>a</sup> Pastor Ayala, is entitled *Autobiography* (1877). Published posthumously, *Autobiography* succinctly relates Martineau's trials and tribulations through life.

As far as equal rights to sexuality are concerned, Taillefer grants recognition to Henry Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) for his invaluable work. Considered pioneering in sexual liberation, Ellis's work openly tackles taboo sexual topics, such as the right of women to sexual pleasure and, for that matter, to sexual autonomy. The text presented in the collection, translated by Victoria Rosado Castillo, unveils as a sexual scientific treatise that examines the sexuality of both man and woman.

Most outspoken, Olive Schreiner (1855-1920) never felt in the need to comply with the Victorian feminine behavioral canons. She would openly talk back at men and ridicule them, standing out of the rest for her rebellious attitude towards the feminine and the religious. She took down all dichotomies, divisions and differences typical of sexist societies, and defended equality of class, race, gender and sexuality. The text selected, translated by Encarnación Postigo Pinazo, deals with women's work situation, advocating for a modern concept of womanhood. Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929), the younger sister of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, is considered the mother of the English Suffragist Movement. She too joined the ranks of women against the Contagious Diseases legislation. Her militancy, however, was non-violent and always within the constitution, never transgressing the borders of legality. Operating within the legal arena, Fawcett participated in the first committee towards women's suffrage arguing that women would only be able to eradicate sexist laws by acquiring their right to vote. Her activism shows a different 'modus operandi' from that of other women featured in this book, an indication of Taillefer's degree of carefulness in the selection process of English feminist women and their work. The texts shown herein includes several chapters of *Women's Suffrage* (1912) and *The Women's Victory—and After: Personal Reminiscences* (1920), translated by Jorge Leiva Rojo.

In compiling the works of women writers, Taillefer has also taken into account the presence of liberal upper-middle class women who had been familiarized with the fight for women's equal rights since birth. Such is the case of Emmeline Goulden Pankhurst (1858-1928). Since an early age, Pankhurst got involved in campaigning for social reforms in favor of the marginalized (children, workers, the unemployed, prisoners, etc.). Apart from founding the Women's Social and Political Union, Pankhurst's biggest accomplishment resides in her developing methods of civil disobedience. She conducted hunger strikes, confronted police, disrupted the public order by vandalizing shops windows, sabotaging communication media and organizing arson fires. Her activism was such that in a period of four years she was incarcerated three times. She was an excellent journalist and even a

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<sup>5</sup> "Sorprende que una trayectoria profesional de tal envergadura haya sido pasada por alto por historiadores, educadores, sociólogos, economistas y filósofos, dada su contribución a estos campos tanto en Gran Bretaña como en Estados Unidos" (Taillefer, 2019: 150): It is surprising that a career path of such a magnitude has passed unnoticed by historians, educators, sociologists and philosophers, given the importance of her contribution in such fields not only in Great Britain, but also in the United States.

better public speaker, which helped her to attract the general public's attention towards the Cause. Her speech delivered in Hartford, CT, in 1913 is included in the collection. Translated by Carmen M<sup>a</sup> Pastor Ayala, the oratory discourse as well as the strength and enthusiasm of Pankhurst's words have been flawlessly transferred to Spanish. A more liberal feminist, Ray Mary Costelloe Strachey (1887-1940) represents an added bonus to this book. Indeed, her work, out of which *The Cause* (1928) is well known, has been pivotal for the success of the suffragist movement. The activist became the editor of the suffragist newspaper *The Woman's Leader*, previously known as *The Common Cause*. In addition, she coordinated an essay collection on the legal and social position of women at the time. She published feminist works such as her grandmother's (Hannah [Whitall] Pearsall Smith) biography<sup>6</sup>, among others. The selected work, *The Cause*, translated by Victoria Rosado Castillo, breathes activism throughout, as it claims that feminism defines itself by campaigning for the right of women to be involved in the public sphere as productive members of society. In Taillefer's own words: It is a detailed account of women's accomplishments on education, work, and legislation [...] from the perspective of a more liberal than radical feminist<sup>7</sup>.

Virginia Stephen Woolf (1882-1941) is without doubt the best-known writer featured in this collection<sup>8</sup>. More the intellectual type, Woolf was more theoretical than activist. Her literary works *Night and Day* (1919) and *Three Guineas* (1938) have been considered feminist in essence. Yet her contribution to feminism did not stop with the writing of such works, but involved others such as her novel *Orlando* (1928), a parody of the history of English literature and sexuality. Virginia Woolf's poetic novel is 'avant garde' as it seeks a feminine style through a 'stream of consciousness' interior monologue, allowing characters to continually move about between present and past in such a manner that the reader feels they have managed to get to know them intimately<sup>9</sup>. The fragment selected for this collection comes to us from Woolf's well known essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Chapter 6. Translated by M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Silva Ros, the text conveys the ironical undertone with which the author criticizes European male cultural institutions for having excluded women throughout the years. More specifically, Chapter 6 demands financial independence and accessibility to a room of one's own, a guarantee of complete independence.

One of the attractive features of Taillefer's collection is by far the vast display of many and different 'variants' of feminism; from the low-key perspective of Millicent Garrett Fawcett, or the literary approach of Virginia Stephen Woolf, to the most aggressive stance of Emmeline Goulden Pankhurst, to name a few. The feminism of Christabel Pankhurst (1880-1958), Emmeline's daughter, has been craftily selected to close the collection. For, as far as feminist individualism is concerned,

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<sup>6</sup> *A Quaker Grandmother* (1914).

<sup>7</sup> "Se trata de una historia detallada de los logros de las mujeres en materia de educación, trabajo y leyes [...] desde el punto de vista de una feminista más liberal que radical" (Taillefer 2019, 226).

<sup>8</sup> The reader may also be familiar with Florence Nightingale's accomplishments in the field of nursing.

<sup>9</sup> "La novela poética de Virginia Woolf es vanguardista, pues busca un estilo femenino a través del monólogo interior del 'flujo de conciencia', que permite a los personajes moverse continuamente entre el pasado y el presente, de forma que el lector tiene la impresión de conocerlos íntimamente (242).

Christabel Pankhurst posits no equal. Christabel was of the opinion that women needed to carry out individual actions to free themselves of male domination<sup>10</sup>. Following in her mother's steps, Christabel was incarcerated for refusing to comply with authorities. Having fled to Paris, Christabel became a far radical feminist militant, while leading the movement from exile. The selected text for this publication is a chapter taken from her work entitled *Unshackled* (1959). Translated by M<sup>a</sup> Dolores Narbona Carrión, the narrative offers an accurate account of how suffragism ultimately succeeded in obtaining for women the right to vote.

As a final reflection, Taillefer's collection of feminist women (and of two men) writings proves enlightening for a Spanish-speaking readership who may not have heard of the work that these courageous writers performed for the benefit and betterment of women all over the world. As suffragists endured social humiliation, discrimination and public scorn, their efforts were not futile, for the rest of the world soon followed suit and began campaigning for their own rights. Apart from the outstanding contextualization to the women's movement by means of a timeline preceding the chapters of the publication, the selection of not only the writers, but also their translated works, yields a clear understanding of the Woman's Cause. In addition, the biographical notes introducing the selected authors set the stage for a most suitable presentation of their works. Lastly, the bibliography listed at the end of Taillefer's project offers the reader an opportunity to broaden their knowledge and understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century English feminist writing.

*La causa de las mujeres de Gran Bretaña a través de sus textos* constitutes Lidia Taillefer's latest academic contribution to Gender Studies. Having been the editor of previous research projects in the field<sup>11</sup>, Taillefer's dedication to the Woman's Cause speaks for itself. Transgressing boundaries between cultures, her edition of Spanish-translated English feminist texts guarantees a more universal perspective on the origins, development and accomplishments of English feminism.

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<sup>10</sup> As Taillefer illustrates, women against the encroachment of the domestic life should not either marry, nor have children (263).

<sup>11</sup> *Nueva lectura de la mujer: crítica histórica* (SPICUM, 1995); *El sexismo en el lenguaje* (Diputación Provincial de Málaga, 1999); *Avanzando hacia la igualdad en las Humanidades* (Asociación Estudios Históricos sobre la Mujer, 2007); and *La igualdad: nuevas perspectivas de género en educación, lingüística y filosofía* (CEDMA, 2011).