

QUIET, QUIESCENT, ACQUIESCENT: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN PORTUGUESE LITERATURE

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One in these days cannot but muse upon
The coldness and the quietude of death
William Everson

In recent years, a growing number of academics have engaged with the dual questions of feminist criticism and women's writing in Portugal, examining in particular canonicity and female authorship. The scholarship arising out of their research and scholarship is as valuable as it is necessary. Nevertheless, there is still considerable scope for studies of Portuguese women writers, their socio-historical context and their subject matter. The landmark work was, of course, *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (1972); attention rightly focused on the Three Marias and their role in ushering in a new era of feminist consciousness. More recently, the *Novas Cartas Portuguesas 40 Anos Depois* research group, directed by Ana Luísa Amaral in the University of Oporto, has built on those foundations, engaging with issues of inclusion/exclusion, feminism, gender, sexuality, postcolonialism, trauma and war.

However, concentration on one specific work and its afterlife may have had the unfortunate side effect of overshadowing other woman writers, or even erasing them from the literary landscape. For Hilary Owen and Cláudia Pazos-Alonso, "The retrieval of lost, suppressed and forgotten women's writing in Portugal, particularly pre-1950s and earlier, remains an urgent work in progress for feminist scholars" (2009: 180). In fact, Chatarina Edfeldt (2006) has published an 'alternative' literary history, in which she analyses various twentieth-century histories of Portuguese literature and demonstrates convincingly how women authors have not just been relegated to the margins, but consigned to oblivion. Her monograph goes some way towards raising awareness of their contribution, thus constituting an act of recovery.

Among other discoveries, this recuperative work reveals that female writers, themselves frequently relegated to the margins, have chosen to write about the *descartabilidade* or disposability of woman, because she is unmarried, infertile, or simply too old, and academics have taken note of this trend:

In recent years, the representation of old age in literature has attracted growing scholarly interest. This is partly because established novelists on both sides of the Atlantic have made older women their central protagonists, after years in which mainstream fictional narratives rarely paid much attention to representations of the older female (King, 2009: 296).

Academic work on aging originated in the Social Sciences and Medicine, but it has now become the object of study of other academic disciplines, especially within the Humanities. Scholars have published surveys of authors and works that depict old(er) characters down the centuries and within different national traditions (Porter & Porter 1984; Berman 1987), analysed representations of age in poetry, fiction, drama and film (King 2013), or produced collections of essays on age-related topics and themes (Jansohn 2004). The Catalan research group DEDAL-LIT, based in the University of Lleida, has been at the forefront of European research in this field for more than a decade, publishing a series of volumes on representations of aging in literature, while there is equally valuable scholarship on ‘other’ literatures, for example Velčić (2010) for Croatian, as well as a dedicated number of the *Forum for Modern Language Studies* which includes an article on the treatment of age by the Portuguese novelist José Luís Peixoto (Silva & Sousa, 2011: 210-221).

Among the more obvious conclusions, it is generally accepted that older men are treated differently from aging women –compare the tragic grandeur of King Lear with Dickens’ witch-like grotesquery of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* or Faulkner’s deranged Emily Grierson in “A Rose for Emily” (Harmon, 1999: 103-114), while the adjective ‘old’ habitually enshrines more negative connotations than positive ones (Berman and Sobkowska-Ashcroft 1986)–. Furthermore, critics have adopted their own specific discourse, using terms such as humanistic gerontology, gerontological humanists, female senescence or the ghettoization of the elderly. Intellectual awareness of the subject is now a given, disposable women are certainly found in the Portuguese literary context, and bringing the two together constitutes the next stage in this analysis.

In writing about the *condição feminina*, certain Portuguese women authors have flagged up the kind of personal tragedy that is so circumscribed as to pass virtually unnoticed, yet of inestimable transcendence to the person whose misfortune or calamity this is. These small tragedies can be broached in full-length novels, but they are perhaps more suited to the intensity of short stories or *crónicas* written by authors who are profoundly aware of the contradictions inherent in Portuguese society, both during and after the Estado Novo. António de Oliveira Salazar exalted the family unit (Ferreira 1996) but he did not prioritise the elderly, with the exception of a brief mention in the 1884 Law of Social Welfare of 1935. The seventh poster in the propaganda series *Lições de Salazar*, “Deus, Pátria, Família”, shows a father, mother, son and daughter, but no grandmothers, spinster aunts or other dependent female relatives, visually suggesting that they did not have a role to play, although elsewhere he did include them as separate female category:

We consider that it is the man who should labor and maintain the family and we say that the work of the married woman outside her home, and, similarly that of the spinster who is a member of the family, should not be encouraged (Salazar, 1939: 161-62, cited in Lisboa, 2010: 175).



Although restricted in size, the authors and works singled out for comment in this article offer various perspectives on women's lives, with common themes recurring through different decades and political contexts. In chronological order, these are Irene Lisboa (1892-1958) who published *crônicas* and short stories (initially under the pseudonym João Falcão). The second is Manuela Porto (1908-1950), followed by Maria Judite de Carvalho (1921-1998),¹ then Maria Ondina Braga (1932-2003) –writing a decade after the Carnation Revolution– and finally, in the twenty-first century, award-winning authors Teolinda Gersão (b. 1940), and Hélia Correia (b. 1949). All of them have been the subject of specialised critical analysis within the last decade (Pazos-Alonso 2007; Fernandes 2008; Lisboa 2010; Bozkurt 2010; Owen and Pazos-Alonso 2011).

Rejecting what Sapega has characterised as “the state’s masculinist tradition of grand narratives” (2008: 89), their brief, often intimate writings encompass the themes of abandonment, loss and bereavement, old age and death, with two additional and contrasting themes, infertility and motherhood. The protagonists are not disreputable characters like Gil Vicente’s celestinesque bawd Brizida Vaz in *Auto da Barca do Inferno* or the bibulous Maria Parda; they are neither the unattainable ladies of Camões’s sonnets nor tragic romantic heroines of the stature of Ferreira’s Inês de Castro; they do not experience the profound despair of Mariana Alcoforado (translated from the French then transformed by the Three Marias), and they have never experienced the plenitude of Earth-Mothers like Miguel Torga’s Mariana. With the exception of Hélia Correia’s old woman, the female characters depicted in these short fictions belong to the urban working or middle classes and are therefore members of a group whose stories are not normally narrated. They may have a room of their own, but have been abandoned by husbands and children, or they never even attained the goals of marriage or motherhood. Their lives are characterised by absence, whether the absence of family members, human warmth, or quite simply, the food they need to survive in an uncaring urban milieu.

However, despite the unremitting wretchedness of many of the lives depicted in the stories, the tone is rarely belligerent and the characters themselves are resigned and submissive rather than contestatory. The narrators are keen observers of human behaviour, but the narratorial voice tends to

¹ Carvalho’s short story “George” in *A Seta Despedida* (1995) is not included in this discussion as it has already been the subject of a detailed analysis by Juliet Perkins.

be quietly, though ferociously ironic. Readers are allowed access to characters' thoughts and memories through the privileged perspective of an omniscient narrator, stretches of interior monologue, direct speech or combinations of all three narrative modes. "Tanta gente, Mariana" is a first person narrative with interior monologue and direct speech that alternates between past and present. In fact, the narratives have much in common with Maria Irene Ramalho de Sousa Santos's analysis of Irene Lisboa's verses, which "defiantly propound an explicitly 'minor' poetics of 'feminine' insignificances and trivialities, obliquely suggesting that it is in fact 'major'" (Ramalho de Sousa Santos, 1998: 21). Thus in "A Noiva Inconsolável", the apparently trivial comment that Joana's mother has gone out to purchase a blouse and black stockings is indeed 'major', since "os trapos pretos que nunca mais havia de despir" (p. 136) are the visible symbol of her withdrawal from society.

Teolinda Gersão's elderly widow fills her life with the trivia of household utensils, domestic chores and an obsessive frugality which now constitute her *raison-de-êre*. Materially less comfortable than Teolinda's protagonist, Maria Ondina Braga's character Cremilde has a similar attachment to her treasured possessions, each one the physical remnant of a memory, and each one unbearably paltry and pathetic. Now seventy-nine years old, Cremilde was widowed at twenty-eight and has not heard from her daughter for thirty years; she has therefore spent half a century on her own, unaccompanied by family members. The unnamed old woman in Teolinda Gersão's short story has also been forsaken, neglected by her children and grandchildren –"percebera que eles não tinham tempo de ler as cartas" (p. 78)–. Apparently insignificant details such as the fact that she has crossed out all the telephone numbers in her diary enhance the pathos, reminding the reader that she has outlived her own generation (pp. 78-79). Hélia Correia's old woman is not even identified by a name. "Tinha um nome mas perdera-a. Chegara certo dia ainda com ele aos correios da vila. No regresso, chamou-se apenas «velha»" (p. 4). She too has outlived her husband, and her sons have moved away. They telephone her but rarely visit, and have absolutely no interest in returning to their native soil. Left alone, she has regressed to an almost animalistic state. Despite a professional career, Irene Lisboa's retired headmistress in "Épocas" has effectively disappeared and will not be missed by her colleagues: "A directora aposentou-se porque tinha o seu tempo cumprido e não deixou nem levou saudades. Nunca mais se ouviu falar dela" (Lisboa, 1995: 161). It is difficult to say which are worse, in the eyes of these authors, the psychological or physical consequences of old age. On the one hand age brings loneliness, on the other there is increased fragility, illness, poverty and hunger –with the five escudos she has 'earned' from begging, Cremilde can buy barely enough to keep her from starvation, "dois pães e uma maçã" (Braga, p. 74)–. With no one to provide for them, either family or State, these characters suffer genuine hardship. Yes despite having 'come down in the world', Braga and Gersão's old women cling on to notions of decency, endeavouring to keep up appearances and fulfil social expectations, which is all the more absurd when they are virtually invisible. Moreover, their efforts to make the best of their circumstances are not necessarily lauded by the authors, but described with irony and possibly a measure of exasperation. "A velha era felicíssima. Pois não é verdade que tinha uma boa vida e nada lhe faltava?", "Tinha tudo, e não precisava de se privar de nada" (Gersão, pp. 73-74). For this character,

the journey of life has been reduced to a tram ride round Lisbon, though she is marginally better off than the private teacher in Irene Lisboa's "O casamento de Alicinha" who cannot even afford to ride to work in an *elétrico* (1997). For some characters, memory is central to their lives and self-definition, yet memories bring scant comfort, since their lives are a litany of loss and deprivation. In the case of Carvalho's eighty-four year old protagonist Cristina Rita, in "Uma varanda com flores", memories and even the capacity to remember have been eroded by the passage of time. "Uma coisa perdida [...] Perdida lá muito para trás, ao fim de um caminho todo branco onde não me lembro ter passado" (p. 104). In fact, characters are now ready to relinquish life. Death holds no fears for Cristina Rita, and can be no worse than the life she is living. "Que havia de reçar? A morte? Mas marés já haviam roído todas as cordas. Já nenhuma a prendia" (p. 102). Maria Ondina Braga's Cremilde knows that her time has come; her only fear is that she will die alone and there will be no one to remember her. It will be as if she has never existed. Gersão's story ends with a surreal dream sequence in which the old woman is apparently carried off by angels. Correia's old woman, on the other hand, is more subversive. Beyond caring about the social niceties, she has willingly abandoned conventional notions of appropriate behaviour and regressed to her untrammelled childhood: "... depois de uma vida completa, uma vida acabada, a bem dizer ... Cada vez mais recuperava as suas porcarias de infância. Estava livre, com os filhos bem longe e o homem morto" (p. 1).

Younger women fare no better in this society as it is portrayed by the authors. Manuela Porto's youthful Maria do Carmo –"tem apenas vinte e poucos anos (p. 230)"– is so crushed by a loveless marriage, abject poverty, the demands of two infants and the birth of a third child that she chooses death to life and motherhood. In the beginning, she tries to live up to the Estado Novo ideal of a virtuous wife, the *pobre mulher abnegada*: "Não levantou nunca voz, nem quando os filhos nasceram, nem quando a avó morreu, nem quando deu pelo seu irremediável viver" (p. 235). It is only when she is lying on the floor, in labour, on her own, at three o'clock in the morning, that she gives voice to her despair, "teve muito vagamente a noção de que a sua boca se abria e de que alguém gritou, gritou, gritou" (p. 235). The woman is overwhelmed by poverty and domestic servitude, "a fazer todo o serviço de uma criada que não recebe soldada, e a ter filhos, muitos filhos" (p. 243), and nothing will change. Given the era in which this story was published, it is hardly surprising that neither contraception nor abortion are mentioned as a possible solutions. Her unfaithful husband does not provide for her and is unlikely to do so, "manter-se-á a pessoa animada e frívola que procura viver a seu talante" (p. 243). Untrained and unskilled, she will not find a job that allows her to support her family, and her mother-in-law would not help by taking care of the children. Such is her desperation, she cannot bear to look at her baby, having even hoped for a still birth. The hospital to which she has been taken does not provide any comfort; she is referred to as "a 27" (p. 232) and rebuked for her unnatural attitude, interpreted as self centredness by another patient and an unsympathetic nurse. This is not the rosy vision of motherhood promoted by the Estado Novo, nor is the denouement of the story, where the young woman chooses not to call for help as she lies hemorrhaging in her hospital bed: "Basta esperar, basta esperar e o sossego, a felicidade, a paz, nunca conseguidos, virão ao seu encontro.

Basta esperar” (p. 244). Not only does this fly in the face of Estado Novo values and Church teaching –reason enough for the censorship cuts imposed on Porto’s work– her choice is also completely at odds with eight centuries of Portuguese cultural tradition, strongly influenced by the cult of Mary, where motherhood is all but sacred and celebrated in countless works of prose and poetry, including numerous dedicated anthologies. (For contrasting views on Marianism in literature, see Warner 1976 and Kristeva 1986 respectively). More recently, Maria Manuel Lisboa has referred to “the lip service that is paid in Portugal to mothers, from the Virgin Mary to the *Pátria* via the domesticated stay-at-home mother” and “official state Mariolatry” (2010: 185-186). Yet, despite the pre-eminence of the motherhood theme, “very few scholars have studied its presence in literature” (Kendrick, 2003: 43). Still, some authors have engaged with the question of whether motherhood is societal construct, biological imperative, or both of these things. Long before Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born* (1986) or the advent of radical antimaternalism, Manuela Porto used Maria do Carmo to challenge and deconstruct patriarchal myths of motherhood, followed three decades later by the Three Marias.

Carvalho’s “A Noiva Inconsolável” has a particularly vicious twist: Joana’s fiancé has supposedly drowned while bathing in the sea at Carcavelos, but the text implies that he has fled to Africa in order to avoid marrying her. The ‘inconsolable’ Joana prefers to wear perpetual mourning rather than suffer the ignominy of being classified as an unmarried and, worse still, unmarriageable woman. Responding to social pressure, she has no option but to go from *moça casadoura* to self-styled widow. “Subitamente era outra pessoa” (p. 136). Concealed in her widow’s weeds, Joana believes she has emerged with a new identity from this act of social immolation.

Mariana, created by the same author, has always felt alone. First bereft of her parents, then abandoned by her husband António who falls in love with another woman, she is rejected by her lover, Luís Gonzaga, who prefers the priesthood to a loving relationship with Mariana. “A minha vida é como um tronco a que foram secando todas as folhas e depois, um após outro, todos os ramos. Nem um ficou. E agora vai cair por falta de seiva” (p. 19). In reaction to this emotional vacuum, the protagonist deliberately becomes pregnant outside marriage, prepared to brave the condemnation, ostracisation and isolation that will inevitably ensue. Although we know that within the chronology of the story she is not old, only in her mid thirties, following the loss of her child Marian has lapsed into a premature middle age, believing her life to be over, even before the terminal diagnosis which merely confirms what she has already internalised. The reader is left wondering whether Mariana’s profound sorrow has exacerbated her illness; she makes no effort to cling on to life. However, as her life draws to a close, she is impelled to express her bitterness and resentment, as well as her feeling of impotence at having allowed this situation to unfold:

Felizes todos eles, imensamente felizes depois de me terem varrido de si como a um bicho sem importância que os aborrecia. Fui eu e o meu silêncio quem lhes deu toda essa ventura. Uma palavra teria bastado, um grito, uma lágrima, mas eu não pude tirar de mim nenhuma dessas coisas. Agora é tarde, porque vou morrer (p. 23).

Like her younger ‘sister’ Maria do Carmo, Mariana has not only been silenced, but is equally acquiescent: “Sabes, António, estou de acordo com tudo o que queiras” (p. 32). Death seems to be the only solution for some of these women characters, but suicide was completely taboo in the eyes of both Church and government, never to be mentioned in the press or in literary texts under the strict censorship of the Estado Novo. That is not to say it does not take place in works of fiction, just as in real life.

Correia’s perverse old woman does not display deeply maternal sentiments regarding her three sons, who are described more like animal young than human offspring. “Eles arranhavam-se e mordiam-se uns aos outros, os seus cabelos, que eram leves, eriçavam-se. Nos amuos, batiam com testa contra as portas, pequenos bodes à procura da saída” (p. 2). She has done her duty, “Tinha de endireitá-los como a plantas que o vento contorcesse, forçá-los a tirar as mãos do chão e os dedos do nariz, dos genitais” (p. 2), but it does not seem to have given her any pleasure or satisfaction. “O longo tempo que aquela criação lhe demorou gastou-lhe os nervos mais que o razoável” (p. 2). This does not live up to the Estado Novo ideal of family life. The angel *in* the hearth depicted in Salazar’s *Lição n.º 7* has become a tamer of beasts. And yet, when her sons left home, “ela perdera aquele motor que a mantivera em movimento” (p. 3), suggesting that women’s lives have no meaning other than motherhood and mothering. Thus, where a woman fails to carry out this role, like Carvalho’s Mariana, she is considered, or considers herself, to be a failure. See, for example, Helena Marques’s caustic description in *O Último Cais* (1992: 61) of the ‘meninas velhas’, or ‘old maids’, the “grupo definitivamente solitário, patético e marginal das mulheres sem marido”:

E se o seu coração e o seu corpo sofrem, por vezes cruelmente, a privação de um marido, de filhos, de uma família bem próxima e bem sua, a resignação acaba por prevalecer e um sorriso corajoso, que passa de suave a azedo consoante a disposição ou a companhia, consegue esconder a penosa solidão da sua existência vazia (p. 63).

Although the women in the stories have tried to follow the rules and do what is expected of them, obedience and submissiveness bring no rewards, and certainly no joy. Rather, they are expected to suffer in silence, especially the elderly. While they may complain to themselves –“A velha estava só e resmungava, como todos os velhos verdadeiros” (Correia, p. 4)– they do not protest vociferously, and, were they to do so, it is unlikely that anyone would listen. At the same time, those who break society’s rules do not go ‘unpunished’, within the narratives: Maria do Carmo only married because she was pregnant, and Mariana loses her illegitimate child. When women choose an unsanctioned course of action, the outcome will not be positive; like their more ‘virtuous’ sisters, they are trapped within their gender.

When her professional life comes to an end, Irene Lisboa’s headmistress effectively ceases to exist; even before then, her life had been “sem histórias” (p. 161). Given the time and place of their textuality, Maria do Carmo’s and Mariana’s life stories can only end in death. Carvalho’s Joana chooses a different kind of demise, shutting down her life at the age of thirty. By focusing on the supposedly ‘insignificant’. Cristina Rita, Cremilde and Gersão’s nameless old woman all reveal the

small, undramatic tragedies of women who have been left behind. Correia, writing a kind of magical realism, achieves much the same goal, although her protagonist is protected from robbery with violence by a savage Mother Nature.

These authors condense complex social issues into very brief narratives and quietly denounce the asphyxiating female identities that society and the family construct and impose. Characters may (or may not) have a name, they are defined by their relationships to the living and the dead, their role within the family or society, and the generation to which they belong. Confined within their homes – Cristina Rita’s third-floor apartment in a delapidated building– and their gender roles, these women are no longer considered important or necessary, if they ever truly were. Vlatka Velčić identifies “a number of issues common in other popular as well as literary representations of female senescence, namely the portrayal of old women as “Other” to the social norm because old age brings deterioration to the body and the spirit, resulting in decreased functionality, social isolation, and dehumanization” (Velčić, 2012: 31).

Attitudes regarding marriage and motherhood may have undergone some changes in the years since the 25th of April (abortion laws in Portugal were liberalized on April 10, 2007), but conditions of life do not seem to have improved discernibly for the older woman, particularly following the economic crisis that began in 2010. Effectively, since the mid-twentieth century, authors have been pointing to the failure of the family unit and the wider society to value women and provide them with emotional support as well as financial security.

This study could undoubtedly be extended to other literary texts, for example Natércia Freire’s “Noiva sem noivo” or Natália Nunes’s “As Velhas Senhoras”, or to the *crónica*, a genre that Portuguese women writers have used to effect change (Bozkurt 2010). Still, even the limited corpus discussed above serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of certain themes and preoccupations in Portuguese women’s writing. Paradoxically, these texts embody a two-fold exclusion in which authors who do not belong to the official canon of Portuguese literature (Camões, Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa, *et al*) have chosen to write about a segment of the population that dwells on the margins. The authors deliberately privilege what Bozkurt identifies as “the micro-narrative of the private and the personal, the small and seemingly insignificant events that make up women’s lives” (Bozkurt, 2010: 132). Without stridency or hyperbole, these women deliberately ‘write back’ against peripheralisation, exclusion or abjection, foregrounding individuals –women– so powerless to challenge the status quo that they almost actively collude in the process of their own effacement.

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