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Romancing Female Identity: The Influence of *Jane Eyre* on Portuguese Women's Novels

In *Brontë Transformations* (1996), Patsy Stoneman gives an account of the ways in which texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* acquire what she calls 'mythological status'. We can add to this that these texts transcend the barrier of the national culture in which they were produced and reproduced, crossing the frontiers of other cultures and other languages to which they were translated and by which they were, sometimes, re-appropriated.

That Charlotte Brontë's novels were known in Portugal is easily perceived by the existing translations. In fact, all her novels have been translated to Portuguese more than once with several different titles, sometimes by renowned writers, from *Shirley* to *The Professor*, from *Villette* to *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre*, in particular, has been translated in different epochs by different people and continues to be published in Portugal to this day. But, given the fact that educated women in the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were generally fluent in at least one foreign language, having been educated by English, French or German governesses,[1] we do not need to rely solely on these translations to assume the possibility of the cultural dissemination of this novel. Indeed, more often than not, texts were read in the original, or in another foreign language, like French. This study, therefore, will not take into account specifically the translations of *Jane Eyre* into Portuguese, but will be based on the influence we may detect in texts that, in some way, rewrite it.

This essay, then, explores the influence that both Charlotte Brontë's work in general and *Jane Eyre* in particular may have had in the consolidation of female identity through romance. In Portuguese, 'romance' is also equivalent to 'novel', but here I will use it in the English sense,

1 In relation to this cf. Cecília Barreira (1991, pp.39–55).

which points, among other things, to the sentimental novel, a genre notably aimed at a feminine audience. The idea for this paper results from my acquaintance with two different texts which, albeit in completely different ways, make evident that Charlotte Brontë and her novels were read by Portuguese women and may have influenced Portuguese women novelists. The texts I propose to analyse here are different in many aspects. Not only do they belong to different epochs – one is a text from the end of the nineteenth century, and the other is a text from the 1940s – but they also belong to different genres: one is an essay on Charlotte Brontë, and the other is a novel.

First, I will focus my attention on a book of essays by Cláudia de Campos, a (now quite obscure) nineteenth-century woman writer, who was born in a small village in the south of Portugal (Sines). Cláudia de Campos, as she herself states in the essay we will analyse here, was thoroughly influenced by English culture and literature, which was possible on account of her acquaintance with a British family who lived in Sines. The family's exceptional library was made available to her from an early age. Later, she was sent to study at an English school in Lisbon, which completed her English education. Among her most cherished literary influences she mentions the novels of Charlotte Brontë. I will try to analyse this influence, assuming Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter's notion of a female subculture of women's writing.

Secondly, I will focus my analysis on the novel *Sózinha* [*Alone*] by the writer and feminist Sara Beirão, who was linked to the *Conselho Nacional das Mulheres Portuguesas* [*National Council of Portuguese Women*], where she had leading functions from the 1930s almost to the end of the association, in 1947; she was also, for two decades, the editor of the Council's journal. The author of several novels and short-stories, in *Sózinha*, first published in 1940, we can detect a pattern familiar from *Jane Eyre*, the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*. We may say, borrowing from Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984), that, like *Jane Eyre*, *Sózinha* is

> a story of enclosure and escape, a distinctively female *Bildungsroman* in which the problems encountered by the protagonist as she struggles from the imprisonment of her childhood toward an almost unthinkable goal of mature freedom are symptomatic of difficulties Everywoman in a patriarchal society must meet and overcome [...] (p.339).

Cláudia de Campos and The Woman's Novel

In 1895, Cláudia de Campos published a book entitled *Mulheres (Ensaios de Psychologia Feminina)* [*Women (Essays on Feminine Psychology)*], where she devoted her attention to the analysis of the lives and work of women writers. In a remarkable work of gynocriticism *avant-la-lettre*,[2] she discusses the work of the Countess of La Fayette and Mme de Staël, Josephine Neuville, the Romanian writer Carmen Sylva and the English aristocrat Esther Stanhope. The major part of the book is dedicated to Charlotte Brontë, who seems to be, for Campos, a source of unparalleled influence, as is made evident by the opening remarks of the long essay dedicated to the English writer:

> Charlotte Brontë! I cannot read or write this name without summoning to my spirit a torrent of sweet memories.
>
> For the novels of this great English writer constituted my first readings in this genre, allowing for the opening up of unknown horizons, giving shelter to my restless fancy, answering my naïve curiosity and leaving deep impressions, which till this day vibrate in me. (Campos 1895, p.1)[3]

The impression which the English novelist seems to have left in the spirit of the Portuguese writer can be explained by the imprint which childhood readings tend to leave in our spirits; but a reading of Cláudia de Campos's essay will reveal that this lasting impression is linked to the author's recognition of an idea of femaleness in Charlotte Brontë's novels; in other words, Campos's love for the novels of Charlotte Brontë is the result of a sense of recognition of a female identity. For a Portuguese adolescent with a literary bent, Charlotte Brontë constitutes a role-model insofar as she opens up 'unknown horizons' beyond the domestic closure of femaleness, but also insofar as she displays a sense

2 I am referring to the concept of 'gynocriticism' as defined by Elaine Showalter in 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' (1989); as is known, with this concept, Showalter draws our attention to the need to 'construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories.' (p.131)

3 All the excerpts from Cláudia de Campos's books, as well as Sara Beirão's, are my own translation.

of femininity with which an adolescent can identify. As the author herself puts it:

> The profound and instinctive interest that such a woman inspires does not lie in our supposing that she may feel completely original things and that she may be totally different from her earthly sisters. A soul completely diverse from the others, though she might awaken admiration, would not awaken this chain of sympathy, which is the result of mysterious and obscure affinity. (Campos 1895, pp.160–1)

In *A Literature of Their Own* (1984), Elaine Showalter describes 'the female literary tradition in the English novel', by asserting that while 'women have generally been regarded as "sociological chameleons", taking on the class, lifestyle, and culture of their male relatives', it can also, however, be claimed that they have formed 'a subculture within the framework of a larger society', and have been brought together 'by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual.' (Showalter 1984, p.11). Elaine Showalter comes close to the argument proposed by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women*, where it is said that 'to be a woman writer long meant, may still mean, belonging to a literary movement apart from but hardly subordinate to the mainstream: an undercurrent, rapid and powerful.' (Moers 1985, p.42). Moers, like Showalter, thus argues that women found themselves in a literary subculture that may better be explained by their confinement in domesticity, their inability to go out into the public sphere. Therefore, as Ellen Moers puts it, women were restricted to what they could read, deriving a sense of confidence from the writings of other women:

> The personal give-and-take of the literary life was closed to them. Without it, they studied with a special closeness the works written by their own sex, and developed a sense of easy, almost rude familiarity with the women who wrote them. (Moers 1985, p.43)

Thus it is with the Portuguese Cláudia de Campos, who, as a woman of letters in nineteenth-century Portugal, seems to be at odds to find a tradition of Portuguese women writers; nevertheless, she finds in women like the ones previously mentioned the tradition where she can inscribe herself, giving voice to Virginia Woolf's later assertion of the universality of the female condition when, in *Three Guineas*, she states: 'As

a woman I have no country. As a woman I do not want a country. As a woman the whole world is my country.'(Woolf 1979, p.125)[4]

From Charlotte Brontë she derives the model of a woman who writes about female experience, someone who embodies woman's nature and possesses 'the secret of interpreting, from hers, [women's] way of feeling' (Campos 1895, p.161). In this sense, not only does Cláudia de Campos write about the characters in the novels, from whom she derives a sense of affinity, but she also seeks information about the writer herself, since as a woman writer she feels the importance of understanding the nature of the author's life; she needs role-models that may provide guidance for her own career. Although she does not display a strong consciousness of the difficulty it implies for a woman to be a writer, she nevertheless alludes to it, in the following terms:

> To know how a writer, and especially a woman writer – since for a woman, even nowadays, it is still harder to find her own way in the arts – have managed to distinguish themselves from the common people by attaining celebrity, is something that has always inspired in me the greatest and deepest interest. (Campos 1895, p.187)

But why Charlotte Brontë? Indeed, Charlotte Brontë can hardly be a choice dictated, say, by ignorance of other woman writers. This is apparent when one reads this book on famous women, especially her study on Charlotte Brontë. Cláudia de Campos is impressively well read, not only in English, which she claims to be her own culture by education, but in other languages as well. In this book she writes about other women, as we have seen, and in her study of Charlotte Brontë she mentions a plurality of English authors, from Milton to Shakespeare, from Pope to Byron, from Moore to Tennyson. However, the other English woman writer she discusses to some extent is George Eliot, whose writings and personality are evoked to stand in opposition to those of Charlotte Brontë. Thus, while she sees both in Brontë's heroines and in Brontë herself – for she uses the biography of Charlotte Brontë to track down the features and the actions the writer attributed to her

4 However dislocated the concept of the universality of womanhood may be by now, we can understand how important it was for the first women who, in one way or another, fought for women's rights, because they sensed that all women were in the same situation.

characters – the perfect incarnation of woman's mind and feelings, she finds George Eliot a most 'anti-feminine' writer, someone who betrays the feminine essence. According to Cláudia de Campos,

> This was perhaps the greatest weakness of the artist of undefined sex, who, like Madame de Staël, so longed to be a man, that she wrote in her novel Daniel Deronda this excerpt, too obviously transparent: 'You can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl.' (Campos 1895, p.150)[5]

According to Campos, George Eliot possesses one of the most frightening marks of anti-femininity from which she, as a woman writer, might want to distance herself: she was ugly. Ugliness is, for Cláudia de Campos, a characteristic that many women have to endure, but none is willing to accept. Thus, by distancing herself from George Eliot, whom she describes in the most ungraceful manner – George Eliot is described as a 'thin and sickly' woman, who 'possessed an enormous head, a face of an old woman, completely lacking in grace and freshness, and such a length from the eyes to the mouth that she resembled a horse' (Campos 1895, p.147) – she may well be exorcising the phantom of the intellectual, serious, but stereotypically unfeminine writer with which she does not wish to be associated. According to Showalter, 'the popular stereotypes of the old-maid authoress' normally haunted the aspiring women novelists (Showalter 1984, p.101),[6] and this may well be the case with Cláudia de Campos, whose photograph, which was shown on the inside cover of her novels, shows a stereotypical nineteenth-century feminine attitude and pose.

Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre* provide, for Campos, a more believable woman's consciousness, for, although they were not beautiful, they felt that as a handicap and not as an advantage, as George Eliot had done. Elaine Showalter tells us that

5 The quote from Daniel Deronda is from the novel itself; in Campos's translated quoted, we have the word 'woman', instead of 'girl'.

6 Showalter further tells us an anecdote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life that exemplifies the way the stereotype was used: 'Elizabeth Barrett, for example, had been warned by Mary Russell Mitford that all 'literary ladies were ugly. 'I have never met one in my life,' she wrote, 'that might not have served for a scarecrow to keep the birds from the cherries.'' (Showalter 1984, p.101)

> [i]n rejecting Austen and deciding instead to write about 'what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life,' Charlotte Brontë had chosen a volcanic literature of the body as well as of the heart, a sexual and often supernatural world. (Showalter 1984, pp.103–4)

This is, apparently, a stance that, as a woman, Cláudia de Campos is more willing to accept, as if to reiterate the gender paradigm which ascribes love and emotion to women and rationality to men; a paradigm Campos is not willing to disrupt, as her novels very pointedly demonstrate. In *Elle* [*She*] (1899), for example, we have the story of a very emotional woman, someone who has to learn to develop a balance between 'sense and sensibility', to borrow from Jane Austen. Nevertheless, the author displays a nineteenth-century awareness of women's limited social role, as this excerpt confirms:

> Sophia represented the Christian wife, and likewise represented the little cultivated woman, domesticated by centuries of serfdom; someone who felt brooding in herself obscure and atavistic beliefs, which made her unable to govern herself and rendered her unconsciously humble in face of men's strength, the overwhelming power of her husband, who, for her, was the Master. (Campos 1997, p.3)

Sara Beirão and The New Woman's Novel

In Sara Beirão's novel *Sózinha* [Alone] (1940), the presence of *Jane Eyre* is a case of plot similarity rather than of obvious and stated influence. There are indeed some narrative features that may echo the plot of *Jane Eyre*, both in tone – as Beirão's novel is conspicuously melodramatic – and in theme.

Sózinha is the story of a little girl, Júlia, whose loving parents die when she is very young. Alone in the world, she is given to the care of her godfather, a married doctor with children, Júlia's father's former colleague and friend, whose wife mistreats the orphan and does not allow her to live with them, on the grounds that she would be a financial burden for the family. Faced with his wife's attitude, Júlia's godfather sends her to a respectable and expensive school for upper-class girls, but asks the headmistress to lie about Júlia's situation, saying that she is

taking her for free. The resulting humiliation Júlia has to endure is enormous. Thus, she is determined to get out of the school as soon as she can, but with a proper education. She studies so hard that she becomes the best student in the school. In the end she manages to finish medical school, becomes a doctor and a professor at the university and marries a colleague, the brother of a wealthy friend she had met at the institution where she had studied. Luís Lencastre, the fiancé, had repeatedly been rejected by Júlia, not only because she was determined to finish her education and pursue a career, but also because he belonged to the upper classes, which meant a marriage based on inequality. In the end, love triumphs, though.

Although the conclusion depicts the same fairy tale tone of Charlotte Brontë's story, with the poor princess marrying the rich prince, the plot similarities with *Jane Eyre* are more evident at the level of the construction of the heroine than at the level of the love story. Luís Lencastre, Júlia's fiancé, is no Romantic old Rochester, coming from the depths of a life misspent in the search for carnal love, but a loving and young man, cut out as a more realistic character, truly the equal of Júlia in moral terms; here, there are no gothic figures of female repressed anger and no third stories of hidden secrets. It is, then, in the orphan's determination to win her autonomy that we may find the link with *Jane Eyre*, the archetypal and proto-feminist *Bildungsroman* of the nineteenth century, which here comes back in the guise of a plot that tries to send out a feminist message to its audience.

Published in 1940, at a time when women's rights were being reduced by António Salazar's dictatorial regime, the novel in question is a clear statement in favour of the autonomy of women that goes against the grain of the ideology of the times. It must be said that, being the editor of *Alma Feminina* [*Feminine Soul*], the bulletin of a feminist association, the *National Council of Portuguese Women*, Sara Beirão must have felt this repression directly, since the magazine, like every other publication, had to be submitted to approval by the censor prior to publication.[7] In *Sózinha*, we have a heroine that not only is a brilliant

7 This is something that is noticeable when we start reading the issues of this bulletin, for, at a certain point, they become less interesting. Instead of articles on women's suffrage and emancipation, the articles start focusing on the importance of the social role of women as mothers. When Maria Lamas, the leading Portuguese

student and becomes an eminent doctor, but also achieves her aims by herself, relying solely on her determination and intelligence.[8] Thus, although this novel was published almost a century after *Jane Eyre*, the atmosphere of repression in relation to women and the expansion of their rights is in many senses similar. As Gilbert and Gubar note in relation to *Jane Eyre*, 'the occasional woman who has a weakness for black-browed Byronic heroes can be accommodated in novels and even in some drawing rooms; the woman who yearns to escape entirely from drawing rooms and patriarchal mansions obviously cannot' (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, p.338). As I see it, like Jane, Júlia is such a woman; like Charlotte Brontë's heroine, she reaches sexual fulfilment after the acquisition of autonomy.

Obviously, even allowing for a dictatorship's repression, we cannot overlook the fact that a hundred years separate these two novels and that in terms of women's social status, some things had already changed. Women had already tentatively entered the job market at a professional level, and in many countries they had already achieved important political rights. However, as Patsy Stoneman puts it in her assessment of Brontë transformations in the inter-war period,

> [d]espite apparent improvements in the position of women [...], it is clear that the relationship of power between men and women had changed little, so that a novel like *Jane Eyre* which dealt with gender relations in 1847 was still highly relevant in this period. (Stoneman 1996, pp.87–8).

The same could be said in relation to this distant relation of Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Sózinha*. In Portugal, women who had university or secondary education had been granted suffrage in 1931, but, as noted above, the regime clearly opposed the expansion of women's rights. In a letter to the dictator António Salazar, published in *Alma Feminina*, Sara Beirão and the other feminists congratulate themselves for women's suffrage, but protest the persistent discrimination of a suffrage law that does not give the vote to women under the same circumstances as men

feminist of the second wave, became the President of the association, the tone of the bulletin changed. However, the association was soon closed down by the government.

8 In other novels by the same author there are always determined and intelligent women. Sometimes the issue of feminism is raised directly, in propagandistic form.

and, furthermore, they also raise the issue of the inequality of wages between the sexes.

The times were indeed different, though, and we can see these differences in the resolution of the novel by Sara Beirão. *Jane Eyre*'s marriage of equals is made possible by a fantastic turn of the plot, whereby Jane inherits a fortune from an uncle who had died in Madeira, but also by a 'weakening of the male figure', as Sally Mitchell has put it (quoted in Stoneman 1996, p.23), for Rochester becomes maimed. In *Sózinha,* however, equality is achieved by the heroine's own effort in ascending to the same profession as her suitor.

We can also detect a difference related to professional women's social status. In *Sózinha*, we do not find Jane's feeling of degradation at the prospect of being a teacher when, at the beginning of chapter 31, she asks:

> Was I very gleeful, settled, content, during the hours I passed in yonder bare, humble school-room this morning and afternoon? Not to deceive myself, I must reply – No: I felt desolate to a degree. I felt – yes, idiot that I am – I felt degraded. I doubted I had taken a step which sank instead of raising me in the scale of social existence. (*Jane Eyre*, chapter 31)

In *Sózinha*, teaching is not ranked low on the social scale; on the contrary, Sara Beirão creates very interesting and convincing figures of teachers, both male and female, and even pays homage to a real teacher, Luísa Ey, a German woman of letters who had lived in Portugal at the beginning of the century and who had translated a substantial number of Portuguese novels and poetry into German; she died in 1936.[9] In the novel there is a German teacher who is always referred to as 'the great Luísa Ey', who helps the orphan by giving her piano and painting lessons for free. She serves as a positive role-model who shows to Júlia that women can achieve greatness in their profession. She is always described as a somewhat distant and highly intelligent person, someone who is above the rest of the community of women where she lives:

9 Sara Beirão published the news of her death in *Alma Feminina*, describing her as an eminent woman of letters and the translator into German of the work of some of the best nineteenth-century Portuguese novelists and poets, including Almeida Garrett, Eça de Queiroz, Guerra Junqueiro, Júlio Dantas, Trindade Coelho and António Correia de Oliveira (Beirão 1936, p.5).

> Luísa Ey, the intelligent and strict German teacher, who went by that feminine audience spreading her vast knowledge, without ever detaining herself or paying attention to them, without worrying about anything else but her professional mission, indifferent, closed in her egoism, took an interest in the orphan, and one Sunday showed up in the school to ask her for a walk. (Beirão 1976, p.115)

Other positive role-models include Berta Lencastre, the generous and wealthy friend at the school and Sílvia Rebelo, a boarding guest at the school, who is studying to be a doctor. In contrast to these cultivated and independent women, there is a horde of futile girls, who are not worried about their means of livelihood and are always pestering Júlia, humiliating her in all situations.

Conclusion

Although it would be rash to see in *Sózinha* a direct rewriting of *Jane Eyre*, it is undoubtedly a novel that registers plot similarities, thus confirming Patsy Stoneman's assertion that

> [f]amous texts like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which are repeatedly plundered [...] acquire a different status, rather like that of fairytale, which we might describe as mythological. This status depends partly on some inherent significance in the original text, and partly on the process of reiteration of the novel. (Stoneman 1996, p.4)

On the other hand, both *Sózinha* and Cláudia de Campos's essay on Charlotte Brontë are indicative of the widespread influence of Charlotte Brontë on thousands of women, readers and writers, who looked up to her heroines, and most especially to Jane Eyre, as a source of romance, surely, but also as a powerful icon of women's independence, thus attesting to the potentialities of romance in the transformation of female identity.

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