

Brief Encounters with an Exotic but Decadent *Other*: The Image and Perception of Portugal (and the Portuguese) in Early Victorian Women's Poetry

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In this paper we intend to explore some poetic representations of Portugal and the Portuguese in early nineteenth-century English women's poetry and to analyse the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other' in terms of the attraction/repulsion in relation to what is foreign. We will conclude that in this 'encounter' early Victorian women poets re-imagine and reconfigure Portugal by using different literary strategies. Felicia Hemans rewrites the Portuguese tragedy of Inês de Castro as a *tableau* of post-mortem coronation by enhancing the figure's mythical and aesthetic dimensions. Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna places her poetic romance in the mediatic context of the Peninsular Wars in order to suggest Portugal as the feminine inferior Other. The Brontë sisters use geographical and topographic elements derived from Portugal to conceive the imaginary characters and plots present in their fictional poems and juvenilia. And Elizabeth Barrett Browning appropriates and reworks Portuguese literary traditions and conventions in order to voice her poetics of melancholy.

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1. Introduction: British Women Re-imagining and Reconfiguring Portugal

The relationship between the feminine 'I' and the foreign 'Other', that this paper suggests, has not only become part of a major philosophical issue throughout history, but is as well a central theme in the discussion of both post modernity and contemporary women's poetry. But poetic representations of the *other* country, and the *other* people, that are significant or meaningful tend to emerge under specific personal and historical

circumstances. Thus, a given poetic representation may differ according to the nationality and the past experience of the respective woman poet as there is always a degree of subjectivity or 'self-image' involved in the representation of another culture or 'hetero-image'. I intend, here, to interrogate the 'image' of the 'other' present in Victorian women's poetry, reflecting both on the idea of *strangeness* and the *stranger*, and formulating the issue of representation as an historical construct. I will try to confront identity and alterity/difference in some of their poems, by reading in between 'images', but also addressing the (poetic) text as a 'dialogue' or 'encounter', as a space of relationships.

Representations of Portugal (the country, its people and culture) are not very abundant in British women's literature, but the early nineteenth century provided some of these poets with the ideal historical and artistic occasion to focus their attention on a small peripheral Iberian country. Felicia Browne Hemans, a contemporary of Byron and Shelley, became interested in exploring the romantic and historical potential of Portuguese mythical women such as Inez de Castro in her poetry. Perhaps more importantly, British women poets, as different as Hemans and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, used the dramatic context of the 'theatre of war' during the Napoleonic invasions of the Peninsula (1807-15) to situate their respective poems focusing specifically on Portugal (its people, landscape, religion, etc.). A decade or two later on, in the earliest tales and poems belonging to their collaborative juvenilia (1829-39), Charlotte and Emily Brontë charismatically used male and female fictional characters or *alter egos* with Portuguese (sur)names, features, contexts and locations. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had a great interest in Portuguese poets such as Luís de Camões and Soror Maria do Céu, subtly incorporated Renaissance and Baroque Portuguese poetic conventions in her most famous love poetry (1840-50), which also possesses audible echoes of Alcoforado's *Portuguese Letters*. Together, these writers have substantially contributed to the poetic perception of otherness, by re-imagining

and re-configuring Portugal as a romantic, exotic and passionate country, with a very rich history but also with a markedly decadent and bigoted outlook.

2. Felicia Hemans's *Inês de Castro*: Rewriting the Portuguese tragedy as *tableau*

The late Romantic woman poet Felicia Dorothea Browne Hemans (1793-1835) has been one of the first English female authors to appropriate this early European myth of love beyond death in her poem "The Coronation of Inez De Castro", inserted in her volume *Songs of the Affections* (1830). Hemans had her own personal and artistic motives for appropriating this Portuguese story. She sets many of her poems in situations of conflict between the private and the public realms,¹ thus challenging Romantic historiography and art. But to understand her personal involvement in the Portuguese historical context, it is necessary to analyse the connection that this poet usually establishes between the suffering caused by armed conflict and national identity, between *domestic loss* and *national sacrifice*.²

The poem, composed of twelve melodious octaves in alternating rhyme, is based on the well-known legend that King Pedro ordered Inez's body exhumed from her grave, had her seated on the throne, crowned and, in a macabre final gesture, forced the entire court to swear allegiance to their new queen by kissing the corpse's hand. Inez would only then be reburied, this time in the Monastery of Alcobaça, in an extraordinary religious and stately ceremony (in April 1361), which is also described by Hemans (in the subtitle) as a paradigmatic illustration of Germaine de Staël's

¹ Namely between, Kelly states, "individual desire as a personal absolute and the intrigues and power relations of a monarchic court" (2001: 201-2).

² Pedro's love for Inês brought the exiled Castilian nobility very close to power, with Inez's brothers becoming the prince's friends and trusted advisors. Thus, the influence of Inez and her two brothers on the Prince had provoked hostility at the Portuguese court. Some of King Afonso IV's advisors believed that a member of the Castro family could plot to kill Fernando, Constanza's and Pedro's heir, to promote Inez's sons to the throne.

epigrammatic statement about the union of Love and Death.³ Although the symbolic proclamation of Inez as ‘queen’ does not have to imply a literal coronation, Hemans chose to ‘literalise’ that particular image—more than just ‘stage’ it, to aestheticise it, to fill it with elaborate and suggestive detail, so as to be immortalised and memorialised as Staël had suggested, that is, as a ‘living’ *tableau*.

Furthermore, Hemans’s poem seems to constitute a direct answer to the initial question posed by Elizabeth Bronfen in her book on *Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*: “How can a verbal or visual artistic representation be both aesthetically pleasing and morbid, as the conjunction of beautiful woman and death seems to imply?” (1992: x). In fact, against the natural order of things, the bright coronation rites of this queen must, most unusually, give way to the dark burial rituals and mournful lamentation instead of the expected joyful royal celebration. In this context, the uncanniness of the figure of a dead Inez sitting silently on the throne with a “pale still face”, whose “jewell’d robes fell strangely still [...] So stone-like was its rest” (vv. 29-32), becomes a fundamental paradox and an ominous sign.⁴

In the end, although Love is triumphantly proclaimed as “mightier” than Death by the poet, there also remains a pervasive and inescapable sense of “wasted worth” on her part (v. 82). This happens, we gather, because through this stately ceremony, and in spite of it, Inez could not be brought to life to re-write her ‘history’ and, thus, that of Portugal:

And the ring of state, and the starry crown,
And all the rich array,
Are borne to the house of silence down,
With her, that queen of clay.

³ The story was well-known in Europe mainly through the French tragedy, beginning with Houdard de la Motte’s tragedy of 1723, which created a sensation in Paris. De Staël must have been not only closely aware of its popularity but also herself sensitive to it.

⁴ In chapter XLIV of his *Crónica* (199-202), Lopes comments on the great love of Pedro for Inez, which becomes materialised in an impressive tribute to her memory: a stately reburial fit for a queen and the erection of a monumental tomb. The fact that the tomb’s statue representing Inez had a crown in its head would later on give rise to the legend upon which Hemans’s poem is based.

(vv. 91-4)

As Inez is finally taken down to her tomb, we realise once again her statue-like and sculptured existence, standing as an aestheticised and perpetuating monument to a nation's grief. Both her peculiar circumstances and characterisation seem to rehearse in a reversed manner the story of Pygmalion's Galatea: it is Death itself, no loving spark of life, which in a sense confers immortality to her. Although Hemans may have felt some identification with this woman's predicament, her somewhat ironic descriptive lines clearly work to distance her from the rich aristocratic setting, very unlike her own middle-class one, and that she probably senses as being not only ostentatious but intrinsically decadent.⁵

The poet's exotic cultural displacement allows disturbingly familiar themes to emerge in a foreign scene that signals a universal condition for her: feminine sacrifice finally rewarded. The poet's feminine romantic revisionist strategy is the one of presenting woman as historically significant and, therefore, as worthy of being memorialised, if only as a victim of imperial history and its Promethean male deeds.⁶ The reasons for Inez's demise – be it transgressive love or political intrigue (or both) – are not mentioned, let alone questioned. But in its engagement with 'the dead' and its concomitant interest in historical transport, Hemans's poem exposes "the methodological difficulties of memorialisation" (Westover, 2005: 148), or the wish to confer more protagonism to certain historical women by enhancing their mythical and aesthetic dimensions.

3. Felicia Hemans and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna in the Portuguese 'theatre of war'

⁵ Felicia Hemans's family was part of the earnest, prosperous and cosmopolitan merchant class of Liverpool, including religious Dissenters and republicans, who disapproved as much of aristocratic excesses as the religious ostentation of Catholicism.

⁶ Nowadays, Inez's execution is interpreted as lawful or judiciary, probably due to the allegations of impending threat to the national sovereignty.

Susan Valladares, in her article “Romantic Englishwomen and ‘the Theatre of Glory’” (2008), addresses the issue of “how female literary interaction with early nineteenth-century Spain opened up a geopolitical space charged with anxious questions about national identity and belonging” (106). She stresses that this period of political uncertainty and instability was peculiarly well suited for the intervention of British women writers and that the Peninsular War, in particular, afforded an opportunity for literary women to engage in a rewriting of both national and literary agency.

That is notably the case of Felicia Hemans, who wrote on subjects related to the Napoleonic Wars, namely the ode in heroic couplets *England and Spain: or Valour and Patriotism* of 1808 and *The Domestic Affections* collection of 1812.⁷ Besides having a historical or nationalistic interest in these events, Hemans also possessed personal reasons for addressing such a momentous theme. Both her husband (Captain Alfred Hemans) and two of her brothers (Thomas and George Browne) were doing military service in the Iberian Peninsula at the time of the Wars,⁸ and she had become interested in all aspects of Spanish and Portuguese histories and cultures.

In an 1811 poem, written in heroic couplets, and entitled “To my Eldest Brother, with the British Army in Portugal”, she envisions her dear relative “distant far, amidst th’intrepid host, / Albion’s firm sons, on Lusitania’s coast”, and anticipates the happy moment of his return (*Domestic Affections*, 1812). Hemans, not unlike other British writers of the period, had clearly begun her career by imagining Southern countries like Spain and Portugal as the embodiment of a fading chivalric ethos (a preservation of the supposed common European Gothic identity). But hers became also

⁷ *England and Spain* describes how the British army under Arthur Wellesley issued forth to join forces with the guerrilla fighters of Spain and Portugal. The poem praises the Anglo-Spanish alliance and openly calls for a renewed commitment to the Peninsular War, editing out all the negative stereotypes of Iberian greed and rapacity. Hemans adopts a language and tone reminiscent of the revolutionary rhetoric of the 1790s, such as the progress of Liberty.

⁸ Thomas and George had served Sir John Moore and the 23rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

inevitably a political cause: by supporting British intervention in the Peninsula and deciding to write about it, she went deliberately against her dissenting supporters, who were known to oppose the war.

In this context, *The Convent Bell*, a long poem in seven cantos about that polemic intervention in Portuguese soil, and published anonymously in 1819, will constitute a pertinent focus of analysis.⁹ It tells the story of a group of British soldiers that, after the victorious battle of the Douro under Wellington, seek food and shelter in the secluded Convent of Saint Clara, before they move on to Talavera in Spain. It is there that their recently wounded Irish commander falls in love with a beautiful and noble Portuguese nun; this turns out to be an ill-fated romance that ends with the death of the hero in the battlefield and of the grieved nun in the convent. The theme is highly reminiscent of the story of Mariana Alcoforado, present in her *Lettres Portugaises* of 1669. This might not be a coincidence as, just two years before (1817), an English translation—*Letters from a Portuguese Nun to an Officer in the French Army* – by W. R. Bowles had appeared in London.

Another woman writer of this period, the social novelist, reformist and religious tract writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846) would be the one to appear much later, in 1845, as the author of *The Convent Bell and Other Poems*.¹⁰ In contrast with Hemans, her *Personal Recollections*, published in 1841 and posthumously in 1847, register a very biased attitude towards Portugal, the country where her only brother was stationed during the Peninsular Wars and where he would inclusively live afterwards for a ten-year period, “on the staff of the Portuguese army” until the

⁹ The *Literary and Philosophical Intelligence*, of May 1819, announced in its “Varieties” column that “A volume of Poems founded on the Events of the War of the Peninsula, written during its progress and after its conclusion; by the wife of an officer (now on half pay) who served in its campaigns, will soon appear” (my emphasis).

¹⁰ Tonna writes, “the strict incognito to be preserved would secure me from any charge of inconsistency” (238), that is, an incoherence between her more respectable religious work and her writing of foolish romances. Thus, fear of public notoriety together with an attempt to preserve her profits, may explain this mystery.

establishment of the Portuguese ‘Cortes’ and the dismissal of all British officers. He had even cultivated some of the land in the interior, “Which he had gallantly fought to rescue” (209). Yet, Tonna writes that: ‘It was a subject of continual sorrow to me that he was residing in the heart of *an exclusively Popish country*, far from every means of grace; not even a place of worship within many leagues, and *wholly shut out from Christian intercourse.*” (153, my emphasis). Tonna’s mother, she adds further ‘[...] had been learning to prize her native land in *a disgusting region of all that is most directly opposed to liberty, civil or religious; to honourable feeling, just conduct, honest principle, or practical decency:* In short, she had been in Portugal!” (103, my emphasis).

Upon her brother’s return to England, Tonna would anonymously publish a poem in seven Spenserian stanzas entitled “My Brother”, in which she welcomes him to his “island home” (1826). Tonna reveals some facts not only about her brother’s stay in Portugal but also her own thoughts and feelings regarding the impact of this experience in her own life. The poet uses the arguments of British nationalism and family ties to lure her brother back home, after “sixteen burning summer suns” had elapsed in his “far abode” (6-8). Portugal is “a moral sty” within which Britons are “condemned to seek/ Truth’s trampled pearl”, where “patriot honour” is “couched in falsehood’s blinking eye” and where they have met “War’s sternest blast of devastating breath” (10-14). In the end, the poet seems also to hint negatively at the Portuguese aftermath dismissal of British troops: “ingrates, reckless of thy generous toil, / Uproot the shelter when the storm’s o’erblown” (16-17).

This more personal and realistic picture does not coincide with the fictionalised or idealised representation of both the country and the people of Portugal that had occurred in *The Convent Bell*. For example, when one of the characters refers to “the dazzling sky, / A gold and purple canopy, / [...] vying with gorgeous flowers, / That nature in this lonely place / has strewed, to shame our richest

bowers” (Canto I, stanza VII), and the author herself describes with awe the picturesque beauty and natural sublime of the Mondego region that her British heroes have traversed. But also, and more surprisingly, when the poet describes the characters in the Convent of Saint Clara, namely Father Bernardo and Sister Maria. Tonna’s mixed revulsion and attraction for Catholic cultures most probably derived not only from popular anti-Catholicism, especially rife during the first half of the nineteenth century, but also from the English Gothic novels.¹¹

The sentimental novels, in particular, used the convent as a backdrop, a convenient device for the separation of would-be lovers and a mechanism for the creation of difficulties and stumbling-blocks to a happy resolution. It is significant that Ronald, the hero, finds Maria and the other cloistered nuns very much as he finds the Portuguese nation: helplessly subject to a tyrannical force and at the mercy of violence and bigotry. For Diego Saglia (*Poetic Castles in Spain*), “[...] during the peninsular war, this conventional plot was endowed with *a strong political and military subtext*, and intercultural sentimental relationships were transfigured into allegorical representations of Spain [including Portugal] as *a lady in distress*, the French as her assailants, and British soldiers as *heroic knights coming to her rescue*.” (226, my emphasis).

In sharp contrast with this picture of ravaged and weeping Lusitania or Lusitania, stands the often evoked and praised image of Britannia or Albion, which as a powerful protective oak tree “spreads her shade o’er other lands, / While her protecting arms extend / A refuge for the poor, / And virtue, strength, and beauty blend / Her empire to secure” (III, stanza XII). The British national hero, Wellesley, is “Described as a messianic apparition, [...] metamorphosed into a triumphant hero/angel *hovering benignly over the desolate fields of Iberia*” (Saglia 229, my emphasis). If, on the

¹¹ English Gothic novels like those of Ann Radcliffe and M. G. Lewis, frequently used motifs of Catholicism with unnatural and sinister connotations of seclusion – the abbey, the monk, the nun, the priest – in their plots. In the years prior to 1833 various publications denounced convents through the medium of a story of an imprisoned nun.

one hand, the poem allegorically represents and glorifies British imperialism, justifying it on the grounds of cultural superiority, on the other hand, Woman only finds her place and identity *within* the male sphere, and this includes the female author of the poem, who defines herself as the mere ‘wife of an officer’. The ending of *The Convent Bell* seems to suggest not only the author’s belief that a British soldier’s “bright renown” should not be dimmed by an unhallowed love connection but also that it is far preferable that he dies in the battlefield than that he should “shame [his] country’s *warlike race*” (VII, my emphasis).

4. Imagining the Other: Traces of Portugal in the Poetry and *Juvenilia* of the Brontës

Sometimes, the ‘encounter’ with the Other only takes place in the *mind* or in the *imagination* of the woman poet because a real or effective contact with the foreigner may not be possible, for different reasons. The Brontës, who never travelled to the Iberian Peninsula and who never saw with their own eyes this different reality, still managed to find a substitute source of information and inspiration in the events and characters of their history and geography books.

One of these figures was precisely Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, who had been a major protagonist in the Peninsular Wars and a well-known figure to the invaded early nineteenth-century Portuguese people (1807-14).¹² Wellington was for the young Brontës not just a(n) (inter)national hero but a powerful imaginative symbol; one playing a major role not only in

¹² On 1 August 1808, the British General Arthur Wellesley (later Duke of Wellington) landed a British army in Lisbon, to prevent commercial blockade, and thus initiated the Peninsular War. Wellesley's initial victory over Junot at Vimeiro (21 August 1808) was wiped out by his superiors in the Convention of Cintra (30 August 1808). Nevertheless, Wellesley (now Lord Wellington) returned to Portugal on 22 April 1809 to recommence the campaign. Portuguese forces under British command distinguished themselves in the defence of the lines of Torres Vedras (1809–1810) and in the subsequent invasion of Spain and France.

their creations but also in the intercultural relations between the two countries (England and Portugal). Wellington and his sons, Arthur and Charles, became for these women poets and novelists compelling examples of the simultaneously fascinating and threatening potential of the intercourse or communication with the Iberian Other.

In their juvenile poetry, written mostly between the years of 1829 and 1839, and based on the fictional realms of *Angria* and *Gondal*,¹³ Charlotte and Emily Brontë ransacked the real locations of the Peninsula in maps and travel books, in search of foreign, exotic names and places, as well as the distinctive physical and mental traits of the Southern Other, to use in their juvenile creations. Charlotte's hero and *poetic persona*, Arthur Wellesley himself, first becomes the 'Marquis of *Douro*' – in a clear allusion to the decisive battle that was fought by that famous Portuguese river – because he succeeds in all his military campaigns. And, when his ambition turns into colonial enterprise and conquest in the western coast of Africa, he obtains the title and Byronic reputation of 'Duke of *Zamor(n)a*' (a Spanish city); this character would also constitute a preview of Mr Rochester and his dark Jamaican past (Guimarães, 2008: 95).

In the later *Gondal* saga, Emily Brontë would, in turn, introduce her charismatic heroine and *poetic persona*, Augusta G. *Alme(i)da*, who not coincidentally bears the same name as that of the Portuguese border location and fortress. She is a powerful female ruler who collects several tragic lovers, including the

¹³ The older siblings Charlotte and Branwell created the imaginary country and game of Angria, which featured the Duke of Wellington and his sons as the heroes. It had its origins in the Glasstown Confederacy, an earlier imaginary setting created by the siblings as children. Glasstown was founded when twelve wooden soldiers were offered to Branwell Brontë by his father. Emily and Anne, as the youngest siblings, staged a rebellion and established the imaginary world of Gondal for themselves, whose saga is set on two islands in the South Pacific. The northern island, Gondal, is a realm of moorlands and snow (based on Yorkshire); the southern island, Gaaldine, features a more tropical climate. Gaaldine is subject to Gondal, which may be related to the time period of the early nineteenth-century in which Britain was expanding its Empire.

handsomely dark one called ‘*Fernando de Samara*’ (a Portuguese name), eventually originating her later famous villain Heathcliff. Furthermore, like the Portuguese female monarch during the Peninsular Wars – D. Maria I, the ‘mad queen’ – whom she resembles in many ways, A.G.A. would in the end be forced to run into exile, as an outlaw, pressed by an overwhelming foreign invasion.¹⁴

In addition to this, the sisters’ fictionalised poems abound with more or less detailed descriptions of bright luxuriant landscapes, beautifully rich manors and romantic palaces, which are very probably inspired in Portugal’s characteristic architecture and natural scenery. Their male and female characters, often passionate and dark-featured, indulge in all sorts of stereotyped mannerisms and postures in their speech and behaviour – supposedly, the sisters’ juvenile way of re-presenting what according to them was *exotically foreign*.

More interestingly, the Portuguese civil war, also known as the Liberal Wars or the ‘two brothers’ wars’ (1828-34),¹⁵ raged in Portugal precisely during the period in which the Brontës began writing their poems. Those foreign events were frequently reported in the British press (which they avidly read). The wars probably inspired the powerful fictional representation of the context of fratricidal conflict in Emily’s imaginary *Gondal*. The Gondalian civil wars were dramatised by two opposing factions and their respective families: those that she significantly designated as the

¹⁴ Known as the Pious (in Portugal), or the Mad (in Brazil), Queen Maria suffered from religious mania and melancholia. She was the first undisputed Queen regnant of Portugal. With Napoleon’s European conquests, her court, then under the direction of Prince Dom João, the Prince Regent, moved to the then Portuguese colony of Brazil. At the urging of the British government, on 29 November 1807, the entire Braganza dynasty decided to flee to establish a Cortes-in-exile in the Portuguese Viceroyalty of Brazil.

¹⁵ The Portuguese Civil War or Miguelite War, was a conflict between progressive constitutionalists (led by D. Pedro) and authoritarian absolutists (by D. Miguel) over royal succession in Portugal that lasted from 1828 to 1834. Embroiled parties included Portuguese rebels, the United Kingdom, France, the Catholic Church and Spain. The absolutists controlled the rural areas, where they were supported by the aristocracy, and by a peasantry that was galvanized by the Church. The Liberals occupied Portugal’s major cities, Lisbon and Porto, where they commanded a sizable following among the middle classes. When D. Miguel was defeated and exiled, Dom Pedro restored the Constitutional Charter.

‘royalist’ and ‘republican’ factions (corresponding to the Portuguese ‘absolutist’ and ‘constitutional’ ones). As there had been no equivalent conflict to this one in Britain, the Liberal Wars constituted, therefore, an historical occasion for Emily to imaginatively expound her critical and sceptical thought of humanity.

5. ‘A fondness for being sad’: Portuguese Literature and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Poetics of Melancholy

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) made the first draft copy of her poem “Catarina to Camoens” in 1831, precisely during the time she was writing her diary, thus revealing that she had knowledge of the Portuguese poet’s life and work; indeed, she would again mention Camões and his verse epic *The Lusiads* in her later poem “A Vision of Poets” (*Poems*, 1844). Part II of her *Diary* (1831-32) contains a curious seven-page list with the names of Portuguese and Spanish poets: a total of fifty-eight representatives of the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods and respective genres, thus proving her keen interest in Iberian culture.

“Catarina to Camoëns”, only published in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1843, bears the following explanatory sub-title: “Dying in his absence abroad, and referring to the poem in which he recorded the sweetness of her eyes”; Robert Browning had once declared that his wife’s condition closely resembled that of the Portuguese Catarina: he fancied the relationship between the invalid poet and the dying Catarina in his letters to Elizabeth during their courtship between 1845 and 1847. Fears that he would lose her caused him to “apprehend, [...] the whole sense of that *closed door* of Catarina’s” (Monteiro 28) – a reference to the opening lines of the lady in the poem: “On the door you will not enter, / I have gazed too long – adieu! / [...] Death is near me, and not *you!*” (vv 1-4).¹⁶ Browning

¹⁶ All the quotations of EBB’s poems that are cited in this article are taken from The Wordsworth Poetry Library edition of her *Works* (1994). The emphases given in italics are ours.

discerned that “Catarina to Camoëns” dramatised a *keening voice* with meaning deeply private to EBB,¹⁷ and determined that in her sickroom his wife need *not* muse about an ‘exiled lover’ as had Catarina on her deathbed. EBB is paradoxically concerned with emphasising that ‘first dark stage’ that she had grown accustomed to, and that comprises “The sweet, sad years, the *melancholy years*, / Those of my own life, who by turns had flung // A shadow across me” (I, vv 7-9).

In the case of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, published in 1850, she hoped that her readers would take the title to mean ‘from the Portuguese language’ and not from ‘the Portuguese Catarina’. But the title also echoes Lord Strangford’s translations – *Poems, from the Portuguese of Luis de Camoens*, published in 1803. This was exactly the time in which English readers, and EBB, were introduced in proper fashion to the Portuguese poet’s courtly lyrics and songs of exile. Strangford’s long introductory “Remarks on the Life and Writings of Camoens” presented the tragic story of the unappreciated poet, exiled because of his unfortunate love for Dona Catarina de Ataíde. Likewise, it was those lyrics by Camoens chosen primarily for their supposedly autobiographical but also erotic and melancholy content that most attracted the English readers of the nineteenth century.

EBB’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* are often and inevitably associated with the courtship letters that she and Browning addressed to each other before their elopement (Karlin). The two genres, the poetic and the epistolary, cross over, indeed, being secretly simultaneous and even mutually illuminating. Another Portuguese text that might have influenced EBB and her poetics of melancholy, both directly and by way of its impact on Strangford, was *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, first published in French in 1669 as *Lettres d’une Religieuse Portugaise*. The letters, originally five

¹⁷ For practical purposes, we will be using the well-known abbreviation of the author’s name (EBB) in all subsequent references to her.

in number, are the record of an ill-starred affair of love, seduction, and abandonment between a real Portuguese nun at Beja – Mariana Alcoforado – and a French army officer, Noël de Chamilly.

The love portrayed in both her poems and the nun's *Letters* is chivalric and full of devotion (Rothstein, 1999: 52). Another similarity resides in the respective stories, in particular the confession of a long-concealed affection on the part of the woman: Mariana's for the departed officer and Catarina's for the banished poet. This feeling of abandonment, in both cases, originated highly lyrical and also exquisitely melancholy outpourings, both on the part of the Portuguese poet and the Portuguese nun. And, through EBB, on the part of Catarina as well, who is finally given a voice of her own. Not a translator from the Portuguese, Elizabeth Barrett expanded on Camões and the Portuguese nun in another way: she invented a chapter missing from the biographical accounts of both – the voice of the Other.

The *Portuguese Letters*, in their turn, had such a phenomenal impact on both sides of the English Channel that to write 'à la portugaise' became a veritable code for a certain style – written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress. Certain cultural assumptions underlay the code of the Portuguese style: not only was Portugal viewed as the land of passion but also the nun's sensuality and sensibility were attributed to the extremes of heat, intensity, and mystery in her environment. EBB absorbed the characteristic 'doubleness' of amorous discourse present in the nun's *Portuguese Letters*, for they are addressed both to the chevalier and to herself. That ambiguity is maintained throughout the letters and the sonnets, oscillating between the pathos of direct statement and that of interior monologue. Both women authors efface the male beloved (who becomes a mere pretext) by focusing on their motives for writing, as if 'writing for themselves'. Both seem to sustain their melancholy passion by writing.

In EBB's *Sonnets* there are subtle allusions or appropriations of another Portuguese poet, Sister Maria do Céu, an eighteenth-

century Carmelite nun, who between 1736 and 1741 published a long narrative in verse about love from, and about, the perspective of a female ‘pilgrim’ (*Enganos do bosque, desenganos do rio*). Unpublished journal notes in Part II of EBB’s diary (1832) contain a long list of Spanish and Portuguese poets, including Soror Maria do Céu and her lyric from that collection entitled “Cover me with flowers”. This duality of flowers of love and of death (17) is appropriated by EBB in her sonnets XXIII and XXIV; her chilling lines “grave-damps falling round my head” and “dreams of death” assume another hue of meaning in the context of Maria’s funerary poem. In EBB’s concluding sonnet XLIV (44), her speaker again mentions ‘ivy’ and ‘flowers’, but in a new transformed way, as poems “withdrawn from heart’s ground”, which constitute palpable evidence of her successful transformation of incapacitating melancholy into artistic creativity.

To conclude, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work seems to point not only to a subtle resistance to patriarchy but also to suggest the possibility of rethinking a symbolics and an aesthetics of loss through the more exotic medium of Portuguese female voices such as those of ‘Catarina’, ‘Mariana’ and ‘Maria do Céu’.

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