

Breaking with Social and Literary Conventions: Judith Teixeira and Maria Teresa Horta¹

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Un scandale n'est pas un homme
ni une oeuvre, mais le bruit des gens
scandalisés.
(Henry-Marx)²

In order to understand women's literature in Portugal since the seventies I am going back in time, back to the '60s and '70s with Maria Teresa Horta (born in 1937) and even further back to the '20s with Judith Teixeira (1880-1959). My aim is to focus on the poetry written by these two women poets in Portugal in two important historical periods, firstly, during the troubled years preceding the setting up of dictatorship in 1926 and later in the period before the 1974 democratic revolution. For this task I have selected two collections of poems which I consider highly representative of their poetry: *Decadência* (*Decadence*, 1923) by Judith Teixeira and *Minha Senhora de Mim* (*Milady of Me*, 1971) by Maria Teresa Horta.

By developing a comparative study of these two works, I hope to contribute, even if briefly, to a better understanding of the challenges made to assumptions underlying the politics of representation in Portuguese society at least until the end of dictatorship. Indeed, at a time when most women were confined to the home and very few had the right to vote, the authors of the

¹ The author would like to thank Maria Teresa Horta for her kind advice.

² The same epigraph opens the following text by Judith Teixeira: "De Mim. Conferência. Em que se explicam as minhas razões sobre a Vida, sobre a Estética, sobre a Moral". (About Me. Conference. Where the reasons for my Life, Aesthetic and Moral are explained –all translations are mine).

works I am referring to play a subversive role. The reality in which women lived is clearly understood in a speech made by the dictator Salazar in 1933: “Women’s work outside the family sphere desintegrates home life, separates its different members, and makes them strangers to each other...”³ And as far as the right to vote is concerned, in 1931 only women with a degree could vote, while for men it would be enough to be able to read and write and “even during the liberal 1960s, little happened to change the course of women’s rights in Portugal.”⁴ Through their literary works both Judite Teixeira and Maria Teresa Horta clearly challenge the reality in which Portuguese women lived, breaking with social and literary conventions.

Censorship and *Decadência*

Both collections of poems, *Decadência* (*Decadence*) and *Minha Senhora de Mim* (*Milady of Me*), explore themes of love and passion through images of the female body. *Decadência – Poemas* (*Decadence – Poems*) by Judith Teixeira was first published in February 1923. The first edition is lost. However, the second edition – printed on the 28th of December 1923 – contains thirty-five poems written between May 1919 and December 1922. It was Judith’s first work and a success at the time of publication. On 16th of February 1923, the well-known daily newspaper *Diário de Lisboa*, reviewing the book, makes the following comment:

³ Quoted in Darlene Joy Sadlier, “Radical Form in Novas Cartas Portuguesas,” *The Question of How – Women Writers and New Portuguese Literature*. New York, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1989. 2-4.

⁴ Darlene Joy Sadlier explains: “[t]he suffrage movement had won the right to vote in England in 1918 and in America in 1920, but it was not until 1969, one year after Salazar fell ill and Caetano took office, that voting privileges were extended to all women in Portugal.’ (idem 4).

Com desusado luxo, em outros tempos incompatível com as musas, mas com certo bom gosto, acaba a distintíssima poetisa Judith Teixeira de publicar um volume de versos, intitulado *Decadência*. Neste livro, de um merecimento indiscutível, encontram-se versos de estranho e sensualíssimo perfume. (*Diário de Lisboa*, 16.2.1923, sem título, 1)⁵

In poems such as “Flores de Cactus” (“Cactus flowers”), “Liberta” (“Free”), “Os meus cabelos” (“My hair”), “Perfis Decadentes” (“Decadent Profiles”), and “A Minha Colcha Encarnada” (“My Red Bedspread”), among others, the reader finds him/herself in a Baudelarian world. He/She will most probably establish a dialogue with certain poems compiled in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which women, women’s hair, women’s bodies, perfumes, colours, beauty, erotic and sensual love as well as anguished love are common references.⁶ Let us take as an example the poem “Perfis Decadentes” (“Decadent Profiles”) by Judith Teixeira in which the elements referred above are present⁷:

Através dos vitrais
ia a luz espreguiçar-se

⁵ With an uncommon luxury, incompatible with the muses of past times, but with a certain exquisite taste, the very distinguished poet Judith Teixeira has recently published a volume in verse, entitled *Decadência*. In this book, of undeniable merit, there may be found verses with a strange and yet extremely sensual perfume.

⁶ See as possible examples ‘La Chevelure’, ‘Le Flacon’, ‘La Fontaine de Sang’, ‘La Mort des Amants’, among others in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal suivies du Spleen de Paris*, introduction de Blaise Allan. Lausanne: La Guilde du Livre, 1947. 116-117, 143-144, 235, 253.

⁷ Judith Teixeira, *Poemas – Decadência, Castelo de Sombras, NVA, Conferência DE MIM*, pesquisa, organização e tábuas bibliográficas de Maria Jorge, L.M.G. Lisboa: &etc, 1996. 38-39.

em listas faiscantes,
sobre as sedas orientais
de cores luxuriantes

Sons ritmados dolentes,
num sensualismo intenso,
vibram misticismos decadentes
por entre nuvens de incenso...

Longos, esguios, estáticos
entre as ondas vermelhas do cetim
dois corpos esculpido em marfim
soergueram-se nostálgicos

sonâmbulos e enigmáticos...

Os seus perfis esfíngicos,
e cálidos,
estremeceram
na ânsia duma beleza pressentida,
dolorosamente pálidos!

Fitaram-se as bocas sensuais!
Os corpos subtilizados,
femininos,
entre mil cintilações
irreais,
enlaçaram-se
nos braços longos e finos!

[...]

E morderam-se as bocas abrasadas,
em contorções de fúria, ensanguentadas!

[...]

Foi um beijo doloroso,
a estrebuchar agonias,
nevrótico, ansioso,
em estranhas epilepsias!

[...]

Sedas esgarçadas,
dispersão de sons,
arco-íris de rendas
irisando tons...⁸

In the years preceding the National Revolution on the 28th of May 1926, there was a growing political unrest, which led to an increase of censorship. Notwithstanding the success of *Decadência*, this work, as well as *Sodoma Divinizada* (*Divinized Sodom*, 1923) by Raúl Leal and *Canções* (*Songs*, 1921) by António Botto, were a major target for the “Liga de Acção dos Estudantes de Lisboa,” a group whose members were also members of the Catholic Centre and who defended conservative moral standards. According to Teotónio Pereira, its leader, their goal was:

[Q]ueimar a ferro em brasa, expondo-os à luz do sol,
esses cancos nauseabundos que têm medrado à
custa da fraqueza de uns e da tolerância
incompreensível de outros. [...] Fiscalizar as livrarias
e meter também na ordem os artistas decadentes, os
poetas de Sodoma, os editores, autores e vendedores

⁸ Through the stained glass window/ the light came stretching/ in sparkling
strips,/ over the oriental silk/ with luxuriant colours./ Sounds in a moaning
cadence,/ with an intense sensuality,/ decadent mysticisms vibrate/ through
clouds of incense.../ Long, slim, static,/ among red waves of satin,/ two
bodies sculptured in ivory/ raise nostalgic,/ sleepwalking and enigmatic.../
Their sphinx-like profiles,/ burning,/ quivered/ yearning towards a foreseen
beauty,/ painfully pale!/ Sensual mouths stared!/ Subtle bodies,/ feminine,/
among a thousand scintillations/ unreal,/ enlaced/ in their long and slim
arms!/ [...]/ And both flaming mouths bit,/ in furious contortions, bloody!/ [...]/
It was a painful kiss,/ twisting agonies,/ neurotic, anxious,/ in strange
epilepsies!/ [...]/ Torn silks,/ scattering of sounds,/ rainbow of embroideries/
making tones iridescent...

de livros imorais [...]. Discretamente, já
princiámos. (in Aníbal Fernandes, (ed.), 92)⁹

On the 5th of March 1923, *Decadência* and the two previously mentioned books were considered immoral and banned by the authorities and later on, at an uncertain date, burnt.¹⁰

When the third and last book of poems by Judith Teixeira is published, entitled *Nua - Poemas de Bizâncio (Naked – Poems of Byzantium, 1926)*¹¹, Marcello Caetano, the founding member and editor of the magazine *Ordem Nova*, wrote an article entitled “Arte” sem moral nenhuma (“Art” without morals), in which he attacks Judith Teixeira’s poetry. According to Marcello Caetano, other authors were able to write good erotic poetry, among whom António Feijó, Bocage and Gregório Matos. However, the judgement Marcello Caetano put forward was not so much on the literary quality of Judith Teixeira’s poetry as on the writer herself and her lack of morals in describing her “pillow secrets” to the public. In his words, Judith was a shameless woman (“uma desenvergonhada”):

Que degradação! [...] O que é pior é que estas
manifestações de pouca vergonha nem sequer têm
uma forma decente; nem, ao menos, uma certa graça

⁹ Pedro Teotónio Pereira in an interview to the newspaper *A Época*, 22.2.1923 [T]o burn in red-hot iron, exposing to sun light, those nauseating cancers which have flourished at the expense of the weakness of some and the incomprehensible tolerance of others. [...] To keep an eye on the bookshops and control the decadent artists, the poets of Sodom, the publishers, authors and sellers of immoral books [...]. Discreetly, we have already begun.

¹⁰ See *A Capital*, “Apreensão de livros. Os estudantes de várias faculdades dirigem-se ao Governo Civil a pedirem a apreensão,” 5.3.1923: 2.

¹¹ This collection of poems is extremely criticised in the newspaper *Revolução Nacional* responsible for the propaganda of the dictatorship. See *Revolução Nacional*, 1, 21.6.1926: 1.

como a que António Feijó punha nos seus versos eróticos, de sabor tão puramente clássico, ou o plebeísmo forte e pitoresco moldado em formas duma impecável correcção que se nota na poesia obscena de Bocage, ou na de Gregório Matos. Nada disso. [...] Tudo aquilo é mesquinho, é ordinário e reles. (Marcello Caetano, 156-58)¹²

Eroticism in *Minha Senhora de Mim*

Notwithstanding the time gap, and especially the different traditions both poets invoke, the link between Judith Teixeira and Maria Teresa Horta is based on a common feature: subversion. By adopting taboo words, highly explicit descriptions of physical love, dealing with the relationship between women and men, women and other women and women and their image of themselves, their poetic works break with the literary establishment. Indeed, just like it happens with the poems by Judith Teixeira in *Decadência*, those by Maria Teresa Horta – and I am thinking particularly of a specific collection of poems, entitled *Minha Senhora de Mim* (*Milady of Me*, 1971) – are constructed out of a language of the body, exploring physical and erotic love. These topics were acceptable from a male point of view at the time the two literary works were published but were questionable when presented from a female perspective.¹³

¹² What a degradation! [...] And the worst is that these shameless manifestations do not even have a decent form; nor do they have the gracefulness that António Feijó managed to give to his erotic verses, so beautifully reminiscent of the classics, or the strong and pitoresque plebeianism molded into shapes with an impressive correction present in the obscene poetry by Bocage or in the poetry by Gregório de Matos. Nothing like it. [...] All of it is narrow, low and cheap.

¹³ By the time Maria Teresa Horta publishes *Minha Senhora de Mim*, she had already written: *Espelho Inicial* (*Initial Mirror*, 1960), *Tatuagem* (*Tattoo*, 1961), *Cidadelas Submersas* (*Submerged Citadels*, 1961), *Verão Coincidente* (*Coincident Summer*, 1962), *Amor Habitado* (*Lived in Love*, 1963) and *Jardim de Inverno* (*Winter Garden*, 1966). She also took part in the group

Minha Senhora de Mim, a volume of fifty-nine poems, has much of the flavour present in “cantigas de amigo.” These compositions were typical of Galician-Portuguese poetry in medieval times. They were part of the legacy of troubadour poetry, with the special peculiarity of placing the responsibility of their enunciation upon a woman. Just like in the “paralelísticas” (parallel verses), a particular type of “cantigas,” in which its repetitive structure enriches the meaning, the repetition present in *Minha Senhora de Mim* also creates an effect of litany and incantation.¹⁴ Take as an example the following poem in the collection¹⁵:

Minha Senhora de Mim

Comigo me desavim
minha senhora
de mim

sem ser dor ou ser cansaço
nem o corpo que disfarço

Comigo me desavim
minha senhora
de mim

nunca dizendo comigo
o amigo nos meus braços

Poetry 61, whose members were: Gastão Cruz, Luísa Neto Jorge, Fiana Hasse Pais Brandão and Casimiro de Brito.

¹⁴ Four of the poems in *Minha Senhora de Mim* by Maria Teresa Horta were sung by Teresa Paula Brito, with music by Nuno Filipe (pseudonym to José Manuel Barros) and recorded in an EP by Moviplay in 1971. The poems are: ‘Existem Pedras’ (‘There are Stones’), ‘Poema sobre a Recusa’ (‘Poem about Refusal’), ‘Meu Acesso Lume’ (‘My Burning Fire’) and ‘Meu Amor’ (‘My Love’). Moviplay, 1971.

¹⁵ Maria Teresa Horta, *Minha Senhora de Mim*. Lisboa: Gótica, 2001. 15.

Comigo me desavim
minha senhora
de mim

recusando o que é desfeito
no interior do meu peito¹⁶

Nevertheless, Maria Teresa Horta does not recreate the myth of sorrow; on the contrary, the poet expresses a “refreshingly open feminine assertiveness.”¹⁷ As Ana Marques Gastão writes in the newspaper *Diário de Notícias*, dated the 13th of November 2001, following the reprint of Teresa Horta’s book (*Gótica* 2001):

[A poetisa] elabora um discurso metafórico nu, fazendo reviver o desejo e o sofrimento perante o amado distante até ao ponto em que esse próprio desejo é extravazado na paz de o próprio corpo se deixar absorver por ele [...]. (Ana Marques Gastão, 44)¹⁸

¹⁶ “**Milady of Me**”: “With me I fell out/ My lady/of me/ no pain or tiredness/ nor the body which I disguise/ With me I fell out/ my lady/ of me/ never saying with me/ the friend in my arms/ With me I fell out/ my lady/ of me/ refusing what is undone/ inside my bosom”

¹⁷ Helder Macedo, ed. *Modern Poetry in Translation 13/14 – Portugal* Compton Chamberlain: The Compton Press Limited, 1972. 44.

¹⁸ [The poet] elaborates a naked metaphorical discourse bringing back to life the desire and the pain for the distant lover until it reaches the point in which that same desire overflows and becomes peace achieved by the body allowing to be absorbed by it.

Some examples of what has been said are poems such as “O Meu Desejo” (“My Desire”) or “Antecipação” (“Anticipation”)¹⁹:

Antecipação

Entreabro as minhas
coxas
no início dos teus beijos

imagino as tuas
pernas
guiadas pelo desejo

oiço baixo o teu
gemido
calado pelos teus dentes

imagino a tua boca
rasgada
sobre o meu ventre²⁰

Minha Senhora de Mim has its starting point in one of the most significant traditions in Portuguese medieval poetry but eventually breaks away from it. It is a subversive work, one in which a woman challenges limits, reversing the common literary treatment of subject/object current at the time. It is the poet’s free and bold treatment of the body, of physical love, of

¹⁹ The last translated by Suzette Macedo and published in 1972 in the literary magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation 13/14 – Portugal*, compiled by Helder Macedo. Macedo, 44.

²⁰ “**Anticipation**”: “Loosening/ my thighs/ when your kisses begin/ I imagine/ your legs/ guided by desire/ I listen to/ your breathing/ clenched behind your teeth/ I imagine/ your mouth/ torn against my womb.

sexuality that is seen by public opinion in the '70s as an excess. Indeed, both public and official responses to the book are overwhelmingly critical. Shortly after the book is published²¹, Nelson de Matos wrote:

Trata-se de uma poesia que claramente se joga na utilização de uns quantos processos que, parecendo de desenvoltura, são apenas de facilidade. Bastante limitada ao nível do que diz e das palavras em que pretende dizer-se [...]. Na terceira e última parte deste livro, sem dúvida aquela em que se pressente um esforço de maior violência [...], pretende Teresa Horta como que o regresso a um certo erotismo que, bem de outro modo, se encontrava patente na sua poesia do início dos anos 60. Tal não é no entanto conseguido [...]. Tomou portanto uma grave opção que a sua escrita não pôde deixar de manifestar. [...] Várias idas à televisão, discos, lançamento de livros em elegantes *soirées*, direcção de uma página literária altamente comprometida – são outros dos aspectos em que essa opção se nos pode tornar legível.. (Nelson de Matos, 226-236)²²

²¹ The newspaper *A Capital* announces the publication of the book on Sunday, the 2nd of May 1971. According to the unsigned article, the ceremony took place in Avenida Visconde Valmor, in the Auditório Sasseti, on the 1st May of 1971 (between 12:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m.). The auditorium was full and the publishing of the book was simultaneous with the publishing of the EP by Teresa Paula Brito, who sings four poems by Maria Teresa Horta, with music by Nuno Filipe. David Mourão Ferreira referred to the book that night as “a reflection on eroticism,” Ana Maria Teodósio read some poems present in *Minha Senhora de Mim* and afterwards José Nuno Martins presented the new EP. At the very end there was a photo exhibition by Luís Esteves. *A Capital*, “Minha Senhora de Mim,” 2.5.1971: 5. The book was published by Dom Quixote (Cadernos de Poesia, N.º 18).

²² The poetry [in *Minha Senhora de Mim*] plays with obvious procedures that may seem bold but are only easy. Message and words are extremely limited [...]. In the third and last part of the book, where an effort towards more

Eventually, the book was banned on account of its eroticism. However, exactly because of the outcry raised by the publication of *Minha Senhora de Mim* and its subsequent ban, the book would come to play a decisive role in the development of Portuguese interventionist literature during the last years of dictatorship. Indeed, it laid the ground for *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* (*New Portuguese Letters* 1972), which, together with *Portugal e o Futuro* by the General António de Spínola (*Portugal and the Future*, February 1974), and due to its international acclaim – it was highly regarded by feminists around the world²³ – played an important role in the downfall of a regime already in its death throes.²⁴ As Maria Teresa Horta

violence is felt [...], Teresa Horta tries to recover a certain eroticism, one already present in her poetry in the 60s but in a different shape. However, the author does not accomplish this task [...]. She has made a very serious choice and her poetry cannot avoid it [...]. Other visible examples of that choice are her participation in certain TV programmes, EPs, the publishing of books in fashionable *soirées* and the responsibility for a highly compromising literary column...

²³ The *First International Feminist Action* adopts as a heading the fight for the rights of the “Three Marias,” the authors of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*: Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta and Maria Velho da Costa. In “Feminist Chronicles 1973” one may read: “NOW organized support for the “Three Marias” jailed in Portugal for writing a feminist book. In its first international action, NOW chapters in Houston, New York, Washington, D.C., Eastern Massachusetts and Los Angeles had demonstrations at Portuguese embassies and consulates in their cities. Similar protests were held the same day in France, Belgium, Sweden, Germany and England. The protest actions and petitions were effective in drawing attention to what was considered the first international feminist cause celebre. The Portuguese government suddenly postponed the trial of the Marias in a delaying tactic calculated to relieve public pressure and discourage further demonstrations. (The Three Marias were acquitted in 1974.) (07/03/73)”. <<http://www.feminist.org/research/chronicles/fc1973a.html>>.

explains in an interview given to the literary journal *Textos e Pretextos*:

[A ideia das *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*] [s]urgiu quando o meu livro *Minha Senhora de Mim* foi proibido pela PIDE, e escandalizou meio mundo, desde os anónimos que me descompunham pelo telefone e me mandavam cartas não assinadas, àqueles que me ameaçavam todos os dias. Foram meses de violência inconcebível, que me deixaram desanimada. Nós as três [Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa e Maria Teresa Horta] já éramos amigas, encontrávamo-nos muitas vezes, almoçávamos juntas uma vez por semana. Num desses almoços, a Maria Velho da Costa levantou a questão: se uma escritora levanta tanta indignação, o que aconteceria se três escritoras escrevessem um livro juntas, a falar de tudo aquilo e muito mais, do que eu tratava nos meus poemas...²⁵

²⁴ António Oliveira Salazar died on the 27th of July 1970. Since the 27th of September 1968 Portugal lived under the rule of Marcello Caetano. This period became known as “Primavera Marcelista.” The end of censorship and the end of the political police (PIDE) were anxiously expected.

²⁵ in “Conversa com Maria Teresa Horta,” text and interview by Ana Raquel Fernandes, Cláudia Coutinho and Sara Ramos Pinto, *Textos e Pretextos*, 3 (Inverno 2003): 61. [The idea of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*] came up when my book *Minha Senhora de Mim* was prohibited by PIDE [Policia Internacional de Defesa do Estado/ International Police of Defense of the State], having shocked a lot of people, from unidentified people who called to insult me and sent me unsigned letters to those who threatened me day after day. Those were months of an incredible violence which left me discouraged. The three of us [Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta] were already friends, we often met and usually had lunch together once a week. In one of those occasions, Maria Velho da Costa came forth with the question: if one woman writer is able to raise so much resentment, what would happen if three women wrote a book together dealing with the same topics I had dealt with in my poems and even more...

Thus, Maria Teresa Horta's book not only challenged the models offered by the literary establishment in the '70s, but also anticipated the well-known revolutionary work entitled *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, which, as I have pointed out, played an important role in the downfall of the regime.

Conclusion: "does anyone remember the name...?"

Despite the importance of her work, there is a growing silence around the author Maria Teresa Horta, one similar to the silence surrounding Judith Teixeira's poetic work. Indeed, as far as the latter is concerned, the question raised by António Manuel Couto Viana in November 1974, "Does anyone remember the name: Judith Teixeira? It won't be easy..."²⁶ is still representative of her status today. Notwithstanding, Maria Teresa Horta has been and is still today an important reference to certain contemporary Portuguese writers: Helena Marques, Lídia Jorge, Ana Luísa Amaral, Adília Lopes, Inês Pedrosa, whose work would be worth studying in connection with Horta's literary output.²⁷

To conclude, let me add that a full understanding of the reasons why Judith Teixeira and Maria Teresa Horta were silenced, that is, how they undermined a male-dominated canon and tradition, will help us break the silence and make both their lives and work more widely known. This way we will be able to appreciate better the impact they had on Portuguese society and literature and, especially, the impact they still have on literary production in Portugal in our time.

²⁶ António Manuel Couto Viana, "Judith Teixeira", 198.

²⁷ Cf. "Conversa com Maria Teresa Horta," 59-63.

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l>.

²⁸ This edition has been fundamental for the article I have written. Indeed it presents a thorough research and an extremely accurate bibliographic table organised by Maria Jorge, L.M.G. The newspaper articles mentioned on the text are only some of the articles compiled by Maria Jorge in the book mentioned.