

Introduction

Portuguese Literature is currently enjoying an unrivalled and long overdue revival outside the Portuguese-speaking world. For instance, in the United States, Harold Bloom paid tribute to the outstanding originality of Fernando Pessoa by citing him among the ten greatest twentieth-century poets in the world in his *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1995). In Europe, meanwhile, the Frankfurt Book Fair, where Portugal was featured as a special theme country in 1997, placed Portuguese writers in the limelight. But surely the most fitting and coveted recognition came when the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to José Saramago, an honor bestowed for the first time to a writer whose native tongue is Portuguese.

Despite this recent “boom,” people in English-speaking countries are still visibly less familiar with foreign literature in general, and the literary output of a perceived small country such as Portugal in particular, than their continental European counterparts. In countries like France or Germany, for instance, a significant number of major contemporary Portuguese authors seems to have warranted translation and dissemination alongside the obvious giants (Eça de Queirós, Pessoa, and lately Saramago). It comes as no surprise, therefore, to note that several of Lídia Jorge’s novels are currently available in translation in those countries. By contrast, to cater for an English-speaking audience, only her best-known work, *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, has been translated so far (*The Murmuring Coast*. Trans. Natália Costa and Ronald W. Sousa. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

This special thematic issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* hopes to redress the balance, for Lídia Jorge is undoubtedly one of the foremost Portuguese novelists to have emerged since the April 1974 Revolution. Like other prolific post-revolutionary writers, she has ten titles to her credit in

the space of two decades. “Amazing” is probably the right word for an author whose fertile imagination has tackled such varied topics as the impact of the April 1974 Revolution and that of the African colonial wars at one end of the spectrum, and the all-encompassing nature of an elusive father/ daughter relationship in a small village at the other. The relevance of her work is unquestionable, for her fiction explores the contradictions present in contemporary Portugal, taking in the differences between rural and city-based experiences, between various generations, and between men and women. Her thematic spread, moreover, is matched by a remarkable stylistic virtuosity. Her unconventional prose can be precise or it can swell in a lyrical mode. Her narrative strategies are just as versatile: her prose oscillates between collective and more individual narrating voices, including the occasional use of male narrators.

In 1980, her first work, *O Dia dos Prodígios*, was immediately hailed as a revelation for its incomparable stylistic and thematic originality and was awarded the prestigious Ricardo Malheiros prize. The writer Vergílio Ferreira may be cited here to represent the views of the critical establishment, as he confidently proclaimed the “afirmação poderosa e súbita de um grande escritor.” What was sincerely meant as the ultimate accolade, “the appearance of a great writer,” nevertheless encodes a stark and intrinsic contradiction. Can a woman writer be a great author irrespective of her gender? Or is it rather not the case that she was considered great *at the expense* of her gender? I would argue, and so do the majority of the contributors to this issue, that it is impossible to read Lídia Jorge without reference to her gender. Indeed, part of her originality lies precisely in being a voice from the margins, in providing a fresh and female perspective on major (or so deemed) historical events, and in engaging in the process of recovering events, voices, and positions often considered minor by the dominant order.

The present volume features an array of essays on some of her best-known fiction. Special attention is devoted here to *A Costa dos Murmúrios*, undoubtedly her most celebrated novel at home and abroad. The importance of its central theme—a personal recollection of colonial wartime in Mozambique that engages in dialogue with the highly fictionalized account featured at the outset of the book—would amply suffice to justify the interest it has elicited. But the original treatment which Lídia Jorge affords to her chosen theme enables her to problematize a wide range of issues close to the heart of modern readers (be they Portuguese or not), including personal and

collective identity, memory, history, language, and representation itself. Here in the present volume, this novel is the focus of three pieces that develop incisive and insightful parameters of analysis focusing on the role of memory and the portrayal of women to cast a new light on this seminal text.

Three further essays consider some of her other more accomplished novels: *O Dia dos Prodígios* (1980), *Notícia da Cidade Silvestre* (1984, awarded the Cidade Lisboa prize), and finally *O Jardim sem Limites* (1995). The latter received mixed reviews when it first appeared, but it is nevertheless crucial to our understanding of Lídia Jorge's perception of contemporary Portugal. *O Dia dos Prodígios* brings to life the collective voice of rural Portugal. By contrast, her third novel, *Notícia da Cidade Silvestre*, takes place in the urban environment of Lisbon and signals Lídia Jorge's departure from the collective to a more individual, and even intimate, perspective. A decade later, *O Jardim sem Limites* revisits the capital city in the 1990s, using again a collective gaze to inscribe the tremendous changes which have occurred in people's way of life and outlook, insofar as modernization, membership of the European Union, and a new cult of the image have all contributed to a sense of *fin-de-siècle* emptiness in the new generation. In so doing, the novel looks back to that other novel that in the Portuguese imagination stands as the emblematic *fin-de-siècle* masterpiece *par excellence*, *Os Maias*. This is her most "realist" work to date, a fact which may account for the mixed reviews it initially attracted.

Only three of Lídia Jorge's novels are not analyzed in detail here. *O Cais das Merendas* (1982), her second novel, provided a complementary perspective on *O Dia dos Prodígios*. In fact, Lídia Jorge has been the first to acknowledge that they were conceived in parallel. Much has been written on *O Cais das Merendas* already (see bibliography), unlike *A Última Dona* (1992), which critics have somewhat neglected. Perhaps not coincidentally, the latter is her only work to date to make predominant use of a male perspective. Nevertheless, Ana Paula Ferreira makes sufficient references to it in the course of her essay on *A Instrumentalina* to emphasize that it occupies a significant place in Lídia Jorge's literary production. One novel which would have most certainly warranted a full-length article here, were it not for reasons of space, is Lídia Jorge's most recent and prodigious *tour de force*, *O Vale da Paixão* (1998). We have included, however, a perceptive and in-depth critical review by Elfriede Engelmayer, who gives us a flavor of this outstanding work, showing it to be one of Jorge's most powerful

and symbolic novels built on intimate and haunting memories.

Although Lídia Jorge's reputation rests primarily on her novels, one should not forget that she has also published successfully in other genres. She has briefly ventured into the theatre, with a play, *A Maçon* (1996), that centers on Adelaide Cabete, one of the leading figures of Portuguese feminism during the first two decades of this century. Despite this foray into drama, Lídia Jorge remains above all a prose fiction writer. In this context, due credit should be given to her not only as a novelist, but also as the author of a number of short stories published in book-form under the titles *A Instrumentalina* (1992) and *Marido e Outros Contos* (1997) respectively. The two essays on her short stories which are included here reveal without a doubt that while these tales may productively be read to cast light on her novelistic works, they also deserve to stand as masterpieces in their own right. Ellen Sapega, in particular, lucidly argues that far from being a minor genre, the short story, by virtue of its very "shortness," is able to do things differently from longer narratives. Indeed, this genre seems lately to be attracting renewed interest from writers and critics alike, a tendency to be applauded given that Portuguese-speaking countries have long since boasted outstanding practitioners of the genre, including the Brazilian Clarice Lispector or more recently the Mozambican Mia Couto.

Since this issue of *Portuguese Literary & Cultural Studies* focuses on the multifaceted literary achievements of Lídia Jorge, most readers will surely agree that the article section closes with a *chave de ouro* by foregoing academic criticism in favor of Jorge's own words, firstly in a piece entitled "O Romance Contemporâneo," followed by Stephanie d'Orey's interview with the writer. The essay, originally read aloud in London in June 1996, analyzes the resurgence and vitality of the novel as a genre in the context of post-revolutionary Portugal. In so doing, the author situates herself within a generation intent on using the novel (as opposed to poetry) as a privileged medium to reflect (on) contemporary reality and makes an impassioned case for the genre's potential. Jorge's own ability to realize, challenge, and stretch the potential of the novel in her own work makes her one of the most distinguished and versatile writers of fiction in contemporary Portugal.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the contributors and editors who have been so willing to devote themselves to this common project. In particular, I should like to acknowledge Paulo de Medeiros, who initially inspired me

to produce this volume, and Victor Mendes, who took over thereafter. And my gratitude goes to Lídia Jorge, too, for her receptiveness to my numerous requests and, above all, for being the writer she is.

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