

## "What is it that we kiss, but never adore?"

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on Katherine Vaz.

*Mariana*.

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Sister Mariana Alcoforado (1640-1723) is undoubtedly the most famous Portuguese nun who ever lived. Though confined to a convent at the age of eleven, she later had a passionate relationship with a French mercenary soldier who had been sent to fight in the Portuguese war against Spain. Mariana's love story would probably have long since been forgotten had she not written five ardent love letters to her French captain, known as *Lettres Portugaises*, after he was dismissed from his duties in Portugal. These letters, first published in France in 1668 and then throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and South America have, over the past three centuries, portrayed sister Mariana as a legendary figure of ultimate passion. However, Mariana has remained virtually unknown in the English-speaking world. It is primarily to this audience that Katherine Vaz offers her historical novel, *Mariana*, set in the southern Portuguese town of Beja.

Based on extensive research in Portugal and on her readings of all available Marianalia sources, Vaz provides the historical, local and biographical context of the renowned *Lettres Portugaises*. Outside Portugal, knowledge of Mariana is often limited to information included in these letters. Some readers and critics have even doubted the authenticity of the *Portuguese Letters*, dismissing them as a French work of fiction. Katherine Vaz's timely novel recreates Mariana's whole existence from her childhood to her death, thus adding new dimensions to a life that has often been reduced to an epistolary existence. Divided into four parts, the novel depicts Mariana's childhood (Part I), her life in the convent up until she meets the French soldier Noel Bouton (Part II), her relationship with Bouton, her letters and their publication (Part III), the aftermath of her self-imposed penance and her death (Part IV). Katherine Vaz's translation of the *Lettres Portugaises* is skillfully interwoven into this novel so that the letters become structurally central to an intense story of passion, joy and sorrow.

Set in southern Portugal, *Mariana* is rich in the flavor of Portuguese cultural traditions. Culinary specialties, familiar terms of endearment and Portuguese history and myths all intertwine in the novel as they transport readers into the heart of Portuguese culture. For those unfamiliar with Portugal and the Portuguese language, Vaz unobtrusively explains the meanings of important traditions and terminology that contribute to the novel's feeling of authenticity. Although an appendix glossary provides further information, the text is largely self-explanatory.

Because Sister Mariana de Alcoforado has become a symbol of unconditional and passionate love, one could easily overlook that the original setting of her youth was a country at war. Vaz vividly portrays the impact of the War of Independence on the Alcoforado family, their friends and associates. Through their eyes, the author recreates the local riots, fights and victories of Beja that accompanied the struggle for independence. In fact, the omnipresent war molds and determines the lives of the protagonists. Mariana's father, the nobleman Francisco da Costa Alcoforado, tenaciously wages his personal war against the Spaniards in a persistent effort to free his family and the country he loves. A hardworking yet stubborn military fanatic, Francisco insists on being obeyed. Ironically, his are the very laws and values that Mariana defies from the beginning, as she seeks to free herself from her father's forceful will. In response to her disobedience, Mariana is sent to the convent where she would "finally have friends and be on her own, as it seemed she wanted" (47). This was common practice through Portugal at the time, for it simplified the arrangements of the family inheritance and kept the country's political systems unfractured and properties intact. Yet Mariana's strong commitment to live according to her heart's dictates caused her to defy the rules and regulations of the cloister, whose laws were an extension of her father's laws. Hoping to achieve her freedom promptly, she cherishes the illusion that one day her father will recognize his mistake and her true life will commence. When he fails to visit her, his absence torments Mariana almost as much as his authoritarianism. Her brother Baltazar also progressively gathers the strength to disobey both the monks of his priory and his father: "I couldn't bring myself to defy Papai and the monks and come to you when I was younger," he tells Mariana, "but now I'm old enough not to care" (78). Though their father had been "a patron of national freedom [...] Baltazar and Mariana were to be viewed as the patrons of personal freedom" (217).

In contrast to the autocratic rule of the father, her mother Leonor is portrayed as a woman of strength and tranquility. Submissive to her husband, whom she loves "fantastically" (85), she nevertheless firmly follows her own convictions. She is empowered by her stoicism, steadily working for the causes in which she believes. Her determination and serenity successfully reduce the infamous brave Rui Lôbo to a buffoon; Leonor is "the only one to call a Lôbo a coward and survive" (93). If her husband seeks peace through war and Portuguese independence, Leonor will only feel peace in death: having heard the rumor of peace for half of her life, the exhaustion of continuous childbearing, along with the hardships and anxiety of wartime, progressively take their toll on her.

As the novel unfolds, Vaz ably conveys the powerful emotions that accompany plot developments. Francisco da Costa Alcoforado's growing shame and anguish are vividly evoked throughout the second part of the novel. A man of war, he readily risked "the dagger of the Spanish King. But he could not stand the stabbing in his heart from his own daughter" (163). He considers her dead. Vaz effectively modulates the crescendo of a father's pain; just when he appears to reach the height of despair, Francisco learns first that his son Baltazar has assisted Mariana's sin, and afterwards that letters documenting the ardent love affair have become public knowledge: "And then with a chill in his spine, Francisco realized that if the affair were true, as he knew it was, then the recording of it by her hand could also be genuine" (223). Publication of the *Lettres Portugaises* proclaims far and wide Mariana's disregard for the laws of her father, the convent and of God.

Images from Portuguese history and symbolism are incorporated into the novel, creating narrative loops that skillfully embellish the central plot. The story of Inês de Castro, who was exhumed after her burial to be crowned Dom Pedro's queen, reappears in *Mariana* with intense emotion. For Francisco, his sorrow is so deep at the end of his life that he painfully relives the memories of his daughter: "He found a throne empty within himself, and there he put his daughter, though he called her dead...Oh Mariana! Betrayer! But she was the precious one of his heart" (225).

Mariana's enclosure in the convent is also portrayed with deep symbolism as her father's life draws to an end. He begins hallucinating about his daughter's entrapment and imagines that he must rescue her. Disturbing flashbacks from Mariana's childhood haunt the old man as he recalls how she had once become entrapped in a blackberry patch where he had sent her. The

alternation of the present with his hallucinations brings him dramatically to his death.

Despite the laws and prohibitions intrinsic to a country at war and the life inside a cloister, *Mariana* does not lack humor. Vaz relates amusing incidents from Mariana's rebellious childhood (often with a mischievous grandmother "vovó") and from her convent life. Forbidden walks to the town market, childhood pranks played on her siblings, and the episode of the drunk plucked geese add a lighter side to a novel of intense passion and conflict. Vovó's riddle, "What is it that we kiss, but never adore?" remains unanswered throughout most of the book, adding an element of intrigue to the novel.

One of Katherine Vaz's greatest accomplishment is the powerful portrayal of Mariana's day-to-day life: "Besides, she wasn't a nun; she was Mariana" (144). The vitality of the protagonist's intense life—a life that cannot be contained within the strict convent walls or other limits of her reality—is vibrantly depicted. Her existence reaches out to integrate all the magic of the universe, a universe rich in colors, adventures and dreams. Her life constantly explores the captivating forces that unite the hearts of the living and the dead, of the present and the absent. From early on in her youth, she aspires to a love that transcends her mortal existence, "to exist within a love where ordinary mortal rules did not apply" (10). Given her circumstances within the convent, her first lesson from her mentor Abbess Dona Maria de Mendonça is, "How to feel the presence of those we love even when they are not materially in front of us" (50). This valuable lesson enables her to withstand the absence of her family, her dear brother, and ultimately, the French captain. It is through her imagination that she can go beyond the walls of the cloister, beyond Beja, to unseen places. In Vaz's narrative, Mariana's life transcends all the physical limitations imposed upon her.

Given our knowledge of the Portuguese Letters, Mariana's love affair with Captain Bouton is no surprise to readers. As she meets and falls in love with him at first sight, the narrative takes a fairy tale turn for just a moment, "straight down onto the street, where everything on all sides of her fell away except for a French Captain who was twisting his horse around, and in the exact moment her head was entirely lifted her eyes caught his and his locked into hers, as if he had been waiting for her" (130). The magic of their first encounter continues throughout the beginning of the relationship, as they connect once again later that night in the locutory of the convent. "There he was. She did not know his name. He was a shape in the night. It was clear

that he had been searching for her. Stepping forward in the same moment that he did, her hands lifted to meet his" (130). This passage stands out in *Mariana*, which on the whole comes across as a more realistic historical novel. Here the author instantly transposes both Mariana and the reader into an intense relationship of love and passion. The passion she feels, as so well-defined in her famous letters, is powerful and real: "Perhaps others in the world, a few of them, had felt like this, but none had ever felt it more powerfully, more rightly, than she did" (138). She feels deep joy, and wishes it to be everlasting.

Vaz emphasizes the fascinating metamorphosis that occurs as Mariana's world takes a new turn. The rituals of the convent appear senseless as all of her universe begins to revolve around her passionate folly: "Bleary-eyed, reciting Matins! Useless! Her lips moving not in words but in trying to relive what kissing him was like" (138). She wanders aimlessly through the convent routines, obsessively seeing her lover in music, in the color of the vestments, in the scriptorium, in her work: "Daytime was nothing but worthless pale padding stitched to the underside of night" (141).

Katherine Vaz evokes the full dimension of Mariana's affair, encompassing the physical, spiritual, social and emotional relationship that the nun has with the French officer. She oscillates between the intensity of Mariana's utter devotion and the captain's nonchalance and indifference. On the one hand, Mariana encounters through him a world beyond her imagination. He transforms her "little house" by bringing to Mariana his experienced vision of the outside world: "The feeling in her room was that it was not a room. He had made it oceans, plains, everywhere" (164). On the other hand, through the voice of the omniscient narrator, Vaz consistently reveals the soldier's true intentions. Though he is flattered by Mariana's complete devotion, he has no difficulty walking nonchalantly away from what was only meant to be "fine and fond, a memory" (169).

Distraught, Mariana loses her universe and all reason for living as Noel Bouton is sent back to France. To escape from the torture of his absence, she recreates his presence and their love by writing to him. Through the ardent, passionate and desperate *Lettres Portugaises*, she progressively realizes that the "ecstasies that intoxicated [her] mind and heart were for [him] nothing more than thrills that came and burned out with the moment" (196).

Having systematically constructed all the necessary elements of an intricate story to sustain the well-known *Lettres Portugaises*, Katherine Vaz takes

her narrative one step further to establish the missing links between Mariana's epistolary writing and publication of the letters in French. From the small town of Beja and the convent of Nossa Senhora da Conceição, Vaz follows Mariana's mercenary soldier to his native France, his encounters in the Parisian milieu, and the circulation of the letters that rapidly led to their publication. Vaz convincingly establishes the authenticity of the letters, and this in turn becomes one of the most powerful aspects of the novel.

As the novel moves swiftly through the decades that follow publication of the letters, the author induces yet another emotional peak. The published letters, read by thousands, ultimately find their way back to their author:

She did not linger over the pages. She knew them as deeply as she would know a child who might have been taken from her when it was a baby and that she did not see again until it came back as an adult. She knew every letter of every word. Each was etched on her soul, with blood seeping out of every word. Mariana's pulse thumped with amazement and outrage that the outside world should be better acquainted with her own secrets than she was herself. (275)

Mariana's chance discovery projects her back to the heartache she had fought to overcome for the past forty years, leaving her with the pain of "eternal unknowing. Love, in its merciless complications, a real force and not a memory, was killing her again" (276).

Ironically she realizes that of all her painstaking archives and records she had labored over throughout her years in the convent, the words that would ultimately immortalize her were "the few documents she wrote with anguished speed, the speed of love, almost forty years ago, when she had been twenty-six" (276). The "eternal unknowing" that torments Mariana is amplified by the despair she feels: having toiled over numbers and accounts for most of her existence, she cannot grasp the exact extent of the circulation of her once private letters. As she prepares to die, she hopes to claim at least one victory through her younger sister Peregrina. Her last wish is for Peregrina to stand for Abbess of the convent in 1732, thus reversing 23, the year of her death: "It will," she tells her sister, "serve as my last victory with books and accounts if I know that you are the one to spin the numbers of my death back into a living triumph" (311). Through her life as by her death, she has triumphed more than she could ever have envisioned, as an inspiration of love-pure, kind and forgiving. At her death, Mariana who had always prayed

for a miracle, realizes that she has all along been granted her own: "the greatest miracle open to anyone is to love madly. Therefore I defy everything in order to stand thus joyfully undone before you, to trouble myself forever, to cast down all before the greatest passion in the world" (312).

As the author states in the afterword of the novel, "Bad enough that her letters should be taken from [Mariana]. Unforgivable that anyone should attempt to brush her spirit aside. My conviction is that her life and authorship should be returned to her" (324). Through this novel, Vaz succeeds in this exact purpose. She brings to readers of our day the enchantment of Mariana and her solid conviction of the authenticity of the *Lettres Portugaises*. It would be virtually impossible to read Katherine Vaz's powerful novel without being deeply moved by its portrayal of Mariana, whose vibrant spirit informs every page.