



The first epic written and published by a woman in portuguese:

Memorial da Infancia de Christo e Triumpho do divino Amor

by Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel¹

O primeiro épico escrito e publicado por uma mulher em língua portuguesa: *Memorial da Infancia de Christo e Triumpho do divino Amor* de Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel

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Abstract: This paper offers a preliminary analysis of the first epic work written and published by a woman in the Portuguese language: *Memorial da Infância de Christo e Triumpho do Divino Amor* (1639)³ by Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel. Published in 1639 but until now never republished, the *Memorial* is a key work for our understanding of both gender and epic studies, both in the context of Portuguese literature and from the standpoint of the Portuguese language as written in the 17th century.

Keywords: epic, women writers, Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel.

Resumo: Neste artigo far-se-á uma análise sucinta do primeiro épico escrito e publicado por uma mulher em língua portuguesa, o *Memorial da Infância de Christo e Triumpho do Divino Amor* (1639), de Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel. Publicado em 1639 mas nunca até agora republicado, o *Memorial* é uma obra fundamental para se entender a relação dos estudos épicos com os estudos de gênero, ambos no contexto português da literatura e da língua portuguesa no século XVII.

Palavras-chave: épico, mulheres escritoras, Soror Maria de Mesquita Pimentel.

Memorial da Infância de Christo e Triumpho do Divino Amor (1639 remains inaccessible to teachers and researchers alike, as do the second and third manuscript parts that also have never been published – *Memorial dos Milagres de Cristo* (*Memorial, an account of Christ's life and miracles*), and *Memorial da Paixão de Cristo* (*An account of the Redeemer's Passion*), respectively.⁴ Together, these texts form an epic trilogy, the whole of which will be the object of analysis of my postdoctoral project in Portuguese Literature at the University of São Paulo, and will result in the in publication of a new

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⁴ The manuscript part will not be the object of the analysis in the present article.

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In this project, our intention is to confirm to what extent the literary strategies deployed by an authoress all but forgotten by the academic community, constitute a consciously female perspective on the epic work – taking into account, of course, the cultural context in which 17th century women were obliged to operate. The literary marginalization suffered by Sister Maria exemplifies the ongoing gender debate surrounding Portuguese literature, in which the canon has typically offered very little space to women writers, especially in the period prior to the 19th century.⁵

Sister Maria de Mesquita Pimentel (1581-1661)⁶ had taken her vows at the Monastery of Saint Benedict of Cástris in the city of Évora as a nun of the Cistercian Order. As Fernanda Olival explains her *History of Private Life in Portugal*, from the 14th to the end of the 18th centuries there was a clear presumption that an association existed between womanhood and the partial or total withdrawal from society explicit in religious vows: “Since the Middle Ages, social values have permitted the private and spiritual life of women to be considered almost entirely coincident” (OLIVAL, 2011, p. 275). On the other hand, as Isabel Sá (2011, p. 287) explains, at that time, the “freedom” permitted to women who embarked upon an ecclesiastical life may have been superior to what was typically conceded to those who remained in the domestic sphere, at least as far as education is concerned: nuns were encouraged by their confessors to publish the texts they wrote or translated, even though it is clearly the case that in the Catholic Church in that period, the concept of “female autonomy” remained very restricted, and what little independence existed was enjoyed more in theory than in practice. However, as Antónia Fialho Conde has been able to confirm by studying the history of the convent where Sister Maria spent much of her life, nuns – with the exception of those in positions of power and leadership – were typically far from fully literate, with much of their learning being acquired through the oral rather than written tradition.

Spending one's life in a convent was a destiny common to many women throughout Europe, and especially so in Catholic Europe, to the extent that it was generally perceived

⁵ This is what, for example, Vanda Anastácio (2005, p. 3) highlights in her studies: “Since women in general did not have access to education, it seems reasonable to suppose that most of those who did, had such limited education that they accepted their roles as wives or mothers. Nevertheless, the truth is that, studying the literature produced between the second half of the 18th century and the third decade of the 19th century, we continuously trip over facts that seem to deny this idea.”

⁶ The dates of birth and death referred by Diogo Machado in the Lusitanian Library.

as an ideal model of Christian spiritual life. It was in this context that many Portuguese women writers of the past opted to willingly accept, or enthusiastically embrace, the alternative form of seclusion afforded by convent life as a means of securing the literacy skills on which intellectual improvement and spiritual advancement crucially depended. Despite the highly unfavorable medieval vision of woman, based as it was upon the stigmatization of Eve's original sin, "nuns were Christ's wives and their function was to protect the rest of society through prayer, providing them – at least in principal – with a status superior to that of married women as simple mortals" (SÁ , 2011, p. 280).

By writing an epic text – a genre that constituted the pinnacle of the masculine authorial project – Sister Maria emerges, in the European context, as a pioneering woman, preceding even that great figure of French literature, Anne-Marie du Bocage, whose *La Colombiade, ou, La foi portée au nouveau monde* (1758) is considered the first epic text to be written by a Frenchwoman, and whose work, through translation, has attained truly global status. We might add, moreover, that another Portuguese women, Bernarda Ferreira de Lacerda (1595-1644) had also published an epic in 1619, entitled *Hespana Libertada* which, having been written in Castilian, was not recognized as a part of the Portuguese literary heritage.

In the *Memorial da Infância de Christo e Triunpho do Divino Amor* (*Memorial, an Account of Christ's Childhood and the Triumph of Divine Love*) of 1639, much in the tradition of convent authors, Sister Maria adopts a biblical theme – in this case, the story of Christ's childhood. However, in addition to approaching the subject from a religious viewpoint, through her erudite use of the Portuguese language and her wide knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology, she also fulfils the basic criterion of the epic text. The work comprises a total of 908 stanzas presented in 156 folios each containing 8 lines; each of the 10 cantos is preceded by a brief summary of the narrative, presented didactically for the better understanding for reader.⁷ Proof of the author's aesthetic preoccupation with the structural requirements of the epic is to be found in the dedication to the Virgin, Our Lady of Exile ("À Virgem Senhora Nossa do Desterro") and in the Prologue, where the content and scope of the text is presented, along with references to the mythological beings that also inspired her narrative. These are the mechanisms whereby the author satisfies the basic requirements of the classic epic poem, and why she refers, in the midst of an epic

⁷ As Isabel Morujão (1998, p. 177-208) has noted, when her aim is to accomplish the didactic function of allowing her reader to visualize scenes from Biblical stories, Sister Pimentel, from the lexical point of view, tends to highlight elements contained in the advice to nuns provided in the work attributed to Saint Bonaventura.

religious work, to various entities from Greek and Roman mythology, going so far as to request the aid of Apollo and Minerva in improving her musicianship:

E vòs ò sacro Apollo, ominipotente,
Que da dourada Ecliptica baixando
A ser pastor no mundo diligente
Vos vai o Amor divino destinando:
Tempera minha lyra docemente,
Para que ao som d'ella vá cantando
Amores de huma ovelha, que perdida,
Vos trouxerão do Ceo, por lhe dar vida.
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto I, est. 3, fl. 1v.)

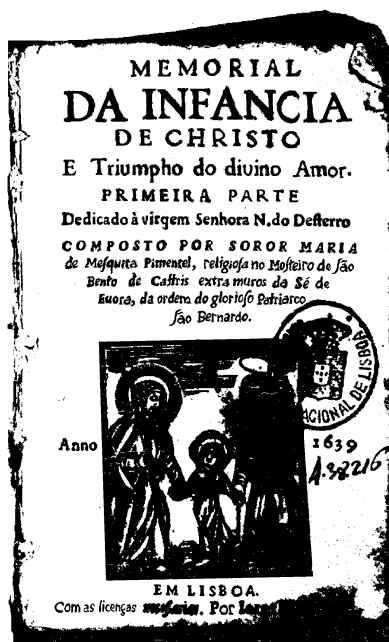
And you, Oh sacred, Oh almighty Apollo,
Descending from the golden Ecliptic
To be a shepherd in this world
Divine Love is your due
Tune my lyre so sweetly
That its sound may sing
Of the love for one lost lamb
That brought you down from Heaven to
save its life.
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant I, stanza 3, sheet
1, left hand page)

De invocar a Minerva já me priva
Temer que o saber seu nada me quadre
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto I, est. 4, fl. 1v.)

Summoning Minerva assuages my fear
That her knowledge may ill befit me
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant 1, stanza 4, sheet
1, left hand page)

Another important element is to be found in the image⁸ in which the Holy Family is portrayed, located on the front page of the first and only edition:

⁸ Reproduction of a rare exemplar contained in the National Library of Portugal.



In spite of the exalted image of the Holy Family, it is the Virgin Mary who, in the course of the narrative, emerges as the most prominent figure, and effectively plays the role of heroine of this epic poem, as I have already shown in Silva 2014, p.57). In a single – indeed, singular – personality, Mary combines the attributes of beauty, fragility and bravery, and is described as a woman of superhuman characteristics: “Não só nas perfeições, & graças da alma/ He phenis singular, & sobrehumana” “Not only in the perfection & grace of her soul, she is a singular and superhuman phoenix]”(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant II, stanza 29, sheet 22, left hand page). Thus in this work there are indications of what Thomas Greene has called the constituents of the epic that can be principally attributed to the figure of the Virgin Mary and to her divine Son: “The epic is the poem which replaces divine worship with humanistic awe for the act which is prodigious but yet human” (GREENE, 1975, p. 14). Up to a point, it is natural that in the passages that describe the Holy Family, as represented in the picture on the title page, great prominence is given to the Virgin Mary, since her son Jesus is still a child. Such powerful emphasis is given to this woman that plans – both heavenly and human – appear subordinate to the mysteries embodied by this Virgin mother.

E fica no presepio a maravilha

A marvel lay in sweet repose

Da nova & divinissima Trindade,

A new and celestial Trinity,

Hum Deos, que està envolto na mãtilha

A God all wrapped in swaddling clothes

E que mamando esconde a divinidade:

Whose suckling conceals Divinity;

A Virgem sua Mãi, a quem se humilha	Before His Mother's stately pose
A terra, & Ceo, por sua dignidade,	Earth & Heaven kneel in symmetry
O divino Joseph, que sobe a tanto	And Joseph ascends to the limits
Que he sua alma hu espirito, o mais santo.	Most blessed in both soul and spirit.
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto VI, est. 78, fl. 64)	(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant VI, stanza 78, sheet 64)

Profundamente a Virgem conferia	A Mother's joy sinks roots so deep
Dentro no curacao o que gozava:	Inside the Virgin's breast
Os secretos mysterios revolvía,	And mysteries forever sleep
E no cofre do peito os encerrava:	As if locked within a chest.
O santo Patriarca em companhia	And Holy Joseph's soul does leap
Com mil jubilos d'alma se enlevava	With joy, a thousand-fold blessed,
Na soberana luz da Mãi tão pura,	In the light of Mother's purity
E no Minino sol da fermosura.	And a fair Child's sanctity.
(PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto VI, est. 79, fl. 64)	(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant VI, stanza 79, sheet 64)

The narrative begins in some remote time, before the very creation of the world, in a celestial world inhabited by angels, where it is revealed to the angels have that in the future Jesus will be the savior of humanity. This discovery awakens envy and rebellion in Lucifer who, together with other discontented angels, unleashes a divine war against the rest of heaven's creatures. The rebels are defeated and exiled to a realm where only suffering and pain rule. The description that the author constructs clearly has its basis in the mythological kingdom of Hades. Subsequently, the author relates how God first creates the world, and then Adam and Eve, who later would bring sinfulness to humanity.

Though the main theme of the text is the childhood of Jesus, the narrative often returns to the idea that everything is possible if we accept this woman who is at once both human and divine. Thus it is not unexpected when Adam refers to a "future Immaculate Virgin" who, transformed into human form will combat sin, a figure that manages to combine a number of qualities, each interwoven with the other, originating among the supreme beings that inhabit both the Christian universe (i.e. angels) and the Greco-Roman universe (i.e. nymphs). The narrator attaches special importance to this divine duality, pleading first with mythological beings to tune her lyre and to endow her with exceptional

vocal talents, and then beseeching the Virgin Mary to give her the necessary power and eloquence, since her poetic skills are so limited and coarse:

E porque a perfeição d'esta obra acabe,
 Em extasi he justo se levante,
 Adorando em seu ventre o q não cabe
 No Ceo, nelle vê tornado infante:
 O que sentio então, só ella o sabe,
 E nem de hum Seraphim ferà bastante,
 Para o poder dizer, a lingua aguda,
 Quanto mais esta minha, q he tão ruda.
 (PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto II, est. 90, fl. 33)

A flawless work we see unfold,
 And rightly stand in awestruck joy,
 Adore, within you, whom Heav'n could
 not hold,
 And see him grow a princely boy;
 What Mary felt, she has never told.
 No seraph's tongue could yet deploy
 Terms wise enough to match the truth,
 Much less my own, coarse and uncouth.
 (PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant II, stanza 90,
 sheet 33)

A gloria que sentis, alta Princeza,
 Mal poderà de mim ser explicada,
 Por quanto he infinita na grandeza,
 E Minha posse he muito limitada:
 Mas para proseguir tão alta empreza,
 Daime huma voz excelsa, & delicada,
 Porque afinando o plectro, entretanto
 A elle leda ponha novo Canto.
 (PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto II, est. 91, fl.
 32v.)

High Princess, the glory that you feel,
 could never
 Be by such as me described,
 It grandeur extends forever,
 And my talents are so confined;
 That I may reach such high endeavor
 Give me a voice sweet and sublime
 And since my plectrum feels quite wrong
 I'll gladly sing you a new song.
 (PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant II, stanza 91,
 sheet 32 left hand page)

In her narrative, Sister Maria clearly sought to deploy authentic passages from the Bible, such as the coming of the three Magi to adore the Child, the presentation of the Child Jesus to the Temple in accordance with the ritual of the Torah, the massacre of the first-born in Bethlehem, the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, while fictionalizing them to a degree by associating them with the intervention of imaginary beings. As Cecil Bowra has commented, the articulation of mythical unreality with biblical truth is commonly found in the structure of the epic poem: "Though it contains real persons and real events, it often

connects them in unreal relations, and may even add unreal persons and unreal events when the fullness of the narrative demands them” (BOWRA, 1952, p. 535).

In other words, we believe that the intention of Sister Maria was to construct a religious text with the characteristics of the Greek and Roman classics, with the purpose of edifying and informing the reader with regard to the importance of knowledge drawn from the two distinct realities. On one hand, readers would accept that the Bible contains the truth of the creation and redemption of the world, the divine promise of the salvation of humanity through the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who became man. On the other hand, Sister Maria clearly felt that her readers needed to be instructed in mythology, so that they might understand how in the ancient world literature, philosophy and a particular form of religiosity developed, and might draw the moral lesson that children’s obedience to their parents is fundamental, and that a woman should accept her destiny – in Sister Maria’s case, a sacred destiny. With reference to other epic works, Anazildo Silva and Christina Ramalho have concluded that “in Western epic poetry, the presence of mythological and religious dimensions, transformed into something real by the intersection of the fantastical and the historical, makes the literary text itself a vehicle of Christian religious reaffirmation of the [prevailing] social structures” (SILVA; RAMALHO, 2007, p. 281).

Moreover, it is worth stressing, as Tzvetan Todorov (2012, p. 53) explains, that when an author has recourse to the marvelous, in which there is a confluence of different worlds and dimensions within the same narrative, we are confronted by the existence of supernatural facts to the exclusion of all others (on the one hand), and the absence of any speculation as to the reactions these might provoke in the characters (on the other). In the case under scrutiny here, in the passage from Canto VI, we find Delius/Apollo called upon to aid divine purpose by loaning his chariot so that the Holy Family – whose reaction to these events is left unspoken – can make good their escape to Egypt. In a scene in which even the Seraphim are called into service, we can see how adept the writer was in deploying the technical resources of this kind of text:

O rico carro humilha Delio louro,	Blond Delius balks at freight so rare
Para que o grão Joseph, & casta esposa	And so Joseph & his innocent wife
Levando dentro nelle seu thesouro	Who in her womb rich treasure bears
Não lhe seja a jornada trabalhosa	Lack no comfort in their strife
Os Seraphins com suas azas d’ouro	The Seraphim, wings gleaming in the air,
O seguem na derrota gloriosa	In glory march, protecting life.

E eu do brando plectro me levanto,

Por ter fim o caminho de meu Canto

(PIMENTEL, 1639, Canto VI, est. 206, fl. 97
v.)

My plectrum's work is all but done

For this my Canto's course is run

(PIMENTEL, 1639, Chant VI, stanza
206, sheet 97, left hand page)

Overall, this first epic work written by a woman in the Portuguese language not only demonstrates the admirable intellectual qualities of a Portuguese woman living in a society where women were considered intellectually inferior to men, but also showed her to be a pioneer in a literary style – the epic poem – that was considered simultaneously intellectually elevated and structurally very rigid and demanding. Notwithstanding this achievement, Sister Maria has suffered to this day a virtual academic invisibility; to date, only three scholars have dedicated any great effort to analyzing her work (Isabel Morujão, Antónia Fialho Conde and myself), reflecting the more general problem of the marginalization of works by women authors in Portuguese literature. In other words, as Christina Ramalho (2007, p. 175) affirms, once we begin to disassemble the barriers that hitherto have prevented the work of Sister Maria, as well as that of other women writers, from being appropriately recognized and valued, their significance as literary actors and agents is slowly revealed. Due to its structural complexity, its historical embeddedness, and its impregnation with mythical elements, the *epopee* constitutes a powerful instrument not only for revising the mechanisms by which history and culture have been socially constructed, but also for reassessing the type of theoretical formulations that may more effectively promote critical readings of wider human experiences.

The project on which the present paper is based aims to demonstrate that, while women have often enjoyed equal intellectual status with men as literary producers, the main difference between the genders has consisted in the disproportionate restrictions placed on women's choice of subject matter. A woman, let alone a nun, would have been censured, both metaphorically and literally, had she opted for a non-religious theme; for her work to be published, Sister Maria's text would have been scrutinized by a series of censors (such as Frei Damaso da Apresentação, Doctor Frei Gaspar dos Reis, Frei Arsenio da Paixão e Frei Theodosio de Lucena) before the Inquisition's authorization would be given. The document approving publication of the *Memorial* ("Licença", 1639) states categorically that nothing had been found in this eighth verse that stood in opposition to the Catholic faith; indeed, its authors consider the whole work to be replete with "diverse high concepts, all elegantly accomplished, demonstrating a greatness of natural skill and talent".

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