

## Representing the Rustic Woman: A Reading of *A sibila* by Agustina Bessa Luís

The image of the rustic woman appears frequently throughout the Portuguese literary tradition, yet she is most often an over simplified caricature that blends in with the majestic, picturesque scenes. Ultimately, she is portrayed as part of the provincial countryside, rarely having a central role in literature and confined to three principal traits, namely spirituality, purity, both physical and emotional, and submission to masculine authority. The frequent implication of these representations is the repetitive desexualization of the rustic woman who is neither the object of masculine desire nor is able to satisfy her own sexual desires. This classic representation of the rustic woman furthermore constitutes part of a larger dichotomy in which many Portuguese canonical masculine writers, such as Eça de Queirós and Camilo Castelo Branco, have frequently placed women throughout Portuguese literature. One extreme is the deplorable, desexualized rustic woman and the other is the sensual, voluptuous urban woman. This paper will analyze the binary images associated with the rustic woman in the Portuguese literary tradition, and then within the contemporary rustic novel *A sibila* by Agustina Bessa Luís who seeks to not only question these representations, but return a voice to the rustic women in literature.<sup>1</sup>

In Portuguese literature, Agustina Bessa Luís is one of the first writers to emphasize the psychological reality of the rustic woman and challenge the images that surround this figure in literature. Previously the Portuguese rustic novel was dominated by masculine figures where the woman was simply nonexistent or unimportant; a mere ornament associated with the men in her life. Women's daily habits, beliefs, and roles in country life were practically unmentioned in both fiction and rural studies. Such is the case of *A vida rural no romance português*, António Alvaro Dória's four hundred page theoretical study of the Portuguese countryside that significantly omits information on the role or representation of the rustic woman. Recently, the Portuguese rustic woman has begun to receive the attention she deserves, particularly in anthropological and sociological studies, such as Brian Juan O'Neil's or Caroline B. Brettell's work.<sup>2</sup> However, this newfound interest in the rustic woman is a recent phenomenon as the cited researchers published their work in the late 1980s or the early 1990s.

Agustina Bessa Luís was ahead of her time, publishing *A sibila* in 1953, a mere three years after Doria published his study of the Portuguese countryside in literature.

In Portuguese literature, it has become commonplace to associate the rustic woman with purity, spirituality, and submissiveness ever since the “cantigas de amigo: which date back to 1198. However, the Portuguese are not alone. Purity has a long tradition of being associated with the country and by extension its inhabitants. As Raymond Williams points out in *The Country and the City*: “On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life; of peace, innocence, and simple virtue”(1). According to Williams, there is a long tradition in literature which associates idealized images and scenes to the country, which dates back to the Virgilian pastoral where the country was a refuge from war and political disturbances that were so frequent in the cities (17). This tradition continued as city dwellers sought out the country as a place of rest and recovery (24).

The rustic woman is a manifestation of the very inner peace that Williams associates with the country. She is furthermore directly tied to physical purity, which entails both virginity and desexualization. A desexualized woman is one who is not the object of masculine sexual desire, as represented by more traditional patriarchal interpretations and in a more feminist interpretation, where she does not act upon or satisfy her own sexual desires. The rustic woman is not only described as virginal, but in fact proud of her virginity since virginity in Raymond William’s very own words is “a rural virtue” (64). Within the specific context of Portugal, Caroline B. Brettell reminds us that Portugal is part of the Mediterranean where female virginity is protected by the males in the family because: “Chastity is next to godliness and reputation is everything” (213).<sup>3</sup> According to many traditional masculine narratives, the rustic woman is portrayed as brute, ignorant, and physically unattractive. Simply stated, she is equated to a beast of burden, useful for only hard, demanding labor. Men neither see her as sexually desirable nor as one who can provide sexual pleasure.

Such examples are abundant in Portuguese literature. One of the first examples can be found in Sá de Miranda’s *Écloga Basto* from 1626. After much debate, the tranquility of the countryside will ultimately preside over the corruption of the court. However, the principal critique of the countryside is the lack of sexually desirable women, termed as “real women”. In the nineteenth century novel, *A queda dum anjo* by Camilo Castelo Branco, the main character, Calisto Elói, abandons

Teodora, his long time rustic wife, for a femme fatale who could satisfy him in ways, namely "gozos celestiais", that his wife could not (154). In Lisbon, Teodora and her provincial habits were the object of ridicule, especially the straw hat (chapeu de palha) used frequently by peasants. The very same straw hat later appears in *A sibila* used by Estina. Like Teodora, the straw hat is used to associate Estina with the rural countryside. In the novel *A capital* by Eça de Queirós, the main character, Artur, is originally from the countryside and searches for acceptance among Lisbon's intellectual elite. When questioned about women from the countryside, Artur replies that they are horrible and again implies the lack of real women (14). This is the same argument presented in *Écloga Basto* centuries ago. Another example comes from Camilo Castelo Branco's "Maria Moisés." Maria Tiburcia and Maria Filipa, two classic rustic women, were single not because of a personal choice, as is the case of Quina in *A sibila*, but because no man was willing to marry them due to their extreme unattractiveness. Furthermore, they were chaste as says Castelo Branco: "era o seu feitio e a sua natureza" (51). Perhaps the clearest example comes from Eça de Queirós' *A cidade e as serras* with Ana Vaqueira, who in Eça's own words, well deserves her name for she is similar to a cow in all aspects. Her qualifications consist of working, digesting, and conceiving well; satisfying nature's demands in all her animality. (157-8).<sup>4</sup>

The rustic woman is frequently reduced to an animal as seen in *A cidade e as serras*. These images were created to reduce the power that women could potentially attain in the rustic domain. In the city, women are commonly considered the "housewife" while men are labeled as the "breadwinners." In most cases, this is not applicable to the rustic woman because she participates in the daily chores of rural life (Connell 155).<sup>5</sup> Brettell emphasizes that even though rustic women are oppressed, they enjoy a greater possibility of economic independence in the country as opposed to women in the urban centers. In the country, provided that a woman manages to own her own land, she could farm it as a means of income. She could furthermore live off the land and ultimately achieve economic independence from a man, as did Quina. Traditionally women did not have access to employment or other means of earning money in the cities, and thus could not enjoy the same possibilities of economic freedom, as did the rustic woman. Ultimately, patriarchy hopes to maintain the power structure by reducing the rustic woman and her work to that of a beast of burden, which minimizes her contributions and opportunities for economic advancement.<sup>6</sup>

Along with not providing sexual pleasure, the rustic woman is not an active searcher or possessor of sexual pleasure, as opposed to the urban women. Returning again to the works of Eça de Queirós, we clearly see the frequent sexual contrast between the rustic and the urban woman in *Os Maias*. Eça portrays nineteenth century Lisbon society with its numerous sensual urban women. Whether they are courtesans or wealthy ladies of society, they are desired by men and also actively seek out male companions to satisfy their own desires. Such is the case of Condessa Gouvarinhos who persistently seduces Carlos da Maia until he cedes to her advances and "sexual appetite (298)." Urban women are described as attaining their own sexual pleasure, such as the detailed scene where the English maid, Miss Sara, is clearly identified as experiencing an orgasm (402).

Agustina Bessa Luís uses the figure of the sibyl as a representation of feminine power demonstrated by the main characters Joaquina Augusta (Quina) and Germa.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Bessa Luís also used the sibyl archetype to illuminate the situation of the rustic woman and to give her a voice, which has been overall absent from Portuguese literature. In this sense, Agustina Bessa Luís is the real sibyl of the novel in the tradition established by Elizabeth Campbell that states the feminine artist is the very manifestation of feminine power and the challenge of masculine authority. According to Campbell's definition, Bessa Luís would be included with Sappho, George Eliot, and Margaret Atwood.<sup>8</sup> Each woman, within her own time frame and her own literary project, sought to inspire a new female voice.

Understanding the archetype of the sibyl is an essential aspect of the novel. It appears that Bessa Luís was aware of the sibyl archetype and the classic tradition. A sibyl is not simply any woman who is a prophetess. There is a clear distinction between the sibyl and the fay. The sibyl, normally found in the rural domain, can predict the future, but she cannot manipulate it. A fay, as defined by Keller and Kinter, is a supernatural being that possesses great beauty and manipulates the destinies of men (3). The fay is also considered a diabolic creature. The sibyl, on the other hand, is not associated with the devil or other evil forces, but rather with God and positive spiritual forces. In fact, the original meaning of the term sibyl was "the will of the Gods" for it was believed that she received prophecies directly from the Gods or by some form of communication with them. Many times the sybil was a medium through which the Gods, particularly Apollo, directly spoke. The sybil was a pagan confirmation of the religious beliefs of the Ro-

mans and in more general terms, a constant reminder that the Gods cared about their people and were concerned with their people's future (Potter 97). The sibyls also received their prophetic visions through enigmatic dreams, called *o somnium* (Keller and Kinter 3).

Another characteristic associated with the sibyl is extreme old age, which implies that the sibyl, in most cases, is not recognized for her physical beauty as is the fay. Chastity is also frequently associated with sibyls. The most significant example is the legend of Cassandra, the virginal daughter of Priam, the king of Troy. According to legend, Apollo, who desired Cassandra and wished to seduce her, offered her one wish. Cassandra chose the gift of prophecy. When Cassandra later refused to cede to Apollo's advances, he punished her with the curse that even though she could see the future, no one would believe her.<sup>9</sup>

In *A sibila*, Bessa Luís, in accordance with the traditions previously described by Raymond Williams, defines Quina as emotionally pure and a model of generosity and love for her fellow beings. The greatest satisfaction in her life is the aid and inspiration that she provided others.<sup>10</sup> Quina never denied her gift of prophecy to those who requested it. Besides taking in and partially raising Germa, Quina accepted Custódio, an abandoned orphan with no hopes for a prosperous future, as if he were her own child and provided him with all the opportunities for a better future. Bessa Luís also identifies Quina as bringing tranquility to the sick and mentally ill (111).

Emotional purity and spirituality coincide in this novel. Many of the demonstrations of purity are directly tied to Quina's work as a sibyl. Quina is identified as a sibyl with the ability to predict the future and know information or secrets due to a special intuition. Furthermore, Quina conforms to many of the traditional characteristics of the sibyl examined in this study. However, Quina does not conform to the basic conditions of a witch with the exception of not liking children (102). One must remember that Quina was isolated not because of her own personal will, but because she was abandoned by her family, especially her brothers. Was Quina believed to be a witch or a sibyl by the local community? The answer depends on the gender of the character in question. Women revered Quina and sought out the help they believed her visions could provide. The men, however, intimidated by Quina's powers, ridiculed her and frequently accused her of being a witch. Within the Portuguese rural context, a witch is generally believed to be an elderly woman who engages in pacts with the devil.

She is thought to be single, meaning never married, despising children, and preferring to isolate herself from human contact. The figure of the witch is very common in the countryside and each village normally has a token witch who usually is innocent of such diabolic behavior, but once attributed such a reputation, it is nearly impossible to remedy it (Santo 170-79). One example is Estina's husband, Inácio Lucas (119). Another example is Abel, Quina's brother who went so far as to accuse her of being crazy (70). Ultimately, the men in the village generally felt threatened by Quina's relative economic success and independence as a woman. Quina openly challenged the traditional role of women and condemned the supposed superior men for all their shortcomings.<sup>11</sup>

As a sibyl, Quina receives her messages through the Gods by praying. For example, Quina's sister, Estina, has a daughter who one day suddenly disappears. Estina seeks out Quina to discover the whereabouts of her child. Estina begs her to "pray". Quina, upon praying, enters a prophetic trance in which she actually sees her sister's daughter dead. Quina also receives her visions through *somnium*. She is often called upon to interpret other people's dreams. In one example, the Condessa Monteiros requests that Quina interpret a dream about hens. Quina with great sorrow does not respond and shortly after the Condessa is dead (129).

Quina is never described as beautiful, unlike her sister Justina who was said to be born naturally beautiful (21). In fact, Quina is openly identified as unattractive (36). Quina also appeared to be born aged and did not have a normal childhood. Already at the age of five, Quina was acquiring an adult's conscience (22). Quina frequently took care of her older brothers and did household chores that corresponded to adults while her brothers played. Like Cassandra, Quina also dies chaste. Quina furthermore shares Cassandra's curse: many people do not believe in her visions. Estina's husband, Inácio Lucas, frequently refers to Quina as a witch and becomes very angered when he believes Quina announced the death of their missing daughter to which Estina responds that no one can prevent God's misfortunes (119).

The forces of fate are present throughout the novel, and affect everyone who passes through the house of Vessada. Destiny is predetermined and Quina can not manipulate neither hers nor anyone else's. This also coincides with the classic traditions of the sibyl; sibyls can see the future but are unable to manipulate it (Keller and Kinter). Quina could not even avoid her own predetermined misfortune that

would happen at the end of her days with the son she adopts, Custódio.

Estava perfeita no seu cargo de sibila, pois conhecia a alma humana de dentro para fora, o que é talvez prever sempre nela o imprevisível, sem, porém, chegar a compreendê-la. Era uma fortaleza de prudência cuja torre de menagem era sempre a vaidade. Mas não passava duma mulherzinha inteiramente ignara, tola, e vulnerável de coração, no dia em que aceitou em sua casa aquela criança e incondicionalmente a adaptou. (136)

She also could not guarantee her own happiness, for Quina dies frustrated and alone. She was alienated by her family and lived the majority of her time isolated. Adão, her one time admirer and lifelong friend, came to visit Quina on her deathbed. Quina's suffering provoked by such treatment is so great she doesn't want to admit it even to herself (185).

Quina failed to achieve all that she had hoped and that many of her aspirations remained incomplete. As the narrator says, Quina "venceu e foi vencida" (251). Quina's life, however, is not really a failure due to the influence she had on many people. She helped many in the community and was sought out for advice and assistance. As a child, Germa loved Quina (102), but upon entering adolescence began to consider Quina strange and felt uncomfortable around her. Germa only truly began to understand Quina and her profound influence on Germa after her death (249). It is Germa who is left at the end of the novel to carry on the traditions of the House of Vessada, and it appears that she holds the hope for a new generation of woman in her family. Furthermore, we are left with the impression that Germa will achieve the happiness that Quina could not, as suggested in the following quote: "Quem é ela para ser um pouco mais do que Quina e esperar que os tempos novos sejam mais aptos a esclarecer o homem e a trazer-lhe a solução de si próprio" (252). After all, says the narrator: "Eis Germa, eis a sua vez agora de traduzir a voz da sua sibila" (251).

One could question the legitimacy of Quina's revelations due to certain ambiguities in the text. For example, Quina has been known to tell an occasional lie (36) and Quina is even identified as possessing a certain charlatanism (45). The other instance that Quina manipulated information was to aid or protect those around her. However, Quina felt that she was obligated to play the role of the comforter, which again

connects Quina to emotional purity as previously discussed (87). Frequently Quina was sought out by fellow women to help them with something beyond her control, such as the circumstance with her cousin, Adriana, who wanted Quina to manipulate the future so that her husband would not continue to betray her with a lover to whom he had promised matrimony. As a sibyl, Quina is incapable of manipulating human destiny. At times, Quina would be frustrated by her own hindrances and afraid she would lose some of the status that she enjoyed as a sibyl. It is only in these circumstances that Quina would exaggerate the truth, as is identified in the following passage: "Aos poucos, essas mulheres descontentes, desesperadas, indecisas e ociosas, criavam-lhe obrigações morais, e, para satisfazer as suas questões, as suas tragicomedias de coração, de consciência, e ate de saúde, ela amplificava as suas possibilidades" (65).

Quina should not be deemed a charlatan for these modifications. She does not manipulate "the truth" for her personal gain, but rather from the obligation she feels to help others. Quina certainly is not benefiting from her persuasions.<sup>12</sup> The only personal motivation Quina has is the respect she receives from the community, which Quina does seek due to her excessive vanity (71). Quina is not idealized; she has the same balance of human faults and strengths as all of us. After all, Quina is identified as: "a mais profunda e inegável expressão do humano" (249). In another passage, the reader is informed the following: "Mas era Germa, de facto, muito nova, e não sabia o que havia em Quina de contradição, incoerência, era o seu profundo conteúdo humano" (108).

Despite the occasional manipulation, the legitimacy of her prophecies is confirmed on numerous occasions throughout the text as she is continuously tied to a higher form of spirituality. Quina is described as acquiring the sibylline form (46). In another example, the narrator says:

...depressa adquiriu uma sabedoria profunda acerca de todos os ritmos da consciência, do instinto, das forças telúricas que se conjugam no fatalismo da continuidade. Conhecia os homens sem o aprender jamais...assim ela vivia, intensamente adaptada com essa capacidade selvagem de defesa, de astúcia, de previsão e pré-conhecimento da vida e das coisas e que o homem civilizado, unido em rebanhos pacíficos, amparado em convenções artificias, vai perdendo ou nunca desenvolve por

completo. Simples era, portanto, para ela atingir uma ascendência espiritual sobre todos aqueles para quem essas qualidades inatas só poderiam significar símbolos de magia. (51-52).

Quina, in addition to being spiritually pure, is also physically pure and thus, desexualized. From a patriarchal interpretation, Quina is not the object of sexual desire, including that of her lifelong admirer, Adão. Another desexualized woman presented by Bessa Luís is Maria da Encarnação, Quina's mother, who is continually left alone and waiting for her husband, who consistently looks to outside sources to satisfy his sexual desires. Another example is the house servant acquired at the end of Quina's days, Libória, who has no sexual desire. Libória expressed the desire to be a doll, which she claimed was the ideal desexualization, because dolls do not have a sex and are inviolable and pure (207). This statement becomes even more interesting when we analyze it under the theoretical tradition of the female doll.

Association of feminine sexuality with dolls dates back to the medieval Kabbalists who sought to form a simulacrum of a human being called the golem, similar to a doll since both are an artificial, fabricated version of the human being. Male golems were associated with intellectual qualities while females were associated with physical beauty, agelessness, and sexuality since they were created to be the ultimate companion to a man; a thoughtless, entirely submissive being who served to provide pleasant company and sexual pleasure. These images continued particularly throughout the Latin American literary tradition where writers such as Felisberto Hernandez, Juan José Arreola, José Donoso, and Rosario Ferre told stories of life size female dolls who were described as the ultimate sexual companions of man.<sup>13</sup> When Libória expresses the desire to be a doll, which she associates as inviolable or impenetrable, she has reversed the theoretical tradition to emphasize her lack of sexuality. Libória, even as the supposed ultimate sexual manifestation, would still be unable to satisfy a man, confining her even more to the desexualized tradition of the rustic woman (Bilbija).

Quina is desexualized and dies chaste but it is important to raise the question whether she could not satisfy her sexual desire due to its homoerotic nature as opposed to simply not having sexual desire. There are many implications that Quina is sexually drawn towards her friend and companion, the Condessa Monteiros. Quina obviously admires

the Condessa for being one of the few women she does not deem weak. However, Quina's feelings run much stronger than sheer admiration due to the clear attachment that Quina has to the Condessa. This attachment began in Quina's childhood when, after frequently hearing many stories about the Condessa, Quina would become pale at the mere mention of her name (27). When the Condessa is very ill and at the end of her days, Quina takes care of all the Condessa's needs and stands by her side to the very end. Afterwards, Quina is profoundly affected by the Condessa's death and remembers her fondly for the rest of her days.

All of this alone, of course, does not imply homoeroticism, but depending on the author of the anonymous love letters that the Condessa received, Quina's attraction to the Condessa could be confirmed. In the same moment that the narrator begins to introduce the friendship between Quina and the Condessa into the narrative, the Condessa begins to receive anonymous love letters from a secret admirer with considerable frequency. This continued for some time until the Condessa insisted on meeting her secret admirer, which caused the end of the correspondence. Quina knew that the Condessa believed a man was sending her the letters because the Condessa would refer to her admirer as "he". Therefore, Quina felt she could not reveal her identity. Furthermore, the narrator implies that the writer of the letters could be a woman. As openly stated by the narrator, due to the sentimental nature of the letters and the facility with which the writer described her passion, no young boy could have been the author. In the very words of Bessa Luís: "Era jovem supunha. Mas advertia nas suas cartas uma prudência sentimental e, ao mesmo tempo, um arrojo tranquilo em falar-lhe do amor, de que nenhum rapaz poderia ser autor" (75).<sup>14</sup>

However, one can not be too quick to assume that Quina is the true author of the letters, because it is also possible that Abel is the definitive author. Abel became infatuated with the Condessa and discussed the possibility of marrying her with Quina to which Quina responded that the Condessa will never marry again. Abel becomes very angered with Quina, accusing her of being a witch, and leaves the house of Vessada (70). Sometime after the end of the mysterious letters, Abel comments to the Condessa: "Parece uma noiva. E ainda hoje minha irmã me disse que a condessa nunca mais se casaria"! (76). As previously established, Abel felt threatened by Quina's powers. Knowing Abel's aggression against Quina, Abel could have hoped to secretly

prove Quina's prophecies wrong by demonstrating the Condessa's desire to remarry if she fell in love. If this is the case, Abel did not prove anything because Quina's prediction still came true. Ultimately, this possibility does seem less probable than the first since Abel, considering his infatuation with the Condessa, would have been able to reveal his true identity once she was in love with her secret admirer. Abel would have been able to achieve what he wanted, the affection of the Condessa. Furthermore, Abel would have perhaps convinced the Condessa to marry him, which would have ultimately undone Quina's predictions. Finally, Bessa Luís specifically uses the term "rapaz" (boy) to refer to who could not have written the letters. The term "rapaz" (boy) has a determined meaning in the rural countryside. "Rapaz" is used to refer to any unmarried male. A thirty-five year old bachelor will still be termed "rapaz" while "homem" (man) is reserved only for married men (Cutileiro 100). Abel was unmarried at the time that the Condessa was receiving the letters, which if we accept what the narrator informs us to be the truth, would eliminate Abel.

Submissiveness is also frequent in *A sibila* as in most representations of the rustic woman. Maria's husband routinely betrayed her and left her alone and abandoned for days on end in the solitude of her house where Maria would suffer to the point she could neither eat nor sleep. "Maria viveu um inferno de desesperos mudos, e a sua reprovação manifestava-se apenas pelo silêncio, lidava até a exaustão mais profunda, e não comia. (20-21). Maria served as little more than a maid for Francisco and as the narrator says, the home was little more than a boarding house where Francisco would take his meals and occasionally sleep (20-21). As for Francisco's taste in women, the narrator openly states that Francisco liked his women submissive (17). Another clearly submissive woman is Estina whose marriage to Inácio Lucas has grave consequences. Inácio, very violent and mentally unstable, frequently emotionally and physically tortured Estina. His cruelty reached the point where he would lock Estina in a room and beat her hours on end. His cruelty was such that he indirectly killed his two sons. The first died of resulting injuries from a blow to the head and the second died from a provoked incidence of pneumonia after being forced to work long hours while sick with the flu. In spite of these cruelties, Estina remained silent before Inácio and would not leave him to even save her own children. Estina defended her actions by stating that if her children die, she is the one who suffers, but if she leaves her husband, she dishonors her family (82).

Given her beliefs, it is unthinkable that Quina would ultimately end up in a submissive relationship to a man. Quina is perhaps one of the strongest female voices in Portuguese literature, especially if one considers the novel was published in 1953. She is one of the very few rustic woman in Portuguese literature to condemn women's traditional roles. In fact, Quina used the very expression "submissive tendencies" to describe and condemn her fellow women. She also labeled them depressing, enslaved, and parasites of men as opposed to true companions (99). Quina frequently warned Germa that the worst thing that could happen to a woman is marriage, and recommended that she enjoy the relative economic opportunities available to a woman in the country that for many previous generations were not available to women in the city.

However, upon careful examination of Quina, one will note that she does tragically become submissive to a man, her adoptive son, Custódio, as opposed to a husband.<sup>15</sup> This is actually not an uncommon occurrence in the rural provinces because women generally tend to cede authority to their husbands and then their sons, in that precise order. In fact, Santo demonstrates in the following quote that most men at the age of eighteen are trained to assume the responsibility of the father; "Os adolescentes pertencem já ao mundo dos adultos, e aos dezoito anos estão a bem dizer preparados para assumir o lugar do pai, se este vem a desaparecer" (98). Santo is referring to the Portuguese maritime tradition in which men frequently were absent from the home due to the conquests. This theme is dominant in the numerous *Cantigas de amigo* where the predominately rustic woman, left behind, waits and longs for their distant husbands or lovers to return. Needless to say, Portuguese patriarchy preferred to pass the authority to the eldest son rather than the wife. That is why even today, as Emilio Willems explains, the eldest son is generally responsible for the well being of his siblings that are still single if something were to happen to the parents (32). Returning again to the novel in question, Custódio is described as someone who demands submission (154). Custódio quickly learned to dominate Quina by manipulating her emotions. Furthermore, the narrator also informs us that Custódio treats Quina like a rustic woman, yet it is the reader's task to decipher the meaning of such a statement (217).

Quina cares for Custódio in the very same way for which she condemned other women as slaves. Quina did everything for Custódio, even brush his hair. Ironically, Custódio is everything that Quina de-

spises and condemns in other men. Custódio is continuously described as a vagabond who does nothing except aimlessly wander through the streets of the local village, smoking and gambling, which Quina included as part of the three vices of men. The third vice, of course, being women. He never worked or studied to better his situation; instead, he would depend on the finances of Quina and find new ways to emotionally manipulate her to receive more money. Even though Custódio disappointed Quina, she would never openly criticize him and defended him from anyone who did.

Custódio's intentions become more evident at the end of Quina's life as it becomes exceedingly clear that he intends to inherit the house of Vessada and the small fortune that Quina accumulated over the years through hard work and dedication.<sup>10</sup> When Custódio realizes that Quina is on her deathbed, he tries many techniques to convince her to make him, instead of Germa, the sole inheritor. Custódio is not even satisfied to inherit a portion of the estate, as Quina had originally planned. In one final desperate attempt, Custódio shamelessly begs her, and upon realizing that Quina will not cede, he loses control of himself and begins to violently shake her.

Custódio impacientou-se, lançou-lhe as mãos aos ombros, e sacudiu-a com certa brutalidade. Quina, tomada por um terror instintivo, refugiou-se ao canto do leito; e estiveram ambos fixando-se um momento, ele parecendo fascinado pelo seu próprio gesto, ela descobrindo-lhe no semblante uma fatalidade, uma sede obcecada, como de quem ultrapassa uma norma de consciência e, transpondo o limiar do crime, extasiado o defronta. Desde então, ela somente pensava na morte, com avidez e até com covardia. (233)

Horrified and terrified by the violence so associated with rustic women, Quina, in a moment of epiphany, finally acknowledges Custódio for who he is and perhaps her own circumstances of submission. Because of her epiphany, Quina loses the will to live and dies shortly after.

Quina, however, did not give in to Custódio's demands and Germa does inherit the house of Vessada, yet Germa ultimately inherited much more from Quina than land. Quina was certainly the first woman of all the female inhabitants of the house of Vessada to question traditional roles and practices. She both conformed to some of the traditional representations analyzed in this study, and yet challenged

many others. Quina is the focus of the novel because she demonstrates the complexity of a rustic woman's emotions and desires, which challenges the simplistic representation so frequent in Portuguese literature. However, she failed to attain the happiness and tranquility that she sought throughout her life. Quina's greatest accomplishment was the influence she had on Germa. This is revealed at the end of the novel through Germa's thoughts as she remembers Quina, which gives Germa courage for her own future, and the hope to find the happiness that Quina could not. The novel does, after all, end with Germa's perspective,<sup>17</sup> and we are left with her reflections and inspirations as she prepares to set out into the world, holding the hope for a new rustic woman inspired by both Quina's achievements and shortcomings.

The new rustic woman will hopefully break free from the binary representation in Portuguese literature that was analysed in this study and so frequent throughout the nineteenth century in the works of Camilo Castelo Branco and Eça de Queirós, to name but a few. Agustina Bessa Luís is the true sibyl of the novel analyzed in this study. She returned a voice to the rustic woman and questioned traditional roles of women in the countryside by challenging the popular images of rustic woman, with the hope that women will not be limited to such narrow literary characterizations.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are two necessary conditions in order to catalog a piece of literature under the term "rustic novel" according to Helena Buescu. These two conditions are that the geographical portrait be fundamental in the formation of the narrator's or character's point of view, and that the rural domain is a cultural and therefore, ideological space where all the implied, relevant characteristics and beliefs are present. *As sibila* conforms to these conditions.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to Brian Juan O'Neil's study "Diverging Bibliographies: Two Portuguese Peasant women" published in 1995, and Caroline B. Brettell's 1986 book *Men who Migrate, Women Who Wait: Population and History in a Portuguese Parish*.

<sup>3</sup> Appearances and reputation are extremely important to Quina and her sister, Germa, as we will shortly see.

<sup>4</sup> In Eça's own words: "Não há ali mais poesia, nem mais

sensibilidade, nem mesmo mais beleza do que uma linda vaca turina. Merece o seu nome de Ana Vaqueira. Trabalha bem, digere bem, concebe bem. Para isso a fez a natureza, assim sã e rija, e ela cumpre.”

<sup>5</sup> As Brian Juan O’Neill pointed out, the exception to this rule is the upper class wealthy rustic woman. She, like her urban counterpart, has servants who attend her and normally does not frequent the workspace. However, this is not the economic reality of the average female Portuguese peasant and is certainly not the typical image associated with the rustic woman in Portuguese literature.

<sup>6</sup> The Portuguese Neo-Realist novel *Avieiros* by Alves Redol illustrates this. In the novel’s rural, fisherman community, women were assigned the hardest, roughest tasks even though their work was not valued. Olinda, the protagonist, summarizes the fishermen’s belief of a woman’s purpose in the community: “Às mulheres basta trabalhar e ter filhos, não?!” (168). This is the very same image that Eça de Queirós used to describe Ana Vaqueira many years earlier.

<sup>7</sup> The Argentinean poet Olga Orozco used the occult, in particular the figure of the sibyl or the witch, much in the same way that Bessa Luís did. Orozco challenged the Latin American patriarchal domination of literature and vindicated the voice of women in the literary world by incorporating the figure of the sibyl as a representation of feminine power (Nicholson).

<sup>8</sup> Of the three, says Campbell, Sappho is the most advanced sybil. “She is the model for the female artist as Sibyl; the seer, the prophetess, the teacher, the literary genius who has moved past ‘analysis and discovery’ to ‘synthesis and exposition” (6).

<sup>9</sup> See Keller and Kinter.

<sup>10</sup> A very similar example is Camilo Castelo Branco’s “Maria Moisés” who dedicated her life to helping others, specifically orphans that she raised and loved as a mother. She also helped “fallen” women through their predicament, such as Joaquina who no longer had the option to marry the man who impregnated her and whose father would disown her if he discovered the truth of his daughter’s fallen honor (63).

<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in the section analyzing submissiveness.

<sup>12</sup> As does the classic figure of the charlatan seen in the Brazilian short story “A cartomante” by Machado de Assis.

<sup>13</sup> “Las hortensias,” “Anuncio,” and “The Youngest Doll” respectively. For more information, see Bilbija’s “Rosario Ferre’s ‘The Youngest Doll,’ on women, Dolls, Golems, and Cyborgs.”

<sup>14</sup> I do not mean to infer that a woman is not capable of writing the same as a man, or that one could determine the gender of the author of a text based on the style of it. I am simply interpreting the information revealed by the narrator as possible evidence that is simply was not a man who wrote the letters.

<sup>15</sup> Ultimately this contradiction should not be a surprise because, as previously explained, there are many contradictions in Quina's personality. Another example is the fact that Quina openly rejects the society in which she lives and she rejects societal expectations of women. At the same time, Quina is proud of society's approval when, for example, they praise her virtue.

<sup>16</sup> As Brian Juan O'Neil points out, the only social moviablity in rural provinces occurs with a death or an inheritance.

<sup>17</sup> One must be careful to not fall into the trap of considering Germa the narrator of the entire novel. At first glance, it would appear that Germa is the narrator seeing that the story begins with Germa conversing with her cousin which provokes the series of flashbacks that constitutes the majority of the narrative. However, it is an omniscient narrator who tells the flashbacks. Germa frequently is a part of the narration but is also refereed to in the third person. If we return to a previous example in this study, we will see the omniscient narrator at work: "Mas era Germa, de facto, muito nova, e não sabia o que havia em Quina de contradição, incoerência, era o seu profundo conteúdo humano" (108). Here not only is it not Germa who is directly narrating, information is also being reveled that Germa herself did not fully understand at that time. We do not return to Germa until the end of the novel when everything comes full circle. The narration suddenly returns to the present with the paragraph that starts: "Tinham passado dois anos daquilo..." (247). However, even at the very end, Germa never moves into a first person narration.

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