

THE THEATRE OF VIRGÍNIA
VICTORINO AND THE FIRST
PORTUGUESE REPUBLIC
*O TEATRO DE VIRGÍNIA
VICTORINO E A PRIMEIRA
REPÚBLICA PORTUGUESA*

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ABSTRACT: Virgínia Victorino's plays addressed the needs of bourgeois audiences at the beginning of the 20th century, leaving behind themes of love and relationships, and entering the notional and ideological field of new Portuguese Republican politics. Her plays attracted the acclaim of their audiences, the criticism of journalists (from Brazil and Portugal) and draw in representatives of the Portuguese government. It is within this context that the author attempts to find ways in which to better attend to new Portuguese social norms, while at the same time continuing to include in her plays, more so than in her poetry, elements of her political stance, which is frequently con-

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troversial. In this way, the work of Virgínia Victorino reflects the intrinsic problems of the new Portuguese Republican political system.

KEYWORDS: Portuguese Plays, Virgínia Victorino, Portuguese Republic.

RESUMO: O teatro de Virgínia Victorino, além de atender necessidades do público burguês do começo do século XX, deixa de lado questões de relações amorosas e entre no campo especulativo e ideológico da nova política da República Portuguesa. Seu teatro consegue atrair o aplauso do público, a crítica jornalística (do Brasil e de Portugal) e representantes do governo português. É dentro desse contexto que a autora tenta encontrar caminhos que possam atender melhor ao novo padrão social português, mas nem por isso deixa de lado de implementar, em suas peças, mais do que em suas poesias, seu posicionamento político, que muitas vezes é controverso. A obra de Virgínia Victorino reflete, desta forma, as próprias problemáticas do novo sistema político republicano português.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teatro português, Virgínia Victorino, República Portuguesa.

A minha arte é toda simplicidade, mas simplicidade que afaga a superfície real dos sentimentos, sem se deixar vulgarizar. Procuro as palavras, como pedras preciosas. Nem todas me servem.

My art is nothing but simplicity, but simplicity which touches the true surface of feelings, without letting itself become vulgar. I seek words, like precious stones. Not all are of value to me.

Virgínia Victorino
(interviewed by Artur Portela)

The implications surrounding the formation of the First Portuguese Republic for the most part revolve around various instabilities in the country. Whether (i) in the area of population,

with wide scale emigration, many deaths from epidemics and war; or whether (ii) in the field of economics, given that only agricultural products such as wine, cork and fruit were readily available, with wheat-derived products being scarce, and consequently magnifying problems related to poverty and hunger, concentrating the vast majority of the country's wealth in Lisbon. Whether (iii) also stemming from the emergence of new social classes, such as the rich bourgeoisie, who held great sway over the country's decisions during their ascent, despite Republican leaders insisting upon the creation of a myth that the new regime was brought into existence by the people. It is also worth highlighting (iv) the "anti-Jesuitism" used as a form of combating the monarchy, leading to an increase in Masonic practice within the country. Even Portuguese literature is found at turbulent period of its existence with many different literary aesthetics, which seek to break free of traditional paradigms and enter into the modern age of a new Europe. It is exactly this period of transformation that is described by Rui Ramos in the following considerations:

Mais do que programas técnicos e moralistas de boa governação e prosperidade, a República continha um projecto de transformação fundamental da humanidade que não era um simples devaneio dos seus partidários mais excêntricos. Deu sentido a muitas das suas acções, como a do confronto com a hierarquia da Igreja Católica, e fez as organizações republicanas desenvolverem um sistema de mobilização e propaganda política cujo paralelo – e não por acaso – só se poderia encontrar na grande rival a Igreja Católica. Por aqui o republicanismo se articula com as actividades intelectuais em Portugal e se vai tornar um dos cadinhos para a produção de uma medida, uma "sacralização" das actividades dos Portugueses, através de um conceito, "cultura", que, dotados de valor absoluto, rituais, devoções, funcionam como "religião". (1993: 433)

In addition to moralistic and technical schemes of good governance and prosperity, the Republic contained within it a project that aimed towards the fundamental transformation of humanity, which was not

just a mere fancy of its most eccentric members. It gave meaning to many of its actions, such as its confrontation with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and it compelled Republican organizations to develop a system of political mobilization and propaganda rivalled only – and not by chance – by its great rival, the Catholic Church. Around this point Republicanism is linked with intellectual activities in Portugal, and is becoming one of the crucibles for the creation of a measure, a “sacralization” of the actions of the Portuguese people, by way of one concept, “culture”, which, blessed with absolute value, rituals, devotions, functions as a “religion”. (1993: 433)

It is in this historical context that Virgínia Victorino’s first poems² come about – set amongst that which is referred to as the First Portuguese Republic (1910-1926) – romantic and a touch coquettish in character. Let us remember that from 1917 onwards Victorino began to debut her first poems in newspapers, as if sketching out drafts for the publication of her future first work, *Namorados* (1918), attracting the attention of newspaper critics: “são lindos os seus versos e d’um encanto e merecimento inconfunível” (1917:?)³. What the author desired, to begin with, was to reveal her poetic compositions to the public and see how they would be received. From the moment at which positive criticism came, the author ventures further and further into the poetic world, publishing various texts, as happened in *A canção de Portugal*: “fala-se de um dos mais nobres espíritos femininos (...) conquistou rapidamente um nome no mundo das letras portuguesas” (1918:?). Another critic, writing in *Semana Alcobacense*, states that Virgínia ought to be considered among the best of Portuguese and Brazilian writers (cf. 1919:?).

² Let us remember that Virgínia Victorino’s first three works were written in verse: *Namorados* (1918), *Apaixonadamente* (1923) and *Renúncia* (1926).

³ The news paper articles with the question mark is part of newspaper clippings arranged by Victorino who often did not bother to highlight the author, the period or the date of the news about his work.

So, we note that even before her first collection, the author is already recognized and critically acclaimed, becoming a symbol as well of a pioneer making a name for herself in the literary world at the start of the 20th Century. However, it is as a playwright that she comes to assert and express with some tenacity her political stance as a supporter of feminist causes. As regards her theatrical work, her début as an author of theatre occurs in 1931, with *Degredados*, which caused uproar amongst the public and in the press: “achieving success throughout its run” (1913a:?). Virgínia establishes herself definitively as a playwright, being the first woman in Portuguese literature to be “aclamada como autora dramática”/”acclaimed as a dramatic author” (1931a:?). *Degredados*, her first work, published in 1931, but staged in 1930, is the most sacred text of the era both for the public and for critics, viewed as “o grande êxito do Teatro Nacional” (“the National Theatre’s great success story”) (1931d:?). However, the author, in this play, touches upon themes relating, directly or indirectly, to issues surrounding the politics of the colonial administration. *Diario de Notícias* from March 1930 highlights that the play is defined

pela gravíssima circunstância de a principal acção se passar na nossa província de Angola, girando em torno da sua mais alta e elevada autoridade, um Alto Comissário Republicano, outros funcionários seus subordinados, apresentados ao público como traidores, miseráveis vendidos ao estrangeiro (1930e:?),

by the most troubling fact of the main action taking place in our province of Angola, revolving around its greatest and highest authority, a Republican High Commissioner, and his other subordinate officials, presented to the public as traitors, the wretched sold to a foreign land (1930e:?),

considering the play’s production at the Teatro Nacional (National Theatre) to be a scandal. For this reason, on the day following the article, the General Inspectorate of Performances

announced that the play would return to the stage, with the aspects that merited “our repairs” now changed. This modification, according to Gustavo Matos Siqueira, who was playing the role of the Government commissioner, referred only to the passage in which the “high commissioner” appeared, whose title was duly changed to “the Government”, which was even then complemented with: “The amendments made – which shall shortly be made clear – were carried out upon the spontaneous decision of the author” (1930c:?). There was some outcry from artistic circles and Virgínia Victorino, in defence of her work, posited that the play had no political intent, only literary, stating that the reference to the colonial administration was a mere artistic device, and clarifying that: “What’s more, it is said in the play that the High Commissioner is loyal to the party who sent him there, and if the main character reproaches the government for worrying only about elections – is it not well established that the action of the play develops within a past and indeterminate timeframe? My sole aim was to make theatre” (1930f:?). *Diário de Notícias* thereby reveals to us that the play was altered, congratulating the author, deeming that “it is only after these modifications that the play falls within the artistic domain” (1930f:?). That is to say, the country’s greatest vehicle for communication was either strictly controlled, or in favour of the Republican regime.

The author becomes not only the muse of Portuguese drama, but also of the regime, insomuch as she is accepted by the controlling political powers of the time. Having been criticized, her play was an absolute success: “A peça ‘Degredados’ tem hoje a 11.^a representação. Pode dizer-se que é também a 11.^a enchente, pois que a marcação para esta noite é enorme. Virgínia Victorino, que tinha o seu nome na poesia portuguesa, fica agora ligada ao teatro pela sua obra” (“The play ‘Degredados’ is now on its 11th performance. Once could also call it its 11th surge, given that bookings for tonight have been enormous. Virgínia Victorino, who made her name in Portuguese poetry, has with this play become a firm staple of the theatre”) (1930e:?)

It is necessary also to emphasize that in Virgínia Victorino's theatre we can find three plays of a political-ideological stance. The first of these is *Degradados*: staged in 1930 (54 performances) and published in 1931, it produced some discomfort, as we have noted, for its attribution of a colonial political role to a corrupt character. Let us recall that the new government was attempting to prove itself superior to the monarchic system and to do this it was necessary to emphasize the Republicans' good leadership, primarily on an issue as complex as the management of the former Portuguese colonies.

Degradados focuses around the character of Joaninha, a young woman of modern, feminist ideals from Lisbon high society who, in order to save her family (consumed by debts run up by a high quality of life and due to the excesses of her brother, João), marries a rich older man, Manuel, passing over her bohemian suitor, Fernando. Meanwhile, her brother, João, having frittered away the family fortune leaves for Africa in search not only of a better life but also of redemption. Following the marriage of the protagonist, the plot space moves to Portuguese Africa. Fernando, now rich, goes in search of Joaninha, who, at the first instance, agrees to flee with her first love, but nonetheless the guilt of having to leave a serious and principled man, Manuel, who had always supported both her and all of her family, causes her to change her mind. Above all, the Portuguese woman is blessed with a superior character, with honesty and kindness: this is confirmed upon the reappearance of her brother, who all believed to be dead. João redeems himself of his blame: the punishment of war was exerted not only upon his body, but also upon his spirit, and he returns as a hero. In other words, all of the principles which permeated the creation of the Portuguese Republic are present in this text: the honest, modern woman, acquiescent to her husband; the citizen who redeems himself of his faults fighting for his country; and a man of the people who achieves wealth.

A Volta, the second play, staged in 1931 (51 performances) and published in 1932, takes up the same nationalist theme, recovering the story of a Portuguese émigré, Manuel de Campos,

who is separated from his family for 25 years. His return home and his meeting with his family is a demonstration that, in Portuguese families of good stock, they remain the same, waiting for him. That is to say, the play contains ideas related to character and to the restructuring of the Portuguese family. The female character and wife, Mariana, above all exemplifies the foundation and pillar of this reconstruction. The playwright constructs a character who is modern, but obedient to her husband, as the only way in which she would be able to transform her spouse's faults is with her honour. In this way, the values of the new bourgeois Portuguese Republic, which sought to reconcile modernity with national traditions (which, in this work, are present in implied form), pleased the public and the new political order.

Camaradas..., her penultimate work, was staged in 1937 (22 performances), now under the regime of the Estado Novo, and published in 1938. It is certainly the play which received the most criticism, whether positive or negative, due to its literary construction and the subject matter it addressed. J.M.A., for example, praised the performances of the actors from the Companhia de Amélia Rey Colaco, but on the subject of the work's construction, advises: "Let experts pronounce whether the end of the play is sufficient to redeem the childish sketches developed in the first two acts. In truth, the action, the subject matter and the writing of the scenes set at the shoemakers' and at the house of the poor shoe merchant are ridiculous and inferior in nature (...). In short, 'Camaradas...', if it had not been written with a superior third act, would be a play of real merit; as it stands, it is an inferior work" (*sic*) (1937:?). This play, which has a strong social inclination, inspired by anti-communist elements, is shown to be very controversial. Victorino also explores in this work the rise of a young boy, humble and hard-working, who comes into some money and, having been swept along by the power of capitalism, begins to earn some of his own. We must note that on some level the plot of this play pleased the ruling powers. Júlia Lelo talks of the problems surrounding this text, both in terms of its structure as well as its plot:

CAMARADAS... constitui um texto contraditório, com um desenvolvimento por vezes inesperado, o que de resto só por si não pode ser considerado defeito, se bem que seja prejudicado pelo tom (anti) propagandístico, um tanto empolado. E apesar de algumas incoerências e de uma certa ingenuidade que por vezes revela (V: 3.1.1.), a intriga está bem construída, com um certo doseamento de imprevisibilidade e efeitos-surpresa que virão a aperfeiçoar-se no texto seguinte. Essa mestria em mexer os cordelinhos de cena, não se devendo já somente ao talento da escritora mas também a vários anos de dedicação ao teatro, creio traduzir-se ainda num maior à-vontade em movimentar personagens. (1993:76-77)

CAMARADAS... constitutes a contradictory text, with sometimes unexpected developments, a point which by itself could not be considered defective, although they are prejudiced by the (anti-)propagandist tone, which is a little stilted. And despite some incoherencies and a certain naivety which at times comes into vision (V: 3.1.1.), the plot is well constructed, with a certain dose of twists and surprise-effects which will come to be perfected in the following text. This mastery of moving the puppet strings, which owes not only to the writer's talent but also to several years of dedication to the theatre, lead to a even greater ease with moving the characters around. (1993:76-77)

Years later, there are no new editions of Virgínia Victorino's work⁴; indeed, there are scarcely any academics dedicating themselves

⁴ Here we note that up until the present there is only one serious and in-depth critical text in Portugal, by Júlia Lelo, on the work of the Portuguese writers, entitled: *Virgínia Victorino e a Vocação do Teatro: o percurso de um sucesso*, a Masters dissertation, Lisbon, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1993. On the subject of Victorino's work the academic states: "The theatre of Virgínia Victorino was intended principally to appeal to the tastes of a bourgeois public, an aim which was not only achieved, but in general meteorically surpassed, something which would not have been easy for a woman of the people. It was necessary not only to please this public but to interest it, force it to give in, to grab it by the horns, interpreting its feelings and ideals. It was necessary, above all, to know how to choose the correct theme out of those which fascinated society at the time, or at least the social class to which she definitively wished to conquer. From the beginning of her career, the poet adopts the stance, the convictions and the ideals of this class, to which she ascended by dint of her literary prowess and for the *savoir faire* with which she conducted her social affairs, dosing sympathy with discretion and sentimental idealism with irony, becoming the definitive "*dramaturga do regime (regime playwright)*" (our italics) (Lelo, 1993:66).

to the study of her work, causing it to become forgotten: with the literary qualities of her texts and the superior nature of her works reversed, her texts were never adapted to the new trends popular with audiences and academics. In other words, the public fondness for Virgínia Victorino's theatre is a direct consequence of the aesthetic aspirations of the time, a theatre with new features, different from the so-called Classical Portuguese theatre, now going after the feminine gaze in relation to Portuguese (Lisbon) society.

Let us then conclude that the theatre of Virgínia Victorino, in addition to addressing the needs of the bourgeois public at the start of the 20th Century, leaves behind questions of romantic relationships and enters the notional and ideological field of new Portuguese Republic politics, despite the author not subscribing to this position, and stating that her intention is merely to "make art". Seen through this lens, she possessed a controversial political conscience, not only for having raised political issues in her plays, but also for revealing to us that women ought to have freedom, but a balanced freedom at that. That is to say, Victorino tried to address all current ideologies, like one who seeks to be accepted by different politicians/parties. Her theatre manages to attract the acclaim of the public, newspaper critics and representatives of the Portuguese government. The work of Virgínia Victorino thus reflects the inherent issues within the first Portuguese Republican political system.

Above all, Republicanism brought Portuguese women a new perspective that did not simply entail confinement within the home, but instead their active participation in society, even if it was a modest participation subject to a degree of control. Virgínia Victorino depicts the day to day theatricality faced by women within the Portuguese cultural milieu. And despite these theatrical texts following a timeline which begins at the First Republic and ends with the Estado Novo, the author does not manage to disconnect herself from the ideals founded from the 5th October onwards, and carries with her, more in her theatre than in her poetry, this mark of the revolution and of the instability of the First Portuguese Republican system.

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