

**(Mis)Fortunes and Perils of Beauty:  
the Women of Bernardim Ribeiro's *Menina e Moça***

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*A woman is beautiful to look upon,  
contaminating to the touch, and deadly to keep*  
([Kramer & Sprenger] *Malleus Maleficarum* 46).

### Introduction

Beautiful women abound in literature. In fact, ‘the beautiful one’ is a recurring character that crosses a wide variety of literary genres, authors, periods and cultures. By simply being beautiful she commands and captivates the looks and desires of all those who cross her path. Indeed, her beauty often occupies central stage and gives rise to a series of plots whose ultimate objective is to conquer and possess such beauty. In Renaissance Portuguese literature, these general observations are rather commonplace; from the sonnets of Camões, fuelled by the striking Laura of Petrarch, to Gil Vicente’s theatre, among other writers and genres, beauty presents itself as women’s most enchanting and necessary attribute. Bernardim Ribeiro’s *Menina e Moça* appears to follow the same pattern. In fact, all the heroines of this novel are exaggeratedly beautiful, and each new character surpasses the beauty of the previous one(s). Nevertheless, beauty is a rather complicated and complex concept; certainly, the above epigram –which does not stand alone<sup>1</sup>– illustrates that there exists a long-standing set of negative beliefs about women’s beauty. This essay will thus examine the manner in which feminine beauty is presented in *Menina e Moça*. In doing so, we will expose how the narrative incorporates and reacts to the often contradictory mainstream concepts of feminine beauty. Ultimately, as we shall elaborate, *Menina e Moça*, becomes a narrative that, above all, exposes, questions and dismantles such concepts.

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<sup>1</sup> As common as the many praises of beauty, are these negative types of observations. In the chapter “The Sieve of Tuccia” Marina Warner examines the virginal body and its necessary virtues as well as its various allegorical representations. The metaphor of the body as a vessel, commonly used for both sexes, has brought dire consequences for women. Deeply associated with matter and the reproductive processes, the feminine body was ascribed a dangerous, contaminating nature, and its contents horrifying and revolting. Warner cites as an example the Abbot Odo of Cluny, who in the tenth century, asserted the following: “the beauty of a woman is only skin-deep. If men could only see what is beneath the flesh and penetrate below the surface [...], they would be nauseated just to look at women, for all this feminine charm is nothing but phlegm, blood, humours, gall. We are all repelled to touch vomit and ordure even with our fingertips. How then can we ever want to embrace what is merely a sack of rottenness?” (250-51).

*Menina e Moça*, Beautifully Enigmatic

Bernardim Ribeiro and *Menina e Moça* have challenged the critics through the ages. Critics have proposed several interpretations regarding the intention and genre of this work; yet, many, if not all, lack concrete evidence. Helder Macedo summarizes some of the facts and conjectures in his critical edition of the novel. According to Macedo, critics have inaccurately persisted in placing Ribeiro's work within a biographical and confessional framework that ranges from unrequited love interests to the musings of an alleged mad Ribeiro (11-35). The only undisputed facts remain few. We know that Bernardim Ribeiro was an esteemed and accomplished poet, although he might have fallen out of grace at court before the publication of *Menina e Moça*. In addition to this novel, he contributed several poems to the *Cancioneiro Geral* of 1516. Abraão Usque, an exiled Portuguese Jew, published the novel in 1554, in Ferrara. Two other editions followed: one in Évora (1557) and one in Cologne (1559). The authorship of the Évora edition has been questioned, and it appears that Ribeiro was not the only author. The genre of the novel also resists classification. It is a hybrid work that brings together different elements from diverse traditions: the pastoral and the sentimental romances, the novels of chivalry, and even elements from the *Cantigas de amigo*. The contents of the narrative itself are also enigmatic. The narrator of the story is a nameless and sad young woman, who finds herself in a bucolic setting, in a self-imposed exile. However, her story and the reasons for her exile are never revealed. An equally sad and also unnamed old woman joins her. The old woman, known as a *dona do tempo antigo*, also suffers. Again, the reason for her suffering is never revealed although we are informed that she has lost a son. The *dona* becomes the narrator of tragic tales of distinguished men and women, who once lived on the valley where our protagonists have taken solace: Lamentor and Beliza, Bimarder and Aónia and Avalor and Arima. Theirs are stories of tragic love, suffering, despair and death. The novel ends abruptly, in mid sentence, except in the Évora edition, where Avalor becomes involved in a series of incoherent chivalrous adventures. The fact that the novel was published by Abraão Usque, whose publications focused almost exclusively on Jewish works, has also led critics to propose interpretations based on Judaism. António Cândido Franco and Helder Macedo, for instance, offer convincing arguments that place *Menina e Moça* as an allegory of the persecution of the Jewish. In these readings, women occupy a distinguished and crucial spiritual role. We will address such role later on.

However, and although it feeds of diverse sources, this narrative is quite innovative in terms of its feminine voice, address and concern. A woman's voice register is certainly not unique, but this narrative "breaks decisively with the hundred-year-old tradition of male narrator-protagonist in the Iberian sentimental romance" (Deyermond 47; see also Cortijo). Feminine voices are also common in the tradition of *Cantigas de amigo*, where the woman is both speaker and protagonist, a factor that, as Deyermond states, must have contributed to the makings of the heroine in Ribeiro's

narrative (54-55). Yet, Deyermond views Ribeiro's text as a "radical innovation, [whereas] a woman who is in command of the narrative though not of her emotions, [reorders] artistically the chaos and defeat of her personal relationships" (56-57). In addition, *Menina e Moça* makes a considerable effort to address women; the young woman considers writing her experiences, but cautions that it is not a book for the cheerful, but for those who have suffered and are sad. Women are identified as the most sad (77-78). The feminine nature of the work is clearly identified in the novel, since "todos os caminhos vão ter a contos de mulheres [e] conto de mulher, não pode deixar de ser triste" (137). Izabel Margato mentions the similarities between *Menina e Moça* and the *Cantigas de amigo* in terms of the "consciencialização da alma feminina," but affirms that "há em *Menina e Moça* um conhecimento –ainda que hipotético– bem maior em relação às mulheres. Sua psicologia foi mais bem arquitectada e seu papel no mundo mais valorizado" (87). According to Mujica, "the strong feminine –even feminist– element that pervades the first part of *Menina e Moça* is one of the romance's most salient characteristics" (71). Thus, having into account the extensive and all-encompassing feminine element of this text, it is not surprising the beauty will then play a significant role.

#### The Paradoxes of Beauty

The reality is that, and regardless of Kramer and Sprenger's condemnation in their influential hammer of witches, beauty acquired a powerful and privileged position during the Renaissance; poetic convention and neo-platonic philosophy declared it to be the outward and visible sign of inward and invisible goodness. The classical concept of beauty includes several universally agreed-upon criteria: "Harmony, perfection, decorum, fruition of divine love, ultimately truth" (Betella 5-6). In the specificity of the Iberian context, we must acknowledge several traditions that have contributed to poetic convention in beauty imagery. In the Galician-Portuguese lyrical tradition, the *Cantigas de amigo* and the *Cantigas de amor* are of substantial importance. In the *Cantigas de amor*, for instance, women's beauty is "unique and divinely ordained" (Weiss 134). Petrarch's influence is also widespread and pervasive. Petrarchan imagery is well documented in Portuguese lyric (Lavalle, Moniz); Forster mentions the Portuguese poets, Sá de Miranda (1481-1558) and Camões (1524-80), whose works excelled in petrarchistic concepts (36). It is not surprising to find Petrarchan imagery in Bernardim Ribeiro's works; he was not only an intimate friend of Sá de Miranda, but he also frequented the same literary and courtly circles. Jorge Alves Osório has found many parallels, especially those that relate to seclusion and silence, between Ribeiro and Petrarch (351-76). The general traits of feminine beauty in Petrarchan imagery consist of physical and spiritual perfection. Her beauty is often praised in metaphorical descriptions, mythological associations, or its effects on the lover (Forster 10). However, although perfect, the lady is unreachable and often cruel (15). In terms of the lady's physical description, Petrarch's Laura is never fully

disclosed as the canon of beauty is established on the praise of individual female body parts (Bettella 86). Those parts, as John Allen has pointed out, find a fertile ground in the Iberian Peninsula where

los poetas del Siglo de Oro nunca imitaron a Petrarca más tenazmente que en la imaginaria de la belleza femenina [...]; la fórmula básica es siempre la misma, aunque las variaciones son innumerables. Cabello, frente, ojos, labios, dientes, cuello, son comparados con, o sustituidos por oro, marfil, estrellas, rosas, perlas, alabastro, etc. (5)<sup>2</sup>

Platonic and neo-platonic thought completed the picture of feminine beauty by endowing it with perfection, and thus associating it to the most positive and divine qualities. Plato clearly establishes a defence of the goodness of beauty in the *Phaedrus*, in which he asserts the following:

And of the things pertaining to the body, it most of all has in some way a common share of the divine—and the divine is beautiful, wise, good, and everything of that sort. By these, then, is the soul's plumage most of all fostered and increased; but by the ugly, bad, and the other opposites it wastes away and is destroyed. (Plato 51)<sup>3</sup>

Iberian writers were also quite familiar with the works of some of the most influential neo-Platonists (Forster 36, Franco 88), and thus, in Castiglione's words, regarded and treated feminine beauty "[as] an influx of the divine goodness" (325). Indubitably, beauty becomes the quintessential asset for the Renaissance woman. As Sara Grieco points out, beauty became "a necessary attribute of moral character and social position [...] for ugliness was associated not only with social inferiority but also with vice" (58). The emphasis on beauty is marked not only by the abundance of beauty guides and several discussions on the importance of beauty, but also by an always-increasing number of qualities that constituted and defined beauty in a woman.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, the heroines of *Menina e Moça* fit the conventional pattern. Beauty is not only their most noticeable attribute, but it also seems to follow the usual formula. Belisa and her sister Aónia are so remarkably beautiful that they are

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<sup>2</sup> This follows a recurring formula across a variety of genres as examined by Rosa Navarro Durán; authors typically construct feminine beauty "con la descripción del rostro: desde el cabello rubio, largo, ondulado, que será oro, incendio, sol, mar, golfo de luz en metáforas que se fosilizan, a sus labios, claveles, corales, rubíes, púrpura, que destacan sobre la blancura de la piel" (79).

<sup>3</sup> In *The Symposium*, Diotima brings forth a similar claim: "All human beings are pregnant in body and in mind, and when we reach a degree of adulthood we naturally desire to give birth. We cannot give birth in what is ugly, only in what is beautiful. [...] The ugly is out of harmony with everything divine, while the beautiful fits in with it" (43).

<sup>4</sup> According to Arthur Marwick, from the later Middle Ages and on to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, such qualities went from seven to thirty considered to be essential (Marwick 37-38).

considered the most treasured items in the midst of the wealth aboard Lamentor's vessel (Ribeiro 97). In fact, when the squire of the knight known as the bridge knight [o cavaleiro da ponte] gets a glimpse of the sisters, he reflects on their unparalleled beauty because “nunca coisa tão bem lhe parecera” (99). Furthermore, the squire's master guards the bridge in order to gain the favour of yet another beautiful woman, considered to be the most beautiful in the area (99). The power of beauty is such that once the knight notices Aónia, he succumbs madly in love with her: “E entrando viu a senhora Aónia que em extremo era formosa, soltos os seus grandes cabelos que toda a cobriam, e parte deles molhados em lágrimas que o seu rosto por algumas partes descobriam. Foi logo trespassado do amor dela” (116). This encounter leads him to ponder his previous obligation to another lady: Aquelisia. However, upon seeing Aónia not only does he completely forget the other, but also regrets the time he had wasted at her service (116). While he sees no logical reason to leave Aquelisia, he is constantly reminded of Aónia. He is, in his words, divided between obligation and beauty (124). Beauty however, trumps obligation, because despite the fact that Aquelisia is of “boa formosura,” Aónia is “a mais formosa coisa que vira” (125). Her extreme beauty is also highlighted in one of the songs sung by Aónia's nurse:

Mas não pode ser, senhora,  
para mal nenhum nascerdes,  
com esse riso gracioso  
que tendes sobre olhos verdes. (154)

Since love is nothing more than, as Castiglione would tell us, the desire for beauty (325), it's not surprising that the knight fell in love at first sight. Additional female characters in the text, such as the *dona* and her young listener, Arima, Lamentor's and Belisa's daughter, and two nameless and mysterious women, who disclose tales of love and deception at the hands of men, all reveal to be, or to have been, beautiful. As individual as each of their stories is, beauty is a common thread. Although old, the *dona* is described as “de corpo alto, disposição boa, o rosto de senhora, dona do tempo antigo” (84). Her listener is noticeably beautiful, regardless of the fact that tears and suffering have had an impact on her appearance (84-85). The two nameless women are equally remarkable; the woman found by Avalor is described as having a beautiful face, long hair and big green eyes (210). Avalor recalls a similar story told by his father, who, once in the woods, found an abandoned woman in a similar predicament. Although we are told that she has been physically mistreated, the text suggests that she had been once beautiful (218-19). Finally, Arima's beauty lies beyond any expectations:

Fez-se a mais formosa coisa do mundo. Sobretudo o que ela tinha estremadamente sobre todas, era-lhe natural uma honestidade. [...] A sua mansidão nos seus ditos e nos seus feitos não eram de coisa mortal. A sua

fala, e o tom dela, soava doutra maneira que voz humana. [...] Não parece senão que se ajuntavam ali todas as perfeições, como se não se haviam de ajuntar mais nunca. (177)

Her beauty is so remarkable that it reaches the king and the royal court. For such beautiful ladies, tradition dictated that “todalas donzelas filhas d’algo, como eram em idade para isso, se levavam à corte da Rainha e dali saíam honradamente casadas” (178).

Accordingly, the text emphasizes that beauty is a necessary feature for women. Inês, Aónia’s maid, advises her mistress not to cry because “quando, pela ventura, vier Bimarder,<sup>5</sup> não vos quereria achar assim, e será esta então maior ofensa para ele” (173). Clearly, beauty is an influential factor that drives Bimarder’s decision to abandon his rank and all his materials. He pursues Aónia simply because “de quão bem lhe parecera, parecia desamor não lhe querer bem” (124). We also learn that Aónia’s nurse was, in her youth, a very beautiful maiden; so beautiful that her father, above and beyond her social class, kept her locked up and educated her with the greatest care and esteem because her beauty was well worth the effort (136). Similarly to Aónia’s nurse, who sings the praises of her mistress’ beauty as a sign of a worthy birth, Avalor extols the beauty of his daughter Arima, who he believes to be destined for greatness: “vós para outra coisa devéis nascer, se vos não foi dada a formosura de balde” (180).

The divine nature of all the heroines’ beauty must also be interpreted in terms of a spiritual refinement that, in Ribeiro’s work, reveals women’s superiority. Franco points out that it is through *saudade* that the characters participate in the divine, that they acquire the liberation from the sensual to the spiritual plenitude (87-103). Women, Macedo suggests, are closer to the divinity than men; upon women reside the capacity to suffer and endure, but also a privileged position of guardians of truth, a sanctity imbue on them by God (35-37). Consequently, “compreender a santidade das mulheres é, portanto o mesmo que conhecer Deus” (37). Thus, in addition to neo-platonic influences, Gnostic doctrine must be taken into account. In it “a divindade é absolutamente transmundana, sendo a sua natureza alheia à do universo, que não criou nem governa e do qual é a antítese” (38). In the critical edition to the novel, Helder Macedo explores the parallels between the historical spiritual circumstances of exiled Jews and the privileged role of woman in Judaism. Macedo draws from the Zohar to establish the superior psychological and spiritual nature of women: “Cada mulher, especificamente a filha, a noiva e a mãe, através da qual o homem tem acesso à salvação espiritual” (42). Thus, our heroines’ beauty, Arima’s in particular, reinforces and delivers the physical perfection to a superior and clearly divine creature. After all, Arima’s beauty and demeanour are, as we are told, not from this world.

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<sup>5</sup> Bimarder is the nameless knight (Narbindel in the Évora edition) who falls in love with Aónia. He adopts this new identity in order to elude his squire of his whereabouts, thus releasing him of his obligation to Aquelisia (128).

Paradoxically, the negative views regarding feminine beauty do not decline in favour of neo-platonic or spiritual tenets in texts of the period. In fact, they appear to grow in popularity while drawing from a variety of sources. Christianity for instance, had long denounced the dangers of the female body; Church fathers and Christian philosophers openly pointed out that women's beauty was nothing more than a weapon of evil and destruction. In biblical scripture, Eve's daughters, often in pact with the devil, use their alluring bodies to corrupt souls and divert men from a path of morality and goodness. According to Merry E. Wiesner, Protestants and Catholic reformers differed very little when it came to Eve's evil nature (27-29). Therefore, it is not surprising that in the ideal notion of woman she appears "sitting with her children, listening to a sermon or reading the Bible," but also "dressed soberly and with her hair modestly covered" (29). Ben Lowe also speaks of the imperfect and dangerous nature of Eve's beauty if unrestrained. In order to curb women's seductive inclinations, true beauty, subjected to the control of men, becomes behavioural rather than physical as the ideal develops into either the chaste virgin or the virtuous obedient wife (27-28).

In addition to Christian thought, we must not overlook Aristotle's observations, whose influence, in vigour well into the seventeenth century, was perhaps the most devastating to women. According to Aristotle women are an inferior product, "a state of being as if it were a deformity," even monsters (461). The importance of Aristotle in the early modern period is such that his influence is prominent and widespread; Elena del Río Parra cites Fuentelapeña and Rifer de Brocaldino who, following Aristotle, condemn even the most beautiful of women:

¿Por qué dicen que es monstruo la mujer, siendo criaturas tan hermosas las más? Porque nace de defecto de la material generante, que la naturaleza siempre se inclina a la generación del hombre, que es lo mas perfecto, con que nace contra el orden de la naturaleza, de imperfección, y por eso se llama varón imperfecto. (cited in Elena Del Río Parra 92)

Even Castiglione who has prescribed the need for and has praised the beauty of women (211), does not deny their accepted limitations and imperfections; the argument, in the words of Signor Gaspare, is quite simple:

I do say that very learned men have written that since Nature always plans and aims at absolute perfection she would, if possible, constantly bring forth men; and when a woman is born this is a mistake or defect, and contrary to Nature's wishes. This is the also the case when someone is born blind, or lame, or with some other defect, as again with trees, when so many fruits fail to ripen. (217)

In early-modern scientific thought, women's beauty also resides in the gloomiest of places. In fact, it coincides with Fuentelapeña and Rifer de Brocaldino's assertions

of monstrosity. Ambroise Paré's publication of *On Monsters and Marvels* contributes greatly to this notion.<sup>6</sup> Paré asserts women's imperfections and inferior reproductive capabilities as matter-of-fact, and deems women responsible for monstrous births. Paré's examples vary, but women's agency grounded in physical deformity, weak imagination, or evil inclination, prevail throughout the book as some of the most common causes of monstrosity. Women's imperfect nature is such that Paré addresses those cases where they [women] have degenerated into men because "nature tends always toward what is most perfect and not, on the contrary, to perform in such a way that what is perfect should become imperfect" (33).<sup>7</sup> Yet, what is most troubling about Paré's little book is the finding that monsters often appear among us under the guise of beautiful women. Certain demons, defined by the author as *succubi*, "transmute themselves into the guise of women" (91). Not only can these demons assume the form of very beautiful women,<sup>8</sup> but their main prey also appears to be beautiful women.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the beautiful woman fits both paradigms, that of seductress and of victim.

The "ugly" side of women's beauty is far-reaching and pervasive, and beautiful demons continue to proliferate not only in the written pages but also in the many visual representations of women. Françoise Borin notes that, despite some advances, paintings such as *Eva prima Pandora* by Jean Cousin "cast doubt on the neo-platonic conception of the Beautiful as a means of access to the Good and betokened a tragic view of existence" (195). Borin includes in her iconographic survey several images such as *The True Woman* or *The Mirror of Life and Death* that are representative of the pairing of beauty and evil. The former consists of the depiction of a two-headed monster, an angel in church and a devil at home, while the latter replaces the devil by women's other double: death (215-18). Both of these illustrations come complete with engravings that caution against the false and ephemeral nature of women's beauty. Thus, while several manuals praise beauty, there are those that caution against it and extol ugliness as women's most advantageous attribute. In the lesser-known Portuguese manual *Espelho de Casados*, the author addresses several requirements necessary for a good marriage. Barros cautions that beautiful women are a great danger to their husbands, because they are extremely desired and difficult to keep (fol. ii). When it comes to the perfect wife, this feat can only be accomplished through virtue and good manners; perfect beauty, as the author adds, comes from virtues and excess in beauty can only bring despair to the husband due to all the attention (fol. lvii-lviii).

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle also figures amongst Paré's cited authorities on the matter (3).

<sup>7</sup> He also mentions that he hasn't been able to find any true stories of the opposite, reinforcing once more that Nature tends toward perfection (33).

<sup>8</sup> "The same thing is written about a butcher's helper who, being plunged deep in empty musings on lust, was astonished that he suddenly perceived before him a Devil in the form of a beautiful woman, with whom, having "done business," his genital parts began to burn, so that it seemed to him he had a fire burning within his body, and he died miserably" (92).

<sup>9</sup> In an example the Devil impregnates a very beautiful girl (94).



*Menina e Moça* and the Fate of the Beautiful

In spite of the initial positive assessments and optimistic predictions for our beautiful heroines, *Menina e Moça* promptly discloses that beauty, the most desired and necessary attribute, is the main cause of much unhappiness and demise. Aónia's nurse sorrowful song foreshadows the ill fate of the beautiful:

Que a dita e a formosura,  
dizem patranhas antigas,  
que pelearam um dia, sendo dantes muito amigas.  
Muitos hão que é fantasia.  
Eu, que vi tempos e anos,  
nenhuma coisa duvido  
como ela é azo de danos. (154)

The incompatibility of beauty and happiness is further reinforced by a consistent negation of women's existence and desire. Beauty makes them prisoners under the constant vigilance of the dominant man. Or, worse yet, it becomes a liability, a site of unwanted advances and sexual attacks. It is not surprising that contrary to the male characters, Belisa and Aónia, the two "treasures," are completely shut out and isolated from the rest of the world; as a result, the sisters resort to gestures because they can't speak the language of the land (107). In Aónia's case for instance, the reader discovers that she is kept locked up, and has left the house only once, under the pretext of a holy pilgrimage and only with the permission of Lamentor (145, 166). Other women also share a similar fate. The young woman found by Avalor's father confides that she was removed from her mother's home and kept in a castle for the pleasure of one of the local lord's nephews (219). The language used in the text as well as the juxtaposition with nature further emphasize women's lack of existence and control over their own destinies. Language signals that women are construed in terms of marketable treasures to be guarded or exchanged, things to be desired, replaced or discarded. Kept in complete seclusion, Aónia is unaware that she is to wed a local wealthy knight, a decision made without her consultation. Her reaction signals her despair: "Aónia passou toda aquela noite num grito. E se não fora por Inês, que de todo seu segredo era sabedora, morrera, ou se fora por este monte" (170). In addition to the already mentioned observation where the squire of the bridge knight recalls the sisters as the most beautiful *things* he had ever seen, similar linguistic posts are found throughout the text that reveal the objectification of women. The last woman found by Avalor's father, states that when her suitor expelled her from the castle, he said the following words to his new love interest: "Vós só, senhora, sois a por quem aquilo deixo, e pude, e folgo de deixar" (220). The usage of *that* [aquilo] places women as mere objects, subjected to the desires of men. Ultimately, beauty renders women and their bodies items of possession and/or commerce through paternal or marital authority. As the

*dona* sadly relates, the fate of a beautiful woman is to remain in isolation: “encostada ao seu estrado, entre paredes, só, podia estar, vendo-se de altos muros cercada e de tantas guardas feitas para coisa de tão pequena força” (92).

Beautiful women’s only asylum appears to be within nature. Rachael Bromberg suggests that the young girl seeks exile in the mountains because nature mirrors human existence in terms of permanence and change. The young girl finds solace in the unchanged nature of the mountains, but also in the constant moving waters of the sea that illustrate her own restlessness (93). Yet, women do not partake in nature’s ability to change. In the midst of her plaintive solitude, the young woman gets some relief from the sweet chirping of a nightingale. Yet, the song soon turns sorrowful and “a triste da avezinha que, estando-se assim queixando, não sei como, caiu morta sobre a água e, caindo por entre as ramas, muitas folhas caíram também com ela” (83). The nightingale’s death, received thus as a presage, is symbolic of the young woman’s predicament “que aponta para a fatalidade a que toda a beleza está destinada” (Franco 67). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the immobile young girl against the rustle of the trees, the hustle and bustle of the birds, and the constant moving waters (82-84) clearly indicates that, unlike everything else, women are prevented from taking action. In fact, as Barbara Mujica has pointed out, Ribeiro makes considerable use of passive constructions in order to convey the helplessness of the young girl. Mujica illustrates this point with several references from the text: “me levaram de casa,” “tudo me foi tirado” (57). Once again, the text does not offer a solution to women. As the wise words of the *dona* tells us, women are left in a precarious state, becoming synonymous with sadness because “não temos remédios para o mal que os homens tem. Porque o pouco tempo que há que vivo, tenho aprendido que não há tristeza nos homens. Só as mulheres são tristes” (90). The remedies mentioned here as she continues to elaborate, consist of the ability to change and move about freely, a prospect denied women. Thus, because only men can move freely and find other ways to occupy their time, women fall victims to sadness and melancholy (90-91).

Lamentor’s advice to his daughter upon her departure to court accentuates the fragile state of women. He states that: “tudo é suspeito e pouco seguro para as mulheres, até o serem santas e virtuosas, porque isto às vezes é causa dos cavaleiros serem mais perdidos por elas, e fazerem coisas tamanhas que lhe fazem a elas crer o que não é senão só no desejo” (181). In women, Lamentor affirms, only a good reputation matters and men cannot be trusted (181). The actions of the various suitors in this narrative confirm Lamentor’s words regarding male conduct; Bimarder does not think twice about abandoning Aquelisia for Aónia and neither does Avalor, who served another lady at court when Arima arrives (184). Worse scenarios are those of the last two maidens, who capture the attention of suitors that, with aggressive tactics,

false promises and intense pursues, are able to seduce them. In one of the cases the narrative stresses his aggressive pursue and her futile attempt to resist:

Quisera tornar o passo atrás fugindo, e assim verdadeiramente o comecei a fazer. Mas ele, que mais corria que eu, lançando-se asinha atrás de mim, me alcançou não muito longe daqui [...]. E falando-me palavras de amor, com afagos e com mimos me assegurou. (213-14)

This confirms that women's beauty further accentuates their defenceless nature. Nahoum-Grappe notes the pernicious nature of beauty because it "designated her as prey; vile seducers picked her out of the crowd" (86). In fact, before telling of their tragedies, the last two maidens make reference to beauty as a leading factor to their disgrace. In the first story for instance, one of the maidens notes that although she was the smallest of the sisters, she was not small in beauty (213). Indeed, the knight who pursued her admits that, to have once seen her, he could not get her out of his mind (214). We also know that the second woman is beautiful because at one point Avalor's father notices and asks her who had harmed her beautiful face (218). Even Arima, who is the most virtuous, cannot escape the negative implications of beauty; jealousy and evil at court lead to rumours regarding her relationship with Avalor. Victim of malicious intentions, Arima does not leave court "well married," but rather saddened and ill (199-202). Hence, beauty becomes in *Menina e Moça* a troublesome attribute and its visibility a constant threat to women's reputation. Aónia's nurse speaks on the importance of reputation as she warns her mistress that it is better to be unhappy than regretful (158), because once destitute, women have nothing to fall back on (Nahoum-Grappe 90).

Yet, as Nahoum-Grappe reminds us, beauty can indeed be used as a tactical tool for social intervention and voice. The possibility arises "when a woman succeeded in captivating a man's attention, she could propose her own views and assert her own way of being in and thinking about the world" (95). And yet, this possibility is denied to the heroines in *Menina e Moça*. In actual fact, the most beautiful of them all, Arima, is also the most silent; along with the observations of her beauty, the reader finds that her eyes are typically lowered, her demeanour is rather submissive, and her presence faint: "e depois daí um pouco abaixou-os [os olhos] com aquele modo de mansidão que a ela só por dom especial foi dado, que conta-se que até no estar, andar, enfim em todolos outros autos a tinha tão suavemente posta que bem parecia que naquele lugar estava só" (183). Arima, despite such beauty, turns out to be the most naturally sad (182). In regards to the other women, beauty grants them visibility but not voice. Aónia must marry a suitor chosen without any previous knowledge or consultation, and the two women nameless were simply possessed and discarded without further ado. Ultimately, beauty can damage the most perfect of reputations. Thus, women's exemplary conduct and behaviour do not spare them from the evils of beauty. Once noticed, pursuance ensues; regardless of women's unwillingness to participate, the

result brings tragic consequences to women alone. This narrative is particularly telling, not of the usual warnings of the dangers of feminine beauty, but rather the immoral conduct of men. Men can easily discard women, replace one with another; and as for women, the experienced *dona* says it best:

Quantas donzelas comeu já a terra com as saudades que lhe deixaram cavaleiros, que comeu outra terra com outras saudades? Cheios estão os livros de histórias de donzelas que ficaram chorando por cavaleiros que se iam, e que se lembravam ainda de dar de esporas a seus cavalos, porque não eram tão desamorosos como eles. (93)

Poetic language also denies women's existence. As beautiful as all the heroines are in this narrative, there is never a complete picture; that is, in true Petrarchan fashion, one does not find a top-to-toe enumeration, but rather part or parts of a woman and thus a fragmented beauty (Vickers 266). Indeed, and although we are told that all the heroines are beautiful, few details are given on the specificity of their beauty. The narrative offers the reader only vague references to long and wavy hair, green eyes, and gracious smiles. These references appear incongruous, since lengthy portrayals of feminine beauty are quite common in narratives (Bettella 86). Yet, Ribeiro chooses the short canon, preferred by the lyric and by Petrarch, who uses it with "obsessive insistence" (Vickers 266). This elusiveness is not without consequence for women's beauty. The fragmented and scattered body parts in Petrarch's lyric becomes a code "that causes us to view the fetishized body as the norm [and] bodies fetishized by a poetic voice logically do not have a voice of their own" (Vickers 277). Bodily fragmentation is also common in the *Cantigas de amigo*, where "save for the odd mention of her eyes, the woman is without body or face. The refusal to endow the lady with any individualizing features reduces her to a cipher of man's own unique status" (Weiss 134). In "Members Only," Vickers examines the praises of body parts in the popular anatomical blazons in the early modern period. Blazons undermined bodily integrity and thus "displayed a body disembodied, divided and conquered" (8). There are several occasions in the narrative where the focus is precisely on parts. Bimarder, for instance, falls in love with Aónia although it is clear that he does not get a full picture of her; her abundant hair, drenched in tears, covers her almost entirely (116). In fact, throughout much of the courtship Aónia's body is not fully unveiled. She remains behind closed quarters, and corresponds with him through a crack on the wall (161-63). Later, the very last and nameless woman of this narrative reveals herself only partially: "e, olhando-a ele bem, vira-lhe aquela parte do seu rosto que descoberto tinha" (218). Hence, the focus on the individual beauties of the heroines or their fragmented bodies further accentuates their inability to exist as a whole, rather than as composites of separate parts.

## On the Beauty of Ugliness

While the young woman, the listener of the story, shares some of her predicament with the *dona*, we learn important details regarding the nature of her beauty. It appears that hers is a “disfigured beauty,”<sup>10</sup> a condition that brings some relief to her situation. Thus, while her story is never disclosed and she remains an enigma from beginning to end, her appearance is brought to the forefront as a noticeable element. She tells her companion that “mulher formosa bem vedes que o não sou já, e pois que já não tenho armas para ofender, para me defender já para que me seriam necessárias?” (86). The issue of beauty as a weapon appears also in the narrative when the squire of the bridge knight informs that his master fell in love with his beloved who possessed only one weapon: her beauty. However, once more, her beauty worked against her because she was not in love with him: “Porque a vontade, segundo ela mostrou, nunca foi dele; mas antes disseram alguns de sua casa que o dia que ela concedeu o prazo chorou muitas lágrimas, e que nunca o concedera se não fora por seu pai” (104). No longer beautiful, our heroine finds solace in the fact that her lack of beauty permits her to go about undetected: “A toda parte já agora posso ir segura de tudo” (86). One must consider that the manner in which this heroine finds freedom can also present a solution to others in the text. In fact, she is not alone as the two last heroines also reveal an effaced beauty. When Avalor finds the abandoned woman in the forest, he notices that she has also been mistreated; upon further examination, the woman tells him that in a fit of rage and despair, and upon finding confirmation that her beloved had another love interest, “lançando eu as mãos irosas aos meus cabelos, todo este chão cobri deles, como vedes” (215). This evokes a similar situation as Avalor’s father also finds a woman in the same predicament. However, she had mutilated her face to the point that streaks of blood were carved on her face. Avalor’s father unsuccessfully tries to dissuade her from further mutilation as she continues to pull out her hair (218-219). Curiously, the sister of the bridge knight also exhibited a similar behaviour upon her brother’s death (106). Indeed, the young woman found by Avalor, who according to the text, is “cortada e magoada” (212), is surprised that the knight is willing to help her; she reveals her amazement when she asks him: “Para que desceste, cavaleiro, que donzelas tristes não são para ver?” (218).<sup>11</sup> Having discussed the dangers of beauty, it is very likely that their “new looks” serve an additional purpose in addition to the reflection of despair. Even though neither of our protagonists can obtain happiness, they can surely attain some independence and relief from men. Upon changing their looks, the young listener and the two latter women effectively manage to disrupt the perceptions of others towards them. Thus, the narrative offers ugliness as the recourse for women; it can grant them freedom as it makes them invisible or at least less appealing to male attention and conquest. Ugliness can serve not only as protection

<sup>10</sup> Because she has shed many tears, her beauty has been somewhat effaced (85).

<sup>11</sup> *Triste* in Portuguese can have other connotations beside sad; it can also be a reference to a sorry, lamentable, dull sight.

against vile seducers (Nahoum-Grappe 90), but also freedom. Yet, the meaning of mutilation may also offer other possibilities. For both Jews and Christians, “there is a link between mutilation, as a universal emblem of corporeal vulnerability and abjection, and holiness” (Greenblatt 223). Although the reformation questioned the practice of self-mutilation, Christianity saw it as a vehicle of piety, whereas, in the image of Christ’s wounded body, wounds meant participation in faith and in the divine power (222-24). Hence, our heroines’ ugliness does not partake in the negative perception that equates ugliness with immorality and evil, but rather in the divine realm. Ironically, through self-mutilation, it is ugliness that participates in the divine.

Umberto Eco’s recent edition of *On Ugliness* includes several Renaissance works that might shed some additional attractiveness onto the beauty of ugliness. One of particular relevance is *Better Ugly than Beautiful* of 1544 by Ortensio Lando. After pointing to the beauty of Helen as the cause for the demise of both Greeks and Trojans, Lando admires the wisdom of well-known ugly figures, such as Socrates. The following is asserted about ugliness:

Oh ugliness, therefore, you saintly friend of chastity, shield against scandal, and protector from dangers, you certainly know the easiest conversations, you remove all bitterness from pleasant talk, you crush evil suspicions, you are the only remedy for jealousy. (167)

Consequently, while beauty presents itself initially as a successful attribute that signals worth, wealth and well being, it soon shows its ugly face. Indeed, *Menina e Moça*’s women are all extremely beautiful. However, beauty, as the narrative discloses, reveals painstaking limitations for women: imprisonment, loneliness, vulnerability, rejection and ultimately, dishonour. Condemned by gender and looks, they fall victims to a patriarchal culture that denies them existence. Regardless of the desire for beauty or the equation of moral goodness with external beauty, the denouement divulges the fallacies of beauty, its dark side through the tortuous path that each heroine must endure. Ironically, this noted enigmatic text exposes an incisive criticism on women’s beauty and the construction of womanhood in fiction and beyond. The criticism of the conduct of men, rather than of women, adds to the feminist undertone of this rather unique work. Hence, Ribeiro’s *Menina e Moça* reveals, not the traditional sexual allure and evil ways of women, but the lack of morality and moderation of male pursuits and desires. Ultimately, women must negate their beauty and resort only to solitude. The fate of Arima exemplifies it best; because and despite of the irony that she truly is as virtuous as her external beauty indicates, the world that surrounds her is not. Alternatively, and as *dona* points out, she cannot exist in a world “onde se não costumam senão prazeres, verdadeiros ou fingidos” (179).

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