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Original scientific article

### **Poetry and Feminine Crafts in the Letters of the Young Marquise of Alorna (1750-1839)**

Taking as a starting point the association between embroidery and language conveyed by the Greek myth of Filomela and Procne, this article examines the relationship between social status and ornaments like embroidery and lace. In order to illustrate this relationship an example is selected from the letters exchanged between the Marquise of Alorna and her Father where a connection is established between the production of these 'feminine' crafts, women's culture and women's writing, in the XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century.

**Keywords:** Embroidery; letters; Sumptuary Laws; XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese Poetry; Womens Writing; Marquise of Alorna (1750-1839)

There is a Greek mythical legend widely disseminated in Europe down the centuries which relates that once upon a time Pandion, king of Athens, gave his daughter Procne in marriage to the king of Thrace, Tereus, as a reward for help he had given him during the war. After the wedding Procne missed her sister Filomela very much and asked her husband to bring her to their palace. On the way from Athens to Thrace, Tereus raped Filomela and in order to prevent her from telling anyone what had happened cut her tongue, locked her up and abandoned her. Isolated and reduced to silence, Filomela produced a work of embroidery which she managed to send to her sister. When Procne saw it, she immediately understood what happened and prepared her revenge.

In this short story there is a traditional craft – embroidery – which is associated with a dramatic moment in the lives of two sisters: it is used as a common language, and transformed in a means of communication, immediately understood by the one who receives it. It is, of course, a mythical vision, but it allows us to illustrate two aspects which will be addressed in this paper: on the one hand, the idea that manual arts like embroidery, lace, needlework, etc, are part of a *common cultural heritage*, which is shared by performers from different social classes and by connoisseurs/users of these productions/works; and, on the other hand, the notion that because of this, in the *longuedurée* of History these arts have been the *locus* of an intensive dialogue between traditional and learned cultures. If it is a fact that traditional arts and crafts tend to specialize and to repeat certain techniques, patterns, colors, and so on, it is also true that they have inspired learned and erudite decorative arts which have adapted them once and again to the transitory trends of fashion[1]

If there was ever a time in European history when decorative arts sponsored by the elites incorporated and used traditional colors and patterns this was, certainly, the second half of the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century, a period when embroidery and lace were integrated in the everyday life of the privileged layers of society, through their adoption in clothing and in objects of personal use. Between the decades of 1750 and 1790, light-colored silk with floral motifs embroidered in hues, as well as lace-decorated sleeves, handcuffs, and cleavages were used in women's as well as in men's clothes. During those years, the French court was seen as a model of prestige, and was dictating European fashion. Portugal was following its example to such an extent that in 1787, the Marquis of Bombelles, who was the newly appointed French ambassador in Lisbon wrote in his diary : "l'habit de cour est le même ici qu'à Versailles" ["the court fashion is the same here as in Versailles"] [2]

Lace, embroidery and silk (the precious fabric which served as support for these handicrafts) attracted special attention on the part of philosophers, moralists and politicians. They are elements from the order of the superfluous, without immediate utility, and their ornamental quality was seen by many as a sign of

futile ostentation, morally reprehensible. However, in the same period, there were numerous economists who underlined that the manufacture of those "inutilities" gave work and income to a large number of people who would be condemned to poverty without this means of subsistence. [3]

Luxury goods occupy a central place in the wider European debate about the well-being and happiness of people, in which is mirrored the profound change of mentalities which were then occurring. In Portugal, the existence of divergent points of view on this matter is documented in the sumptuary laws of the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 1749 (LEI 1749) and in the law of 21<sup>st</sup> of April 1751 (ALVARÁ 1751), as well as in the opinions of the jurists who elaborated them and no less in the reactions they caused.

Let us recall very briefly the pragmatic law of 1749. Written by José Vaz de Carvalho, it defines luxury as a social scourge, blaming it for being the "ruin, not only of property, but of good customs" [*Port.:* "origem da ruína, não só da fazenda, mas dos bons costumes"] [4]. With this statement as justification, he would forbid the use of gold and silver ornaments, of silk lace, of embroidery, of ribbons, of silk galleons and all kinds of lace in clothing. According to this law, the use of these artifacts was limited to the king, the church officers and the ministers of the cult. Since it was to be enforced in the entire Portuguese Empire, this law included a prohibition against the blacks, *mulatos* and their descendants wearing jewelry, "all kinds of silk" and fine fabrics made of wool, linen and cotton.

As one might expect, this law provoked a wave of protest. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of May in the same year the merchants of Lisbon, represented in the *Mesa do Bem Comum* (the city merchants' corporation) sent a written document to the king exposing "the pernicious consequences which can result from its enforcement" in the European territory as well as in the Portuguese America, which they define as a "republic composed of blacks and mulattos". [5] According to their report, in Brazil the number of white people was so small that, if they were the only ones allowed to consume luxury goods, its commerce would disappear. Another known protest came from the jurisdiction of Vila do Conde, in Northern Portugal, whose local authorities sent to the court, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1749, a delegation led by a woman, the lace-maker Joana Maria de Jesus, in representation of the artisans of lace, who saw themselves on the verge of being reduced to indigence if the pragmatic law was enforced. [6]

After the death of King D. João V, in 1751, this law was altered on the basis of a report written by the jurist Manuel de Almeida e Carvalho, to whom luxury "was not an evil thing" but the result of a *useful* activity capable of guaranteeing the welfare of artisans and merchants, thus constituting a source of wealth for the country. Mirroring what was happening in England and in France, the new law authorized the use of lace, embroidery and similar artifacts, as long as they were "fabricated within the limits of these Kingdoms and their Domains, by my natural Subjects, or naturalized." (ALVARÁ 1751)

Although from 1751 onwards the commerce of goods like lace, embroidery and silk was liberalized in the territories under Portuguese administration, this did not mean that these stopped being considered as signs of social distinction, associated with birth and wealth [7]. The aristocracy used them as a way of signaling its privileged status and the new elite, designated in the laws signed during the Ministry of the Prime Minister Marquis of Pombal as "Businessmen" [*Port.:* *Homens de Negócio*], appropriated these same details with the same intention, envisaging them as conveyers of symbolic value. This was certainly more important, for those who wore them, than commercial value.

Let us look at one example which will enable us to underline some of the meanings attributed to handicrafts, patiently produced by someone's hands and thus frequently invested with a strong affective component.

Between 1759 and 1777, the young D. Leonor de Almeida Portugal, who was the grandchild of the Marquis and Marquise of Távora killed by the order of king D. José I, lived incarcerated in the monastery of Chelas in the surroundings of Lisbon, together with her mother and sister, while her father, D. João de Almeida Portugal, was sent to prison. Sometime after the family separation, D. João found a way of secretly corresponding with his wife and daughters. The surviving documents of that correspondence are permeated with references to these traditional crafts, their uses and their value,

concrete as well as symbolic. In the letters written by the young girls D. Leonor and D. Maria to their father, as well as in those they wrote to their lady friend D. Teresa de Mello Breyner, a dear friend and assiduous visitor of the monastery, allusions to lace and needlework are intertwined with references to books and discussions of rules of poetics. Writing and embroidering are activities which are even associated sometimes, in metaphors like this, used by D. Maria in a letter to D. João:

The *batiste* came very wafted. One could see the embroidery well until the stitch of maintenance, however, from then onward nothing could be perceived. But, since I started doing all these things basted, *I feel so at ease as with ruling-lines on paper when I write.*(PF: ALMATI 1)

[*Port.:* A cambraia veio bastamente tramada. Até o ponto de mantimento percebia-se bem o bordado, porém, daí por diante, não se conhecia mais nada. *Eu, depois que faço todas estas coisas alinhavadas, acho-me tão bem como com pauta quando escrevo*]

D. Leonor de Almeida, who would later become Marquise of Alorna, was the eldest daughter. A prisoner of state from the age of 8, she describes herself in these writings as a victim of forces which she cannot control. Being the daughter of a political prisoner and the grand-daughter of aristocrats implicated in a crime of *lese-majesty* she worries permanently for her safety and for her future, but finds, in the common cultural heritage of traditional crafts, the image of an alternative to indigence. She writes to her father, for instance:

Both my sister and myself, judging it not impossible that fortune may take us to the ultimate point, have taken care to prepare ourselves for the most difficult situations. In case of need, when enlightenment and spiritual culture will not be worth anything, we can both be cooks, embroiderers, seamstresses or any womanly office which will be capable of avoiding hardship and indigent poverty. Wherever we go we will take with us an assured income thanks to our skills and I am less ashamed of these ideas, than of others, like the ones laziness in times of abundance can produce. (PF: ALCPAI 36)



[Tanto eu como a mana, não julgando nada impossível que a fortuna nos levasse até o último ponto, cuidámos de preparar-nos para as situações mais defíceis. Em caso de aperto, quando as luzes e cultura do espírito não valha nada, podemos ambas ser cozinheiras, bordadoras, costureiras e qualquer ofício mulheril que possa evitar precisões aflitivas e pobreza miserável. Para qualquer parte que fôssemos, levávamos connosco uma renda certa nas nossas habelidades e tenho menos vergonha destas ideias, que de outras que pode produzir a preguiça no seio d'abundância.]

## Dona Leonor de Almeida Portugal by Franz Joseph Pitschmann

In this sense, it is not surprising that D. Leonor tried to practice these crafts, but one should be aware of the fact that in the precarious situation experienced by the family in those years her manual skills as well as her sister's would also be expedient, allowing them to keep, on the level of appearances, the distinctive signs of their class. In a letter to her father she tells him, for instance, how she dressed up on her birthday:

My sister [cf. use above, p. 4] went to the choir, I went to the toilet table. I had a new orange dress, a very well-made corset, a couple of very beautiful lace spirals, *everything made by my own hands*, except for some ribbon ornaments which were made by my sister. I combed my hair very well and composed myself in a moderate fashion, but in such a way that the mirror would not make me feel bad about myself. It is a fact that poor Philosophy loses somewhat of its importance when the ornaments look good on you. I don't know how I should name this act of our feminine understanding which, in the view of a less ugly image, has the capacity of putting its whole soul in the lace spiral, the corset, the bows, and so on. (PF: ALCPAI 28)

[A mana foi para o coro, eu para o toucador. Tinha um vestido novo cor de laranja, um espartilho bem feito, umas cornetas muito bonitas, *tudo feito pela minha mão*#, excepto uns adornos de fitas, feitos pela mana. Penteei-me muito bem e concertei-me sem excesso, mas de modo que o espelho me não deixasse mal comigo. Com efeito, a miserável Filosofia lá perde um tanto ou quanto, quando os topes nos ficam bem ao parecer. Eu não sei como chame a um acto do nosso entendimento femenino, que à vista de uma imagem menos feia, tem a habelidade de pôr a alma toda na corneta, no espartilho, nos laços, etc. ]

Putting 'her whole soul' into her manual works, D. Leonor will send to her father, together with the letters, the books she manages to buy and her poems, lace and embroideries made by her own hands. She writes, for instance, in another letter:

I am pleased that your Excellency liked the lace, which I do while my disciple reads, and it needs so little attention that I do not lose a word of what she says, and give her lesson without any difficulty. That lace is not bobbin lace as you thought. It is all made with the needle, and the only difference is that it is made with some thicker or thinner needles. It is made with less discomfort than bobbin lace and therefore more quickly.

The handcuffs I gave brother were better, for the lace was finer and in this kind of thing sister is eminent, as in everything and her works are much more perfect than mine. Every adornment she wears is made by her own hands and it is very rare that we wear ornaments which cost us money or have been made by other hands. Our adornments are not many, but those we have are the work of hours when we are not doing more serious tasks. (PF: ALCPAI 36)

[Estimo que V. Ex<sup>a</sup> gostasse da renda, a qual foi feita enquanto a decípola lê, e tão pouca aplicação leva que não perco palavra e dou-lhe lição sem o mínimo embaraço. Aquela rede não é de birlos, como V. Ex<sup>a</sup> entendeu. Tudo se faz com agulha, e só tem a diferença em ser com ela mais ou menos grossa. Faz-se com menos incómodo que as de birlos e, por isso, mais depressa.

Os punhos que dei ao mano estavam melhores, por ser a rede mais fina e, naquele género, é a mana eminente, como em tudo, e as suas obras são muitomais perfeitas que as minhas. Todos os seus adreços são feitos pela sua mão e raras são as coisas com que nos adornamos que leve dinheiro ou mão alheia. Os adornos são poucos, mas esses tais ou quais são obras do tempo em que não tem lugar objectos mais sérios.]

Let us recall that D. Leonor's father, D. João de Almeida Portugal, was in prison, and confined to a small space he shared with the Marquis of Gouveia, D. Martinho de Mascarenhas, a boy almost the same age as D. Leonor and her sister. Held incommunicado the two prisoners were seen only by the guards,

received only rare visits from a confessor and, even more rarely, from a doctor[8]. In spite of these circumstances, amidst the presents mentioned in the letters of D. Leonor and her sister, lace handcuffs abound.

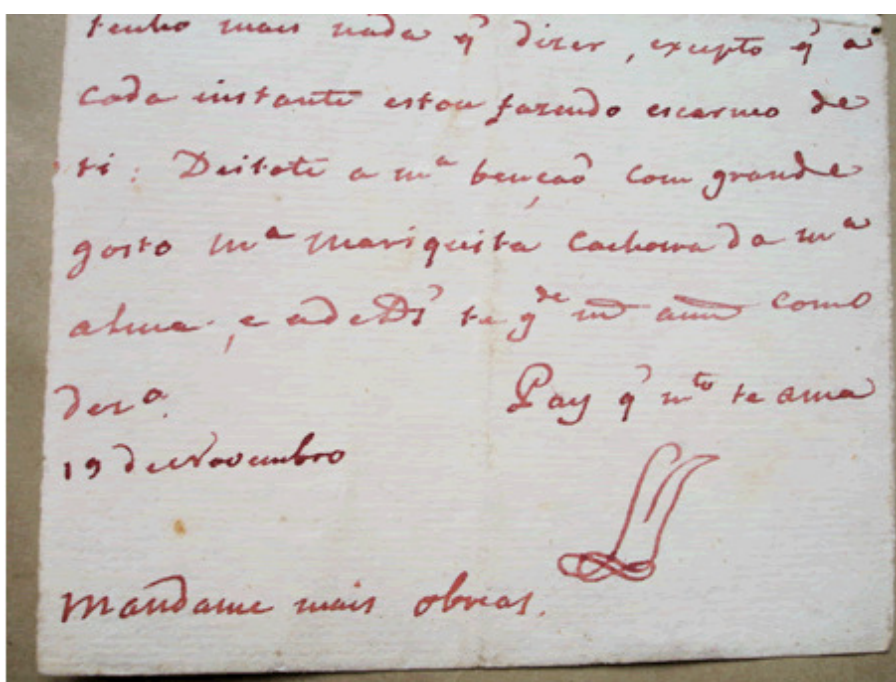
The preoccupation with adornment shown by D. Leonor, as well as these references to lace handcuffs, should be considered in the context of the meaning they had at the time. As we have seen, in the eighteenth century such trims as lace and embroidery were signs of social distinction, so representative that their use was ruled by law. On the other hand, in a society where the concept of cleanliness was not associated as it is today with water and bathing, white linen garments and especially the immaculate whiteness of the visible parts, like collars and handcuffs, were also seen as a sign of hygiene and good appearance[9]. Behind these things, that seem superfluous today, more serious concerns are at stake. The lace handcuffs lovingly made by D. João's daughters would allow him to appear clean and present himself in accordance to his social status, enabling him to preserve the dignified and recognizable looks of an aristocrat, in spite of the deprivation and humiliation of the jail.

The affective charge associated with objects made by the hands of one who gives them adds a special value, as can be seen in the way these three incarcerated people, father and daughters, refer to the little presents they exchange together with the letters, born from ingeniousness and manual skills. If the girls send lace handcuffs, embroidered purses and little dolls dressed and combed according to the latest fashion, the Marquis of Alorna, in spite of his extreme poverty, will reciprocate with drawings and most particularly with something very special: a red ink of his invention he obtained by boiling in water little pieces of brazil redwood.[10] This ink, with which he wrote his first letters to his wife (and caused her horror for she thought it was blood) is mentioned by D. Maria in one of her letters in the following way:

I thank your Excellency very much for the red ink that you sent me which is beautiful and has a much better color than the one you sent me some time ago. I use it ordinarily now, not only because it looks beautiful on Holland paper, but also because *I get a delicate pleasure from using something which has been worked by Your Excellency.* (PF LEON.PAI 75)

[Agradeço muito a V.Ex<sup>a</sup> a tinta encarnada que me mandou, que vem linda e com muito mais bonita cor que a outra que há mais tempo veio. Sirvo-me ordinariamente dela, porque faz bonito matiz no papel d'Holanda, e porque me faz um gosto delicado servir-me daquilo que foi trabalhado por V.Ex<sup>a</sup> .]

The letter in red ink



Luxury goods, signs of distinction, marks of cleanliness and support for the affective investments of the loving ones, lace and embroidery maintain in this Eighteenth Century correspondence common features with the above mentioned Greek legend. In the desperate situation of confinement it is D. Leonor herself who, when she becomes aware of the excellence of her manual skills, imagines a situation in which embroidery could be used as a means of

conveying a message: theirresistible pleading of an innocent young girl asking for her father's freedom:

There is nothing I would not think of to release Your Excellency or that I would not want to do. Even the smallest bagatelles are useful to me and I will tell one which will serve above all to entertain Your Excellency as to what would be possible and useful for me, in the way a novel would. An embroidered waistcoat, in the most beautiful taste, has recently come from France for the Count of Arcos. However, since in these modern clothes the waistcoat cannot be used without sleeves, it was useless without someone in Lisbon who would make them for him. He sent it to the best embroiderers and it was always sent back, with the answer that it could not be done here: some said that satin in that color could not be found, others that there were no *retroz* nor *chenilles* of that same delicacy and finally pleaded the difficulty and perfection of the work.

The Count brought it here for us to see and, when he said that no one dared to make sleeves for it, I said that I would be ready to make them if *retrozes*, and so on could be found. After much trouble, everything was found and I have made the sleeves. If I am not mistaken they look as good as the waistcoat. This rare craft has inspired in me the idea of another, even more rare, and worthy of a king. I thought about embroidering it with pearls and, with the perfection my hands might be capable of, to do something that would excite the appetite of our King (who likes these trifles) and (if it were not considered indecent), to present myself like any street seller, beg that it be bought and, when he asked me for the price, ask for one only word, the word which would make the happiness of my dear Father. If this could ever happen, what man would not be moved, who would not reward a work proper to my sex, executed with such a heroic purpose! (ANTT 180)

[Não há coisa que me não lembre para soltar a V.Ex<sup>a</sup>, que não a deseje fazer. Até as mínimas bagatelas me tem serventia, e contarei uma que serve mais para divertir a V.Ex<sup>a</sup>, por modo de romance, do que me seria possível e útil.

Veio de França ao Conde dos Arcos uma véstia bordada, do mais lindo gosto. Porém, como nestes vestidos modernos não serve véstia sem canhões, ficava-lhe inútil senão houvesse em Lisboa quem os fizesse. Mandou-a a casa dos melhores bordadores e veio sempre recambiada, dizendo que se não podia fazer cá: uns, porque não havia cetim daquela cor, outros, porque não havia retrozes e frocos daquela delicadeza e, finalmente, pela impertinência e perfeição do trabalho.

Trouxe-a cá o Conde para nós a vermos e, dizendo que ninguém se atrevia a fazer-lhe os canhões, disse-lhe eu que estava pronta a fazê-los se se achassem os retrozes, etc. Depois de muito trabalho, achou-se tudo, e eu tenho os canhões feitos e, se me não engano, tão bem feitos como a véstia.

Esta obra rara excitou-me a ideia de outra, mais rara ainda, e que fosse digna de um Rei. Lembrou-me bordá-la de pérolas e, com a perfeição de que são capazes as minhas mãos, fazer coisa que excitasse o apetite d'El-Rei (que gosta muito destas bagatelas) e, (se não fosse indecente), apresentar-me como qualquer vendedeira, rogar que ma comprassem e, ao perguntar-me o preço, exegir uma palavra só, aquela que fizesse a felecidade do meu querido Pai. Se isto se pudesse verficar, qual seria o homem que se não condoesse, que não premeasse os trabalhos próprios do meu sexo, exercitados com um fim tão Heróico!]

D. Leonor's narrative of the dream of obtaining freedom for her Father in exchange for the product of her silk embroidery was inspired by a very specific, tragic, and uncommon situation. It forces us to be aware, however, of the long lasting association, in the Western World, between handwork and affection, and between ornaments in clothes, social status and social stratification. At another level, one can say that it opens a window of different possibilities for thinking about the relationship between handicrafts and the tasks most recommended to women in the past. As the letters of the Alorna girls so clearly put it, the care and attention to detail which are needed for embroidery, needlework or lace, were not very different from those required for writing.

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PF = Private Archive of the Fronteira Palace, Lisbon

ANTT = Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (National Archive)

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**Кључне речи:** Embroidery; letters; Sumptuary Laws; XVIII<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese Poetry; Womens Writing; Marquise of Alorna (1750-1839)

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