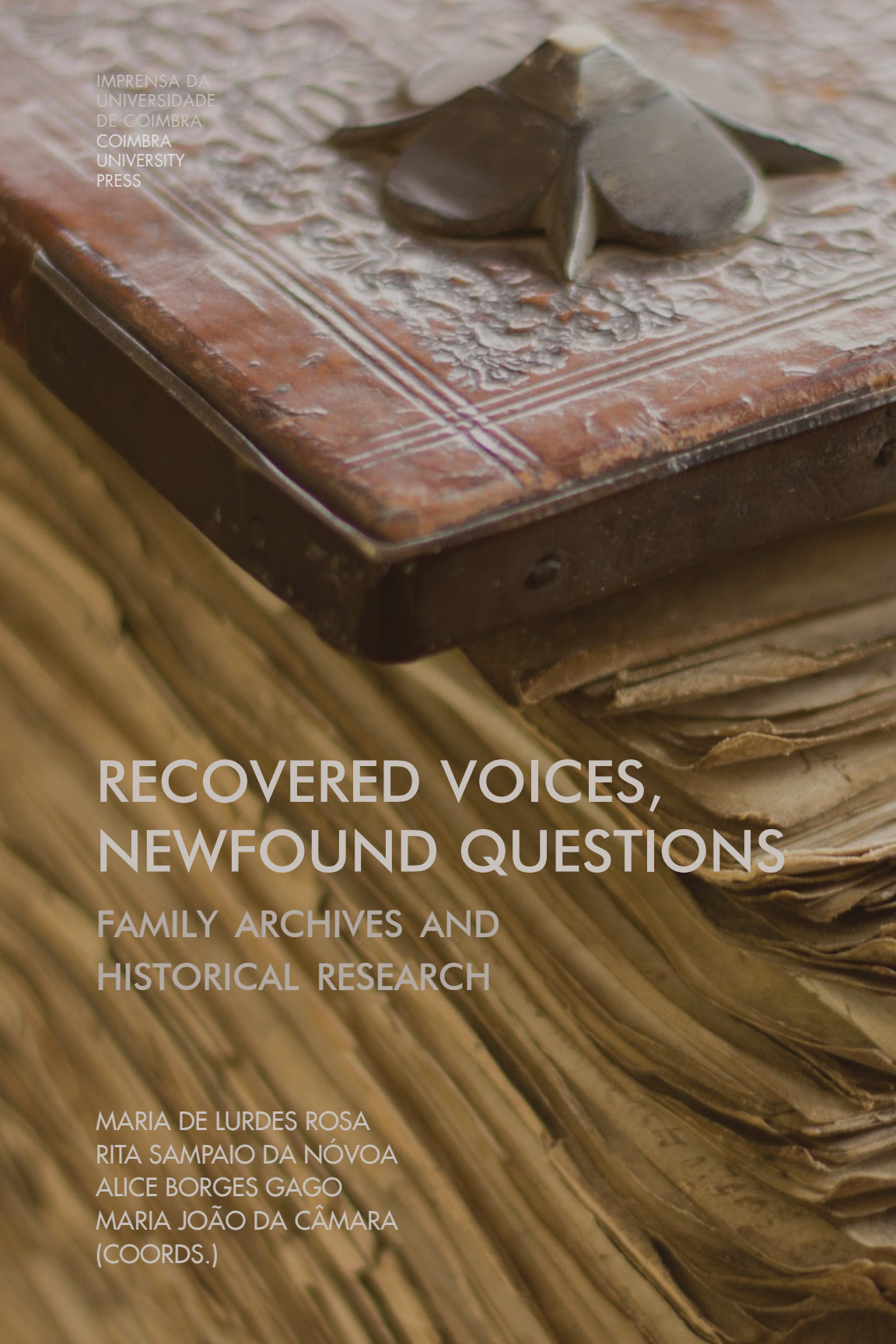
IMPRENSA DA
UNIVERSIDADE
DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



RECOVERED VOICES, NEWFOUND QUESTIONS

FAMILY ARCHIVES AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

MARIA DE LURDES ROSA
RITA SAMPAIO DA NÓVOA
ALICE BORGES GAGO
MARIA JOÃO DA CÂMARA
(COORDS.)

PEDRO URBANO
Instituto de História Contemporânea/NOVA FCSH
Centro de Estudos Clássicos/FL UL
pedro.urbanogm@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-8754-892X

WOMEN WRITING AND FAMILY ARCHIVES: THE MISSING STORY

ABSTRACT: The history of womankind can only be properly explored by looking at the writings of women themselves. Because of this, family archives are essential to reconstruct women's biographies historically, which frequently are unknown. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how family archives, and especially biographical writing, make it possible to learn more about the universe of women, in particular in nineteenth-century Portugal. Since most of the examples available concern the aristocracy of the time, some characteristics can be detected that define this writing and the social group it belongs to.

Keywords: women's writing; family archives; aristocracy; history of women; history of nineteenth-century Portugal

Since the feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which started with universal suffrage and led up to the feminist liberation movement in the 1960s and '70s, womankind came a long way. Since then, international historiography has sought new perspectives, highlighting the contribution of women in different societies throughout time. This allowed the expansion of historical knowledge, not only on this particular theme but also in other areas, through the use of shared methodological perspectives and analysis. This is the case with subjects such as masculinity and (increasingly) sexuality and gender, which had already begun by the 1980s and '90s.

As demonstrated in an article by Irene Vaquinhas — "Estudos sobre a História das Mulheres em Portugal: as grandes linhas de força no início do século XXI" — in Portugal the history of women has mainly evolved after the reinstatement of democracy following the April 1974 revolution, finding

https://doi.org/10.14195/978-989-26-1794-7_17

motivation in the École des *Annales*. As is widely known, the *Annales* school prioritized long-term processes and broadened the study of human actions that, until then, had rarely been studied in history. It also favored interdisciplinarity. Although the movement had first developed in the second quarter of the twentieth century, it became truly significant in Portugal only after the revolution, despite the efforts of Joel Serrão, Oliveira Marques and Vitorino Magalhães Godinho during the *Estado Novo* dictatorship.

Likewise, nineteenth-century history was also marginalized by the *Estado Novo,* and it was only after later that interest in the previous century was renewed. It is in times of revolution, according to Eric Hobsbawm, that notions of liberalism, socialism and democracy arise, concepts that the dictatorship despised.

According to Irene Vaquinhas, women's history initially focused mostly on heroines — queens, suffragettes, journalists — who questioned the status quo and male power specifically. Subsequent historians turned their interest towards anonymous women, about whom very little was known.

However, this research has always depended on a small number of available sources, many of them indirect: legal sources, norms, literature, periodical press, travelogues, sermons and pastoral letters[1].

This naturally raises two questions, both of which are fundamental to the problem of sources and historical knowledge. Firstly, the absence of direct sources, in particular documentation produced by women themselves. The nineteenth century witnessed the development of the periodical press and its specialization, with the result that periodical press for women increased, as well as press written by women. Alongside, some women asserted themselves in literature, however slowly and not without difficulty.

Secondly, the indirect sources are mostly produced by men, regarding both literary and legal and normative texts. Therefore, a male view of women, above all, is the norm and shapes discussion.

How does one go about composing a history of women through women directly, written by and about themselves? The sources are found where women have been confined to for centuries: the domestic space. The excep-

[1] VAQUINHAS, 2009: 241-253.

tions to this rule are women who played different roles than traditional ones: queens, whether in their own right or not; regents; heiresses of noble houses; widows, and members of religious orders.

This is where the importance of family archives comes in, to which Irene Vaquinhas drew attention, since it is where some pleasant surprises may be found to help us write our history of women.

However, caution must be exercised when analyzing the social origin of the producers of these archives. The norm, which certainly applies to Portugal, tends to be that family archives are about aristocratic (or at least noble) families. This means that they refer only to a small part of the Portuguese population throughout the nineteenth century, although they may of course indirectly contain data about other social groups.

The social origin of these families is an important factor in the production of documentation tied to the economic and financial management of aristocratic houses, as well as in the production of official documentation concerning rewards given for service rendered to the crown. Although this continued throughout nineteenth-century Portugal, we can see epistolary pockets forming and, every now and then, autobiographical manuscripts, especially journals, making an appearance. This somewhat contradicts the idea that Portugal lacked tradition in letter-writing and that no other egodocuments were produced, especially when compared to other European countries. It is true that Portugal is a small country, and that its elites were known to have low literacy rates, again compared to those of other European countries. In the eighteenth century, to a great extent these elites were composed of aristocrats, joined in the following century by other social groups, such as the diplomatic corps, businessmen, and financial agents. Despite all this, not only does correspondence exist in large numbers, it has also been preserved.

Since the conservation of archival documents results from construction (once you choose what you want to save) it is easy to understand that documentation relating to land and financial administration survives to a larger extent, as it provided proof of ownership of land, the main guarantor of wealth and heritage. The reasons why correspondence was kept are not as clear. Along with a wish to maintain memory and the emotional connections inherent to this type of text — due to their authors and/or recipients

belonging to the family — historians have developed another theory: that correspondence is a distinctive feature of a cultured, especially aristocratic, elite, characterized by the keeping of libraries, the attendance of artistic performances (theatre, opera, dance), and the taking part in *salons*[2]. These distinctive features, sooner or later, and especially since the nineteenth century, would have been mimicked by other social groups, in particular the bourgeoisie, helped by growing literacy rates and higher education within the aristocratic group itself. In addition, correspondence permitted the strengthening of social ties, the establishing of alliances and the exercise of economic, intellectual and political power[3].

From the early nineteenth century onwards, along with the trivialization of correspondence, the writing of diaries and journals also developed, as intimacy, emotions, personal recollections and biographical writing became highly valued by the Romantics[4]. All of these traits were characteristic of the social elite[5]. Correspondence can be roughly characterized as free, self-designed writing, without aesthetic concerns or stylistic features, and usually is closely related to factual events, since it was written at the end of each day[6].

This type of documentation naturally relates to an increasing and evident differentiation between the concepts of public and private in the nineteenth century. However, these may not be the best concepts with which to characterize this type of documentation. Although self-writing favors discourse about the private life of its authors and the players in it, the division between private and public remains rather tenuous and difficult to define, because among this documentation information about public and official functions can be found just as well. It is therefore necessary to consider the notion of confidentiality, which Vanda Anastácio has considered a feature of correspondence in the eighteenth century[7], which continued into the following century. This can be seen, for example, in the discussion of matters understood only by

---

[2] DAUPHIN *et al.*, 1991: 70.

[3] BELLO VASQUEZ, 2005: 76.

[4] CORRADO, 2000: 11; DUFIEF, 2001: 18-19.

[5] CÂMARA, 1829: 7.

[6] CORRADO, 2000: 256; DUFIEF, 2001: 107.

[7] ANASTÁCIO, 2005: 46.

the two parties involved, the sender and the receiver[8], in keeping the identity of some of the people discussed hiding by using their initials, nicknames or *petit-noms*, often indecipherable to the twenty-first century reader[9].

The confidentiality of communication is what adds value to this type of documentation: it is what allows us to complete, to reconstruct, even to contest the story told by official sources, allowing for the construction of a richer, broader, more complete historical truth.

It is in this universe of egodocuments, whether correspondence or diaries, that we find female authorship. Although male authorship is more abundant, the female equivalent is still expressive. It is important to draw attention to the fact that correspondence is based on the duality between author and sender, and between reader and recipient, as well as to the dangers of focusing exclusively on female authorship, as this could result in the loss of information. This duplicity must be taken into account and correspondence, as a whole, must be considered. Even when the correspondence is exclusively male on both sides (sender and recipient), references to the female universe can still be found.

Throughout my research, I have found in family archives several significant examples of documents written by women, which could be detected only by reading the catalogues very carefully, since there is no possibility of defining research regarding the gender of the author of any document. Women's writing can be found in public archives, such as in the Portuguese National Archives (in the Portuguese royal house fond), and others such as the house of Palmela and the house of Fronteira and Alorna; in the Portuguese National Library, in the count of Arnoso's estate; in the House of Braganza Fondation, in the fond of the marquis of Soveral; in the Sabugosa and São Lourenço Cultural Association, that holds the fonds of these two houses plus the house of Murça, in the custody of their descendants. This is also the case with the correspondence exchanged between the eighth counts of Ponte[10] and their

---

[8] VENTURA, 2006: 171.

[9] GAMA, 1905: 402; COUTINHO, 1838: 399.

[10] João de Saldanha da Gama Melo Torres Guedes de Brito (1816-1874), the eighth count of Ponte, and his wife Maria Teresa de Sousa Botelho Mourão e Vasconcelos (1814-1900),

daughters[11], a part of which was published between 1834 and 1880, and another between 1890 and 1910. These archival nuclei add to others already published: the correspondence between the countess of Alva and her sister Teresa, wife of the *morgado* of Mateus (1814-1819)[12] and the letters between the countess of Rio Maior and her children (1852-1865)[13]. Of course, as more family archives become available and are studied, these examples may also increase; and with them research on the writing of women.

Self-writing allows for the reconstruction of the biographies of its authors, their daily life, their power and social networks, as well as their experiences and feelings[14]. In fact, reconstructing the biographies of female figures is one of the most valuable benefits of analyzing this type of documentation. If we consult a biographical dictionary or encyclopedia, and we are lucky enough to find some of these women, we find them portrayed as daughters, wives or mothers of distinguished men. At best, we will obtain information about the graces and rewards they received and information about whether they stood out in a particular field, whether it was in care, charity or art.

However, we can go further, depending, of course, on the contents of the documentation. This type contains, for example, recurring themes of correspondence that were noticeable already in the late eighteenth century; the health status of the various members of the family, illnesses, deaths[15], the petty incidents of everyday life, confiding in one another, and sharing impressions about the correspondents' friendship and memories of the past[16].

However, their social status is reflected in other themes, namely in the exchanging of material and symbolic goods. Teresa Saldanha da Gama sent

---

daughter of the first count of Vila Real, José Luís de Sousa Botelho Mourão e Vasconcelos (1785-1855), and Teresa Frederica de Sousa Holstein, (1786-1741).

[11] The counts of Ponte had nine children: Manuel (1840-1892), Teresa, José, João, Maria Joaquina, Isabel, Alexandre, Rita and Constança, but this correspondence is specifically between Teresa, Maria Joaquina and Isabel.

[12] VENTURA, 2006.

[13] António José, first marquis of Rio Maior (1836-1891); Teresa Rosa (1837-1916); José (1839-1912).

[14] CASTILLO GÓMEZ, 2014: 25-53.

[15] The countess of Alva's correspondence is the best example of descriptions of the health of her friends and relatives. VENTURA, 2006.

[16] ANASTÁCIO, 2005: 49.

music scores from Paris to her sister Isabel[17]; their sister Maria Joaquina sent Teresa books lately published in Portugal[18]; the countess of Alva sent shoe molds to her sister and asked her for silks and embroidery designs from Paris[19]. The countess of Palmela asked her son for an inexpensive microscope from London, where he lived, which she could use to examine the rubbish[20]. The countess of Sabugosa sent the duchess of Bragança, Amélia of Orleans, typically Portuguese meals, which the cook of the royal house did not prepare, since only French specialties were served at the royal table[21]. Princess Antónia of Bragança requested portraits of family[22] and friends[23] from Sigmaringen, as well as different species of plants[24] and animals[25].

Not only goods were exchanged. We also bear witness to the exchange of artistic knowledge, such as different painting techniques using varying materials[26], about medical treatments, and even about medication itself[27]. This allowed knowledge to spread across borders and the sharing of a common cultural landscape independent of nationality or place of residence. In the case of journals, the exchanges are not so obvious. Still, the culture of the time was always very present: what was fashionable to read or to watch in dramatic and operatic theatres, but specially the personal taste of authors, in literature and music, but also in painting and sculpture[28].

The sharing of knowledge within correspondence went much further. Most of these ladies sent gazettes to their families and friends, as well as

---

17 CASTELO BRANCO, 2013: 218.

18 CASTELO BRANCO, 2013: 224.

19 VENTURA, 2006: 68, 64.

20 GAMA, 1829: 559.

21 MELO, s.d.; s.p.

22 BRAGANÇA, 1871: 16/310/36; BRAGANÇA, 1887a: 16/310/56.

23 CASTELO BRANCO, 2013: 170.

24 BRAGANÇA, 1887b 16/310/57; CASTELO BRANCO, 2013: 159.

25 BRAGANÇA, 1879: 16/310/40; BRAGANÇA, 1885b: 16/310/46.

26 BRAGANÇA, 1869: 16/310/34; BRAGANÇA, 1878: 16/310/34; BRAGANÇA, 1885A, 16/310/45.

27 BRAGANÇA, 1886a: 16/310/51.

28 CÂMARA, 1826-1842.

newspapers that contained ministerial and parliamentary decrees[29], offering their own thoughts on national and international political events, exchanging ideas about them, but also trying to influence the minds of recipients. When Teresa Saldanha da Gama wrote to her son in 1906, saying that the countess of Figueiró was evil because of the damage she had done to the monarchy, it was implicit that this idea was to be spread through his social connections, although in most courtly circles the notion already had become common[30]. During the civil war, political statements became even more evident, since the events had a clear impact on the lives of the writers, their relatives being directly involved in the civil war. This was the case of Maria Constança da Câmara, marchioness of Fronteira, who, after learning of the defeat of *Dom* Miguel in battle, wrote in her journal "é de tal a nossa desgraça que nem com as boas notícias nos podemos alegrar, pois os vencidos também são portugueses"[31]. This political consciousness was shared by contemporaries. The future marchioness of Sousa Coutinho, Maria das Dores de Sousa Coutinho (1813-1883), made a real political statement in a letter to her aunt, the first duchess of Palmela, after the victory of the defenders of the constitutional charter, by choosing to remain in Paris:

> Ainda lhe não escrevi depois da entrada em Lisboa, por isso peço-lhe que aceite hoje os meus parabéns, parece-me ainda impossível que Lisboa seja com efeito nossa, já podemos dizer que não somos emigradas, que estamos cá porque muito queremos[32].

One cannot openly speak of exchanges of influence in the correspondence, but requests for help on behalf of third parties were quite common. In fact, women aristocrats, especially those closest to the sovereigns, who attended the royal house and, more specifically, were ladies-in-waiting, were

---

29 VENTURA, 2006: 77; CASTELO BRANCO, 2013: 43.

30 GAMA, 1906: 423.

31 "Our misfortune is so great that even with the good news we cannot rejoice, because the defeated are also Portuguese": CÂMARA, 1829: 309.

32 "I did not write you after Lisbon was taken, so I ask you to accept my congratulations today; it is hard to believe that Lisbon is actually ours, we can say that we are no longer emigrants, that we are here because we want to": COUTINHO, 1833: 1435.

able to obtain royal favors for third parties. In most cases, these requests consisted of financial aid[33], making these women mediators between the most disadvantaged and the queen.

This ability, due to the importance of a stratified society in which symbolic power was as important as any other, relates to another subject which has been given little importance, often dismissed as mere gossip; namely, the recurring attention given by authors to the appointments of new titles and offices[34]. In my opinion, more than making the new title known, spreading news of the event was a question of identifying the restricted group of aristocrats to which the awardee belonged, with whom they could and should maintain close relations. This knowledge in itself was a distinguishing factor among the group, but it could also be an additional power tool for anyone who wanted to use it, extending their network of influence.

A network of influence is very visible in the case of Princess Antónia (1845-1913). From the very beginning of her brother's marriage until at least 1870 she fiercely criticized her sister-in-law, Queen Maria Pia, in correspondence with her childhood friend, Lady Teresa Saldanha da Gama (1842-1929). However, from the mid-1880s there was a change in her attitude. In fact, she attempted to get closer to her sister-in-law through her brother, because Maria Pia was a key pawn in her plan to rob the second wife of her father, Fernando II, the countess of Edla, of her right to Fernando's inheritance. Maria Pia antagonized her father-in-law's widow. As such, even though she had previously condemned her conduct, Antónia regarded her as a potential ally in this matter[35].

From another perspective, self-writing allows us a glimpse into the daily life of the social group to which its authors belonged: masses, visits to charities, shopping, walks, or horseback riding. The end of the nineteenth century was marked by the introduction of many innovations such as the bicycle, the game of tennis and the presence of the phonograph in soirées, whereas previously the only entertainment had been the recital of opera arias and duets or

---

[33] GAMA, 1903: s.p..

[34] For example, GAMA, 1901: 382, or GAMA, 1907: 455.

[35] BRAGANÇA, 1883: 16/310/92; BRAGANÇA, 1886b: 16/310/48.

games of cards. In addition to forms of sociability related to cultural consumption, such as going to the theatre or the opera, there were also visits to spas and sea bathing. Taking part in monarchical ceremonies and joining the royal family in its various activities proved especially important. The closer these women were to the royal family — through their position in the royal household — the more their daily life was marked and dependent on the rhythm and experiences of the monarchy.

More than providing mere descriptions of these events, these women showed a clear concern in observing how everything happened and who was present and in what form, as can be seen in the diary of the countess of Sabugosa and Murça. The care and attention given to the royal family in particular, and to the elegant society of the time, are demonstrative of the importance of royalty and high society, but also of the mindset of its authors. In fact, this can be assumed to be a main theme of interest, if not the central theme. It is in this sense that the words of the marchioness of Fronteira can be understood:

> O meu diário tem tido uma interrupção tão grande, mas hoje que tive a honra de jantar com S[ua] Majestade, é um acontecimento que não pode ficar no esquecimento e por isso tornei a abrir o meu jornal para marcar este dia que não direi que foi dos mais divertidos[36].

One of the main motivations for writing was to record moments considered extraordinary, that broke the monotony of everyday life[37]. The importance of these events to authors is clear.

The journals also favor descriptions of the intimate dimensions of the authors' lives. However, sentiments, which are to be expected in an intimate nineteenth-century diary[38], seem to be dismissed in these cases, even though

---

[36] "My diary has been left untouched for so long, but today I had the honor of having dinner with Her Majesty. It is an event that cannot be forgotten and for that reason I have reopened my diary to mark this day, although it was not the most enjoyable of days". CÂMARA, 1836: 36a-37.

[37] CORRADO, 2001: 108.

[38] DUFIEF, 2001: 9.

moods, feelings and impressions are noted spontaneously[39]. There is also a certain distance from intimate themes, beyond forbidden matters and taboos, such as topics relating to the body (unless talking about health) and sexuality. Emotions are not talked about explicitly in the narration of daily events. However, they do make an appearance every now and then in reasoning associations. Special dates, such as birthdays and death anniversaries and New Year's Eve, are the right times for this, since rites of passage also come in the realm of affections. Small episodes of everyday life also serve as a pretext to demonstrate thoughts and feelings. In fact, the descriptions of the narrator's day-to-day life is what allows us access to their intimate life, their way of thinking and feeling, and specifically their relationships with their immediate family members — their origin family (parents or siblings) and the family they make for themselves (their husband and children). There will be the occasional, outburst, but modestly rooted in modesty and decency, as socially expected of women. Regardless of authorship, descriptions of parties and social engagements usually incorporate comments like "Não me diverti nada, mas a festa foi bonita"[40].

In conclusion, analysis of self-writing — in whatever form, whether in correspondence or a diary — gives us important clues about the daily life of authors, as well as their families and social environment. Although the narrative lacks an emotional dimension, this sometimes can be found implicitly, allowing for a sense of the emotionality of its author and more in-depth intimacy. What is most evident with the particular case of correspondence is the existence of a symbolic power, often shared or used for the author's own benefit. It allows us to reconstruct the authors' sociability and influence networks. This aspect is what characterizes nineteenth-century women in a more authentic and realistic way.

---

[39] DUFIEF, 2001: 109.

[40] "I wasn't amused, but the party was beautiful" MELO, 1896: 10/07.

(Página deixada propositadamente em branco)