10. Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann’s Lésbia: The Creation of the Woman Writer in Brazil

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Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann’s *Lésbia*: Context and Themes

The subject of this chapter is the novel *Lésbia*, which tells the fictional story of a writer-protagonist who is both Brazilian and a woman. It was authored by Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann (1853–95), active as a poet, novelist and author of short stories between 1880 and the year of her death. *Lésbia* was completed in serial form in 1884, the final decade of monarchical empire in Brazil, and was published as a bound novel in 1890, one year after the downfall of Brazil’s monarchy and the advent of the First Republic. The narrative, still untranslated into English, describes the literary formation and development of the eponymous heroine Lésbia, who, after a disastrous marriage and further romantic disappointments, undergoes a crisis of values and makes a conscious decision to reject her destiny as wife and mother. She reinvents herself as a writer of short stories, novels and poems and establishes an independent career as a successful author and powerful society mondaine in Rio de Janeiro. The novel concludes with a dramatic denouement when the protagonist takes her own life, an act that Bormann portrays as a rational and autonomous decision, a natural consequence of Lésbia’s ‘tumultuous and eventful life’.2

My aim here is to present a case study of *Lésbia* within the novel's most significant contexts and from three interrelated perspectives. Firstly, I will examine the novel in relation to the socio-historical, philosophical and literary transitions taking place in Brazil in the last two decades of
the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship has reassessed the influence of these transitions on the Brazilian novel of this period and in particular has re-evaluated the certainties, prevalent up to the 1860s, that the genre could function as an unequivocal and unmediated representation of Brazilian reality, an integral component of the ‘political self-legitimation of the emerging nation-state’. Highly problematic to begin with, these convictions about the role and place of the novel in national life were challenged by subsequent generations of writers emerging from more varied social backgrounds, who engaged with divergent ideas as the nineteenth century drew to its conclusion. The transition from Empire to Republic and beyond brought with it conflicting and divergent debates about the nation’s ideological identity and future direction and posed special challenges for the novelists of the era, including Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908) and contemporaries such as Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann. The quest for an aesthetic equal to the task of representing and engaging with the issues of the age is fundamental to the theme of Lésbia.

Secondly, I will illustrate the ways in which Lésbia may be regarded as a nineteenth-century precursor of the modern Künstlerroman in Brazil, that is, a novel that expounds the formation and development of its principal protagonist as artist or writer, and the process of coming to maturity through the cultivation of the aesthetic self. According to Sara Castro-Klarén, ‘This emphasis on the acquisition of a thinking and writing craft is particularly acute in Brazilian writers; an emphasis that may be partly traced to a fundamental characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel which scholars such as Zephyr Frank have recently discussed: the protagonist’s problematic Bildung, or development, and the crafting of an identity, in relation to Brazilian society and the national situation of the age.’ It has also been argued that the theme of the conflicted protagonist became an ever more integral component of the novel in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, a part of the ‘crisis of representation’ in Brazil which came with the advent of the First Republic and beyond. In Bormann’s Lésbia, the themes of the Bildungsroman, or novel of development, are recast in a novel about the protagonist as artist, whose evolution takes place on a literary and discursive as well as a biographical level. Since the intention of the Künstlerroman is to elucidate the process of writing, to examine the novel from this perspective will provide further insight into the antecedents of the contemporary Brazilian novel.

Thirdly, I will trace the particular ways in which Bormann appropriates the genre of the Künstlerroman to document and discuss the vicissitudes befalling the woman author in the late nineteenth century, the choices available to her in her writing and publication, and the
negotiation of ideas in society and literature which inform her identity. A related theme of the chapter is the question of how the retrieval and study of these works by nineteenth-century women authors have also served to challenge long-standing dogmas and tenets in Brazilian literary historiography, to transgress established and schematized patterns characteristic of literary history in Brazil and to revise key ideas about the development of Brazilian literature.

Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann: Life and Work

Details of Maria Benedita Câmara Bormann’s own life are scanty: the author was born into a prestigious family of some social and political standing in Porto Alegre in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, and the family moved to Rio de Janeiro when Bormann was 10. She was married to her maternal uncle, a hero of the Paraguayan War and government minister, but remained with her parents until her death from a stomach ulcer in 1895. Throughout the 15 years up to her death, Bormann published articles, serialized novels and short stories in newspapers such as O Paiz (1884–1934) and A Gazeta de Notícias (1875–1942). These publications were of Republican orientation and advocated the abolition of slavery in Brazil. Bormann was also a regular contributor to A Família (1888–98), edited by Bormann’s contemporary Josefina Álvares (1851–1913), a journal dedicated to the advocacy of women’s suffrage and right to education. Under the pen name ‘Délia’, Bormann also published six bound works of fiction, three of which are still extant: besides Lésbia, a collection of three novellas – Uma vítima, Duas irmãs, Magdalena (1884) – and another novel, Celeste (1893), reissued in 1988.

From the internal evidence in the extant novels, Bormann’s subject matter and style owe much to the aesthetics of popular serial fiction favoured by Brazilian readers: melodramatic in tone, featuring emotionally charged themes of domestic conflict, betrayal, thwarted love and inescapable death, expressed in a ‘language of tears’ intended to evoke an empathetic reaction in the reader. In both plot and theme Lésbia conforms in its essentials to the widely prevalent conventions of domestic and sentimental fiction, a genre that derived from the eighteenth-century European ‘novel of sensibility’ frequently authored by women. Adapted and developed by female authors in the Americas, sentimental fiction remained ‘a dominant fictional type until after 1870’. The narrative of sentimental fiction was frequently structured around the young female protagonist, deprived in youth of supports such as marriage and a family,
and obliged to develop her inner resources to attain self-mastery and confront the world. We cannot know to what extent Lésbia was autobiographical, or otherwise pertained to Bormann’s own life, but the depiction in the novel of the formation, development and discourse of the young female protagonist as a brilliant author who must establish a separate identity enables Bormann to subvert and readapt the literary conventions she adopts in order to intervene in the national political and cultural debates of her time, reflect on the transformations in the production of literature in Brazil and introduce her own modes of intertextuality, which provide important pointers to the ways in which the nineteenth-century novel in Brazil may be assessed and revalued.

Lésbia was retrieved, edited and republished by Editora Mulheres in 1998. The work, therefore, is one of the texts rediscovered and published by Brazilian scholars dedicated to the recovery, publication and revisionary study of prose and poetic texts of female authorship written and published in Brazil from the advent of independence in 1822 and throughout the decades preceding the end of Empire in 1889 and beyond. The recovery of these texts has enabled the revision of traditional perceptions of the status of women in this epoch, summed up as ‘the dependent female, a prisoner in the web of patriarchal authority’. As Viotti da Costa points out, this bleak portrait, created by holding married middle-class and upper-class women at the beginning of Empire to be representative of the female population, may not have been entirely accurate to begin with.

Although the profoundly patriarchal system established in the colonial era by the plantation-owning oligarchy and their political representatives had scarcely been modified by independence in 1822, changes took place over the course of the nineteenth century, beginning with the ascent of Dom Pedro II to the throne in 1831 and his majority in 1840, continuing during his reign and accelerating with the collapse of the Empire. From 1836 onwards, the most prevalent publishing outlet for prose fiction was as a serial published in instalments in a dedicated section of a periodical. This mode of publication, described by Mary L. Daniel as ‘fundamental to both long and short fiction in Brazil during the first half of the nineteenth century’, originated from the French feuilleton (meaning ‘leaf’) – a section, usually at the foot of the page, dedicated to the arts, theatre, popular culture and light literature. Once transplanted to Brazil, the feuilleton form was adapted to accommodate fiction of various kinds, beginning with translations of European narratives, but also adopted by Brazilian authors for whom this mode of publication ensured some form of distribution to the literate public, and
payment. Once the serials were collated, published and distributed in bound form by the printing press established in Brazil after independence, a national literary culture was established in the 1840s. Beginning with the adaptation of the sentimental novel of manners in local settings, a canon of Brazilian novelists – including José de Alencar (1829–77), Joaquim Manuel de Macedo (1820–82) and Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis (1839–1908) – emerged in subsequent decades. The aesthetic and themes of European serial fiction, which broadly consisted of either human drama in everyday contexts or material of historical import, were combined and adapted by Brazilian authors, gradually extending in ambition and scope to include broader contemporary social and national themes, in accordance with the quest in a recently independent nation for an autonomous identity and a national consciousness. But this emergence of the novel as a genre in Brazil also entailed the establishment of a reading public that largely consisted of women of the bourgeois and upper-class households of Rio, São Paulo and the northeastern coastal cities. This readership could not be ignored by the press, the nascent publishing industry or, indeed, by established Brazilian male authors. It was precisely to this readership that much of the work of novelists such as José de Alencar and Machado de Assis was directed. The expansion of this market meant that opportunities for enterprising and literate women also expanded. These included increasing opportunities for the publication of didactic and children’s literature by Brazilian publishing houses from the 1880s onwards, and the foundation of dedicated periodicals for women, which included in their pages the dissemination of new ideas advocating liberal republicanism and the abolition of slavery. There were some opportunities for literate middle-class women to participate in certain roles in these movements, and these developments at the end of Empire had important implications for the production of literature in various genres by women. They also provided an opportunity for Bormann and her contemporaries to insert their own voices and perspectives and establish a literary or polemical career:

Women’s voices began to make themselves heard, whether in the form of the crônica, novels, in folhetim form of polemical texts, although almost always in conditions of explicit censorship or the complacent gaze of the masculine world, which saw in this indulgence or writing merely a feminine whim or an affront to good taste or breeding.
This body of diverse and heterogeneous texts, including novels published by Bormann, has remained in a state of obscurity, neglect or limbo, and the names of their authors exist at best as fleeting or unexplained references in established literary histories documenting the evolution of Brazil’s national canon of literature. Bormann’s works, for example, already rare by the end of the nineteenth century, had vanished altogether by the beginning of the twentieth; there is only one brief reference to her work in Wilson Martin’s study, História da inteligência brasileira. There are several reasons for this state of neglect. Firstly, the ephemeral nature of the mode of literary production available to women meant that much of this fiction has been lost to posterity and with it the names of its authors, even though they were known, popular or even lionized in this period. Notwithstanding the development from mid-century of an autonomous canon of Brazilian fiction with established authors, problems still existed with respect to copyright, authorial rights and publication which rendered the process of authoring books ‘a thankless task for authors’. Although the number of publishers in Brazil increased during the 1880s and throughout the Republican era, the rights of authors over their intellectual property were not fully guaranteed by law until 1898. Until the 1870s, just one established France-based publisher, Baptist-Louis Garnier and its subsidiaries in Brazil, held a monopoly on the publication of bound works, which were otherwise the purview of typographic companies such as Typographic Central and Magalhães e Companhia, both of whom printed Bormann’s extant novels. Published books were still issued in limited editions. Distribution and the securing of a readership were frequently the responsibility of the author. In Lésbia, Bormann describes at some length her protagonist’s quest to find a publisher for her first prose novel. She eventually encounters a sympathetic newspaper editor who agrees to publish the work as a serial, and then to issue the bound novel in an edition of 1,000 copies, giving Lésbia half of these to distribute herself. Furthermore, serial fiction in domestic or sentimental genres authored by women did not enjoy much prestige among Brazil’s intellectual elites. Eminent scholars such as José Veríssimo, Silvio Romero and Araripe Júnior were the founders of the central tenets underpinning Brazilian literary historiography in the nineteenth century. This critical trinity, who were also founding members of the Academia Brasileira de Letras [Brazilian Academy of Letters] in 1897, worked exhaustively in their studies to assert the importance of Brazil’s men of letters in the context of the development of national life and thought, but disregarded or eliminated altogether the copious production of the female authors, activists and polemicists popular with their contemporaries: Silvio Romero
authored a five-volume history of Brazilian literature over a period from 1888 to 1907, yet excluded any reference to the women authors who were active from the late eighteenth century onwards; José Veríssimo also omitted any work of female authorship in his seminal study *História da literatura brasileira*, published in 1916.

For women writers active in this epoch, therefore, the development of their craft entailed a long and arduous process of self-definition. In addition to the vicissitudes of publication, distribution and acceptance of their work by the public, particular challenges also arose from confrontation and negotiation with mythologies of many kinds pertaining to the construction of gender in this era. But the negotiation and synthesis of these myths of recreation acquired ever-increasing complexity towards the end of the nineteenth century, when women writers such as Bormann could draw for their inspiration on successful and influential European predecessors such as George Sand and Germaine de Staël, both cited in *Lésbia*, and could create protagonists who constituted ‘a powerful, intelligent, witty female figure’ quite different from depictions of the frustrated female artist as confined madwoman or monstrous figure, and in total contradistinction to the virtuous heroines of the domestic novel.

**Lésbia: Plot and Theme**

This is the case in *Lésbia*, which adopts the pattern of the classic *Künstlerroman*, based on an archetypal pattern of birth, death and rebirth as a writer. According to Grace Stewart, the novel takes the form of a voyage from early and innocent childhood experiences into an initiation into an underworld that threatens to blight the protagonist’s talent or to alienate them from society. This is followed by a subsequent re-evaluation of the self and, finally, a definitive statement of the heroine’s position vis-à-vis her art and what she intends to accomplish with it. The protagonist of *Lésbia*, Arabela, or Bela to her family and friends, begins the novel as a delicately nurtured young lady of good family endowed with a precocious intellect and brilliance. She is married at an early age to a boorish and oppressive husband, from whom she finally effects a separation with the aid of her family, only to endure more emotional trauma at the hands of a faithless and superficial dandy, a stock character in this period. Bela’s natural resilience asserts itself, however, and she rebels against her condition, passing through what Carolyn Heilbrun has termed the moratorium: ‘the decision to place oneself outside the bounds of society’s restraints and ready-made narratives’. As an outcast who is now unable
to fulfil society’s expectations of her with respect to romantic love, marriage and children, Bela vows to sublimate her trauma through writing and establish a literary career for herself with or without public approval:

I will learn not to pursue fruitless and vain chimeras, and work only for my own consolation. After that, would the appreciation of the public compensate for my sufferings, my despair? No! So, what would it be good for? I will write for myself alone, avoiding any public opprobrium that would disturb me, adding to my woes.\footnote{33}

Thus far, the plot of the novel conforms to the traditional pattern of the Künstlerroman, which may also take the form of a voyage, or quest: from innocent childhood experience comes the fall into a psychic underworld or miasma, which obstructs the writer’s talent and capacity for self-expression, blighting her place in society and threatening to engulf her. From this point, the nascent writer effects a separation from her past, and her present milieu, and re-evaluates her identity, her values and her position in society. Finally, a process of liberation takes place and there is a definitive statement of independence, repeated and developed in the author’s writing.

This resolution effected, Bela now undergoes a ‘violent moral revolution’, is transfigured, and her environment with her. Her dressing table is transformed into a study desk. The first fruits of her labour are created from ‘that life which was hers, and those torments, which had convulsed her in piercing despair’.\footnote{34} Bela begins to seek, and finds, publication for her prose fiction and poetry in newspapers and subsequently as bound books. At this point Bela adopts the pen name ‘Lésbia’, signalling her autonomy as an author, and an independent literary expression that will inform her subsequent and copious production of novels, short stories and poems. Bormann further reinforces her protagonist’s independence by having her win one of the numerous lotteries popular during the Empire, a device also used by Machado de Assis in *Dom Casmurro* (1889)\footnote{35} to improve the situation of the novel’s lower-class heroine, Capitu.\footnote{36} Lésbia elevates her own situation by purchasing a townhouse, described as ‘a small palace’ in Rio’s most fashionable quarter, the Rio Comprido. Far from being confined to an attic, the heroine writes on a rosewood desk that combines signifiers of feminine refinement with those of wealth and power. To allow herself the necessary latitude to both negotiate and reflect on Brazilian upper-class society, Lésbia appropriates and uses to her own advantage several images of women prevalent in the fin de siècle; the enigmatic sphinx, the inspirational muse whose writings have an
extraordinary effect on all who read them, and the figure of the beautiful and powerful society mondaine. She is imperious in her dealings with others, invulnerable and impregnable in the heart of the nation’s capital. Having established her identity and reputation beyond all question, Lésbia relaunches herself into society to ease her self-imposed exile.

**Brazil: Society and Letters**

The setting for Bormann’s novel is the high bourgeois and aristocratic milieu of Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Empire in Brazil since the transposition of the Portuguese court and its retainers from Lisbon in 1808. Lésbia, who operates in this world, but is not of it, observes her milieu. Her engagement with society not only forms a backdrop for the novel’s plot and denouement, but has a direct bearing on her philosophy vis-à-vis society and humanity, and her writing life. Thus Bormann is no less involved than other intellectuals and writers of the 1880s with questions of broader import in the national arena, and engages fully with these questions in *Lésbia*. At the time of the novel’s publication in serial form in 1884, the monarchical regime was in the last decade of its existence, five years from its final overthrow in 1889 through a military coup supported by a group of Republican sympathizers from the burgeoning coffee-producing state of São Paulo. Up to this event, the decadence of a society whose oligarchs presided over an economy almost entirely dedicated to the export of plantation-led commodities continued to make itself felt. This regime was presided over by an emperor and court that readily dispensed titles of nobility such as ‘baron’, ‘count’ and ‘viscount’ as well entitlements to land and credit. The system was further buttressed by middlemen linked to the ‘patronage machine’ responsible for dispensing foreign capital, imported policy prescriptions and imported goods – including bound novels.

Lésbia’s self-invention enables her sardonic observation of this gallery of oligarchs, elites and hangers-on in the last decade of Empire, described by the contemporary critic Sílvio Romero as ‘an aristocracy of money … the most vicious and bastard of all aristocracies’. *Lésbia* portrays the petty jealousies and vindictiveness of social climbers in a society ruled by patronage and favour, and the writers for whom the composition of prose and verse in pallid neoclassical style was a means of social ascendancy. Bormann and her protagonist give no quarter when it comes to titled aristocrats with no credible roots in heredity: ‘Now, speaking of Brazil, I would say that our aristocracy is merely a fiction, but in its place
we have a bourgeoisie with possibly some money, more or less, corrupted by debt and entangled in defaults, with little class or tone: and that’s how we recognize them.”

In the novel’s engagement with the prevalent literary and philosophical ideas that informed the era of Empire and beyond, Bormann and her protagonist must use and subvert the faithful adherence of Brazil’s elites to inherited and imposed European tradition. For the bourgeois classes of Rio and their retainers, literacy and letters evidently held significance only insofar as they were a means of social ascendency and admission into the nation’s oligarchy. French, and to some extent Portuguese, literature, philosophy and thought continued to dominate literary production in Brazil into the last decade of the nineteenth century and beyond. Bormann associates much of the predominance of poorly understood European-derived philosophy with a demeaning situation of neocolonial dependency, inextricably linked to a ‘contagion of self-doubt and alienation’ which stifled the capacity for independent thought. She critiques this situation many times in the novel: “The descendants of Brazil suffer from a chronic affliction: foreign parlance, which leads them to glorify other countries, diminishing their beautiful native land, and the many and varied efforts of their compatriots, not realizing that they also degrade the nation, destroying the good impulses of those who have merit.”

These observations on philosophical and literary trends prevalent at the time of Lésbia’s publication form a starting point for understanding Bormann’s stance on the political issues and ideological cross-currents of the late nineteenth century in Brazil and its complex ramifications for literary production. As Lésbia’s parallel observations about ‘the positivist conclusions of the nineteenth century’ make clear, the author-protagonist is also prepared to adapt to a certain extent the philosophies propounded by the French intellectual Auguste Comte (1798–1857), which held that the advance of scientific, empirical knowledge was the foundation and driving force of social progress. At the time of the novel’s first publication in 1884, positivist ideals strongly informed the debates of two groups: firstly, the emerging class of intellectuals with Republican affiliations who had emerged from regions of Brazil beyond Rio de Janeiro and, secondly, the new professional groups in Brazil’s urban areas with no affiliation to traditional landowning elites. The Republican movement, first formally established as a political party in Rio de Janeiro in 1870, was gaining unstoppable traction by the 1880s. Moreover, the increasing incentives to accelerate the long decline of slavery as an institution, also linked to the federalist interests of the Republicans, finally came to fruition in 1888.
when the Lei Áurea [Golden Law] legally ended slavery. By the time of Lésbia’s publication in bound form in 1890, Comtean positivism had been formalized as the intellectual structure that would underpin the regimes of Brazil’s First Republic from 1889 to 1930.

Bormann’s protagonist is clearly of the expanding urban and broadly Republican class by upbringing and temperament. Bormann’s choice of classical names for her own pen name, Délia, and for her protagonist, Lésbia, also reveals the novel’s Republican sympathies, for it was the custom of Republican activists in this period to adopt Roman names for themselves. The writer-protagonist Lésbia’s espousal of the Republican ideals that were to be imperfectly implanted in Brazil at the end of the 1880s, together with the ideals of equality and justice for Brazil’s slave population, is asserted in her outspoken discourse in the purportedly aristocratic society in which she operates. For example, her riposte to an absurd proposal of marriage from a titled gentleman, ‘the baron of Buriti, the viscount of Pacoval’, is a polemic against the landed aristocracy’s practice of the bogus manumission of slaves to gain kudos and an honorarium; a practice that reflected the contradictory situation throughout the 17 years from the introduction of the Rio Branco Law, or Law of the Free Womb, in 1871 to the final prohibition of slavery with the Golden Law in 1888. Intended to provide liberty, with some monetary compensation, for all children born to slave mothers, together with those slaves who were the property of the state and monarchy, the poorly enforced Law of the Free Womb had little effect on the institution of slavery at the time of Lésbia’s publication.

Lésbia also critiques the reception of her work by her readership, and the reputation she has acquired as a dissolute maverick. She complains of the misapprehension of her work and the intentions behind it in the following terms:

They said that she was a realist writer who was more dissolute even than Zola himself; however, none of these fools knew how to distinguish one school from another. … they were all mistaken, since Lésbia adopted an eclectic style, harvesting from here and there what was best, disregarding effeminate and timid sentiments and inconvenient vulgarities, adapting with fine judgement the exigencies of the positivist conclusions of the nineteenth century with all the contemporary evolutions of psychology and physiology.

Bormann is referring in the quotation above to the naturalist currents in literature extended and adapted by the French author Émile Zola.
(1840–1902), based on contemporary scientific ideas, including theories of evolution and medicine. In Europe, these ideas underpinned the themes of novels whose protagonists’ characters and destinies were influenced in great measure by their biological inheritance and their environment. By the 1880s, the adaptation of the broad tenets of naturalism to the trajectories of conflicted protagonists within contemporary Brazil was increasingly evident in novels authored by Bormann’s contemporaries. This emerging body of works included the novels O mulato (1881) [The Mulatto], Casa de pensão (1884) [Rooming House] and O cortiço (1890) [The Slum] by Aluísio Azevedo (1857–1913). Works such as A carne [The Flesh] by Júlio Ribeiro (1888) and O Ateneu (1888) [The Athenaeum] by Raul Pompeia confirm this emerging orientation in Brazilian letters. Scholars such as Eva Paulino Bueno and Elizabeth A. Marchant have argued that these novels and their successors in the Republican era represent the first attempts by a group of Brazilian writers born or located outside established oligarchical or intellectual elites to ‘turn a de-centred or ex-centric gaze at the totality of Brazilian society of their time’. In so doing, these writers established both a critique and a new aesthetic derived from representations of different voices in conflict with the society into which they were born. In this, Bormann’s work may reflect the concerns of her peers, since Lésbia too reflects the discourses of a heterogeneous society that could not entirely conform to any one European-derived school, representing instead a gradual move towards a style capable of engaging with the highly contested ideological and political concerns of the age. But, as Schaffer points out, ‘Naturalism was coded as an exclusively masculine form, for the naturalist writer described aspects of life that only men were supposed to recognize.’ Bormann’s engagement with socio-political issues, the conflict of the individual protagonist with society, and the implications for the Brazilian novel of the late nineteenth century is therefore of a different order from that of male contemporaries such as Azevedo and his successors, and for several reasons.

Firstly, the experiences of Bormann’s protagonist do not extend beyond those which a Brazilian upper-class woman, albeit one financially independent, might realistically have had in this era: writing and journalism, participation in society events, and a sojourn in continental Europe. As a self-defined aesthetic writer, Lésbia regards herself as a scrupulous scientific recorder of psychological types and their motivations and actions. What Bormann’s protagonist does not acknowledge, however, are positivist doctrines that maintain that the individual holds no great significance in the movement towards a society based on the
twin pillars of order and progress, or the idea that facts of any kind are free from values or can be integrated into one ‘science’.\textsuperscript{59}

**Influences and Affiliations**

Lésbia’s relationship to her literary forebears and the European literary inheritance constitutes what Gilbert and Gubar define as female ‘affiliation’ rather than ‘influence’, a term that connotes ‘an influx or pouring in of essential power’.\textsuperscript{60} The concept of affiliation carries with it the possibilities of both choice and continuity, in that one may consciously or not choose with whom to affiliate, and so exercise full autonomy as a writer. Since Lésbia is operating from a marginal if privileged position, and somewhat apart from her social milieu, she is engaged in constant assessment of herself and her situation vis-à-vis both her craft and the human condition, to reflect upon and learn from experience. Thus a substantial part of the novel consists of the author-protagonist’s multifaceted odyssey through her many and varied literary influences, philosophers and mentors, who aid her in her frequent withdrawals to reflect and meditate on her literary and personal development and her observations of the motivations, idiosyncrasies and idioms of those around her. It is to Lésbia’s advantage that she retains her freedom from the ‘anxiety of influence’\textsuperscript{61} exacerbated and complicated in much Brazilian writing by male authors of this epoch. She takes advantage of both a ‘matrilineal and patrilineal inheritance’ and oscillates between the two within an arduous process of self-definition.

Lésbia’s abandonment of her former name and patronymic, and the adoption of a pen name, is a sign of rebirth and newly assumed ‘authority and power to name her environment around her’. This was a not uncommon practice of women writers in the nineteenth century; it was ‘the mark of a christening into a second self, a rebirth into a linguistic primacy’.\textsuperscript{62} Bormann’s adoption of a classical pen name for herself and a classical pseudonym for her protagonist has further connotations in the context of the literary milieu in which both had to operate, and in the context of the gradual collapse of the Empire and the diffusion of Republican ideals at the time of the novel’s writing. Bormann and her protagonist affiliate themselves with figures and literary modes deriving from Graeco-Roman civilization, held by the aesthetic writers of Brazil’s belle époque as the authentic foundation of Western literary tradition. The foundations of Bormann’s protagonist’s thought on Platonic and aesthetic ideals are made abundantly clear in Bormann’s preface to the first
edition of Lésbia in 1890: ‘Regarding the book, also a work of art, it is likewise … since the subject is the fantasy of the author, it can be happy or mournful, grandiose or even banal; what is important is that the form is correct, the idea well developed and the deduction logical.’

In Lésbia, this tradition is reclaimed and redefined as a new form of literary matrilineage. The names of Délia and Lésbia, together with other female literary forebears of French provenance liberally cited in the novel, affirm the affiliation of the writer-protagonist to a specifically women’s literary genealogy and imagination. The self-signification of Bormann’s protagonist Lésbia connotes an autonomous and mature woman who is lauded at the height of an empire. This figure is also associated with Sappho, whose feminine brand of lyricism was inherited by George Sand and Germaine de Staël, inspirations for other woman writers of the epoch and the creators of the myth of the female artist which was to become the counterpoint of ‘Romanticism’s Prometheus/Icarus myth of artistic manhood’.

These two authors are also cited by Lésbia, who has occasion throughout her odyssey to remind herself that these writers too suffered at the hands of an uncomprehending public and envious literary competitors.

Bormann acknowledges two works by different authors as her guiding texts, both of which have no apparent connection in terms of genre or period, but do inform much of the action and reflection in the novel. The first of these texts is the Enchiridion, the manual of maxims attributed to the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, active as a teacher in Rome and Greece in the first and second centuries AD. Precepts from this work precipitate Lésbia’s liberation from her existential crisis and subsequent moratorium and provide a coherent thread that underpins Lésbia’s beliefs and actions. According to classical Stoic philosophy, care, respect and attention to oneself through the practice of reading, writing and reflection play their part in a system of reciprocal obligations and, in consequence, they also constitute a social practice upon which authentic communion with others may be based. The identity and development of the writer thus entail the education and cultivation of the self.

The same principle of the emergence of the individual both as a citizen who engages with society and as an author is evident in Lésbia’s other principal literary association, the epistolary novel The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. This novel, and Goethe’s oeuvre in general, is linked to Lésbia’s Stoic philosophy inasmuch as the German author maintained that no action is free of consequences and that the vicissitudes of life are in a state of balance and counterbalance and require constant evaluation and
These philosophical premises adopted by Lésbia also lead her to reject essentialism or determinism of any kind, especially when it comes to matters of gender and woman’s position in society. Women, as well as men, are responsible for their own improvement and their own destiny:

It is not just the Brazilian spirit which is still contaminated by prejudice; men in their majority don’t look well on the emancipation of women, through study and through the cultivation of independent opinion.

These lions without claws are at least partly right; if all women were to explode, lifting themselves up through instruction, moved by ambition, copying men’s defects and virtues, men would indeed spend a miserable quarter of an hour.

Notwithstanding such frequent and pithy observations about the male sex, Bormann rejects the premise of male mastery and dominance by diffusing a wide range of temperaments among the plethora of male characters who people her book, including her enlightened and progressive physician and a string of absurd suitors. Bormann also has her protagonist acquire a sympathetic companion in her odyssey, a gentle poet renamed Catulo, who, as Lésbia’s counterpart and platonic soulmate, is indispensable to her creative process. Lésbia’s trajectory through the social milieu of Rio society is interspersed with moments of contemplation and reading in which she engages in platonic dialogue with Catulo concerning the significance of all that has happened to her.

We see, therefore, that Lésbia’s literary praxis as an aesthetic writer consists of writing, rewriting and constantly reassessing the ever-fascinating story of her own life; her main plot, or story, is the ‘terra incognita’ of her own self. As the above quotation illustrates, the author-protagonist’s incessant efforts to effect a synthesis between mutually exclusive concepts and forms associated with fixed gender positions have great repercussions for the language used in the work. A novel produced by Lésbia entitled Blandina, which finally establishes her as a popular writer with the reading public, is described thus:

That work displayed a vigorous spirit, which lay in the concept and development of the plot; at the same time the gentle flexibility of the style, unfolding with a refined feminine touch, revealed those tender depths which a man could scarcely guess at and which only a woman is accustomed to possess and express.
But, as we have seen, Lésbia devours what she terms ‘foreign parlance’, and combines it with thoughts, reflections and insights drawn from her own experience, not refusing the conflict and tension that may arise in the process. The paragraphs are short, to the point of becoming aphorisms, and Bormann provides her protagonist with an epigrammatic language that becomes itself an instrument against dependency and the objectification of the author-protagonist, ‘a refusal of mastery, an opting for openness and possibility which can itself make women’s writing a challenge to the literary structures it must necessarily inhabit’. The novel’s stylistic mutability, its shifts from one register to another, from lovingly detailed descriptions of clothes and domestic artefacts as typical of the domestic and sentimental novel, to reflections on the writing of Rousseau, Spinoza and Goethe, make for a bricolage effect throughout the work. This is what Norma Telles, the editor of the current edition of Lésbia, terms a ‘mestiça aesthetic’. Lésbia’s multiple readings and integration of texts from a wide range of sources imply an eclecticism with an almost proto-modernist quality. The nascent modernism of fin-de-siècle women’s writing has been noted by other critics; tactical revisions of contemporary thought, abrupt shifts in register and psychological introspection were used by female authors of the fin de siècle to bring together and reconcile mutually exclusive definitions of femininity.

The Return of the Quest: Denouement and Suicide

The novel reaches a dramatic conclusion when the author-protagonist, after a sketchily described eight-year sojourn in Europe, returns to Brazil and subsequently takes her own life, an act graphically described by Bormann. The sequence of events that leads to the suicide occur after Lésbia, now 40 years old, undergoes another existential crisis, resulting from the onset of old age and the diminishing of her artfully constructed persona. On her return to Brazil, she experiences once more the original schism that provoked her separation from society and the accepted and traditional destiny of woman. This crisis is precipitated by an encounter with an ardent young admirer 20 years her junior, who awakens in Lésbia a long-suppressed passion, and resultant anguish. Lésbia finds her physical stamina and physical beauty declining with age; none of her carefully constructed defences or her long and arduous process of self-creation can, in the end, stave bodily suffering: ‘Yes, that ugly and degrading flowing of old age, bitter, biting, ashamed of itself, is what I feel! … Forty
years! A cruel age, in which the remnants of girlhood evaporate, giving way to the sad diminishing of beauty and freshness!  

The true cost of Lésbia’s self-creation is made clear at this point. The conversion of Lésbia into writer, muse and mondaine has entailed the renunciation of her body and physical impulses as a precondition for ‘the symbolic interchange with language’, which endows the author-protagonist with the necessary objectivity to enunciate and define herself through textual creation, binding her created and creating self into the world of external symbols: ‘Negation of the body and of the impulses which go with it engenders the peace which allows for thought and reflection, abstraction and generalization of the external world, making it possible to master “that which is absent”’.  

We have seen the ways in which Bormann and her protagonist consciously affiliate themselves to the aesthetic literary tradition; yet, following this literary praxis, Lésbia can only exercise her reason and craft in the absence or petrification of the flesh. Nor have the heterogeneity and synthesis of her writing practice enabled Lésbia to overcome fully the boundaries that society has set on her role and conduct as a woman. At various points in the book, Lésbia stresses the fundamental schism between her femininity and her intellect; her transgression has produced both a monstrous nature and the petrifaction of her body. In a lengthy monologue expounding her philosophy of writing and art to her companion Catulo, she states,

One is a writer, the other a woman: in me those two entities are almost always in opposition. … As a writer, in practical life, I profess a little of Spinoza, finding within my own spirit a very strong point of support, which helps me attain the perfection of my being. As a woman, however, I still let myself be moved by the impulses of an enigmatic heart made almost monstrous by the excess of its aspirations.

Female melancholia and psychic disintegration are familiar themes in the work of Brazilian nineteenth-century novelists; Bormann’s contemporaries Aluísio Azevedo and Júlio Ribeiro documented in some detail their female protagonists’ nervous or hysterical attacks caused by unrequited passion or doomed love. Gilbert and Gubar assert that the trope of female crucifixion or sacrifice, ‘sexual or social, literal or figurative’, haunts texts by fin-de-siècle women writers. There are also echoes of Goethe’s Werther, who, caught in an untenable situation between a grand passion and loyalty to his friends, commits suicide for the sake of
Similarly in Lésbia, the protagonist takes her fateful decision after a visit from Alberto’s despairing fiancée, Heloísa, who pleads with Lésbia to take into account her lover’s betrothal. Like Werther, Lésbia takes the decision to sacrifice herself for the sake of others: ‘Lésbia voluntarily renounced the last happiness of her life, for the benefit of that innocent girl who had the courage to be humble and simple.’

There is a marked contrast between the motives behind Lésbia’s decision to end her own life and the motives of Goethe’s Werther or behind the suicides of many female protagonists in nineteenth-century novels. According to Mary DeGuire, young Werther’s demise is a result of the failure to achieve the balance needed between romantic ideals and practical application of them in the wider society. The decision of the mature Lésbia, on the other hand, is only taken after much reflection and, in fact, is a logical outcome of the Stoic philosophy that transformed the author-protagonist’s destiny and now brings it to an end. The human subject benefits their friends and community through the exercise of control over their own will and perceptions, even to the point of bringing about their own death, if they have fulfilled the destiny marked out for them or have contributed what they are meant to. The point is reinforced when the conclusion of the book reveals that Lésbia has distributed the remainder of her fortune to the founding of an educational establishment for abandoned and destitute female orphans and the creation of a secondary school for girls. This conclusion is another example of Bormann’s subversion of the prevailing themes and motifs in the literary frames of reference of the era in which she wrote. The rationale for Lésbia’s self-sacrifice enables at least a partial resolution of the contradictions inherent in the position of her protagonist, and enables a final outcome that points towards the future. It suggests a basis for the literacy and redemption of future generations of Brazilian women and further demonstrates the status of Lésbia as a landmark in the difficult construction of an autonomous tradition of women’s writing in Brazil: ‘the pathway of the Brazilian woman towards her cultural emancipation’.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set the most relevant contexts in which Maria Benedicta Câmara Bormann’s novel was written, its key themes and stylistic features. What, then, is the contribution of Lésbia to our understanding
of the nineteenth-century Brazilian novel and the place of the work within contemporary readings of literature? Bormann’s singular work was published at two specific junctures: firstly, when opportunities for women authors to present their own thematic and linguistic perspectives through published works opened out in late nineteenth-century Brazil. These opportunities arose parallel to changes in the nation’s public life that were also reflected in diversified ideological and philosophical frames of reference for writers to adapt. Secondly, these changes brought with them the further evolution of the novel from the first adaptations of the genre as a representation of national identity after Independence in 1822. We have seen how divergent and conflicted voices emerged in the subsequent decades before and after the advent of the First Republic in 1889, including those of Machado de Assis and the Naturalist trend in the novel. If, as the scholars cited in this study suggest, the *Bildungsroman* with its conflicted protagonist reflects the nascent signs of emerging capitalist modernity in the late nineteenth century, then it was also at this point of transition that Brazil’s first *Künstlerroman* appeared, a form which enabled a woman writer with a female protagonist to emerge ‘on the border between two epochs’ and engage on multiple levels with the national issues of her time, on a socio-historical, ideological and literary level. As a close reading of the novel illustrates, the conscious intertextuality, reflexivity and strategic revisions in *Lésbia* read as a notable example of the evolving orientation in the late nineteenth century towards the formation of ‘new patterns of interrelationship, cross-fertilisation and elective affinity that emerged within and around the “virtual cosmopolis” of the colonial city’. From then on, these trends gathered momentum throughout the era of the First Republic, finally reaching their full expression in the radical iconoclasms of the Semana de Arte Moderna [Modern Art Week of 1922] and beyond. Viewed in this way, the historiography which informs readings of the contemporary Brazilian novel may be recast as the dynamic process of ideological, philosophical and textual revisions, rather than as chronological sequences divided into discrete periods and determined by one or more specific literary movements. Further, and following recent currents in contemporary scholarship, more nuanced attention to these texts may enable a revision of the novel as a genre and canon formed by Anglo-American and European authors, towards a process of two-way and mutually reciprocal exchange of aesthetic, epistemological and linguistic concepts within the novel itself, and as embodied in emergent protagonists such as Bormann’s Lésbia.
Notes

7. Frank 2016, 3.
15. The task of recovering the works of nineteenth-century women authors from obscurity gained momentum from 1985 onwards, beginning with the creation of a federal group of academic networks, the Organização Institucional Sobre a Mulher na Literatura, and a series of conferences and seminars, Encontros Nacionais Sobre a Mulher na Literatura. These initiatives provided the base for subsequent academic research and collaboration, including the foundation in 1996 of a publishing house, Editora Mulheres, dedicated to the editing and republication of works by women authors of the era, including Lésbia.

The two most comprehensive anthologies of works by women authors and accounts of their contexts are Muzart (2004) and Coelho (2002a). For a comprehensive overview of the literary historiography, bibliographies and anthologies published since the beginning of the twentieth century, see Pinheiro (2006). For a contextualized overview of these nineteenth-century authors in English, see Schmidt (2015).

30. Schaffer 2000, 43.
38. Viotti da Costa 2000, XV.
41. Dean 1986, 77.
44. Nekrašas 2015, 105.
45. Sharpe 1999, 144.
46. Telles 1988, 8.
49. Mattoso 1997, 118.
51. Azevedo 2012b (translated by Murray Graeme MacNicholl [Azevedo 1994]).
52. Azevedo 2015.
58. Schaffer 2000, 43.
60. Gilbert and Gubar 1988, 11.
64. Lewis 2003, 17.
68. Tantillo 2010, 17.
72. Jacobus 1979, 16.
73. Telles 1988, 13.
79. Gilbert and Gubar, 82.
80. Goethe 2012, 103.
86. Bakhtin 1986, 23.

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