

# Visions of India in Portuguese literature of the Renaissance: Brief sketches

The establishment of the sea route and subsequent conquests in India propelled Portugal into a coveted position as Europe's most powerful empire at the beginning of the 16th century. Portugal's fame, wealth, and feats are well documented. But while official accounts praise Portuguese ingenuity and heroism, writers offer other insights into a country's greed and social disorder. This brief article exposes such insights and their intersection with other important discourses of the time.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE RISE OF AN EMPIRE

The establishment of the sea route and subsequent conquests in India propelled Portugal into a coveted position as Europe's most powerful empire at the beginning of the 16th century. It is common now to read that Portugal opened new worlds to the old world, that the Portuguese established the first bases of social interaction in modern times between the East and the West. Indeed, following a series of conquests and maritime explorations, the Portuguese, commanded by Vasco da Gama, arrived in India near Calicut on May 20, 1498. Reaching the land of spices was not just a Portuguese desire, it was a dream shared by all of Europe. Yet it was tiny Portugal that accomplished such a feat.

Perhaps owing to historical hostilities with neighbouring Castille, Portugal always felt the calling to venture out to the open sea. Following decades of conquest, expertise, and seafaring developments that boasted Portuguese confidence in capturing lands and oceans, Vasco da Gama's trail-blazing expedition to India gave the Portuguese world recognition. In addition to seeking Christians and serving God, as the Portuguese would say and write, the Portuguese were clearly much more interested in making profit for themselves, in getting their hands on riches

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that local traders possessed. Thus, by the early 16th century, Portugal had seized control of trade routes in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, by capturing several strategic sites, including Goa, which it held until 1961. Wealth began to pour into Portugal. Indian pepper and cotton were highly prized commodities. Nutmeg, mace, and cloves also generated extraordinary revenues. Although the sea voyages were long and piracy and shipwrecks were common hazards, the profits of a successful round trip to India were astronomical.

Lisbon became a vibrant and powerful city, and the Portuguese become affluent world players. They displayed their glorious new wealth in extraordinary gifts such as Hanno, a white elephant given to Pope Leo X on his coronation in 1514. In the following year, a rhinoceros arrived in Lisbon, a gift from an Indian sultan. Exuberance and extravagance characterized these early times. Even arrogance became part of official discourse, such as when a Portuguese chronicler bragged that one could learn more from a Portuguese in one

day than from a Roman in a century. However, while the Portuguese sea route to India was praised at home and in Europe as a major accomplishment, representations in literature offered varied and complex perspectives on the India adventure.

## LITERARY CONTEXT: THE QUESTIONING OF AN EMPIRE

India's impact on Portuguese literature was almost immediate. In addition to returning with material wealth, navigators brought back tales of their bold travels and their attempts to control far-away seas and lands, evoking an overall fascination with the riches of India. For those looking to escape the toils of poverty, India represented a paradise of easy delights. Yet dangers lurked within these delights. Perhaps the best example was *Auto da Índia (India Play)*, by the playwright Gil Vicente, first staged in 1509. The inspiration for the *India Play* was the expedition of Tristão da Cunha in 1506, but the story was that of those who were left behind—the women whose husbands had succumbed to the lure of India. During her husband's three-year absence, Constança, while playing the part of the devoted wife, entertains lovers in an effort to get favours from them. Her freedom is cut short by the sudden return of her husband, bearing neither riches nor fame. Contrary to official discourses, this husband is in no way a hero; rather, he is a lowly individual whose desires are motivated by greed alone. In fact, as the plot reveals, greed and corruption characterize the entire enterprise, from the captain to the most insignificant players.

In about 1537, India appears in Jorge Ferreira de Vasconcelos's comedy *Eufrosina*. India is referenced in a letter that Silvia, one of the characters, receives from her brother in Goa. It is

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likely that this letter was inspired by real and common letters of the time. Silvia's brother speaks of troublesome voyages and promises of easy riches, much as many of those before him did, including the husband in Vicente's *India Play*. He also refers sneeringly to Indian girls. But, most importantly, the letter mentions the dishonourable behaviour of the Portuguese in India, as well as the homesickness of a disillusioned youth. The sentiment expressed earlier by Vicente is present here, but with increased anxiety and an ethical questioning of the morality of the conquest.

Luís de Camões, Portugal's most acclaimed Renaissance poet, was no stranger to the India adventure. In addition to documenting this experience in his epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusíads*), Camões was the first European artist to make the trip to India. In fact, as the story goes, upon being shipwrecked after leaving Macao, Camões swam ashore while holding his unfinished manuscript aloft. Yet when Camões arrived in India in 1553, the corruption and greed alluded to in previous works were rampant. The condemnation of Portuguese pride and greed are well-known facets of *The Lusíads*. In a famous episode featuring a character known as the Old Man of Restelo, as Vasco da Gama and his crew prepare to

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depart for India, an old man appears and offers a harsh and foreboding criticism of the trip. The old man speaks of the illusory nature of fame and admonishes the Portuguese for leaving the nation in a state of fragility, bereft of men and subjected to possible attacks from the Moors—the enemy at the gates, as the old man suggests.

It is, however, in Camões's lyric poetry where we find the most innovative and defiant representation of India. Indian beauty appears in competition with the models of feminine beauty in vogue: the long-established Petrarchan beauty of golden-blond Laura. It is the raven hair in the poem "That Captive" that receives praise, that captivates, and it is the enticing dark beauty of Barbara that makes all forget the blond beauty. Thus, Camões openly challenges and

subverts the parameters of feminine beauty in vogue for centuries.

## DUELLING VISIONS

It is clear that Portuguese writers' visions of India differed from imperial discourse. The land of easy delights that beckoned the most inept of suitors, such as Constança's husband, was the source of Portuguese moral ruin and depravity. Imperial conquest and financial gain did not benefit the nation's moral well-being. Yet, in lyrical poetry, Camões challenged Petrarchan beauty by proposing a new model in which the colour, gender, and class of often marginalized and subaltern subjects displaced the entrenched European ideals. 🍁

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