

Rachel's Gown

HELOÍSA BUARQUE DE HOLLANDA

Translation by CHRISTOPHER PETERSON

Easy Fame

Rachel's first writing was symptomatic and definitive. Having moved from the coastal capital of Ceará, Fortaleza, to the *sertão* in January of '27 and already an avid reader of the daily papers, she read the news about the election of the new Student Queen, journalist Suzana de Alencar Guimarães. Irritated over the Queen's "feminine", pseudolyrical style (including the nom de plume "Marquise"), she took pen in hand and wrote to the editor, satirizing the contest and the winning candidate. The letter, signed with a pseudonym, was an instant success and set off a frantic search for this "Rita de Queluz". However, as always, she had left a clue. The letter had been postmarked Estação de Junco, the name of her father's ranch, and Rachel de Queiroz was found out and immediately invited to work at the newspaper *O Ceará*. Rachel's slot had been cast.

At age 17, while already working at *O Ceará*, she published *História de Um Nome*, a serial novel, wrote the play *Minha prima Nazaré*, participated in literary journals, and tried her luck at poetry. In 1929 she wrote her first novel, *O Quinze* (years later translated into French by the Stock publishing house - *L'année de la grande sécheresse*; German - *Das Jahr '15*; and Japanese), which was a major success even beyond the borders of her home state, Ceará. Augusto Frederico Schmidt and Alceu Amoroso Lima in Rio and Artur

Mota in São Paulo enthusiastically lauded her literary debut.

Rachel had at once become a public figure and national byword at the tender age of 20. Every day she received letters, telegrams, and requests for her books. To see her own picture in newspapers and magazines was no longer a surprise. When she travelled she had a constant troupe of admirers among the local intellectuals. On one occasion, as proof of his admiration, Luiz da Câmara Cascudo recited poetry in her honor on board. "It was as if I had been elected Queen of the Pageant," she later recalled of her first romance.

While Rachel was not surprised with this breathtaking recognition, the same was not true for her literary godfathers. In *Uma Revelação - O Quinze*, published in *Novidades Literárias* on August 18, 1930, Schmidt, who was credited with having "discovered" her, explains his enthusiasm over having unveiled a great, previously unknown Brazilian writer. Yet he observes that in the book he sees "nothing that even remotely reminds one of the pretentiousness, futility, and falseness of our feminine literature," and openly admits that Rachel de Queiroz might be one name covering up for another.

Graciliano Ramos expressed the same doubt when he wrote about *Caminho de Pedras* some years later. "*O Quinze* cropped up in the mid-thirties and caused greater unease in readers' souls than José Américo's novel, because it was a book written by a woman, and what really troubled people was that it was by a young woman at that. Could it really have been by a woman? I myself didn't believe it. Having read the title and seen the photograph in the newspaper, I shook my head: There is no one with such a name. It's

all just a joke. A young girl like that writing a novel! It must be a pen name for some bearded fellow."

A self-possessed Rachel paid no heed to the anguish her work caused in male hearts. Rather, she sent the novel to a list of a hundred critics and writers, including the then controversial Graça Aranha, who was defending the new modernist winds then sweeping across the Brazilian arts in open defiance of the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

In March 1931, the Graça Aranha Foundation awarded prizes for the first time: Murilo Mendes won the poetry class, Cícero Dias painting, and Rachel de Queiroz the novel class. At the time of his sudden death, Graça Aranha was sitting reading *O Quinze*. Several years later in the Graça Aranha Museum, this scene was reconstructed: *O Quinze* is open to page 32, resting on the arm of the chair where the writer died.

After Rachel won this prize, the novel was hotly disputed by publishers who wanted to print the second edition. Rachel chose Editora Nacional. Today, *O Quinze*, written when Rachel was 19, is in its 48th edition, has been read by over 100,000 people, and is unanimously considered a classic in the history of Brazilian literature.

Rachel says of this instantaneous success: "The book just exploded on the scene. But this was good, because I have always had my head in the right place, I never let myself get carried away by all that noise. I was a Communist, and deep down inside what I really wanted was to destroy that entire society, including the Editora Nacional."

Forty-eight years later, on November 4, 1977, Rachel de Queiroz, author of five novels, two plays, and eight books of short stories, with translations in English, French, German, Polish, and Japanese, having collaborated regularly with the press for 50 years and translated 47 books, was admitted to the Brazilian Academy of Letters to take seat number five, founded by Raimundo Correia.

She was the first woman to be admitted to the Academy. The world will never really know whether the huge national celebration that

surrounded this event was because of women's definitive victory in breaking into one of the strictest bastions of Brazilian culture or whether it was just one more of Rachel's "natural", offhand accomplishments. I think one can dare make some guesses as to which version is correct.

Among the several fields of observation that emerge in the enigmatic crossroads of Rachel's singular professional career and the historical obstacles raised to women's professional recognition, particularly in the first half of the century, I chose her triumph over Article 2 of the founding Statutes of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, which determined that "only native Brazilians (*brasileiros natos*) can be members of the Academy." The orthodox interpretation of this sentence by members of the Academy defied even the most elementary rules of grammar when it defined the plural *brasileiros* as not including the combination of female Brazilians (*brasileiras*) and male ones (*brasileiros*).

La grammaire a son mystère (a necessary digression)

The controversy concerning the presence of women in the Brazilian Academy of Letters was nothing new, however. It is known that during the preparatory meetings for the founding of the Academy, Lucio de Mendonça, acknowledged to be the true founder, was in favor of having women in the membership, and he made his position explicit in an article to the *Estado de São Paulo*. In addition, Júlia Lopes de Almeida, a well-known, respected novelist, was seriously considered for admittance by the founders. Besides Júlia Lopes de Almeida, another woman writer who was considered for the Academy's list of founders was Francisca Júlia. However, the idea was voted down by the conservative majority of participants in the preliminary meetings. Instead of Dona Júlia, then the first lady of our literature, the Academy admitted her husband Filinto, who wrote verses of debatable value and who was not even a "native Brazilian", but who displayed a critical sense of humor by taking

the self-ascribed title of consort member.¹ They say that Dona Júlia, like her contemporary women writers, declined to protest either due to her extreme modesty or because she preferred such an honor to go to her husband. A prudent stance, to say the least. At the time, women were rarely allowed to enter concerts and other public events (and even then through the back door) as proven by the statutes of the Beethoven Club, where Machado de Assis was a member of the board of directors. Women were ridiculed when they went so far as to practice liberal professions, an example of which can be read in the play *As Doutoradas*, by male Academician França Jr., presented in 1889. No doubt as a way of acknowledging Dona Júlia's "expertise" as the "shadow behind seat number 3", after she died the Academy went to great lengths to pay tribute to her "enormous literary merit". Special sessions in praise and memory of Dona Júlia's work were part of the Academy's yearly activities until Filinto himself died in 1945. It was as if Dona Júlia's presence in seat number 3 was considered visible and legitimate as long as it was occupied by the consort member. Such yearly homage included sorrowful references to "the prejudice that kept her out of the Academy"² and to the recitals by the *Clube das Vitória Régias* (an early 20th-century Brazilian women's literary guild) where "the most outstanding members of the feminine intellectual and artistic world" took the numbered seats at the Academy and recited Dona Júlia's writing, going so far as to raise a bust to her, "our greatest woman novelist". A mourning Filinto, in turn, left 100 thousand cruzeiros in his will to establish a Júlia Lopes de Almeida Prize to be awarded by the Academy to outstanding women novelists. Dona Júlia thus ended up achieving inside-out immortality, playing back seat to chair number 3.

Thirty years after Júlia Lopes de Almeida

¹ MONTELLO, Josué. *As Mulheres na Academia*. In *Jornal do Brasil*, August 5, 1976.

² *Jornal do Commercio*, May 31, 1934.

had been refused as a founding member of the Academy, a woman of letters, poet Amélia Bevilacqua, wife of Academy member and jurist Clóvis Bevilacqua, submitted a request to Academy President Dr. Aloysio de Castro to be awarded Alfredo Pujol's seat (as attested in the acts of the May 29, 1930 meeting), a place with a lineage of the highest order, having had Machado de Assis as founder and José de Alencar as patron.

Since this was the first time a woman had vied for a seat in the Academy, the President did not feel he was authorized to interpret Article 2 of the Statutes, and he asked the plenary to manifest its opinion. The time was certainly ripe for the debate sparked by Amélia Bevilacqua's candidacy. In spite of disagreement from conservative wings of society, women's participation was broadening considerably. Amélia Bevilacqua's noisy 1930 campaign for a seat in the Academy was unavoidably in tune with an entire platform of struggles and claims, the main banner of which was women's suffrage. The Brazilian Feminist Crusade was founded in Recife to struggle for such political rights, and it joined voices with the Brazilian Federation for Feminine Progress, founded by Berta Lutz in Rio de Janeiro in 1922. It was in this context that Academy President Dr. Aloysio de Castro requested that the Academy members take a position as to the criteria for judging Dona Amélia's admissibility. Those in favor included Augusto de Lima, Ademar Magalhães, Luís Carlos, Affonso Celso, Fernando Magalhães, João Ribeiro, Laudelino Freire, Magalhães de Azeredo, Félix Pacheco (who publicly declared his support for female membership in the Academy), and of course Clóvis Bevilacqua, Amélia's husband. In other words, a little over a quarter of the membership was in favor. The rest were against, and the stance taken by two members, Alberto Oliveira and Silva Ramos, carried considerable weight. They pointed out that the issue had been discussed during the founding of the Academy and that it had been decided that women were not to be admitted as

members.³ Those who voted against were Aloysio de Castro, Gustavo Barroso, Olegário Mariano, Afrânio Peixoto, Alberto de Oliveira, Coelho Netto, Constâncio Alves, Dantas Barreto, Goulart de Andrade, Humberto de Campos, Luis Guimarães Filho, Ramiz Galvão, Roquette-Pinto, and Silva Ramos.

Laudelino Freire was not convinced, and during the July 24, 1930, session he accused the Academy of "stubbornly resisting irrefutable arguments". He proposed that the issue be reconsidered, based on both its inherent importance and the irregular way it had been dealt with during the preliminary discussion on May 29. Under the statutes, a case like this required a vote by at least 21 members in a previously announced session. He suggested that the chairman send each and every Academy member the following question along with a request for a written answer within 60 days: "Does the word *brasileiros* in Article 2 of the Statutes include women Brazilian writers?"

The Brazilian Academy of Letters was thus conducting the debate over women's admissibility to literary immortality as if it were an essentially grammatical question. It was insensitive to Clóvis Bevilacqua as he invoked the Academy's responsibility as ultimate authority over the Dictionary of the Portuguese Language.

In 1930, Otávio Mangabeira was given the seat Dona Amélia had vied for.

Unlike Dona Júlia, Dona Amélia decided to challenge the Academy to a broad public debate, the final act of which was the publication of the book *A Academia Brasileira de Letras e Amélia Bevilacqua*, which the author defined as a historical and literary document. The materials presented in the book, including interviews, newspaper articles, and papers by the author in defense of her candidacy, give one an idea of how hot a political and grammatical debate Dona Amélia's aspirations and

provocations had sparked in the Academy. The book shows how Dona Amélia managed to mobilize educated public opinion in Brazil concerning the orthodox and contradictory use of the word *brasileiros* in Article 2 of the Academy's Statutes. Considering that the Academy was the normative institution for the national language, she at the very least had succeeded in denouncing what was "an unpleasant mistake that cannot be allowed to prevail for long," as Felix Pacheco put it at the height of the debate.

However, it was Constâncio Alves, radically against female membership, who was to lay bare the grammatical enigma that had been raised by Dona Amélia's candidacy. He stated the following in justifying his vote: "Those who defend female candidates base their arguments on a modern (?) interpretation of the Constitution by which they demand suffrage and other political rights for women." In another article in the *Revista da Academia*, the same author takes an even more radical position: "This same sophism provides the underpinnings for feminist political ambitions. The use of the word *brasileiros* in the Constitution was not the same as in our Statutes...: (in the Constitution) they forgot to dot the i's...." The debate that determined "The Ineligibility of Ladies to the Brazilian Academy" as published in the August 1930 issue of the *Revista da Academia Brasileira de Letras* was certainly a broad, unconstrained one, since it even referred to the jurisprudence used in the Academy of Letters founded by Mussolini. It quoted the history of Catholicism, "an infinite parade of marvelous feminine figures who walk up to the altars but cannot celebrate mass or give confession to anyone," and concluded with a gesture of extraordinary chivalry: "Our literary guild does not have enough seats to hold such boundless merits." Beyond this, it oscillates between a visible misogyny - challenging "this odd feminism, which fails to counsel women in favor of such an initiative (founding their own Academy), whereby instead of establishing a work of their own

³ Speech by Magalhães Jr. upon receiving Dinah Silveira de Queiroz into the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1980.

that would prove their autonomy and the efficacy of their efforts, they make an issue of dwelling in a house that they did not build." - and a certain kind of panic, as suggested by Constâncio Alves' final speech: "Pay heed to these words, illustrious colleagues. What troubles might the future not hold if you had to vote on female candidates? Defeated men are capable of pardoning, and if they were not, little would it matter. Yet can we be indifferent to the dissatisfaction of a defeated woman? Not at all. Thus I say to you: do not allow Discord to reign in this house as it has with Paris and all that disgrace. Let it not, making use of a cell in the Academy, repeat what it has achieved with damned Apple. Let us be prudent like Rosny. As is fair, let us admire all women of letters, but let us not vote for any of them. Ah! non, pas ça." Carlos de Laet was less chivalrous and more pragmatic when he argued some time later, "We really should let them in, because they bring their 'seats' along with them." Still, the press was emphatically in favor of Amélia's candidacy. In the article *Resolução Anacrônica* published in the May 31, 1930, edition of *Jornal do Brasil*, J.H. de Sá Leitão satirized the controversy like this: "All manner of cerebral effort is useless in understanding such subtlety: 'mon âme a son secret, ma grammaire a son mystère.' I give you access to the greatest of adventures, yet deny it for literary immortality. Such is not an elegant solution. In addition to not being chivalrous, it gets bogged down in ingrained illogic. Let us call on the Academy's statutes to take a breath of fresh air and face up to the issue of feminism, among other reasons for the good its poets have said about women in the chapter on charm and fancy." Another article, published in *Jornal do Brasil* on June 5, 1930, reads like this: "By ruling against the entry of women into the Petit Trianon, the Academy of Letters has struck a terrible blow against feminism, including its major political intentions. It unwittingly provided important arguments for interpreting our basic law, the Constitution.... "Indeed, the defense of women's political

rights is based on precisely the same term. Those of us who defend women's suffrage believe that the term *brasileiros* as used in our Magna Charta refers to all individuals, regardless of their sex. Our most erudite institution, which is preparing a dictionary, a complete philological guide, has taken the opposite position. There is no doubt that this has been a terrible blow."

Although the debate over Amélia Bevilacqua's candidacy turned out to be explicitly political and anti-feminist, one detail calls our attention: the Academy members' concern over a no less grammatical problem: how to conjugate the masculine word *fardeao* (robe) in the feminine? As we shall see below, it was Rachel de Queiroz who solved this problem.

The idea of a feminine robe was of particular concern to President Aloysio de Castro and to poets Alberto de Oliveira and Olegário Mariano. The latter wrote in *Diário de Notícias* about how dumbfounded he was over the possibility of a victory by Dona Amélia, and his fantasies were divided between nuns and geishas: "What kind of uniform will we invent for her? A habit or a Japanese kimono?"

On April 29, 1976, Oswaldo Orico, moved by Dinah Silveira de Queiroz's campaign in favor of female membership in the Academy, presented a proposal for an amendment to the Statutes. The main change referred to Article 17: "This proposal intends to give all Brazilians the same opportunity, which has been denied by a conflicting measure in the Statutes, which do not prevent women from enrolling in the election process for a chair in the Academy." A taboo that had stood for eighty years had finally fallen. The doors of the Academy were now open to women writers. Dinah, who stated that she was struggling for all women (and not just herself) to enter the Academy, took up the defense of Rachel de Queiroz's candidacy.

Rachel's gown

The following year, in July 1977, Rachel sent a letter to the Academy in which she declared herself candidate for vacant seat

number 5. On August 5, she was elected in the first round of votes, with 23 in her favor. Her competitor, Pontes Miranda, got 15 votes. There was one blank vote, and among the 39 members, 13 sent their votes in through the mail. Those who voted openly for Rachel were Adonias Filho, Francisco de Assis Barbosa, Herberto Sales, José Cândido de Carvalho, Mauro Mota, Miguel Reale, Odylo Costa Filho, Austregesilo de Athayde, and Lyra Tavares, "who was against women's membership, but who voted for Rachel". Those who voted against her were Barbosa Lima Sobrinho, Elmano Cardim, Pedro Calmon, and Viana Moog. Once Rachel de Queiroz had been elected and the grammatical controversy over women's membership in the Academy had apparently been settled, a pending issue kept feeding certain basic anxieties in the Petit Trianon: What uniform could Rachel use that would be compatible with the heroic symbolism expressed by the men's swords and the laurels on their robes? President Austregesilo de Athayde was apparently unaware of the revolution promoted by Mary Quant, one of the spearheads of the behavioral protests of the previous decade, when he confirmed to the press how relevant the issue was for the Academy: "The presence of a woman in our sessions won't change anything. The only thing that will change is the uniform." Thus it was that the "House of Machado de Assis" played stage to one of the most curious debates of the late 1970s, with all the slips of tongue that psychology in print allowed us.

The traditional five o'clock tea became a fashion arena. In the search for the appropriate uniform for Rachel, heated discussions accompanied fashion showings by Guilherme Guimarães of the Mônaco Boutique and Sílvia Souza Dantas, the ultimate winner of this second, hotly-contested round. "In principle, all attempts were made to imitate the male robe, and only the slacks were replaced with a skirt. The writer was horrified by the idea of frilly lace and a *tailleur* with braids and epaulets....," according to Sílvia Souza Dantas.

The press followed every last detail of this work. The *Jornal da Bahia* wrote on September 29, 1977: "The most picturesque event at the House of Machado de Assis will certainly not be the arrival of a woman to talk with the 'immortals' but the special meeting that was held a few days ago at the Academy to approve the blueprints for the *toilette*."

In the dozens of articles that appeared in the newspapers on the uniform that Rachel was expected to wear (including stacks of letters from readers), it was clear that the Academy members had ensured themselves the last word in this difficult decision. "During the last five o'clock tea, Pedro Calmon - who had been notoriously contrary to the admittance of women into the House of Machado de Assis - raised a proposal that was considered vindictive, that the Academy produce several patterns so that the members could choose the uniform Rachel was supposed to wear." (*O Liberal*, Belém, September 6, 1977)

Academy President Austregesilo de Athayde was much more liberal in suggesting to Rachel herself that she come up with some ideas for her robe. However, as he declared to the São Paulo newspaper *Diário Popular* on September 9, "in order to avoid stylish fantasies, the Academy plenary itself will have the final vote on the uniform she is to wear." Meanwhile, Rachel was barraged with opinions: the list included a *toreador's* bolero, epaulets, braids, and even a processional cape, proposed by members of the *Irmadade do Outeiro* (Brotherhood of the Knoll). It was a heyday for Freud and Lacan. Embarrassed, Rachel de Queiroz tried to ease her new colleagues' qualms: "They're making a big deal out of this business of my uniform. My dresses are all shifts. They're all cut out of the same pattern. I don't dress. I cover myself," she declared rather worriedly to *O Globo* on October 9, 1977. According to the press, the writer ended up deciding by herself and turning deaf ears to the suggestions for boleros (too impractical) and capes (too liturgical). Her only demand was that the robe be sober. Preferring not to mention the names

of the illustrious academicians that had made suggestions on such a nerve end, she explained her option for sobriety as a "natural" feminine one, since "females of all animal species are less ornate than males. So I just followed the rule." (*Jornal do Brasil*, November 4, 1977).

The final version approved by stylist Silvia Souza Dantas was in her words "a simple gown, like Rachel, in Academic green, long, straight, with a V-shaped neckline and bell-bottom sleeves." (*Jornal do Commercio*, October 29, 1977) The only carry-over from the old male robe was the gold oakleaf embroidery done by the Academy embroiderers on Rua do Senado. The September 4 1977 issue of *Correio Braziliense* informed the public that "Rachel's full-length gown consumed 13 meters of crepe and 3 meters of linen. Her necklace, a present from the Governor of Ceará, is solid gold, a departure from the men's medallions, made of gold-plated silver." However, this potential advantage was offset by the cost of her full-length gown. As social columnist Ibraim Sued pointed out in *O Globo* on October 23, 1977, "Women are already a savings for the Academy, since a man's robe costs 60 thousand cruzeiros and a woman's gown only 11 thousand. Neat." This argument does not seem to have convinced socialite Tereza de Souza Campos, who maliciously asked the writer how many hungry children from Rachel's native Brazilian Northeast could be fed with the money spent on her controversial gown, thus taking revenge for a similar challenge Rachel had once raised to high society in the Rio de Janeiro newspapers.

There was consensus on one point, however. "The sword, a symbol of fidelity to the institution, will not be necessary." *Ultima Hora*, on September 4, 1977, wrote: "Rachel de Queiroz is on the side of women and is not backing down. She is about to take her seat in the Academy thanks to a woman's work, with a woman's body, and with a woman's dress. She has a precedent in terms of jurisprudence: Joan of Arc bore no sword."

The investiture

Finally, on November 4, 1977, safe and sound, Rachel de Queiroz, wearing a discreet, elegant gown despite male Academic taste, took her seat at the Brazilian Academy of Letters. As *Jornal do Brasil* reported, beginning at seven in the morning Rachel was flooded with telephone calls, visits, and curiosity seekers and had to take refuge at her sister Maria Luiza's home. The president of the Academy in turn ensured the press that "the investiture of the first woman member of the Academy will take place at nine PM today according to the 'standard, immutable ritual', and no laudatory speeches by women poets will be allowed."

To this day, no immortal has been as warmly welcomed as Rachel de Queiroz, and for the first time in 80 years the inaugural ceremony took on the air of a popular demonstration. "The Portela Samba School wanted to pay homage to the first woman to enter the Brazilian Academy of Letters, but they were refused by President Austregesilo de Athayde on the grounds that it was a formal ceremony and therefore was incompatible with the samba school's carnivalesque presence. So the school decided to pay its tribute to her outside the Academy, right in the middle of Avenida Presidente Wilson," wrote social columnist Zózimo on September 15, 1977.

Since it was raining, however, Portela was not able to hold the parade it had promised and inaugurate their "Academicians' Wing". This disappointment was compensated for by the parades by samba schools all over Ceará. In the town of Crato, samba groups were formed with motifs taken from Rachel's books, reproduced in huge styrofoam sculptures.

Soccer, a particularly important sport during this period of authoritarian government in Brazil (characterized by the slogan "Brazil: Love It or Leave It"), was also on the agenda for celebration of Rachel's triumph. The *Jornal dos Sports*, in its September 21 edition, reminded its readers that "long before she became a literary immortal and rose to Academy membership, Rachel,

an enthusiastic Vasco da Gama fan, had been named team Cardinal by Nelson Rodrigues and was thus a Vasco pontiff". The Vasco da Gama soccer club had even tried to provide Rachel with her inaugural uniform. Congressmen, Senators, mayors, and city councilmen all paid tribute to the writer. Mauro Benevides, Senator from Ceará by the extinct MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement - opposition) party, spoke on the history of her life and work in the Brazilian Congress. Speeches by Senators Franco Montoro (São Paulo), Benjamin Farah (Rio de Janeiro), and Agenor Maria (Rio Grande do Norte) of the MDB and Magalhães Pinto and Benedito Ferreira of the Arena (National Renewal Alliance - pro-government) added to the tribute. During the Senate's November 7 session, the assistant leader of the government party, Ruy Santos (Arena, Bahia), gave a speech on Rachel's inauguration in celebration of her triumph as "a milestone for Brazilian civilization". From samba to soccer, including politics, Rachel's investiture had acquired an air of national triumph. On the day after the ceremony, the headlines in *Ultima Hora* read: "Rachel's Inauguration a Demonstration: Public Overrides Red Tape". The feminists did not even feel left out or upset when the newly invested academician spoke critically of their movement. "They were all happy because it was the first time a woman had entered the Academy. There was no controversy to it," Rachel recalled later. Still, it was no accident that in 1930 and 1977, two decisive moments for the country's political history - the beginning of the revolution that led Getúlio Vargas to power and the beginning of the process of political distension that put an end to the military dictatorship - the issue of women's rights had been raised in such an avoidable and at the same time delicate way. Considering just the Academy reactions and the local political thermometer, one can observe both the pathways and detours that Amélia Bevilacqua and Rachel de Queiroz took on their march to literary immortality. One first proviso that must be mentioned is the difficulty in drawing a

parallel between Amélia and Rachel. Dona Amélia fought a public fight with the Academy that ended up estranging her husband Clóvis Bevilacqua from his fellow academicians, since he wanted (or was convinced) to impose his wife's candidacy on his colleagues. Her campaign was considered a banner by both the press and feminist groups, and Academy members considered it extremely irritating and even aggressive. Many academicians questioned the literary quality of Amélia's work, but the discussion centered around the "unpleasant mistake" contained in Article 2 of the Academy's statutes. The fact is that Amélia ended up losing the prestige she had acquired with her various publications and Silvio Romero's praise for her book *Provocações e Debates* and even came to be considered a bizarre figure with a reputation for being off balance or even crazy.

While Dona Amélia was raising a ruckus with her candidacy at the Academy, Rachel de Queiroz, who was already a nationally renowned writer, was meeting at the Praça do Ferreira in Fortaleza with a group of activists, workers, and intellectuals, planning the Communist Party of Ceará, of which she was a founding member. An impassioned militant of the social cause, she never took interest in feminist struggles, nor did she take part in the demand for women's suffrage.

Women and the Communist Party seemed irreconcilable to Rachel. The politics of the masses that the Communists were defending in opposition to the government seemed incompatible with the feminist movements of the time. The latter identified with Vargas' politics and according to Rachel were dealing with the issue of women's suffrage in an elitist, segregated way, linked with "minuscule conservative groups". In addition to her clear political divergence, Rachel's aversion to the feminists expressed her literary and artistic reservations about them. For the young woman "who wrote like a man", the militant feminist writers, including Dona Amélia Bevilacqua, represented a stuffy old "syrupy" style

without the necessary literary punch. Rachel, on the contrary, fascinated by *Macunaíma*, was alone among women writers of the time in seeking to absorb modernist progress. Using her rare literary discipline, she developed a kind of language that was adverse to ornamental impulses, grounded more in nouns than in adjectives, shirking not only the literary standards of the time but mainly what she considered "feminine literature". Unlike the majority of her militant feminist contemporaries, her novels pictured the strongest and most revolutionary female characters of the time and raised issues like women's professional training, constraints of marriage, sexual freedom, and even abortion, in what was the best feminist style of the time. Let us say she practiced an individual form of feminism, straddling the more general social issue and her horror of the circumscribed world of domestic space reserved for women and women writers.

Amélia's attitude during her polemical candidacy was closer to that of Dinah Silveira de Queiroz. The latter, having received the Machado de Assis Prize in 1954, began to seriously consider conquering literary immortality through membership in the Academy, and for 25 years struggled obstinately for women to be admitted. In July 1970 she declared her candidacy for the seat left by Alvaro Lins. She became a candidate for a second time that year, competing for Aníbal Freyre's seat, based on a legal opinion submitted by Vicente Rao showing that the prohibition of women as members was discriminatory and unconstitutional. Dinah insisted for a third time in 1971 without success, trying for Clementino Fraga's place. It is said that President Austregesilo de Athayde declared, "The day Dinah enters that door (to the Academy) will be the same day I leave by the other." At the height of this discussion in 1971, Rachel was sounded out by Odilo Costa Filho about the possibility of her becoming a candidate. Rachel's answer: "I am not a candidate to the Academy, and even if I wanted to be, I could not. To even think of this is forbidden. It's a sin, and

a woman of my age cannot sin." (*Zero Hora*, Rio Grande do Sul, August 6, 1977). It was only in 1980, on her second attempt after Rachel had entered the Academy, that Dinah succeeded in becoming a literary immortal, defeating Gustavo Capanema. Raimundo Magalhães Jr.'s welcoming speech was clear in characterizing her investiture as the consolidation of women's presence in the Academy. Dinah herself acknowledged this in her declaration to the press: "Rachel's presence in the Academy might have been like a symbol. The feminine side of the Academy would have been just she alone, and no woman writer, no matter how good she was, could have crossed the threshold to immortality as she had. My membership was like a relief; the taboo had been broken." This opinion was not totally devoid of meaning, since Dona Carmen herself, the Academy secretary and a person who was familiar with all the backstage gossip, reported that the day Rachel was admitted, the men had commented off the record: "She was the last, not the first."

The fact is that "Rachel's style" together with her indisputable prominence in the Brazilian world of letters (at a time when the Statutes declared that women were ineligible for membership) were extremely appropriate for smoothing this very difficult rite of passage.

Still, although Rachel used her enviable ability to insist on declaring herself non-feminist and anarchist, so that her victory escaped possible political and/or feminist appropriation, she did not manage to keep her entry into the institution from having certain such repercussions. In 1966, Rachel had been nominated by dictator Castelo Branco to the Brazilian delegation to the UN General Assembly, and since 1967 she had been part of the Federal Cultural Council under a government that was quite unpopular among the leftist intellectuals. The press thus received her as both the first woman to enter the Petit Trianon and representative of an undesirable political sector. President Geisel sent Rachel a congratulatory telegram saying that he

was one of her loyal readers, to which the writer responded elegantly, acknowledging his ability as "a firm-handed helmsman in these troubled waters the world is sailing through", and this exchange was reproduced by literally all of the country's newspapers. Oswaldo Orico, the very author of the amendment to the Academy's statutes, did not show up for the election and considered her victory "the effect of outside pressure, mainly from the Federal Cultural Council." (*Jornal de Santa Catarina*, August 6, 1977). "The victor was not a woman but a government agency," accused the defeated candidate, former Ambassador Pontes de Miranda, in a show of lack of elegance. (*Jornal de Santa Catarina*, August 6, 1977). The Left was split and preferred not to celebrate the fact as a feminist triumph but as a political game in which the main beneficiary was the government itself. Like a preview to what was to become the famous controversy raised the following year by film director Cacá Diegues, who denounced the so-called "Ideological Patrols", the debate heated up in declarations by Alceu Amoroso Lima, one of the most prominent liberal leaders in defense of civil rights in the post-'64 period. He called the accusations against Rachel unfounded and publicly confirmed his vote for "Brazil's greatest woman writer" in his article Ideological Hydrophobia, published on August 14 in *Última Hora*, in which he reconfirmed the merit and fairness of Rachel's election and pointed out ironically how fragile the literary immortals' swords were in upholding the Geisel government.

On the other hand, in spite of Rachel's insistent public declarations that she had entered the Academy "exclusively as a woman of letters" and that she would "defend membership for great writers, not only women", there is no doubt that at a time when the feminist movement was undergoing considerable growth and institutionalization as a reflection of the expansion of worldwide feminist movements, there was an air of euphoric triumph for women over the fall of the most traditional

male oligarchy in the country: the Brazilian Academy of Letters. The newspapers were full of declarations like, "The majority of the members considered Rachel de Queiroz's victory a milestone in the Academy's history," "This victory could mean greater respect for women's literature," and "Rachel de Queiroz opened the way and managed to break through the discriminatory blockade in the illustrious House of Machado de Assis," along with a surprising amount of anachronical anti-feminist tirades and violent attacks against the movement, one that for obvious reasons was not supported by the majority of the population.

What was believed to be Rachel's anti-feminism began to be blown up and exploited by the media. I will quote just a few of the gems that appeared in the press: "Rachel de Queiroz will be sworn in today as member of the Academy of Letters. The hotheaded feminists were quick to turn her into a symbol for the Women's Lib Movement, a proposal that has a lot in common with the Portella Mission, with just one difference: while the leader of the Senate wants to talk politics, all the women are interested in is sex." "Rachel de Queiroz has nothing to do with feminism. She has not given in to permissiveness, has not appeared in a loincloth, has not walked around with her breasts showing, has never used the word fulfillment, has not signed imbecile manifestos, has not adhered to the schemes of either the Left or the Right, and I doubt very much if she has ever entered an analyst's office. Rachel de Queiroz knows how to sew, to cook, to make rice and beans. Contrary to what some fools may think, Rachel de Queiroz is entering the Brazilian Academy of Letters on her own merits and because she is a true woman!" (Raul Giudicelli, *Última Hora*, November 4, 1977).

And of course there was the usual witch-hunting tirade referring to Betty Friedmann, as *Estado de Minas* and *Correio Braziliense* attested: "The glory of this victory belongs to a woman who does not live by Betty Friedmann's prayer book."

For the time being I will postpone any

evaluation on the relationships between Rachel, feminism, and post-1964 politics. However, I would just like to observe that critics in general and feminist critics in particular have been extraordinarily timid in approaching not only the possible meanings in these issues but also a more detailed analysis of the life, personality, and work of our greatest modernist woman writer.

On how Rachel trod the carpet in the House of Machado de Assis

As the first woman to enter the Academy, having first deciphered the enigma of the robe, how did Rachel translate into the feminine gender such clearly patrilinear traits as the passing-down of Academic cultural patrimony?

It would be worthwhile to recall that occupying a seat in the Academy of Letters is no easy matter. The inaugural ceremony, like the praxis of procedures that precedes it, demands of the candidate a long and liturgical "initiation" process made up of trials of humility, virtue, and personal merit. If successful, the future academician is ready to be received into the House as a legitimate heir to its lineage and tradition, of which he becomes guardian and transmitter from that moment onward. Thus, let us see how Rachel stood in this complex and conspicuously masculine ritual.

In the first session after the death of an Academy member, the President formally declares the seat vacant and enrollment open for potential candidates during the next three months. Within four months' time the seat is occupied again.

In addition, each seat has a very specific meaning and symbolism.

According to tradition, in Louis XIV's court, only the great noblemen and prelates had the right to sit in *fauteuils*, the only exception being that made for the President of the French Academy of Letters, who had also been conceded this privilege. But writer La Monnoye's candidacy in 1703 raised a serious problem. His election to the Academy hinged on the vote of one of the members, the Cardinal d'Estrées, who had become Prince of the Church and thus

had the right to *afauteuil* in the King's Court and who thus refused to sit on a simple plebeian's stool. Louis XIV, aware of the impasse, ordered that the lord members of the Academy be conceded 40 *fauteuils*. This was the origin of the Academic seat's "objective" prestige. The seat is like a little throne.⁴ As such, it can only be passed down or at worst usurped. In the beginning, seats were passed down through the spontaneous designation of new members by old ones. However, in 1713 a new impasse arose when Lamoignon turned down the Academy's invitation to join, showing how sensible it would be if entry into the Academy were preceded by an official request on the candidate's part. As was said in the French Academy, "Like a decent matron, the Academy does not offer itself, nor does it concede a daughter's hand - *pardon*, the possession of a seat - without the manifest desire of someone who wants to possess it, without a formal request." Thus was established the practice of the candidate submitting a letter, in which he asks the President to enroll him to compete for the vacant seat, a custom which was later broadened and perfected by sending telegrams to the other members. The candidate is then ready to begin the long and winding road of "visits" to his future colleagues, taking copies of his own books, presents, delicacies, flowers, and of course requests for votes.

Word has it that Rachel changed the rules of the game a little even in this preliminary phase. After delivering her letter of candidacy to the President (at the insistence of Adonias Filho, according to her), she travelled to Ceará and only came back when it was time for the vote, thus escaping the "trial" of visits, the required exercise of humility and submission to her future peers. Even so, when she arrived from the *sertão* she passed the test with no great difficulty.

⁴ With regard to the history of the Brazilian Academy of Letters and the French Academy, see: NEVES, Fêmão. *A Academia Brasileira de Letras: notas e documentos para a sua História (1896-1940)*. Brazilian Academy of Letters, 1940.

Once a candidate has been elected, the inaugural ceremony is scheduled during which he is to be received by his new peers, gives the traditional acceptance speech, signs the Academy book with Machado de Assis' gold pen, and receives the diploma, medallion, and sword, thus completing the ritual of Academic consecration.

The custom of a solemn public speech dates from 1673, with Flécher's investiture. The new member humbly approaches the members of the government and the Academy, speaks of his predecessor and then listens to praise of himself by one of the members of the House. In the Brazilian case we find an extremely curious variant to this ritual. In the French Academy, the *fauteuils* are not numbered, nor do they have patrons. What was new in our Academy was that when Machado de Assis gave the inaugural speech in 1896⁵, "to conserve national literary unity in the Political Federation" and to maintain "tradition as its first desire", he and his colleagues realized that considering how young our national culture was it would be necessary to "invent" this tradition. Since our literary aristocracy lacked a genealogy, the founders' best strategy was to spiritually create patrons for their seats that represented "traditional, illustrious names in national fiction, poetry, critique, and eloquence"⁶. The suggestion for naming patrons for the seats came from Joaquim Nabuco, according to the preliminary text of the Bylaws and Statutes: "Each of the Academy's 40 seats will be named in honor of one of the main Brazilian writers, and the first occupant of each seat will stand before it and give a speech in praise of the literary name inscribed on it."⁷

However, this genealogical impulse was not created by the literary academies. Throughout literary historiography and review, there is a common, recurrent

concern for establishing lineages, with exhaustive scrutiny of "influences" in writings, in works, and in the constitution of literary schools, with identification of the "founders" of national literature. It might be said that the establishment of legitimate families with "patriarchs", "heroes", and "geniuses" is one of the central ideas in literary critique and theory and even that literary history is constructed like a traditional system of patriarchal patronage, that is, within a patrilinear logic based on the legacy of property and patrimony.

The Brazilian Academy of Letters, founded under the basic logic of protecting and preserving national linguistic and literary patrimony and as the loftiest organ for literary consecration and legislation in Brazil, was no exception to this rule. Each seat, as it was "occupied" by a new member, required the retracing and reconstitution of the genealogical line that defined it. The ritualization of a member's investiture, whether through the speech in which the aspirant was to retrace his predecessors' lineage, thus proving himself a "legitimate heir" to this "trunk" or "place" in literature, or through the *mis-en-scene* of the reception by an already invested member, explains a little of the system which defines the processes of literary legitimation. Given this logic, the exclusion of women does not appear to have been merely an issue of grammar or fashion.

The legacy of patrimony, or the usual discourse

Rachel had a unique task ahead of her, quite similar to the challenge of translating the masculine robe into the feminine - she would have to adapt, or at least mollify, the solemn patriarchal passing-down of national literary patrimony. What metaphors would Rachel need to translate the heroic Academic discourse into the specific syntax of the weaker sex? Seat number five's lineage was made up of Bernardo Guimarães (patron), Raimundo Corrêa (founder), Oswaldo Cruz, Aloysio de Castro, and Cândido Mota Filho. Now it would be Rachel's. How would she appropriately request ritual

⁵Speech given at the founding session of the Brazilian Academy of Letters on July 20, 1897, at 8:00 PM, in one of the rooms of the Pedagogium at 28, Rua do Passeio, Rio de Janeiro.

⁶ ASSIS, Machado de. *Ibidem*.

⁷ NEVES, Fernão. *Op. cit.*.

permission and sit comfortably on this spot that had been occupied since 1897 by exponents and founders of Brazilian national culture, if she was going to wear a long gown with a V-shaped neck and high-heeled shoes and was not going to be bearing a sword?

Rachel chose the longest yet surest route. She returned to the *sertão*, the hinterland of her native Ceará, in a clear search for self-understanding, and presented the solemn plenary with a young girl searching for the moon with her eyes, standing on the gable of the old colonial ranch house. Beginning there, layer by layer, as if in a moving picture, as if in a dream, she reconstructed her first contact with Raimundo Corrêa, patron of the chair that in a few minutes would be hers. "The girl looks at the moon, aims her gaze right into the platter-shaped moon, with eyes that are nearsighted. She sighs, but it is a different kind of sigh, satisfied, consoled; the girl is still not at the age for sighs as such, she is at the age of imagination and dreams. Gazing into the moon, silently, scarcely moving her lips, she whispers a prayer to herself, a spell - a poem? A poem that is prayer and incantation. She whispers as if she were praying to the moon, and in fact, she is praying to the moon. In this spell prayed by the girl you have already recognized the unforgettable poem. And in that adolescent who was trying to make herself sorceress of that lunar cult, allow me to introduce you to the old woman of today, trying to unveil her ancient ties with the poem and its lofty author (Raimundo Corrêa)." What is even more fantastic is that later on in her speech she tells how she had found this poem "in a book that had already been read threadbare by an earlier generation of girls" - her aunts. Using a classically feminine strategy, Rachel had succeeded in bewitching her audience in the first few lines of her speech and in recovering another whole lineage that had also taken part in and shaped Brazilian literature: the massive presence of women as both readers and teachers in stimulating our literary tradition. She at once recovered the female lineage in her literary background

and (to use a word that is in style) "privatized" Raimundo Corrêa as a founding figure, turning him simply into her "own private, mysterious, crazy poet".

Now, with the seat's patron, poet Bernardo Guimarães, Rachel took a stance that was probably unique in the House by approaching him critically and rejecting the links of parentage that according to Academy norms she should have been tightening. She even questioned Raimundo for having chosen Bernardo, referring to the latter as "a slave to the law, almost neurotically scrupulous", while the first was "his antipode, an irreverent Bohemian who stood up to authority, received callers playing the guitar, attended appointments quoting burlesque verse... and was a symbol for all his (Bernardo's) stifled insubordination." Rachel went out on a limb with her own first Academic insubordination and did not seem prone to the kind of praise for law and order that might justify (in the eyes of many) her chair's patron's contradictory positions. On page five of her speech, she denounced Bernardo Guimarães, "who did not have the courage to confront the taboos of his time; who wrote racist restrictions, as did all the other adversaries of slavery - pious, paternalistic, moved by charitable sentiments, but not at all egalitarian". She went on to criticize his most famous novel, *Escrava Isaura*, a white character created for a reading public of masters and mistresses.

As for Oswaldo Cruz, the third link in the complex genealogy of her chair, Rachel observed that he had entered the Academy not as a writer "but as part of a very rare category, the very special 'hero category'". Once again she went backward in time and painted a fascinating picture (one I would go so far as to say was ironic) of this category which in one way or another was alive there in the laurels, the brilliance, and the swords of the 39 members who were present in fact or in spirit. Having made the initial distinction between "heroes that kill", like Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon, and those that defend life, "the angelical heroes", under which

classification she included Dr. Oswaldo Cruz, she went on to describe his adventures and glory in the struggle against the plague, ignorance, malaria in the Amazon, and yellow fever in Pará.

Rachel then went on to laud Aloysio de Castro, the third occupant of Bernardo Guimarães' seat. As in the case of Raimundo Corrêa, she did not canonically praise her predecessor but provided a "flash" of her private, personal connection with the academician. Once again, by route of her feminine "network", in this case her friend Lota Macedo Soares, she had been taken to Aloysio de Castro's home. Not her own private poet, the prince of a young girl's dreams, but as was fitting for her age in the logic of atavistic feminine fantasies, it was a gallant cavalier that emerged from Rachel's words, filling the solemn air of the ceremony. "Taken by surprise, the master poet received us in his study, sitting at the piano, dressed in a burgundy satin robe. And softly interrupting Lota's outbursts, he asked who I was, smiling in satisfaction when he learned of my trade. He began to play a song, I think to make me feel at home. He was extremely kind and unforgettable: the grand piano, where there were pictures in silver frames, the shady study, and the lovable gentleman delicately picking out a Chopin prelude." Unlike the others, Cândido Mota Filho, who until that moment had held the chair that was to be hers, merited a meticulous, objective evaluation by the soon-to-be literary immortal, who praised his intellectual, political, and social valor as well as his activities as a lawyer, journalist, politician, professor, and man of letters. In the best Academic style, Rachel solidly retraced the legitimacy of her predecessor's lineage. The time had now come for Rachel to include herself as the latest link in a linear chain that symbolized seat number five's tradition and to finally receive this legitimate legacy, the patrimony that this illustrious lineage represented. As the curtains were about to close on her speech, there came a surprise: while she was completely disinterested in the historical and literary

value of the man Cândido Mota Filho, whom she had praised so respectfully, the first woman in the Academy's long history went backward in time again, taking her listeners back to a sunny afternoon at Flamengo Park in Rio. Writer Rachel and Minister Motta Filho were talking about family matters. She described Motta Filho talking rather prudently about his admiration for Nelsinho Motta, his grandson, whose irresistible love for popular music might have proved unfitting for the famous woman scholar's probable elitist tastes. Rachel had sealed an affectionate grandmotherly complicity with Motta Filho by confessing to be "an unconditional fan" of the rebel descendant of seat number five's last occupant. The "grand finale" to her inaugural speech was antiheroic par excellence, underrating the laurels of literary genealogy and concluding with family matters, "sweetly and contentedly" discussing the private space by which she was penetrating the public space of literary consecration with her usual natural air.

One apparently unimportant "post scriptum" is befitting: In spite of the atmosphere of nationwide turmoil that Rachel's inauguration raised, not **one single time** did Adonias Filho's welcoming speech mention the historical fact that Rachel de Queiroz was the first woman to belong to the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

Easy fame?

I will now return to the issue I raised at the beginning: how unusually breathtaking Rachel de Queiroz's career had been considering the traditional obstacles to recognition of women's work. And drawing on the same strategies Rachel used in her inaugural speech, I will also go back to my first contact with the writer who since then has been the center of my feminist concerns. I have always devoted my attention to the study of cultural resistance, marginal areas and marginal figures in literature, and the name Rachel de Queiroz was as noble as it was distant to me. In reality, I was not attracted to the world of academies and great writers. Of the Academy members, I

had only approached Afrânio Coutinho, and this only because of a coincidence that made me his assistant at the beginning of my professional career. And it was Afrânio Coutinho that introduced me to Rachel de Queiroz at the boarding gate in the Galeão airport in Rio, on the way to a meeting of Latin American writers in Brasília. It only took a second for me to realize that I was irreversibly spellbound by her. When I got back to Rio, I called Rachel to set up an interview for an article I was doing on Orson Welles' visit to Brazil, which was no doubt a pretext to meet with her again. It was then that, having forgotten Orson Welles and knowing of my interest in studying women, just like Sherazade, Rachel began to weave and tell infinite stories of northeastern Brazilian matriarchs, strong, independent, powerful, and extremely cruel women. Story after story emerged, of Dona Bárbara de Alencar, Dona Federalina de Lavras, Dona Marica Macedo. These were characters that reminded me of some of the dominating, fearful figures that peopled novels by José de Alencar, Machado de Assis, and Aluísio de Azevedo, of Dona Guidinha do Poço, Jorge Amado's Bahian ladies, Pedro Navas' women from Minas Gerais. These were paradigmatic feminine images of an archetypical, familiar Brazil.

Still, I felt that something distinguished Rachel's matriarchs from those characters from Brazilian novels, distant images of a Brazil lost in the remote past. I realized how our writers had taken (and still take) strange pleasure in presenting them as barbarian, oppressive caricatures. In Rachel's stories, on the contrary, the deeds, audacity, and daily lives of women of the *sertão* shone brightly. Her narrative, which betrayed a certain kind of pride, brought alive in the present the memory of the various forms of feminine power that had been forgotten or destroyed throughout history. However, one question still puzzled me: what was Rachel talking about when she spoke of the matriarchs? From then on I perceived that to study women in Brazil and in Brazilian literature without dealing with Rachel de Queiroz would be rash, at the very least.

Rachel, like the matriarchs she invokes, had always lived "naturally" with power. At age twenty, she was already considered a definitive writer (owner of a "masculine, virile writing style"). She had continuously and significantly occupied space in the Brazilian press. As she still does, she had moved about without any apparent constraint or embarrassment in the most influential, powerful circles of our intellectual elite. She had joined the Communist Party, but when she saw her novel *João Miguel* censored by her coreligionaries she did not hesitate in leaving the party and adhering to Trotskyism. In 1937, she was arrested in Fortaleza. She got married, separated, and discovered with a degree of freedom that was surprising for her time the joy of inventing and building her private and professional life just as she pleased. She had access to and influence in Brazilian politics, was invited by Jânio Quadros to be Minister of Education, represented Brazil at the United Nations, and was a founding member of the National Cultural Council. As we have seen, she was the first woman to become a member of the Academy of Letters, in the midst of a national celebration. In short, she was a notable "exception" to the almost exclusively masculine framework of literary history in Brazil. Her first critics' discomfort over *O Quinze* had been an eloquent example of this.

Still, this exceptionalness, which was relatively common in modernism around the world, seemed insufficient to explain Rachel's case.

The modernist intellectuals and artists that stood out, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, like Virginia Woolf, Gertrud Stein, or even Tarsila do Amaral in Brazil, based themselves on radically transgressive customs and principles, confronting bourgeois values seen as backward, taking sides with feminist struggles and experimental, iconoclastic aesthetics. Occupying this new public space that was opening up to women little by little was done traumatically, paying the high price of competition and confrontation with established norms.

Rachel, on the other hand, did not seem to identify with feminism, political or literary gain, or the vanguards - or even with modernism itself, as she often said. She preferred the individual, autonomous road. Ever since *O Quinze* had been released, she had proven to be completely at will between private and public spaces, between her daily life, literature, and politics. While she surprised and even shocked the critics with the quality of her writing, her intellectual trajectory does not seem to have caused particular discomfort among her male colleagues. The most striking proof of this, still referring to her admittance to the Brazilian Academy of Letters, was the "natural", consensual way her election was received as the first woman to belong to the defensive Academy.

Journalist Ana Luisa Collor de Mello perhaps struck closest to the truth when she wrote the following in the *Gazeta de Alagoas* on August 9, 1977: "I s-e-r-i-o-u-s-l-y d-o-u-b-t that the first woman to enter the exclusive Brazilian Academy of Letters could have been anyone but a Northeasterner.... I have no doubt that Rachel de Queiroz symbolizes Northeastern women. This victory belongs to the people of the Northeast. Or should I say, to the people of Brazil." Rachel was not far from this opinion when she stated to *O Globo* a short time later, "It was not I that entered the Academy, it was the people of Ceará." (*O Globo*, October 29, 1977).

Was this demagoguery? The hypothesis is not very likely, considering how coherent her vast work was, linked as it was in a visceral way to the "Northeastern Brazilianness" that was emerging in the 1930s, consecrated definitively by Gilberto Freyre's work⁸, or even taking a common-sense view of her

personality, expressed in Manuel Bandeira's now-classic diagnosis: "No one is as Brazil as Rachel is. I mean, Brazil in every sense of the word: *brasílica*, *brasiliense*, *brasiliiana*, *brasileira*." (Four different ways of saying "Brazilian" in Brazilian Portuguese: *brasílica* refers to people or things native to Brazil, *brasiliense* is a native or inhabitant of the national capital Brasília, *brasiliiana* refers to a collection of books, publications, and studies on Brazil, and *brasileira* refers to a female Brazilian - T.N.).

I am further reminded of the final sentence in her first writings, a nationalist manifesto, as was usual for the time, published in the *Maracajá* magazine in April 1929, thus at the height of modernism, Rachel, then 18, declared: "I sing to my land's tumultuous present and to its past, so short, so clear, so full of vitality that it is almost like another present."

I begin to think back to the strange feeling of discovery that Rachel's stories gave me during our first encounter. There was tremendous revelation for me, this naive feminist from the Rio-São Paulo axis in discovering the symbolic force of tales and deeds in those distant, semi-legendary women owners of land and cattle in the Northeastern hinterland, the *sertão*. These were stories of women with total control over their lives, managing ranches and dominating children, relatives, tenant farmers, slaves. They administered a broad network of powers including the local economy, politics, and clergy. The state and the Church were thus defined as an extension of the family, with the massive presence of feminine power. Women, as ranchers and heads of families, invented and improvised diverse social roles, bridging differences between the public and private spheres.⁹ They thus demonstrated surprisingly

woman, her work and her time, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, September 16, 1991.

⁹ Research on the role of women in the formation of the Brazilian state and the notions of public and private space in the 19th century have been developed in rigorous and pioneering work by Maria Odila Silva Dias, partially revealed in conferences and as-yet unpublished papers.

⁸ The concept of *brasilidade nordestina* (Northeastern Brazilianness) emerged in the 1930s in the ideological struggle between Regionalism and São Paulo Modernism and expresses the impasse generated by the 1930 Revolution between the country's new and old political and social elites. This idea was developed by Michel Zaidan in his work on the Northeastern novel in 1930 and his proposal for creating and disseminating the concept of the Northeast as the "cradle of Brazilian nationality", presented at the seminar Rachel de Queiroz: a

how the patriarchal Brazilian family in practice succeeded in begetting anti-patriarchal, semi-patriarchal, and para-patriarchal forms of social organization.

It is curious that one of the themes that has proven dearest to international feminist historiography is precisely the rereading of the complex process of redefining sexual roles during the formative period of the modern republic, when for the first time the home economy was no longer the central productive unit. Expressions of indignation, such as that of Montefresquieu when he denounced "the unrestricted freedom of women of the aristocracy" and "the vices of aristocratic luxury" and especially their role as power brokers at the heart of royal society, and that of Rousseau, who publicly denounced "the unnatural practices" of aristocratic women who renounced their maternal duties to take part in worldly matters, reveal the argumentative heat of the cultural segregation that "modern civilization" imposed over women themselves and their penetration and participation in public life. In this context, as recent studies show (although still not in sufficient detail), in response to the strictly misogynous and dualistic construction of home and state as separate spheres, women developed extremely subtle processes for legitimization and involvement in the public space which shed light on and challenge the classical premises of traditional political theory.¹⁰ In our case, Rachel's career and her "natural" exceptionalness and recognition show not only how fragile the concept of private space is in the formation of Brazilian society but above all how she, as a self-styled feminist, revealed her enormous talent in using domesticity to expand on the language of public and political freedom, thus succeeding in extraordinarily reestablishing the elasticity of the private power of the authentic matriarchs and their force in Brazilian social imagination.

She began her professional career around

1930, a delicate moment in Brazilian history, when the institutionalization of spaces (whether they were allowed for women or not) began to take shape.

What metaphors were necessary at this point to make women's penetration and participation in public life feasible? What did women rely on to define their individuality? What is behind the image (which is almost always a conservative one) of the few women who did succeed not only in expressing themselves culturally in an active way but also in being accepted by society during this period?

Rachel, who possesses "unparalleled autonomy and independence in Brazilian women's writing", in Gilberto Freyre's words¹¹, gives us some clues. In principle, she very clearly characterizes her individuality, rejecting any kind of association with feminist or literary groups or movements and systematically omitting from her discourse any trace of explicit competition, that great "modern" male bugaboo.

It is not difficult to find testimony like this published at the time of her admittance to the Academy: "I don't like to write. I only write to make money. If I could, I wouldn't even sign my name. The truth is that I'm not a novelist - I'm a good housekeeper, a better cook than a writer." Or like the high-flown declaration to Marisa Raja Gabaglia that made headlines in a well-known Rio magazine: "My motherhood is inexhaustible." There is no denying that this image "caught on" and that it is going to become the *leitmotif* of the commemorative volume for her eightieth birthday, which is to be published by the José Olympio publishing house. For example, Otto Lara Rezende says on page 124: "I would dare to say that she manages her own affairs badly or not at all, in the sense that she doesn't take her own talent seriously or try to make it more professional.... Rachel doesn't let herself be carried away by the image she projects of herself. She is natural to a flaw, as if poking fun at what is conventionally

¹⁰ LANDES, Joan. Women and the Public Sphere: a modern perspective. In *Social Analysis*, nº 15, August 1984, p. 20-31.

¹¹ FREYRE, Gilberto. In *Última Hora*, Rio de Janeiro, September 18, 1977.

considered literary glory. Having done everything that she has, she looks at what she has done with a touch of disdain. Sometimes I wonder if it doesn't even occur to her that she is Rachel de Queiroz."¹²

Yet it does occur to this self-styled feminist, so much so that in addition to her highly disciplined literary work, she was capable of paving an unparalleled personal and professional pathway. What appears to be at stake here - and it is precisely this that is fascinating in a study on Rachel de Queiroz - are the building processes in this trajectory as an exemplary policy for the instrumentalization

of archetypical oligarchical and still-residual structures in the logic and dynamics of social relations in a "Northeastern Brazilianness" that overflowed from the ranches into the royalty in the formation of the Brazilian state.

It was somewhat like this that on November 4, 1977, Rachel de Queiroz - shunning the Academic sword but never her profound knowledge of Brazil - donned a long green gown with a V-shaped neckline and gold-embroidered motifs and opened the doors to official literary recognition for women.

¹²REZENDE, Otto Lara. Razões e Flores. In *Rachel de Queiroz: as oitenta*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio Editora, 1990, p. 123-125.