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The "Three Marias," Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta & Maria Velho Da Costa

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THE “THREE MARIAS,” MARIA ISABEL BARRENO, MARIA TERESA HORTA & MARIA VELHO DA COSTA, remind us that writing can be a dangerous act. These are excerpts from *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, which set off an international storm in the 1970s when the book was deemed an outrage to public morals under the dictatorship of Salazar. The Three Marias were imprisoned and their work was banned until a trial judge deemed it of literary value.

Their method had been to meet once a week and share their writing. This was no false united front; they often argued and disagreed. Their aim, to varying degrees, involved not only questions about women in their own right, but also how men and women might live together, and how sexual expression, the intellect, and social factors—politics—might coincide.

They had agreed to use, as a model, the story of a famous Portuguese nun, Sórora Mariana Alcoforado, who lived in the seventeenth century during Portugal’s war of independence against Spain. She had a love affair with a French officer in the army sent to aid Portugal and wrote him five letters that have been called some of the most passionate documents in existence. Mariana’s history had obvious appeal: She embodies passion, solitude, and politics, since she was from the aristocracy. Her affair resulted in proclamations by the King against outrages in the convents. At the time, women were often put into convents simply to prevent an estate from being divided among too many sons-in-law.

Although there is strong evidence to suggest that Mariana existed, many people believe that she is fictional, part of the French literary canon. Nevertheless, interpretations of her were rendered by Matisse, Modigliani, and Braque, and Stendahl remarked that it was necessary to love like the Portuguese nun, “with that ardent soul whose fiery mark is left for us in her letters.”

I wrote a novel in which I interpreted Mariana’s life, and the television host in Portugal who wanted to interview me was none other than Maria Teresa Horta, delighted that another woman in another country had also found this splendid nun an inspiration.

Today I find these pieces as startling as when I first read them. The selections demonstrate the arc throughout the volume, that of eroticism insisting upon its role in politics. The graphic depiction of a nun masturbating recalls Mariana’s isolation, fervor, and fury at her political trap, and her need to marry sexuality and love with creative expression. The second selection shows women over various epochs trying to emerge from solitude to locate their destinies without the bedevilment of traditional roles.