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“The Ladies, God bless’em!”

By Jane Manaster

Richard Croker, a captain in the late 99th regiment on foot, traveled through Spain and Portugal towards the end of the eighteenth century. His letters home, published in London some twenty years later, provide an unedited version of all he saw. His trip was not wholly satisfactory, but in a somewhat backhanded compliment he noted that “there are finer women and better mules in Portugal than in Andalusia.”¹ As Portugal was not on the Grand Tour, those who traveled (on foot or otherwise), were not the dilettantes who enjoyed frivolous interludes around western and central Europe, but rather duty bound on military or commercial missions. Croker, his contemporaries, and those who followed him, scattered observations in their letters and reports about the Portuguese women they saw, often as dispassionately as they wrote about food, the weather, and the country’s topography. Women were seen generally either from afar or in unreported rendezvous, and drew comment from the homesick, the lusty, and the misogynous alike. Reading accounts that lie in rare book collections, we can learn of the limited, if not unhappy existence women led, their looks and fashions, behavior and occupations.

Where the visits were unsatisfactory or unhappy, the travelers made fewer comments, and revealed less about the fair sex. Southey, for example, lost patience early, and excused himself from descriptions with “the stink of the streets of Lisbon are a strong antidote to curiosity.”² Fortunately for us, bad beginnings were

¹ Richard Croker, Esq., Captain in the late 99th regiment on foot. *Travels through several provinces of Spain and Portugal, etc.* London; printed for the author, 1799.

² Robert Southey, *Letters written during a short residence in Spain and Portugal*, 2nd edition, Bristol, Biggs & Cottle; London, T. N. Longman & O. Rees, 1799.

usually soon forgotten. Croker, after entering the country at Evera (sic.), where the wine accompanying his partridge dinner was "neither red nor white, bad in colour and worse in quality," had just one further disappointment to contend with. Before he began to enjoy himself, he found entertainment virtually absent in Lisbon due to "the piety of the Queen," Maria I, who had shut up all the places of amusement, "allowing neither opera nor play even at this festive season." Only the fortnightly balls given by members of the Factory salvaged his hopes. When his spirits rose, he seemed relieved to have left Spain. "It was impossible not to observe, in the towns that we have lately passed through, the difference between the women of Portugal and those of Spain. The Portuguese women are handsome in their persons, smart in their dress, with fine eyes and teeth, and beautiful hair in the greatest abundance these, too, were women of ordinary rank," he noted wistfully, "as we were not in the way of seeing any other."³

The travelers, entering over the mountains in the east or sailing up the Tagus estuary, noted regional differences, but mostly described urban women with counterparts in Lisbon, Oporto, and the smaller towns they visited. If Spain had been the previous port of call, the women of both countries were compared. Major William Dalrymple, on a tour of duty in 1777, noted a "prejudice both in this country and Spain, which is somewhat singular: having had the finest moon-light evenings imaginable, I have constantly noticed the women hold their fans, in such a manner, as to prevent the moon shining on their faces, as they conceive it will spoil their complexions."⁴

Complexions were frequently admired. "The few (women) that I have seen unmasked," wrote James Murphy in 1795, "had a pale complexion, black sparkling eyes, and a countenance replete

³ Richard Croker, op.cit.

⁴ William D. Dalrymple, *Travels through Spain and Portugal in 1774*, London; printed for J. Almon, 1777.

with simplicity. In stature they are rather low, but of pleasing figure, their walk and deportment are easy and graceful."⁵

In 1808, beset by the French incursions, the Reverend William Bradford sketched portraits as he accompanied a brigade of the British Army, serving as their chaplain. He noted that "the ladies of Portugal are generally handsome, and in many instances may boast the highest pretensions to beauty. Their features are regular, their dark eyes full of expression, and they are justly celebrated for their clearness of complexion, and the interesting character of their countenance. Though their figures are rather *en bon point*, they are well shaped, and seldom exceed middle height."⁶

The Reverend J. A. Goldsmith (described in fine print as the author of *Grammar of Geography, Grammar of British Geography, &c.*) is credited with writing *A Geographical View of the World embracing the manners, customs and pursuits of every nation* which appeared in 1851 in the tenth American edition, with credit added for James G. Percival, M.D. who "revised, corrected and improved" it. A bibliographic riddle, however, suggests the original version was penned by Sir Richard Phillips who departed this earth in 1840. Be that as it may, either the Rev. Goldsmith or Sir Richard considered Portuguese women to be "rather below than above middle stature, but graceful and beautiful. No females are less studious of enhancing their attractions by artificial means or counterfeiting, by paltry arts, the charms that nature has withheld. To the most regular features, they add a sprightly disposition and

⁵ James C. Murphy, *Travels in Portugal through the provinces of Entre Douro & Minho, Beira, Estramadura, & Alem-Tajo in the years 1789 and 1790, consisting of observations on the manners, customs, trade, public buildings, arts, antiquities, etc.* London, 1795.

⁶ William Bradford, A.B., *Sketches of the country, character, and costume in Portugal and Spain, made during the campaign, and on the route of the British Army in 1808 and 1809*. Engraved and coloured from drawings by Bradford (etc.) of St. John's College, Oxford, Chaplain of the Brigade to the Expedition. With incidental illustration, and appropriate descriptions, of each subject.; London, printed for John Booth, by William Savage, 1809.

captivating carriage. The round face, the full-fed form, are more esteemed in this country than the long tapering visage and thin delicate frame the forehead should be broad, smooth, and white; the eyes large, bright, and quick; with regard to colour, some prefer the blue, some the black, and others the green. The mouth ought to be rather small than large, the lips full, and the teeth white and regular. The stature most admired is middle-sized."⁷

Another man of the cloth, the Reverend William Kinsey, fellow of Trinity College, Oxford, and Chaplain to the Right Hon. Lord Auckland, also had an eye for the ladies. He was struck by "the vivacity of their expressive eyes, and their beautiful ringlets of black hair" which told "how much nature has done for them in the way of ornament."⁸

The final chapters of Higgin's *Spanish Life in Town and Country* describe Portugal, and were written by one sadly dyspeptic Eugene W. Street. He was less impressed by his encounters. "The women, who as a rule, are very pretty as little girls, lose their good looks as they grow up, and are disappointing when compared with the Spaniards."⁹ But he was susceptible to the lower ranks. "Sometimes one comes across fish- or market-women of considerable comeliness, which, when conjoined to the graceful figure and poise induced by the habitual carriage of heavy weights on the head and the absence of shoes, makes a striking picture."¹⁰

⁷ J. Goldsmith, *A geographical view of the world, embracing the manners, customs and pursuits of every nation; founded on the best authorities*, by Rev. J. Goldsmith; 10th American edition; revised, corrected and improved by James G. Percival, M.D., illustrated with engravings; New York, Pratt, Woodford & Co., 1851 (Probably written by Sir Richard Phillips (1767-1840).

⁸ William Morgan Kinsey, B.D., *Portugal illustrated*; London, 1828.

⁹ Louis Higgin, *Spanish Life in town and country*, with two chapters on Portugal by Eugene W. Street; in series *Our European Neighbours*; New York, published for the Bay View Reading Club by G. P. Putnam, 1904.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Louis Higgin.

Bewitched by the flashing eyes, comely figures and appealing deportment, the writers give thumbnail fashion reports, too. Richard Twiss traveled through Spain and Portugal in the early 1770s. He had a glorious time, describing eunuchs and elephants, pickled sardines, tobacco, and the castle of St. Julian with equal fervour. He "never met with women more lively in any part of Europe; they are perpetually dancing, singing, laughing, and talking, and are sprightly and vivacious in the highest degree."¹¹ Probably his fairly tender age, he was twenty-five at the time, made him their darling. "The ladies wear very large and heavy pendants in their ears," he wrote, "the sleeves of their gowns are wide enough to admit their waists, which, however, seldom exceeds a span in diameter."¹² Not then, according to Twiss, quite so *en bon point!*

Before an age of easy shampooing, it was important not to have a "bad hair day." Accordingly, several fashion reports included details of head-dresses where "ribbands and flowers" were cunningly mixed. The so-called ladies of rank tended to dress like the French or English, without national distinction. Generally styles were sober, and "all that is remarkable in the dress of those of the middle class, is a white handkerchief worn as a head dress and a cloak resembling the capa, which is worn over the person."¹³ Men and women in Lisbon, according to Kinsey, usually wore "loose cloaks made of cloth, as a preservative against the influence of the eddies of cold air which are met at the corner of the streets the women of the middling class, when they walk out, have generally a square white muslin kerchief, half doubled, upon the head, as a security from the effects of heat and cold, whose snowy whiteness contrasts prettily with their sombre dress and dark complexions."¹⁴

¹¹ Richard Twiss, *Travels through Portugal and Spain in 1772-1773*; printed in London for the author, 1775.

¹² R. Twiss.

¹³ W. Bradford, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ W. M. Kinsey, *op. cit.*

One writer praised women's direct contribution to fashion. In Murphy's *Travels in Portugal through the provinces of Entre Douro & Minho, Beira, Estramadura & Alem-Tejo in the years 1789 and 1790*, he paid gracious homage, acknowledging it was much to the credit of the women of Portugal, and especially Beira, that they "manufacture all the linen used in the kingdom through its various branches; they sow the grain, reap the product, and hatchel the flax, afterwards they weave the yarn, and make up the linen not inferior, perhaps, to any in Europe, for colour, softness, and durability."¹⁵

Working women certainly wore more striking outfits. Bradford remarked on those he saw in Guarda, seeing "something singular and picturesque in the appearance of the young women who are employed in carrying water pitchers to and from the wells ... The dress is far from inelegant, and consists of no other colours than brown and blue. They wear no stockings, but their feet are protected by neat sandals."¹⁶

Goldsmith (or was it Sir Phillip?) also recorded how drably the middle-class tended to dress. "Cottons, muslins, and coloured silks they very rarely wear. A kind of black garment, over a petticoat of the same colour, is the usual dress; except in Lisbon, where the women wear black *mantos*, a kind of garment that covers the head and the upper part of the body. Cloaks and petticoats of diverse colours, made of woollen cloth, fringed with gold or ribbons, are worn by the inferior ranks."¹⁷

Later, in the 1870s, colourful fashion and class were reversed. The Lady Catherine Jackson wrote in "Fair Lusitania," a book with an attractively tooled cover and one hundred and twenty black and white photographs, all far duller than her prose. She captured the glamour of the women shopping in the Chiado, "dressed in the lightest and brightest of colours, and after the

¹⁵ J. C. Murphy, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ W. Bradford, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ J. Goldsmith, *op. cit.*

extremest fashions of the figures in the latest *Journal des Modes*. Hats and bonnets of the newest Paris shapes, brilliant with flowers, feathers, and ribbons, crown the lofty edifices of plaits, and rolls, and bands and puffs, at present in vogue."¹⁸ Then comes an evocative image of the resort at Foz, where in the hotel courtyard stand "three sturdy women, bare-legged, and in coarse blue frieze petticoats and very broad hats - a bathing woman for each party ... (the) women generally carry down unwilling children, or some part of the mountain of shawls, cloaks, and towels."¹⁹

Glitter, however humble, has long been a fashion feature. "We observe even the fish-women with trinkets and bracelets of gold about the neck and wrist," wrote Murphy who delighted in everything he saw, including an Arabic description on a cannon, a Sanskrit inscription at Cintra, and the practice of beekeeping. Written in 1795 to his Royal Highness Don John of Brazil, his book was offered as "part of my Researches in the Kingdom of your Royal Highness."²⁰ Even Street, like a magpie, was attracted to the "wealth of golden earrings, charms, chains, and such like in which the women invest their savings," not finding it "anomalous or incongruous, though shown on a background of dirty and ragged clothing."²¹

Most men saw the Portuguese women's lives as dull and unsophisticated, though a few enjoyed seeing real or imagined intrigue, and Dalrymple was an unequivocal gossip. "Sapphic love rises predominant here; the stories I have heard of the females, who indulge themselves in this passion, are almost incredible."²² And with this we must be satisfied!

¹⁸ Jackson, Catherine Chlotte, Lady; *Fair Lusitania*; London, Richard Bentley & Son, New Burlington Street; publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty, 1874.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Lady C. C. Jackson

²⁰ J. C. Murphy, *op. cit.*

²¹ L. Higgin, *op. cit.*

²² J. Goldsmith, *op. cit.*

Then, and surely no less now, husbands were jealous. According to Captain Croker, private murders and assassinations were rife. The Portuguese men, unlike the women, were "undoubtedly the worst looking race in Europe" due to their heterogeneity, and the women were not only better-looking, but also more amiable. Murphy, especially when writing up his notes on Leiria, launched the same unwonted attack in his comparison of men with women. He found them "low in stature and feeble, which some attribute to their eating too much oil; but if that operated as the cause, we should expect to find the females affected by it in like manner - just the reverse."²³ Not only were they strong and well-proportioned, and of moderate size, he announced, but also, "when ranged with men they look like Amazons," possessing a gallantry or warlike spirit which, if put to the challenge, would allow them to "lord over the men like the women of Metelin."²⁴

Whether due to jealousy, or simply tradition, the women in Oporto, Murphy wrote in 1795, "are seldom observed out of doors except going to, or returning from church, a place they usually visit twice a-day; and then the face is veiled, or half-concealed beneath the folds of a black mantle."²⁵ In Lisbon, too, he noticed that no woman ventured out of doors without the permission of her husband or parents. "To avoid all suspicion, men, even though relations, are not allowed to visit their apartments, or even sit beside them in public places. Hence their lovers are seldom gratified with a sight of them except in the churches; here they make their sighs and signals." Despite the duennas, and with the help of the altar boys who "fall on their knees histrionically," the lovers exchange billet-doux, conveying the letters under their "drapery" or contriving to have their hands meet in the holy water font. The preferred behaviour, Murphy learned, denied women any wine as it gave "a suspicion of their chastity."²⁶ The most repressive guardians of

²³ J. C. Murphy, *op. cit.*

²⁴ *Ibid.* J. C. Murphy

²⁵ *Ibid.* J. C. Murphy

²⁶ *Ibid.* J. C. Murphy

propriety saw the marriage of widows as "a species of adultery sanctioned by law."

Kinsey was not unaware of the church's attraction for women. "Crowds of the second class of women," he demurred in an endless and rather ungrammatical sentence, "are generally to be found attending the celebration of mass in the different churches, whose deportment however, during the consecration of the holy sacrament, and when retiring from the house of prayer, would not induce a Protestant to believe that very deeply-rooted religious feelings could induce the assemblage of people together in a place for which they manifest so little outward respect."²⁷

Women had so few opportunities to see and be seen, or flirt a little. Croker noticed women at their lattices, probably a legacy from the Moorish custom whereby women could not be seen by outsiders. "There they are almost ever to be seen; very handsome in their persons; their very fine hair, elegantly mixed with flowers and feathers; apparently sprightly, gay, and dressed for show."²⁸

Street viewed this behavior differently, and even writing at the beginning of this century suggested that women's knowledge of life was "limited to the view from the windows of their homes, where they may be seen looking out on the street scenes below whenever the shade allows them to stand at the window or on the balcony."²⁹ The only place he felt women had any pleasure was at the bull ring where, even though they could not yell or swear, they nonetheless enjoyed the spectacle and the opportunity to participate in a spirited event.

The last word must surely go to an author for whom women were "we" rather than "they," allowing a different perspective, and an intimacy crossing national distinctions. Lady Jackson, delighted with her trip in the 1870s, scorned the "no smoking" rule in a

²⁷ W. M. Kinsey, *op. cit.*

²⁸ R. Croker, *op. cit.*

²⁹ L. Higgin, *op. cit.*

Coimbra hotel dining room when *senhoras* were present. "A great and unnecessary presence, I fancy what Spanish or Portuguese could dine comfortably without a smoke and how few of the *senhoras* would wish them to. Indeed," she adds, "at a private table, I have seen a *senhora* enjoy her cigarette after dinner as much as the gentlemen."³⁰

³⁰ Lady C. C. Jackson, *op. cit.*

