In classical Greek legend, Antigone chooses to rebel against patriarchal authority by burying the body of her brother Polynices, in spite of his treachery to his native city of Thebes and in defiance of the clear orders of King Creon. For prioritising this sense of loyalty to moral imperatives and to the honour of her own family over political expediency, she is punished, and, paradoxically, she finds herself unable to continue the line of that same family as a result of her rebellion against a man-made order.

It is this figure of Antigone whom Owen and Pazos-Alonso adopt to demonstrate what they see as the dilemma faced by women writers in Portugal in the twentieth century. Their argument examines a number of works by six major female authors in Portugal, active from the early decades of the twentieth century through to the present day, arguing with authority and wide-ranging reading that the traditional conception of literary genius as an exclusively male quality presents the female author with a near insoluble dilemma: either to accept that at best she can be the once-in-a-generation exception who achieves widespread recognition but in doing so proves the rule of male supremacy, or to face the prospect of ghettoization within the ‘minor’ category of women’s writing (which exceptional figures are often said to ‘transcend’, thus denigrating rather than promoting their female colleagues).

Of course, to varying degrees the writers represented here have achieved success. Lídia Jorge is widely acknowledged as one of the most prolific, prominent, and inventive writers active in Portugal today, but the same could not necessarily be said of all of the other figures covered here: the short-lived poet, Florbela Espanca (1894–1930); the chronicler and short-story writer, Irene Lisboa (1892–1958); the matriarchal prose writer of the rural North, Agustina Bessa Luís (1923– ); the controversial Feminist poet and playwright, Natália Correia (1923–1993); and her namesake, the successful novelist, Hélia Correia (1948– ) are the other five figures studied in this work. As the authors indicate, many other writers could have been profitably included in this work,
not least the ‘Three Marias’—Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Isabel Barreno, and Maria Velho da Costa—whose Novas Cartas Portuguesas of 1972 first drew international attention to Portuguese women’s writing, through the scandal of the confiscation of that work and the authors’ subsequent trial in the latter days of the Estado Novo dictatorship. Yet, in spite of this prominent positioning of women’s writing in Portugal today, it remains subordinate to the prestige of male-authored fiction: as Owen and Pazos Alonso demonstrate, literary canons (given expression through works of reference such as the prestigious História da Literatura Portuguesa, edited by Lopes and Saraiva, or, in an international context, through Harold Bloom’s concept of The Western Canon, where no Portuguese women writers feature at all) continue to privilege male authors, thus making it all the more difficult for future women writers to achieve the same status as Camões, Pessoa, Eça de Queirós, or Saramago. The success achieved by female figures remains secondary to that achieved by men (an inevitable by-product of the more general male domination of Portuguese society), and the dilemma remains: by representing the gendered situation of Portuguese women (in accordance with the classical Antigone, as, for example, Irene Lisboa does in her striking short story, ‘Um Dito’, which is cogently analysed here), does the female writer risk accepting her relegation to the sidelines, or should she adopt a more ambitious approach, which may in turn see her effectively abandoning her literary sisters to that same ghetto from which she seeks to escape?

There is, of course, no easy answer, nor any single solution to such questions, and the strategy adopted by each writer to address them is dependent on considerations such as dominant social structures, literary and cultural influences, and a variety of personal circumstances relevant to their individual time and context. Owen and Pazos Alonso guide us through these issues adeptly, by means of a lengthy expository Introduction, followed by six chapters (one dealing with each of the writers covered), and a brief summing-up of the major issues considered within their book.

A recurrent element in the strategy of all of these writers is the destabilisation of apparently fixed and familiar categories: if the Three Marias are said to propose a literary genealogy based on the metaphorical relationship between aunts and nieces rather than one of direct matrilineal derivation, then a writer such as Florbela (with her powerful self-heteronymization as ‘Soror Saudade’) calls into question our stereotyped image of the nun as a blank screen on to which male imaginings can be projected in the absence of any agency or emotional response from the figure of the woman. Florbela’s later writing in particular gives strong expression to female desire, alongside the welcoming of a death which is seen by the authors as both a statement of equality with canonical male writers such as Antero de Quental and Camilo, and as a reproach to a world which has thwarted her freedom to express herself fully in poetry. The paradox, of course, is that this is achieved precisely through the poet’s craftsmanship in the most demanding of poetic forms (the sonnet), but with Florbela, as with the other writers examined in this work, the central
tension remains—an urge to question the female writer’s apparent peripherality to literary history while also recognising that this very act of questioning may perpetuate that status. As the critics observe, the nun’s habit serves both to conceal the body and to draw attention to the fact that it is concealed. It is no coincidence, then, that no less than three of the later writers examined here (Agustina Bessa Luís, Natália Correia, and Hélia Correia) adopt the spectre of Florbela to reexamine the same dilemmas from their own perspectives later in the century.

The discussion of Irene Lisboa highlights her willing refusal of the traditionally major genre of the novel in favour of shorter forms (short stories, chronicles, and poems) which permit her to shape her own space where an ironic perspective on male-dominated discourse and social structures can be enunciated, while the analysis offered of Agustina concentrates on the ability of the fictional woman to write her own story: thus, an enlightening contrast is suggested between Fanny Owen (where the reality of Camilo’s tragic lost love interest is effaced by his inscription of his own, romanticised, not to say voyeuristic, story over hers) and Vale Abraão, whose superficial similarities to Flaubert’s Madame Bovary disguise the protagonist’s ability to subversively write her own life story and to script her own eventual suicide in ways which differ subtly from that of her French model.

The work of Natália Correia is examined through the lens of her evocation of an alternative form of matriarchy, which also asserts the primacy of an instinctive Portuguese fertility arising from the land (particularly that of her native Azores) set against a questioning of purely intellectual northern European benchmarks in the second half of the twentieth century: while the potential for creativity in such an approach is recognised by the critics, they also draw attention to the concomitant danger within Correia’s analysis of a reaffirmation of the exceptionality of the female genius when it is expressed. By way of contrast, however, the analysis given to her namesake, Hélia Correia, explores the figure of the alienated and silenced woman (following the English Gothic tradition of the Brontës) as revealed through the investigation of the past life and relationships of a deceased male poet in A Casa Eterna, as well as the search for individuation in the leading female figures in her dramatic works, Florbela and Perdição: Exercício sobre Antígona (all three of these works dating from the same year, 1991). Meanwhile, the study of Lídia Jorge demonstrates the potential for empowerment of a number of women through their written memories, which go hand in hand with a demonstration of the illusory domination of the male.

The chapters devoted to these writers are supplemented by English translations of a number of poems by Florbela, Irene Lisboa, and Natália Correia: it might have been enlightening to see the original Portuguese versions of these poems alongside Richard Zenith’s excellent rendering of them, but this is a relatively minor criticism of an otherwise engaging, authoritative, and stimulating exploration of a dilemma which will continue to vex critics and
practitioners of women’s writing, and not only in Portugal. When sidelining by
the self-appointed mainstream is such an ever-present threat, how does the
female writer enter the hallowed halls of the canon while still being able to
reflect on an essential part of her own experience of the world, which is that
very ghetto from which she has to escape in the first place in order to write?

David Frier is Senior Lecturer in Portuguese at the University of Leeds, in England. He is the
author of *The Novels of José Saramago: Echoes from the Past, Pathways into the Future* (Cardiff: University
of Wales Press, 2007) and *As (Trans)figurações do Eu nos Romances de Camilo Castelo Branco* (1850-
1870) (Lisbon: INCM, 2005). He also edited the volume *Pessoa in an Intertextual Web: Influence and
Innovation* (London: Legenda 2012), and he is the author of numerous articles on the works of
Camilo Castelo Branco, José Saramago and Eça de Queiroz. He is also a member of the Editorial
Board of the *Boletim da Casa de Camilo.*