Camões is among the most famous writers of Portuguese literature.

Luís Vaz de Camões

Luís Vaz de Camões is considered the main Portuguese poet. Due to the power of his poetry, he has been compared to Homer, Virgil, Dante and Shakespeare. His best known work is the epic Os Lusíadas.

He was born in 1524, but we don’t know exactly where : probably in Lisbon, or in Coimbra. The biographical information on Camões are uncertain and they derive largely from his work. He was born in a family of impoverished aristocrats; he maybe studied in Coimbra, where he tumultuously lived a life of duels and love affairs.

He was a soldier in Africa (where he had been exiled, according to some biographers, for some amorous scandals) and in Ceuta where he lost his right eye during a duel in 1547. In 1552, while in Lisbon, due to a brawl in which he wounded a court official, Camoes was imprisoned for a few months and then, at his request, he was sent to India.

He lived a long time in the East: Goa, Persian Gulf, Macao. In a shipwreck at the mouth of the Mekong River (1559) he lost all his possessions: he saved only the manuscript of his masterpiece, the poem Os Lusíadas. Even in Goa he was imprisoned, because of debts.

After his release, in 1567 he obtained the possibility of going to Mozambique, an important step to return home. In 1569, some friends of his paid his debts, so he returned to Lisbon, where in 1572 he published his poem, dedicated to the young King Sebastian. He became famous and received a modest pension from the king but this didn’t prevent him from dying in ”sheer poverty” (1580).

Camões was also the author of Rimas, printed posthumously in 1595 and considered by some critics better than Os Lusíadas. His compositions include about 400 poems in the traditional Iberian meters (redondilhas, cantigas, glosas, vilancetes), or in imitation of classical Italian meters (sonnets, canzoni, eclogues, elegies in endecasyllabes), in which Camões shows his profound knowledge of Italian literature, especially about Petrarch, and alternates echoes of folk medieval poetry and refined verbal games typical of the humanist poets- the latter being specially praised during the Spanish baroque age.

Prevailing theme is love- linked to the stilnovistic theory of which Camões felt all the charm through the Canzoniere of Petrarch- but also seen as loss of sense and irrepressible agony.

Camões also shows with realism and pessimistic tones : the mutability of the world, the anxiety for a justice never obtained, the contrast between the substance and the fate of the individual, submission to a mystical Christian God, capable of assuming upon himself the sins of man and to promote the redemption in a pure and absolute reality.

Camões wrote also three plays written in his youth and unknown for decades: the Comedy Anfitriões is an imitation of Plautus; Auto d’el-rei Seleuco introduces the theme of father and son’s rivalry in love; Filodemo is a romantic pastoral comedy, close to the English Elizabethan theatre.
Os Lusíadas is Portugal's national epic. Despite being modeled on Virgil’s Eneide and on the Italian poems about chivalry, it moves away from the classical tradition of chivalry because it doesn’t tell fantastic situations, but focuses on the journey of Vasco da Gama in India and its will of “enlarging the memory of the fatherland” and of showing its greatness. The Christian spirituality that pervades the poem counterpoints elements of pagan mythology, set in a lush and exotic nature.

The poem Os Lusíadas ("Lusiadas" are Portuguese people because in classic mythology Luso, son of Bacchus, is the conqueror of Portugal) is the work of Portuguese literature that has had more widespread success in the world. The critical review of the text presents numerous problems, despite the poem was published when the poet was still alive (two editions, without significant variations). The poem consists of ten cantos, with a variable number of stanzas (1102 in total), written in the decasyllabic ottava rima, which has the rhyme scheme ABABABCC.

The poem is made up of four sections:

- **An introduction** (*proposition* – presentation of the theme and heroes of the poem)
- **Invocation** – a prayer to the Táidges, the nymphs of the river Tejo;
- **A dedication** – (to D. Sebastião), followed by narration (the epic itself)
- **An epilogue**, (beginning at Canto X, stanza 145).

The middle section contains the narration and a variety of scenes. The most important part of Os Lusíadas, the *arrival in India*, was placed at the point in the poem that divides the work according to the golden section at the beginning of Canto VII.
Starting from the voyage of Vasco da Gama to India, the poet tells the whole history of Portugal in which the heroes of maritime portuguese history are mixed to mythical characters and mythological gods like Bacchus or Venus -that with the help of Mars and Jupiter helps the Portuguese fleet, while Neptune hinders the journey.

Each literature has its own "poem": Italians have the Divine Comedy, the French have the Chanson de Roland, the English Paradise Lost, the Germans Die Nibelungen, the Spanish el Cid and the Portuguese have Os Lusiadas. What is interesting is it was published during Renaissance, so in a different cultural context from that of the other countries. It celebrates the maritime expansionism of Portugal at the time, first-rate European power strongly projected towards the conquest of new lands in the West (in the current Brazil) and East (in the region we call Indochina) of the world.

It's a little *Odyssey* (the story of a sea voyage) and it's a little *Aeneid* too because it wants to celebrate, through the story of the exploits of a hero, the glorious destiny of his nation.