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HOMENAGEM A
IRENE RAMALHO SANTOS

THE EDGE OF ONE OF MANY CIRCLES

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POST-IMPERIAL RE-IMAGININGS: GENDER AND ETHNICITY IN *PRÓSPERO MORREU*

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Resumo: Este artigo debruça-se sobre *Próspero Morreu,* a única obra teatral publicada por Ana Luísa Amaral até agora, e avalia o significado do seu diálogo intertextual com a peça de Shakespeare, *A Tempestade*, no contexto de um Portugal pós-imperial, examinando como três das personagens de Shakespeare (Caliban, Ariel e Prospero) são "traduzidas" para um público contemporâneo. Além disso, indaga como a ausência de mães na peça original é atualizada através de uma reinvenção da tradição, com a recriação de Penélope como uma personagem bem mais complexa do que parecia ser na sua figuração mítica inicial. Em última análise, argumentar-se-á que, através das tensões e conflitos entre o fado e a liberdade presentes nesta tragédia, Amaral problematiza dois temas incontornáveis no âmbito da sociedade portuguesa contemporânea, nomeadamente a raça e o género.

Palavras-chave: género; raça; tragédia moderna; *A Tempestade;* reescrita feminista.

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Abstract: This paper tackles Ana Luisa Amaral's only play to date, the tragedy *Próspero Morreu* (2011), and discusses its intertextual engagement and revision of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest* in the context of post-imperial Portugal. It examines how three Shakespearean characters (Caliban, Ariel and Prospero) are re-signified for a 21st-century audience. It furthermore considers how the figuration of absent mothers in Shakespeare's original is updated through the reinvention of tradition, by staging the iconic Penelope as a more complex character than its original myth allowed. Ultimately it will be argued that, through the ongoing conflicting tensions between fate and freedom featured in this play, Amaral interrogates two of the most ongoing pressing issues in contemporary Portuguese society, those of race and gender.

Keywords: gender; race; modern tragedy; *The Tempest*; feminist rewriting.

Mudam-se os tempos, mudam-se as vontades

(*Camões*)

In a recent testimony, Amaral, citing the Argentinian philosopher Maria Lugones, aludes to impurity as a means of resistance against the "tentativa de controle exercida por aqueles que possuem o poder, os que categorizam, os que tentam quebrar tudo o que é impuro, dividindo-o em elementos puros" (2013: 18). A proudly "impure" product, *Próspero Morreu* stands as a modern-day tragedy. It maintains unity of time, place and action, albeit it over one single act, but weaves into it an eye-catching hybridity, primarily stemming

from its daring creative intertwining of different voices from past Western cultural tradition. Starting with its title, Amaral engages with a wide range of hypertexts, which encompass not only two seminal canonical authors from early modern European tradition, Camões and Shakespeare, but also Greek myths. Revis(it)ing our cultural legacy is an important feminist endeavour because, as Adrienne Rich puts it: "We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (15).[1]

In *Próspero Morreu*, Amaral's familiarity with the Western canon, visible in multiple guises throughout her writing career as a poet (Klobucka; Ramalho), is extended to Shakespeare. Indeed, the play re-scripts the characters of Caliban and Ariel for the post-imperial age of the new millennium. Since the pretext for the play is an imaginary wake, a third character from *The Tempest*, Prospero, although dead as the title indicates, is present throughout in his coffin. In so doing, *Próspero Morreu* furthermore implicitly stages a dialogue with another play, *O marinheiro* by Pessoa, a fact touched upon by Eugénia Vasques who describes the unconventional gathering as being "de ressonância pessoana" (58).

Amaral's first poetic licence resides in the forging of new female kinships, through the conflation of two different Greek myths, since Penélope becomes recast as Ariadne's fictive mother. As Rui Carvalho Homem notes, "this *lineage*. . . is made possible by the line or thread that defines their significance in their respective *mythoi*" (5). As

[1] Specifically in the context of Portuguese drama, the trend towards the appropriation of male literary imagination from a woman-centred perspective became increasingly visible from the 1990s onwards. For two examples, see Inês Alves Mendes.

such, their genealogical bond recovers the importance of historically suppressed mother-daughter relations.[2]

A second poetic liberty, in a clear break with the social and figurative conventions of the past, stems from staging a romantic relationship between the rebellious daughter, Ariadne, and the man that she chooses to love (the "savage" Caliban) rather than the one that was destined for her in myth, Theseus. Her transgressive feelings for Caliban, disclosed to the spectators in a series of three asides, entail the post-colonial rewriting of a figure whose name was almost an anagram of cannibal and who was accused of having attempted to rape Miranda in the Shakespearean original.

The issue of racism becomes explicitly tackled in Ariadne's third aside, coupling the feminist perspective with a revision of racial prejudice. Shakespeare's monstrous Caliban was not explicitly black, but in Amaral's text he becomes almost excessively emphasized as such:

> Como posso dizer que amo a negridão
> maior que o mundo viu:
> monstro mil vezes monstro,
> dizem eles,
> um ser, disforme e feio, para os outros,
> não para mim, que o amo (19)

Ariadne's use of key phrases such as "dizem eles", and "para os outros" highlights the fact that the racial stereotypes that label Caliban as "um monstro" were / are forced upon him by the prejudices of "civilised" white men. This powerful aside furthermore

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[2] By giving prominence to the mother figure, Amaral is rewriting man-made literary *history*, all the more so given that, in Greek myth, Penélope only had one (male) child, Telemaque. We may recall at this juncture that in *The Tempest* Miranda was orphaned of mother.

debunks the widespread belief that the Portuguese are not racist, to which Freyre's theories of Luso-tropicalism had lent credence in the context of the mid-twentieth century Lusophone world. In fact, in the decades leading up to the new millennium, some mainstream Portuguese novels had began to deconstruct the one-way myth of lusotropicalism, by exploring relationships between a white woman and a black or mulatto man. For instance Lídia Jorge in *A costa dos múrmurios* (1988) inverted the depiction of sexual encounters between a white man and a black woman – which had, from the beginning of colonial times, been the more readily condoned face of the lusophone empire.[3]

In the early modern period, one such relationship was famously textualized by Camões ("Endechas a Bárbara Escrava"). Camões played with convention, in a way that was revolutionary for his time, by building a narrative of Renaissance courtly love where it is the slave woman, rather than the *dona angelicata*, that paradoxically seemed to have a complete power over her master. Yet, the fundamentally assymmetrical nature of the relationship of Camões and his slave often remained unquestioned ever since. By contrast when, immediately after the aside which divulged to the audience Ariadne's transgressive love, Amaral brings Luiz and Bárbara on the stage, the latter is very explicitly introduced by Ariel as a slave of a *bygone* age:

> Olhai quem chega agora:
> Bárbara, *a escrava*,
> de Goa e *de outro tempo*,
> e o seu amado, Luiz. (2011: 17) (my italics)

[3] For an analysis of Jorge's subsequent more extensive deconstruction of the myth of luso-tropicalism in *O vento assobiando nas gruas* (2002), see Ana Paula Ferreira (2013).

Ariel's reference to Bárbara as belonging to a different temporal space is far from gratuitous: it hints at her being (and remaining) almost frozen in time, like Camões, whose first name retains old-fashioned spelling conventions.

Also relevant in the context of ethnic stereoptyping is the fact that Caliban remains entirely silent throughout the first half of the play, a point which dramatically emphasises his historically subaltern position. As we reach the halfway point in the play, however, the pressing need for reimagining historically sedimented roles comes to the fore. According to Ariel – who in *The Tempest* was entrusted to release Caliban (admittedly at Prospero's bidding) –, the old repressive order has reached its end. As Caliban acquires a voice and takes centre-stage, it is Prospero's tyrannical power that is conversely named as monstrous by Ariel: "Sem liberdade é o poder um monstro / de braços bifurcados e língua bifurcada / onde se alojam leis sem pensamento / e se torna viscoso o coração" (*idem*: 31-32). Caliban, freed by the "magia do amor", is afforded a moving love duet with Ariadne, showcasing their mutually reinforcing newfound agency. Nonetheless, the "magia do amor" is violently shattered when Teseus comes back on stage.

Theseus has a choice, highlighted by the fact that the fate of Ariadne is decided over several pages, in slow motion. But in a tragic climax, he kills his bride. Ariadne's murder, the enactment of an archaic honour killing that calls to mind issues of domestic violence still present in today's world, is the key turning-point in the play. As Raymond Williams puts it, regenerative modification of society is the purpose of modern tragedy: "The tragic action, in its deepest sense, is not the confirmation of disorder, but its experience, its comprehension and its resolution" (108). This explains why, in the aftermath of Ariadne's untimely demise, the plays dwells on a range of reactions which, cumulatively, offer a fuller picture of the conditions that historically enable both order and disorder.

Caliban, unlike what might have been expected, doesn't take justice in his hands, arguably making him the better man. His non-violence contrasts with the open revolt of the mother, following her daughter's unnatural death. This is equally striking, for it turns on its head the traditional image of the woman as passive. Penélope acquires a dissenting voice, as she explicitly questions Próspero's residual influence, which perpetuates social and gender injustices, through the device of multiple unanswered rhetorical questions: "Assim Próspero vence?! / E assim renasce? Assim: a voz / de um morto?" (2011: 52). Hers is a powerful interrogation of the influence that an outdated patriarchal system continues to have upon the island. As such, her use of the present tense also brings the issue into Portugal's historical present in the new millennium. In fact, in this speech, Próspero's ghost is equated to a "vulture", recalling the celebrated poem by Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, "O velho abutre", published in 1962 and widely interpreted as a thinly veiled reference to Salazar himself.

If the figure of Próspero is equated with patriarchal and colonial society, then his death could simultaneously present an opportunity for a long overdue transition to a post-colonial, more democratic society. Notwithstanding his physical death, however, as Penélope stresses, his ghost has yet to come undone: "Não há fio que desuna o seu fantasma?". Próspero's legacy (and by extension Salazar's too) still needs to be unravelled. As such, the question "Nada podemos nós?" (2011: 53) draws in the audience, through the use of the collective "nós", forcing us to reflect on Portuguese present-day society.

Sadly, it has taken Penélope's daughter unnatural death to shake her out of internalized subservience, so that any future change can only take place over Ariadne's dead body. One young woman, however, remains alive on stage: Bárbara, an arguably "peripheral" and powerless female character from the perspective of the dominant

order, here carefully recovered by Amaral. Interestingly, the last words (if we except Ariel) belong to her. Bárbara, speaking *after* Luiz (who declares that he "renega" the fixed, sedimented "tempo" that would be passed down as a legacy through his canonical poetry) succinctly, if ambiguously, expresses the complexities of her precarious position. She tellingly wishes for her braid – a material sign of her otherness both as woman and as racially other – to undo the power of Prospero's paternally-authorized legacy, namely *his*tory. Her (non-European) hair re-inscribes the material body, and furthermore provides an incipient response to literary tradition, enshrined in poems such as "La chevelure" by Baudelaire. It may therefore be posited as an alternative 'thread' to white male canonical tradition. Yet the incompleteness of her response, underscored by use of ellipsis, stands out.

The action of the play had begun at dawn. In the course of one day, the play allowed people like Caliban, Bárbara, Penélope and Ariadne to briefly emerge from the shadows of history, as it revis(it)ed stock images of the past. The chronological frame of Amaral's play is symmetrically opposed to that of Fernando Pessoa, since his ended before dawn, whereas hers begins at dawn and finishes at nightfall. Yet she does not simply seek to invert the Pessoan dreamscape – since her play, unlike his, is not static. As it comes to an end, while the stage directions seemingly take the characters back to their initial positions, this self-consciously highlights the notion of performance and the fact that much has changed in the space of one day. The numerous instances of inexact repetition contribute to the partial empowerment of characters like Ariadne, and to a lesser extent Caliban and Penélope, and the concomitant downfall of Theseus. They thus become the new hero(in)es, displacing Theseus.

Last but not least, it is worth dwelling on the ambiguities pertaining to Ariel, who takes on the role of chorus, donning a white

mask throughout.[4] In one significant respect, gender, s/he eludes classification. A male character in the Shakespearean original, s/he is initially posited in Amaral's tragedy as androgynous: "Esta coisa meio ela, meio ele" (2011: 16) in the words of Penélope.[5] Ariel's own self-definition begins by negating gender altogether "Nem homem nem mulher" (*idem*: 29), but s/he ultimately fashions herself as, grammatically speaking, very definitely female:

> E eu aqui estou,
> *chamada* pelos tempos para o anunciar.
> Para dizer também: quem morrerá? (*idem*: 30) (my italics)

As Owen and Pazos Alonso note, drawing on work by the feminist philosopher Battersby, the concept of androgyny is assymmetrical: "Conventionally gender crossover implied by the feminization of male genius could work in a positive sense for men but not the other way round" (*idem*: 18). Ariel's transitioning towards femaleness is thus significant, not least in her parting speech:

> E eu, que a contei, ou eu, coro de nós,
> irei ficar em história.
> Escrava dos tempos, mas do tempo livre. (*idem*: 57)

This paradox foregrounds Ariel as both a female slave ("escrava", thereby associating her with Bárbara) yet free. She remains ambiguously poised between fate and free will and, one might add,

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[4] Although the mask is in keeping with the fact that ritualized stories were typically performed by masked actors, its colour may offer a post-modern take on Fanon's title, *Black Skins, White Masks*.

[5] There may be an intertextual dimension to this transgendering, if we bear in mind that Woolf's Orlando, another character originating from Elizabethean times, becomes female.

between tradition and modernity: bound by male canonical norms (the chorus in tragedy), yet simultaneously able to transcend time. Tellingly, she also envisions herself as transcending a single identity, a plural "coro de nós", thereby hinting at her ability to incorporate different voices within her (like a female Pessoan *drama em gente*?). Early on, Penélope had described Ariel as being "de ousadia maior que Prometeu" (*idem*: 16), the male god credited with giving fire to humankind. If we interpret fire as a sign of knowledge and creativity, then perhaps the mediation of Ariel can help us to re-imagine the past differently, through the feminization of male genius.

In the closing lines of the play, inexact repetition suggests that reality, far from being fixed, is susceptible to change and revision:

> Caiu a noite. E sopra um vento fino.
> E não é já assombro
> assombro tal? (*idem*: 57)

In contrast to the opening line of the play – "É de manhã a e sopra um vento fino" (*idem*: 11) – the wind now features in an independent sentence, as a separate event: after night (often associated with femaleness in Western tradition) has fallen, a gentle wind begins to blow. The wind may hint at (re)-creation, bearing in mind the Biblical creation of the world: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters" (Gen 1:1-2 New American Standard Bible). If so, the wind implicitly symbolizes the demiurgic hand of Amaral, showing that we are a far cry away indeed from a sterile repetition of Greek tragedy.

Coming back, by way of conclusion, to Amaral's reflections about poetry as a no (wo)man's land: "A minha terra de ninguém com gente dentro é, porque de gente feita, uma terra impura, de corpos e de

vozes daqueles e daquelas que antes de mim tiveram voz. E ainda as vozes dos que vivem ao meu lado, temporal e espacialmente, e que tantas vezes não lhe têm direito" (Amaral 2013: 19). Taking our cue from these remarks, we might say that *Próspero Morreu,* a play set in an imaginary island, arguably a "terra de ninguém com gente dentro", is a deliberately impure palimpsest, made up of "corpos e de vozes daqueles e daquelas que antes de mim tiveram voz". It includes those who still remain almost voiceless for the time being (Bárbara) and those who belatedly begin to acquire a voice (Caliban, Penélope), while teasing out the contradictions and ambiguities arising out of inherited cultural roles and expectations (Ariel). Perhaps not coincidentally set in the depth of winter, Amaral's tragedy boldly succeeds in deploying impurity as a means of resistance in order to sows the seeds of change. Through a series of inexact repetitions at various levels, *Próspero Morreu* invites questions about our cultural legacy. In so doing, it exposes preconceived notions of gender and ethnicity that may, surreptitiously, linger on in Portuguese society to this day. In short, through poetic licence and defamiliarization, this complex and ambitious twentieth-first century tragedy allows the audience to experience the writing of the past differently, no longer in order "to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us".

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