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José Luiz Passos

***Machado de Assis' Library:
Drama and Deception in the Rise of Brazilian Realism***



University of California, Berkeley
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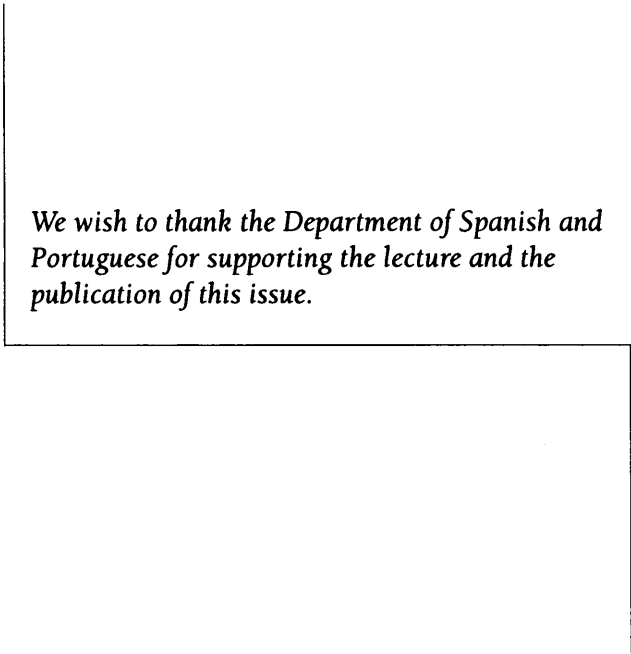
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PREFACE

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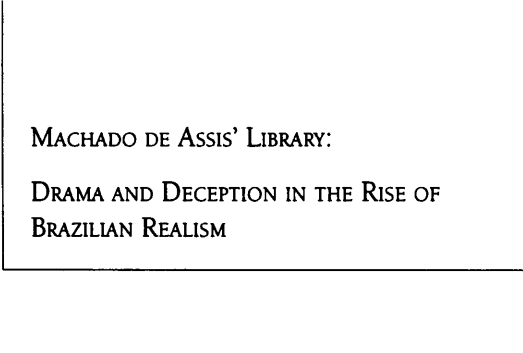
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MACHADO DE ASSIS' LIBRARY:

DRAMA AND DECEPTION IN THE RISE OF
BRAZILIAN REALISM





Along the history of Brazilian literary criticism, the strong interest in Machado de Assis' *Dom Casmurro* (1899) was considerably reshaped by Helen Caldwell's book, *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis* (1960). After sixty years of readings of *Dom Casmurro*, Caldwell argued practically for the first time for the innocence of Capitu, based on her understanding that Machado had intended to rewrite Shakespeare's *Othello* through the memoirs of an unreliable narrator who fused *Othello* and *Iago* in an attempt to convince the reader that his *Desdemona*—*Capitu*—was guilty as charged. The novel soon became the national paradigm of a successful literary puzzle, which—according to the critics—could only be deciphered by attentive readers.

There is a long list of criticism of *Dom Casmurro*. It is not my intention to review any of these titles here or to provide, at this point, an alternative interpretation. *Dom Casmurro* and Machado de Assis' late novels in general are part of my current book project on the relations between ethics and realism. However, this paper is an attempt to understand how claims such as "*Dom Casmurro* rewrites *Othello*" make sense in the context of 19th century Brazilian literature. The presence of foreign authors from the Renaissance drama to the 18th century European ironists in Machado's works has been regarded as an important element in his use of stylistic features unusual to the Latin American narrative. Shakespeare is unmistakably the author most systematically referred to throughout Machado's writings. In an incomplete account of this affiliation, Caldwell (1, note 3) counted 225 direct references to twenty different plays of Shakespeare. The English playwright made his presence felt in almost every major work of Machado. This connection has never been systematically studied. Why was Shakespeare so important to Machado de Assis?

I have argued elsewhere that Machado's novels ironically inquire about a rationale for human conduct. In this study I shall argue that Machado's early interest in Shakespeare is actually first and foremost an interest in drama as his dearest genre and in deception as a challenging and recurrent motif. I contend that Machado found in the Brazilian reception of some of Shakespeare's

plays the literary grounds for his concerns with the representation of human agency. In other words, since very early on, his works show a strong interest in how individuals can account for their decisions and choices, and how literature can make them intelligible. Among Machado's literary criticism, plays, short stories, and novels, *Othello*—directly mentioned more than thirty times—is regarded as one of the highest achievements of literature. Machado's interest in *Othello*, however, is not exclusively his own. I will set aside my interest in Machado's late novels for a moment and present some results of my research on the Brazilian literary context in which the young Machado might have been influenced by the unusual Shakespearean presence in Brazilian Theater. The history of Brazilian narrative and theater are often told independently. I will try to show how in spite of the fact that Machado is regarded as a poor playwright—or precisely because of this—his interest in drama can shed light on his development as a narrative writer.

First, I will set the context of *Othello's* reception in the early 19th century Rio de Janeiro—highlighting the persistence of the motif of deception—in an attempt to show the way this particular play related to the rise of the Romantic Theater in Brazil. I will then proceed placing Machado as a theater critic and romantic novelist in the context of his generation's concern with the portrayal of national life through the naïve opposition of reason and deceit. This essay will then conclude by presenting the heroines of Machado de Assis' first phase novels as an unusual meditation upon the motivations behind human deception, the way it relates to the national societal particularities, and some of its consequences for the Brazilian novel.

The Neoclassic Othello of Brazilian Romanticism

Modern Brazilian Theater began, in large part, from the way in which writers and actors in Brazil interpreted the revaluation that French romanticism gave to neoclassic tragedy. The first Brazilian tragedy, *Antônio José ou O Poeta e a Inquisição*, by Gonçalves de Magalhães (1811-1882), was performed in 1838 and published

the following year. Oscillating between the rigidity of the classic model and the formal and thematic flexibility of the romantics, Gonçalves de Magalhães adopts Racine and Shakespeare as an argument against the theatrical excesses of romanticism. According to the Brazilian author, contemporary romantic theater reminded him of “an orgy of the imagination, without any moral end” (qtd. in Prado, *O drama* 14). One of the targets of Magalhães was the preface of *Cromwell* (1827), by Victor Hugo, that for its part proclaimed Shakespeare as the foundation of the romantic attack on the unities of French neoclassicism.

Viewing drama as the encounter of poetry with reality—and of the ideal with modernity—Victor Hugo affirms that Shakespeare “is drama; and drama, which fuses in one stroke the grotesque and the sublime, buffoonery and the terrifying, tragedy and comedy, drama is the very nature of the third era of poetry—contemporary literature” [‘c’est le drame; et le drame, qui fond sous un même souffle le grotesque et le sublime, le terrible et le buffon, la tragédie et la comédie, le drame est le caractère propre de la troisième époque de poésie, de la littérature actuelle’ (213-15)]. Hugo’s interpretation of the development of poetry—which culminates in the revelation of modern man’s truth through Shakespearean drama—would have important consequences for Brazilian Theater in the 19th century. Gonçalves de Magalhães rebels against the emphasis that the sum of the grotesque and the sublime, and the equivalence of nature and truth, would have in the preface of the French poet. Allied with romanticism in only a few of its theses, the Brazilian playwright opts for an eclecticism in which he found—in the curious conjunction of romantic liberalism and the formal and moral sobriety of neoclassicism—the basis of his distinction between drama and tragedy. The former representing man in history, in its concrete particularities, the latter presenting general situations whose universality was capable of guaranteeing a certain approximation of philosophic reflection. In both cases, the function of the theater was to reveal beauty, defined by Gonçalves de Magalhães, after his readings of Victor Cousin, as an expression of moral truth. Curiously, in a Brazil independent from Portugal since

1822, the national tragedy would be born of a dramatic indictment of tyranny, inspired on the one hand by the French romantic ideal of liberty, and on the other by the nostalgia of neoclassic virtue and harmony. The eclecticism that characterizes Gonçalves de Magalhães' theatrical work reveals the ambivalent way the European models were adapted to the Brazilian cultural scenario, producing anachronisms that tried to reconcile, in an Empire of slave economics, enlightenment and rationalism with the principles of romantic liberalism.

However, it was an actor and businessman, not a collection of works or any author in particular, who dominated Brazilian Theater in the first half of the 19th century. João Caetano dos Santos (1808-1863) had premiered in the first Brazilian national tragedy and would come to occupy a central position in the rise of Brazilian Theater as an institution. It was the neoclassic Shakespeare, adapted to the French stage norms by Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816), that Gonçalves de Magalhães invoked to support his demands for a less extravagant style of representation. A year before acting in *Antonio José ou O Poeta e a Inquisição*, João Caetano had played Ducis' *Othello* in Magalhães' own translation. Between 1837 and 1860 the Brazilian actor would play this neoclassic *Othello* twenty-six times, along with adaptations of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet* (C. M. Gomes, *William Shakespeare* 71-107). Ducis' *Othello ou le More de Venise* was first performed in Paris in the "Théâtre de la République" on November 1792, the first year of the French Republic. Ducis' reinterpretation, which had shocked its French public with the on-stage death of Desdemona, arrived in Brazil almost fifty years later, when European romanticism had already reappraised Shakespearean drama precisely for its mixture of social and linguistic levels; for its grotesque vocabulary; its frank sexuality; the moral ambivalence of its characters, etc. Ducis sought to eliminate some of the elements that characterized the scenic variety of Shakespeare. He avoided giving his *Othello* a dark complexion, which, in his opinion "would have the advantage of not offending the public eye, above all that of the women" (vi). In the French adaptation, the

hero and his lover were still engaged to be married, thus avoiding the possibility of adultery by a married woman. Desdemona (Hédelmonde) was killed with a dagger, a method considered more humane. The public outcry over the on-stage death of Desdemona made Ducis rewrite the conclusion of his first renditions, offering in his published edition both outcomes: the original fatal version and that of reconciliation. The author also modified considerably the presentation of Iago's treachery:

Je suis bien persuadé que si les Anglais peuvent observer tranquillement les manoeuvres d'un pareil monstre sur la scène, les Français ne pourroient jamais un moment y souffrir sa présence, encore moins l'y voir développer toute l'étendue et toute la profondeur de sa scélératesse. C'est ce qui m'a engagé à ne faire connoître le personnage qui le remplace si foiblement dans me pièce, que tout à la fin du dénouement ... Aussi est-ce avec une intetion très déterminée que j'ai caché soigneusement à mes spectateurs ce caractère atroce, pour ne pas les révolter. (v)

[I am convinced that if the English can quietly observe the maneuvers of such a monster [Iago] on stage, the French would never bear his presence on the stage for even a moment and even less watch him develop the extent and depth of his villainy. That is what led me to only reveal the character that replaces him ... in my play at the dénouement ... It is thus with a very clear intention that I have carefully concealed this atrocious character from my spectators, to not disgust them.]

Rather suggestive of the new French republican ethos, the author's dilution of Iago's malice—based in a moralizing judgement in relation to the public—would be responsible for the weakening of the ethic value that the Shakespearean tragedy originally contained; a detail that would not pass unnoticed by Brazilian romanticism or Machado de Assis.

In Brazil, Ducis' Othello was the role that most marked João Caetano's career. Décio de Almeida Prado (*João Caetano* 27) sug-

gests that the fascination the Brazilian actor had with the work came less from his admiration of Shakespeare or Ducis and more from his desire to emulate his true stage idol: the French actor Talma, well known for his Shakespearean repertoire. Curiously, Ducis' neoclassic Othello would take on an exuberant romantic intensity in João Caetano, who represented the protagonist as a dark skinned African, alternating between extreme emotional states, between whispers and roars that sought to emphasize the animal quality of a sublime soul tormented by doubt. Committing his interpretation to paper, João Caetano affirms:

Lembro-me ainda que quando me encarreguei do papel de Otelô, na tragédia o *Mouro de Veneza*, depois de ter dado a este personagem o caráter rude de um filho do deserto, habituado às tempestades e aos embates, entendi que este grande vulto trágico quando falava devia trazer à idéia do espectador o rugido do leão africano, e que não devia falar no tom médio da minha voz; recorri por isso ao tom grave dela e conheci que a poderia sustentar em todo o meu papel... (qtd. in E. Gomes, *Shakespeare no Brasil*, 15)

[I still remember that when I assumed the part of Othello, in the tragedy *The Moor of Venice*, after having given the role the primitive character of a son of the desert, getting accustomed to the tempests and the clashes, I understood that this great tragic figure, when he spoke, needed to give the spectator the impression of a roaring African lion, and I should not speak in the medium tone of my own voice; I therefore resorted to a grave tone and realized I could sustain it throughout the entire role ...]

Here are the possible marks of the Shakespeare from *Cromwell's* preface, that Victor Hugo interpreted as the incarnation of drama that fertilizes reality with its combination of the grotesque and the sublime; able to achieve dramatic truth through the harmony of its contradictions (*La Préface* 223). João Caetano's interpretation of Othello, emulated the romantic perception that equates the tragic hero with natural forces and entities. Ducis' gentle hero would return, through the Brazilian actor, to its ethnic origin and to its

powerful character. In this sense, the anachronism of the tragic Brazilian repertoire—in opting for Ducis' neoclassic Shakespeare—was updated scenically by the strained romantic performance of João Caetano. This was, in large part, the way in which Shakespeare was received in Brazil during the first half of the 19th century. Little by little, Brazilian romantic authors realized the enormous loss of dramatic content involved in this process of Brazilian romantic adaptation of a French neoclassic interpretation of a renaissance English playwright. In the initial phase of João Caetano's career, the public success of *Othello* created, in the actor, a preference for roles whose dramatic intensity revolved around jealousy. Décio de Almeida Prado suggests that, on the Brazilian stage, a series of plays appeared about “the dialectics of jealousy—the furious alternation between love and hate”—expressed in works such as Voltaire's *Zayre*, Antônio Xavier's *Zulmira* and *Ackmet e Rakima*, and Baculard de Arnaud's *Fayel* (Prado, *João Caetano* 28-9). Curiously, when this theme was able to produce the first quality romantic drama in Brazil, *Leonor de Mendonça*, by Gonçalves Dias (1823-1864), João Caetano refused to perform in it, leaving the author disappointed with the denial.

Leonor de Mendonça was performed in 1846. The play was based on an historic episode that occurred in Portugal in 1512. Convinced that his wife had committed adultery with one of the servants, the Duke of Bragança orders her death. In the play, the object of his jealousy, the Duchess Leonor de Mendonça, is unable to convince her husband of her innocence. The Duke has his suspicions reinforced by the existence of a ribbon, belonging to his spouse, which like Desdemona's handkerchief, was also found in the possession of the presumed lover, the young Alcoforado. Echoing *Othello* and *Hamlet* in his extreme suspicion, and tormented by the memory of the death of his father, the Duke accuses, judges, and condemns his wife. Leonor, contrary to the madness of her husband, is characterized by a prudence that she herself defines as owing to her uneasy social position (89; 1.8). In this play, there exists none of Iago's malice, which, in Brazil, had been minimized since Ducis' version of *Othello*. In a loveless marriage, like that of


Leonor and the Duke, the theme of adultery appears almost legitimately, to later be excluded. Leonor is innocent and yet punished just the same. Condemnation without guilt is transformed into the principal motif of the play. The motivation for this act seems to come from the position that both the Duke and the Duchess occupy in relation to each other. In her monologue about the reason for her death, Leonor affirms: “The Duke is very cruel and still I am like him, I am perhaps worse than he is, and I shall die! ... I shall die because I am weak, I shall die because I am a woman! ...” (111; 3.4.1, ellipsis in the original).

Gonçalves Dias’ play is, for its time, a rather advanced denouncement of the social condition of women. One of the most fundamental contributions this drama makes to Brazilian literature is the fact that its heroine discovers ignored aspects of herself when she ponders the evil the Duke imputes to her. This malice seems to furtively emanate from the failed relationship of the protagonists, which taken alone were “good” and “pure”. There is a rather suggestive connection between social subordination and guilt in the way the Duke, the Duchess, and the young Alcoforado relate to one another. When faced with death, Leonor unveils that the absence of communication between them makes up part of the essential tragic characteristics of her position in the family:

A duquesa: Imprudentemente me prodigalizais impróprios e convívios, senhor duque. Fui criada em vossa casa, foi vossa mãe quem me educou. Atentai que parte de quanto me dizeis recai sobre quem se encarregou da minha educação.

O duque: Por quê? Conheço almas fáceis que se persuadem que ser virtuosa é ser fingida e que para ser impune basta ser habilmente criminosa. Outras há que nascem propensas para o crime e com o instinto do vício no coração. Há criaturas assim! (117; 3.5.7).

[The Duchess: Imprudently you lavish upon me insults and familiarities, Senhor Duke. I was brought up in your house, it was your mother who taught me.



The Duke: Why? I know easy souls that convince one that to be virtuous is to feign and to be unpunished is enough to be discretely criminal. There are others that are born with the propensity for crime and with vice in their hearts. There are such creatures!]

The dialogue poses the fundamental question of the play: where does evil come from? Responding to the Duke's accusations, Leonor seems to unravel his theory by interpreting the origin of the conduct that he attributed to her, bringing out the possibility that the genesis of this evil could reside in the bosom of the Duke's own tormented family. The Duke of Bragança in turn accuses her not only of incorporating evil within herself, but also of possessing the capability of dissimulating it, turning deception and malice into equivalent terms. Leonor asks for more time alive to explain his mistake. Impatient and determined, the Duke drags her out of the scene, deciding to kill her personally.

Probably motivated by the vanity of the actor João Caetano in his indirect devotion to Shakespeare, the drama *Leonor de Mendonça* is the first moment when Brazilian literature meditates, through the theme of adultery, about the relation between malice and society in the composition of a character's motivation. Iago's deceptive treachery—that had been censored by the Ducis' neoclassic ethos and transposed to Brazil by João Caetano's romantic reading—returned once again to the Brazilian scene through the first national drama about betrayal. In *Leonor de Mendonça*, Gonçalves Dias dissolves Iago in the social atmosphere that surrounded the protagonists, turning the heroine into a victim of relations from which she could not escape. Leonor's condemnation cannot be explained exclusively by the Duke's blind jealousy, being that their marriage was not based on love. The Duchess was a victim of her position and the Duke of Bragança ends up in a way condemned as well to be the villain in a drama where the lack of communication restricts individual liberty and ferociously punishes free will. The ill will is found imperceptibly divided amongst the characters, even in the romantic Desdemona of Gonçalves Dias. In this drama, Brazilian romanticism de-personalized the very cursed character that enchanted

Victor Hugo in Shakespeare's *Othello*. In *William Shakespeare*, published in 1864, the French poet saw Othello as the majestic night impassioned by the aurora—Desdemona. To Hugo:

[à] côté d'Othello, qui est la nuit, il y a Iago, qui est le mal. Le mal, l'autre forme de l'ombre. La nuit n'est que la nuit du monde; le mal est la nuit de l'âme . . . Contre la blancheur et la candeur, Othello le nègre, Iago le traître, quoi de plus terrible! Ces férocités de l'ombre conspirent, l'une en rugissant, l'autre en ricanant, le tragique étouffement de la lumière. (*William Shakespeare* 324-25)

[Next to Othello, who is the night, there is Iago, who is evil. Evil, the other form of shadow. Night is but the night of the world; evilness is the night of the soul . . . Against the whiteness and the candor, Othello is the Negro [African], Iago is the traitor, what could be more terrible! These ferocities of the shadow conspire—one roaring, the other giggling—the tragic suffocation of the light.]

Hugo notes that Iago compliments Othello. Malice becomes an essential part of the human being. There is a subtlety in this combined view of treachery and evilness that contradicts the classic inheritance present in *Leonor de Mendonça* and in the melodrama that became popular in Brazil. However, in the 1860's the romantic drama had already divided its public attentions with realism.

Realism on Stage: Morality and the Novel

Brazilian romantic theater has dedicated itself principally to the theme of liberty (Prado, *O drama* 196), but not necessarily abolition. In 1850, the suspension of the slave trade liberated a great quantity of capital that would be invested in the modernization of the economy and in the urban infrastructure of Rio de Janeiro (Holanda 42). Brazilian theatrical realism is part of this period of relative progress and growth of the middle classes. Parting from the romantic interest in liberty, the Realist Theater celebrated the modern bourgeois family, still practically non-existent in Brazil.

Realism rejected fantasy and romantic historical drama in favor of contemporary French plays or national works that dealt with the Brazilian society of the time. This movement was represented in Brazil by a group of actors, critics, and playwrights who founded, in Rio de Janeiro in 1855, the Teatro Ginásio Dramático—certainly inspired by the French Gymnase Dramatique. Machado de Assis, then 16 years old, was educated aesthetically through his participation in the debates between the Ginásio Dramático and João Caetano's company, which at that time was still the representative of romanticism and melodrama in Brazil. Ten years later, in 1865, when the realist drama started losing ground to comic and musical theater, Machado de Assis had already transformed himself, according to João Roberto Faria, into the “most important [theater critic] of the period, who best documented the realist reforms implemented by the Ginásio [Dramático]” (158).

Brazilian realist theater had above all two basic intentions: to create a more natural *mis-en-scène*, avoiding the exaggeration of the romantic style of interpretation; and to offer a moral lesson to the spectator, demonstrating the superiority of the bourgeois ethic. The conciliation of love with money, the maintenance of a monogamous family, the satire of romantic exaggeration and aristocratic vanity were all frequent themes in the realist repertoire. In 1862 the play *O protocolo* by Machado de Assis, would return, in realist terms, to the theme of the romantic drama *Leonor de Mendonça* by Gonçalves Dias: a loyal wife, disenchanted with matrimonial love (Elisa) is courted by a romantic adventurer (Venâncio) who threatens the stability of the family. The husband (Pinheiro) as well as the wife, is extremely skeptical of romantic love within marriage. The possibility of infidelity appears as a kind of calculated whim that the wife is able to use to punish her husband for his indifference. When a cousin (Lulu) informs the husband of the threat, he has in mind the intentions of a pathetic Othello: to pull off the ears of his wife's lover. To which his wife asks “after mutilating him, what do you intend to do with mean old Desdemona?” (*Obras* 19:142; scene 12). The husband would take her back to her father's house. But none of this happens. The responsibilities

of husband and wife are invoked, the adventurer is expelled from the family and comedy eludes tragedy through a rationalization of bourgeois conduct, where sincere dialogue restores peace to the family. The lack of this ability to communicate rationally was what caused the condemnation of Leonor de Mendonça in Gonçalves Dias' romantic drama. In Machado's play, however, the exclusion of the interference of evil by reason, in favor of the harmony of customs, evoked the very conciliatory ending of Ducis' *Othello*, 70 years prior. In a way, the Brazilian realists' emphasis on sobriety and a moral lesson—that practically banned Shakespeare from the national stage—brought them closer to the blandness of the neo-classic.

This rationalization of conduct in realist Brazilian drama was part of the attempt to bring spontaneity to the national style of representation. The “natural” character of a scene, of the action, and the interpretation should have added up to its moralizing nature, reproducing reality but introducing small alterations that would contribute to the moral education of the public (Assis, *Obras* 30:185; Vieira 42-3). It was in this sense that Machado de Assis translated with enthusiasm the play *Suplício de uma mulher* by Alexandre Dumas Fils and Émile Girardin, performed in the Ginásio Dramático in 1865. The theme fascinated the realist generation: a wife cheats on her husband with the family's best friend—ending up having the lover's daughter, whom the husband though was his own. When all is revealed, the husband makes an extremely rational decision that would punish all those involved. The deception and the adultery are cunningly overcome by calculated deliberation, that takes the punishment as a public demonstration of the injury—the wife and her lover are condemned to appear before the public as examples, respectively, of ingratitude and villainy (Assis, *Obras* 19:404-05; 3.3). Machado de Assis discusses his interest in the play and its translation into a “folhetim,” affirming that Dumas' work is full of “moral intentions” in its portrayal of adultery and that “the morality of a work consists of the sentiments that it inspires” (*Obras* 19:429). The theme of open adultery was deemed extremely dangerous. It would not be present as

a central motif in the first phase of Machado's novels (1872-78), but it would return in his mature works. *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881), *Quincas Borba* (1891), and *Dom Casmurro* (1899), for example, can be read as a trilogy of adulterous love.

There is an interesting contradiction in the way Brazilian Realist Theater sought to create an impression of verisimilar reality. Keeping with the "fourth wall" theory, as it was understood by Brazilian realism, the spectator should supposedly witness the development of a believable experience—an experience that could occur in the daily life of the public and to which the public could relate. However, the importation of French themes threatened the verisimilitude of the Brazilian national representation. The bourgeois family, autonomous, monogamous, formed by liberal professionals, characterized by a rational code of conduct, and organized upon the principles of equality and liberty, did not find an equivalent in Brazil during the Second Empire (1840-1889). The Brazilian family, in general, remained patriarchal, semi-rural, grounded in the principle of personal obligation, based on exchange of favors, and organized economically and intimately around slave labor until 1888. In a way, the enlightenment-like rationalist spirit of Realist Theater falsified the verisimilitude of its representation of Brazilian society. But this did not impede its relative success and the production of plays that dealt with the ambivalence of Brazilian society in its initial process of modernization. Robert Schwarz interprets *Senhora* (1875), by José de Alencar (1829-1877) and Machado de Assis' first novels (*Ressurreição* [1872], *A mão e a luva* [1874], *Helena* [1876], and *Iaiá Garcia* [1878]) as rationalizations of the patriarchal Brazilian family. To Schwarz, the bourgeois principles inherent in the romantic European novel, had no equivalents in the Brazilian social process of the 1870's (Schwarz, *Ao vencedor* 29-54). Nevertheless, dilemmas similar to those that mark the Brazilian romantic novel were already present twenty years prior in the realist theater (1855-1865). In Brazil, the realist theater anticipated the realist novel and these plays were contemporary with the quasi realist nature that some critics attribute to Brazilian romantic prose (*Candido*, *Formação*

2:97-105; Schwarz, *Ao vencedor* 63-69). When the Brazilian romantic novel enters a period of crisis throughout the last works of Alencar and the first of Machado, trying to find new ways of representing and justifying human conduct in the national scenario, realist theater had already debated the problem on stage, without finding an adequate solution. Through practice, realism reflected on the way in which action should be represented so that it might seem believable and instructive. Thus, Realist Theater created a style of scenic representation and a repertoire of themes that twenty-five years later would be extremely relevant to the transition from romanticism to realism and naturalism in Brazilian prose fiction.

Due to its desire to represent a reality both rational and transparent, realism in Brazilian Theater sought to punish vice and condemn dissimulation. The ability to deceive—to betray and to feign innocence by creating a “double life”—was considered to be one of the impure and unethical uses of reason. Present in the romantic series of plays about jealousy and in the realist villains that threatened families, the representation of this faculty of deception would be important to the way the romantic drama, the realist theater, and Machado de Assis’ early novels confronted the problem of representation of human action, of its rationality and its ethical value.

The experience as a theater critic seems to have led Machado de Assis to consider very carefully his concerns with the verisimilar representation of human agency. It was only after publishing two books of poetry, writing five plays, more than forty short stories, and after translating novels by Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens that Machado attempted to write his first novel. *Ressurreição* was published in 1872 when the author was 33 years old. In the preface to the first edition, Machado stated that

Minha idéia ao escrever este livro foi pôr em ação aquele pensamento de Shakespeare:

“Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win,
By fearing to attempt.”

Não quis fazer romances de costumes; tentei o esboço de uma situação e o contraste de dois caracteres; com esses simples elementos busquei o interesse do livro. (*Obras* 1:9)

[My idea in writing this book was to put into action that thought of Shakespeare's idea that:

“Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win,
By fearing to attempt.”


I had no intention of composing a novel of manners but only the sketch of a situation and the throwing into contrast of two natures; with these simple ingredients I have sought to create the book's interest. (qtd. in Caldwell 21)]

The quote from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1.5) gives the reader an idea of Machado's dramatic—almost theatrical—in-tention in writing his first novel. Very characteristic of his first phase narratives is a strong emphasis on character construction, dialogue, and action, as opposed to the Brazilian romantic and naturalist attention to space, environment, and description. Helen Caldwell (21-31) has pointed out that *Ressurreição* can actually be read as Machado's first attempt to rewrite Othello's dilemma toward *Dom Casmurro* (1899), published 27 years later. In *Ressurreição* Félix's perception of the potential deceptive quality of human agency is precisely what impedes him to rise from the ashes of his dead heart. Félix is unfit to live a happy life because of his lack of trust in humankind. The novel builds an expectation for resurrection in the union between Félix and Lívia, but a rival for Lívia's love poisons the hero's mind. According to the narrator, Luís Batista—the villain—had laid plans to “multiply [Felix's] suspicions, plant the canker of jealousy deep in his heart, make him the instrument of his own destruction. He did not adopt Iago's method, which seemed to him risky and puerile: instead of injecting suspicion through the ears, he infected his eyes” (qtd. in Caldwell 24) [‘... era mister multiplicar as suspeitas do médico, cavar-lhe fundamente no coração a ferida do ciúme, torná-lo em suma instrumento de sua própria ruína. Não adotou o método de Iago, que lhe parecia arriscado e pueril; em vez de insinuar-lhe a suspeita

pelo ouvido, meteu-lha pelos olhos' (*Obras* 1:94)]. Predisposed to distrust because of tormenting past experiences, and influenced by the action of the first Brazilian Iago, Félix ruins both his life and Livia's. The hero's natural tendency for jealousy—acted upon by his rival—is matched only by his capacity for dissimulation. He is unable to live a sound social life because of his perception that reason could—and often would—be used to deceive.

Dissimulation would be an essential concept in all Machado de Assis' novels. Interestingly, in his romantic phase the ability to dissemble would be almost exclusively gender related and socially determined. Almost all heroines of Machado's early novels—contemporaries of the height of Brazilian romanticism—are able to conceal behind a false appearance the motivations for their actions. This talent for practical reasoning seems to be linked to some shameful nature or event present in the characters' past. Machado's first heroines dissimulate in order to overcome the humiliation of both their origins and present position in society. They are predominantly orphans from humble social upbringings living as dependents—or "agregadas"—of wealthy families. Throughout his first four novels, Machado de Assis tried to overcome—albeit still immersed in a romantic worldview—the limits that a verisimilar representation of practical reasoning had imposed on Brazilian Realist Theater when directly adopting the French model. Machado's heroines would be artisans of the reconciliation between love and rational deliberation, something attempted on the realist stage with disregard for both the ambivalence of human motivations and the particularities of Brazilian social relations. Victor Hugo's insight about the complementary nature of Othello and Iago may prove to be useful in understanding Machado's portrayal of both social and intimate life as a counterpoint between malice and sincerity.

The realist dramatic concern with spontaneous *mise-en-scène* had provided Machado de Assis with a keen sense for representing human action. Interestingly, he never wrote a play that followed the criteria he used to review his contemporaries', but several elements of his early poetics are present throughout his novels and

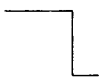


literary criticism. Machado had given up his hopes of being a playwright in the mid 1860s, when Quintino Bocaiúva—a friend, critic, and playwright—criticized his plays (*O protocolo* among them) as “valuable, as literary artifacts, but . . . cold and insensitive as a person without a soul. . . . Your [Machado’s] comedies are to be read and not to be staged” (*Obras* 19:19). The deceptive nature of Machado’s first phase heroes and heroines seems to be related to the way he would make narrative characters reenact the Brazilian romantic and realist theater concerns with the grounds for a new style for the stage. In other words, the Realist Theater had tried to come up with a reasonable set of characters, settings, and motivations that could account for both the creation of Brazilian theater as an institution and the moral representation of national life. Brazilian societal life, however, was characterized, as Roberto Schwarz pointed out (13-25), by a fundamental contradiction: liberalism as the ideology of Brazilian Second Empire (1840-1889) could only match slavery—abolished as late as 1888—as a “misplaced idea.” The reservations realism and romanticism had concerning the representation of deceptive reasoning—that would presumably create a shameful “double life” through its characters—would be taken by Machado as his heroines’ asset. The ability these heroines had to live dissimulating their double lives—an intrinsically ironic mode of agency—reads as Machado’s fictional account of Brazil’s most fundamental contradiction. Brazilian society was an anachronistic proslavery Empire with its cultural and political systems built according to the U.S. Republic and the French enlightenment models. In this sense, Machado’s early novels combine drama and deception to allow for the creation of this uneasy national self that is neither free nor enslaved, but dependent and deceitful. The romantic Machadean heroine—ironically—was able to create an alternative self in order to overcome the humiliating obstacles posed by the interaction with others within a context of a strong imbalance of power.

By 1878, one year after the death of José de Alencar, Machado was perhaps the most important literary figure of the Brazilian Second Empire. That year he reviewed *O primo Basílio*, a novel by

the Portuguese writer Eça de Queiroz, inspired by Émile Zola. In this review Machado seems to distance himself from the sheer moralizing concern of the Brazilian romantic novelists and realist playwrights. He was aiming at what he thought was a puerile fashion in contemporary literature: Naturalism. Machado would make explicit the aesthetic assumptions present in his novels, setting the difference between the outmoded romantic moralizing lesson and what he called the “moral truth” that should be embodied by the novel as a genre (*Obras* 29:156). From his point of view, Naturalism had discarded both: the sheer moralizing lesson and the potential ethical depth allowed by the realist novel. The “photographic” representation of quotidian life’s dull details was insufficient for the ethical effect Machado believed the novel, as a genre, should produce. He criticized the arbitrary nature of Queiroz’s heroine, to whose “inert soul” and puppet-like actions the reader would never relate. Machado had applied a similar argument when he reviewed two of José de Alencar’s romantic heroines almost fifteen years earlier, arguing that “the aim of artistic interpretation is to make facts and feelings intelligible” (*Dispensos* 179). Therefore, both romantic and naturalistic characters were aesthetically “untrue” to him because they fell short of the fundamental ethical nature of literary representation. Whereas Brazilian romanticism had put forth fancy to account for the development of the plot, naturalism focused on the description of base details setting aside what was most important for Machado: action and its development through character construction. *O primo Basílio* was unsuccessful as a novel, according to Machado’s principles, because of its emphasis on subordinate elements: overly detailed description of settings and using of chance or fate to develop the plot. To illustrate his understanding of the literary principles that should guide the writer, Machado would again refer to Shakespeare:

O lenço de Desdêmona tem larga parte na sua morte; mas a alma ciosa e ardente de Otelo, a perfidia de Iago e a inocência de Desdêmona, eis os elementos principais da ação. O drama existe, porque está nos caracteres, nas paixões, na situação moral dos personagens: o acessório não domina o absoluto. (*Obras* 29:171)



[Desdemona's handkerchief plays a very important role in her death. However, Othello's fiery and jealous soul, Iago's treachery, and Desdemona's innocence; these are the main elements of the action. Drama exists because it is in the characters, in the passions, in the moral situation of the protagonists: the accessory does not take over the whole.]

Art is not morality, but it produces its aesthetic effect from the way we as readers and spectators can relate to what is being symbolically enacted. This perception probably comes from the way Machado interpreted Aristotle's definition of tragedy as "a representation not of human beings, but of action and life" (8). This often-misunderstood passage fused in Machado's mind ethics and aesthetic criteria. Shakespeare—most notably once again in *Othello*—was seen by Machado as the true and modern embodiment of the ethical complexity of literary practice. The novel would remain unfaithful to its own fundamental possibilities if it refused to produce a verisimilar representation of human motivations, regardless of what is being represented.

After writing four romantic novels in the third person about characters—mainly women—who had a dissonant realistic sense of life in a world that seemed not to be made for them, Machado's mature narratives would unfold exploring the essential clash of the characters' and narrators' presumed moral beliefs with their actual conduct and the reality that encircles them. This conflict reveals the narrator's unreliability and calls for an active participation of the reader. The creation of a deceptive and unreliable narrator seems to be what literary criticism has regarded as Machado's most important contribution to the rise of the Brazilian Realist novel. I will resist the temptation to analyze *Dom Casmurro* here, but I would like to conclude by presenting an idea that I am currently working on.

The fundamental ironic nature of Machado's first heroines in relation to their environment is transferred in Machado's mature narratives to the relationship between narrator and reader. It is in this sense that *Brás Cubas*, as I have argued elsewhere, condenses

in his unreliability the deceptive nature of the first heroines without the particularities of their humiliating origins or social positions. Brás Cubas withdraws from life to stage his memoirs. He is narrating from the beyond, and socially from “above.” The world of Machado’s second phase heroes and narrators is completely characterized by deception as a general rule for social interaction. Both *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881) and *Dom Casmurro* (1899) would follow similar patterns: narrators—acting almost as directors—stage their recollections in order to give the reader what they consider to be a valuable lesson, which actually ends up contradicting itself. In the last chapter of *Dom Casmurro*, Bentinho poses what is perhaps the ultimate ethical question in Machado’s work:

O resto é saber se a Capitu da praia da Glória já estava dentro da de Matacavalos, ou se esta foi mudadad naquela por efeito de algum caso incidente. Jesus, filho de Sirach, se soubesse dos meus primeiros ciúmes, dir-me-ia, como no seu cap. IX, vers. 1: “Não tenhas ciúmes de tua mulher para que ela não se meta a enganar-te com a malícia que aprender de ti.” Mas eu creio que não, e tu concordarás comigo; se te lembras bem da Capitu menina, hás de reconhecer que uma estava dentro da outra, como a fruta dentro da casca. (*Obras* 7:441)

[What remains is to know if the Capitu of Glória beach was already in the girl of Matacavalos, or if the latter had been changed into the former because of some intervening incident. Jesus, son of Sirach, had he known of my first fits of jealousy, would have said to me, as in his Chapter IX, verse 1: “Be not jealous of thy wife, lest she deceive thee with arts she learned of thee.” But I think not, and that you will agree with me; if you remember Capitu as a girl, you will recognize that the one was in the other, like the fruit inside its rind. (*Dom Casmurro*, trans. John Gledson, 244)]

Dom Casmurro’s argument to convince the reader echoes Gonçalves Dias’ romantic drama *Leonor de Mendonça*, where the heroine pleads for life and the Duke of Bragança dismisses the possibility that the malice he attributes to her could actually have

come from the position Leonor held in the Duke's family. The Duchess said precisely what we know to be true for Capitu: "I was brought up in your house; it was your mother who taught me." To what the Duke anticipates in *Dom Casmurro*: "I know easy souls that convince one that to be virtuous is to feign and to be unpunished is enough to be discretely criminal. There are others who are born with the propensity for crime and with vice in their hearts." *Dom Casmurro's* ending also reminds the reader about the parallels between Machado's novel and Shakespeare's *Othello*. When Bentinho rises and dismisses an argument similar to that of Leonor de Mendonça's, he is actually evoking *Othello's* scene of the willow song, when Emilia says to Desdemona:

Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see, and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have.
.....
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (*Oth.* 4.3.91-95;
101-02)

To which Desdemona answers: "Good night, good night. God me such usage send / Not to pick bad from bad, but by bad mend!" (103-04). Machado's narrator considers for a second that he could be the "intervening incident" that could explain his wife's supposedly treachery. At this very moment Bentinho puts together the Apocrypha book *Ecclesiasticus*—two-thirds of which was discovered in Greek fragments only three years before *Dom Casmurro's* publication—, the romantic drama *Leonor de Mendonça*, *Othello*, *Iago*, and *Emilia*, all to ground his final statement about the origins of malice and its connections to deception.

I hope to have shown how this literary motif was central to the development of Brazilian Theater during the 19th century, and how Machado de Assis' participation in the debates about realist drama shaped his first conceptions about the task of the writer and his ideas about the fundamentals of literary representation.

The consequences of Machado's frustrated passion for theater are present throughout his narratives. *Dom Casmurro* is indeed a re-writing of *Othello*, as Helen Caldwell has argued. It is also a very sophisticated portrayal of Brazil's Second Empire social and political life, as John Gledson pointed out in his interpretation of *Dom Casmurro's* deceptive realism through the connections between its characters and episodes, and real life people and events. However, the most fruitful descendents of *Dom Casmurro* would be the successive rewritings of Machado's novel along the 20th century. In 1936, Graciliano Ramos, perhaps the most important representative of the Brazilian regionalist novel, reshaped *Dom Casmurro* into *São Bernardo*, transferring the narrators' malice into the setting and blaming social relations and environment for the fiery and jealous soul of Brazil's new Othello, Paulo Honório. The playwright José Carlos Cavalcanti Borges published in 1971 *A flor e o fruto*, a drama after *Dom Casmurro*, which sets Machado's story back to its origins: the stage. This attempt would be followed by Lygia Fagundes Teles and Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes' *Capitu*, a screenplay published in 1993. The 1990's still seem to be fascinated by Machado's silenced heroine. Last year Domicio Proença Filho published *Capitu, memórias póstumas*, and *Amor de Capitu (recriação literária)* by Fernando Sabino appeared a few months ago. The latter rewrites Machado's novel in the third person, avoiding the ambivalence of the fictional autobiography and allowing for a different kind of relationship between the reader and the story of Bentinho and Capitu. I have just found out that Ana Maria Machado's forthcoming novel, *A audácia dessa mulher*, invokes *Dom Casmurro* in its denouement, calling for parallels that challenge the reader to read both novels anew. These are only a few examples of how a better understanding of *Dom Casmurro's* relationship to its sources and heirs—fusing drama and deception—can shed light on the development of Brazilian literature over the last 100 years.

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