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Men in Love and the Women They Distrust in Machado de Assis’s Ressurreição and Dom Casmurro*

Diana Anselmo-Sequeira

"O desenlace desta situação desigual entre um homem frio e uma mulher apaixonada parece que devera ser a queda da mulher: foi a queda do homem."

Machado de Assis, Ressurreição, 77.

As obras de Machado de Assis dramatizam as ansiedades vividas no seio da sociedade brasileira do fim de século XIX, especialmente as tensões sentidas entre uma masculinidade ameaçada e uma feminilidade emergente. Este artigo examina dois dos romances que melhor definem as mudanças estilísticas da vida literária de Machado – Ressurreição (1872), o seu primeiro livro moldado ao estilo europeu; e Dom Casmurro (1899, a obra que marcou a sua passagem para um tom único e realista. Analisando a complexa relação de despeito e ternura que instiga os principais pares amorosos retratados nestas duas obras, eu procuro argumentar que o que impele os heróis de Machado (Félix e Bento) a paradoxal e simultaneamente vilipendiarem e cortejarem as suas amadas (Lívia e Capitu) é a ambivalência prevalente em uma sociedade patriarcal assustada pela crescente visibilidade social da mulher. Assim, discutindo as dicotomias recorrentes nos pares amorosos de Machado eu proponho um estudo aprofundado das razões por que Félix e Bento se alimentam do amor de Lívia e Capitu, respectivamente, enquanto ao mesmo tempo fortalecem o seu temperamento derrotista ao procurar falhas nas musas que os adoram. Este artigo procura também respostas para o porquê destas mulheres de força aceitarem um papel tão ingrato na vida dos seus consortes, urdindo assim um ensaio acerca da labiríntica importância que a masculinidade (ou a falta dela) e a feminilidade (ou o excesso desta) têm numa sociedade patriarcal em pânico.
Much has been written about Machado de Assis' male protagonists and their incessant struggle to love a virginal woman, while simultaneously wanting to topple her out of the pedestal, revealing her as a treacherous fiend. Focused on this paradoxical pull and tug of emotions, this paper deals mainly with Machado's first novel, Ressurreição (1872), and his seventh, Dom Casmurro (1899). Both these works ponder upon some of the author's favorite topics, such as the interplay between men and women and how the dialectics jealousy/trust, fruitfulness/sterility, adultery/loyalty, and hate/love are presented as an extension of the antithesis opposing males and females in a highly structured, patriarchal society as Rio de Janeiro's in the late 1800s.

Félix in Ressurreição and Bento in Dom Casmurro have been traditionally analyzed as prototypes of the rabidly jealous male, a theory epitomized by Helen Caldwell, who sees these novels as the Brazilian response to Shakespeare's Othello (1622), the timeless tale of blind jealousy, deliberate mischief and innocent death represented by the characters of Othello, Iago, and Desdemona respectively. Caldwell argues that "jealousy never ceased to fascinate Machado de Assis [. . . and is present in] twenty-eight stories, plays and articles" of his (Brazilian Othello 1). Machado's insistence on this topic is accured by the author's fascination with Shakespeare in general, of which Ressurreição's leitmotif, "Our doubts are traitors/And make us lose the good we oft might win/By fearing to attempt," a quote from Measure for Measure (1604?) is vivid proof (32). Machado's incorporation of Shakespearean motifs is constant throughout his work though, thus "Othello is not the only play of Shakespeare's that Machado de Assis hitched to his starry wagon. Romeo and Juliet [. . . and] the character of Hamlet have a way of creeping in -- even -- into his Othellos" (Caldwell 1, italics mine).

My argument stems exactly from this idea that there are recurrent Shakespearean overtones present in the depiction of Machado's two male protagonists, of which the primordial one is not a reincarnation of irascible Othello but of tormented Hamlet. The Prince of Denmark, a literary paradigm of existential contradiction, is imbued nonetheless with tones of Othello's jealousy and Iago's malice, a complex emotional triad that John Gledson aptly described as "um monstro de três cabeças que guarda [Capitu's] entrada: Bentinho/Bento/Dom Casmurro" (335). Like Bento, Hamlet wears his three personalities as a protective device in order to cope with his original lacuna and, vis-à-vis, debase the defying women who make it feel more glaring, such as dubious Gertrude or lovesick Ophelia.¹

As Hamlet seduced and then raged against poor lovelorn Ophelia, driving her to a doomed fate, so Félix and Bento, two characters described as suffering from an intrinsically flawed and unstable temperament, will lash
out and doom Lívia and Capitu, the two passionate women who approach them out of a love as steadfast as Ophelia’s for Hamlet. The pivotal question addressed in this paper becomes then, firstly, why Machado’s complex male protagonists mimic Hamlet in his voluble behavior, recurrently fencing off love while conversely feeding off it; and secondly, which role the female characters play in this emotional conundrum.

The psychological portrait of the two protagonists is thus a fundamental piece of the puzzle. Félix can be easily interpreted as “a fruta dentro da casca” regarding Bento’s later characterization, the protagonist the critics would dub as Machado’s paradigmatic neurotic anti-hero (215). Foremost, Félix is impersonally described by an omniscient third person narrator as “um homem complexo, incoerente e caprichoso [com . . .] um coração defeituoso, um espírito vago, uma alma insípida, incapaz de felicidade, incapaz de constância” (42). Bento’s self-depiction comes in the same vein; he is after all, an incomplete, failed old man whose unachieved goal of writing his memoirs was, “atar as duas pontas da vida, e restaurar na velhice a adolescência. Pois, senhor, não consegui recompor o que foi nem o que fui. [...] Se só me faltassem os outros, vê; [...] mas falte eu mesmo, e essa lacuna é tudo” (25, italics mine). 2

João Adolfo Hansen remarks, in his ‘Afterword’ to the 1998 edition of Dom Casmurro, that by admitting his own insufficient self-knowledge coupled with a faulty memory, Bento embodies all the necessary characteristics for a first person narrator deemed highly unreliable. Thus his pernicious portrayal of Capitu and his friend Escobar, as his own apologetic portrayal of himself, may very well be skewed by these handicaps. This may also mean his own story is perhaps less tragic and more distant from the Moor’s greatest fall than Bento would like to admit. By writing his memoirs Bento wishes to restructure a past that feels unkind to him, such unkindness epitomized in Capitu’s alleged betrayal. Like Hamlet, his knowledge of the situation is incomplete and dazed, brought upon by Faustian “inquietas sombras” (25); like Hamlet, Bento’s quest for the truth is much more a self-serving, self-involved search for selfish peace of mind than a noble attempt, and thus noble failure, to set things right. And much more explicitly, Bento, like Hamlet, deals with a domestic crisis which has perforated the realm of the home and has bled into the public sphere. “Uncertainty is at the core of domestic intimacy,” Maia Neto declares, and so it is in Hamlet where the doubts about his mother’s part in the ploy to murder his father gnaw at Hamlet much more than the decay of his country (180). Thus Bento’s and Félix’s “problem of [domestic] fortune shifting over time is addressed by Machado especially through female characters [. . . crystallized in the saying] ‘Nothing is eternal in this world’” (40). An echo of Hamlet’s spite for voluble females like his mother can be heard here, mimicking the Prince’s famous ditto: “Frailty, thy
name is woman!" Hamlet's inability to believe in the emotional constancy of the women who surround him denounces hence his innate skepticism of love and womanhood, a trait directly inherited by Machado's anti-heroes.

Moreover, "when [Bento] defines himself as a 'lacuna,'" Hansen declares, "the narrator suggests that the very substance of what he writes is the time which has disappeared from his memory. He narrates, but does not remember. [...] So the author suggests to his readers that they cannot trust in the truth of what the narrator is saying" (247–48). Ultimately then, the reader finds in these two male protagonists the same defining confusion seen in Shakespeare's Hamlet; he embodies the unstable prince torn between notions of virility, father-like authority and power as legacy, all characteristics more predominant in Félix's and Bento's incapacity to commit to love than Othello's trademarked bloody jealousy.

Furthermore, I argue the contentious pull between the Freudian drives of love and death harbored by these two protagonists is also more connected with a defective sense of masculinity and self-worth, typical of a politically and socially convoluted nation (whether Machado's Brazil of the late 1800s or Hamlet's diseased Elsinore of medieval times), than with the perennial discussion regarding the devious nature of the female heroines depicted in these novels, most remarkably Capitu's. Massaud Moisés exemplifies perfectly this traditional, now outdated, line of thought by describing Ressurreição as the thematic precursor of Dom Casmurro in the sense that, "a psicologia do adulterio [...] é o centro da obra [...] . Capitu o comete seguramente, decisivamente, mas conduzida por um impulso de dentro que ultrapassa o plano da conveniência e não tem nada a ver com o adultério por vício ou capricho [...]" (italics mine 18).

Ressurreição obviously contains in its core many of the seminal themes that would blossom in the later novels, such as Dom Casmurro or Quinhas Borba (1891), namely the male fear of commitment or marriage, and the maddening destruction its proximity exerts on men while conversely dooming the women to be cast as one-dimensional virginal brides or adulterous vixens. The parallels found between these two chosen novels are hence better exemplified in the insistence upon a crisis of masculinity provoked by the upheaval of threatening femininity and the implications of the fall and decay of a privileged patriarchal society, than in the constant prosecution of the female protagonists and their relation to adultery. The obsessive chase for a culprit, so popular in the early criticism of Machado's Dom Casmurro, seems now turned into a wild goose chase with no resolving end in sight, for ambiguity is just a shade in Machado's complex characters, but a shade nevertheless that points again to that sense of moral incompleteness pertaining to his male protagonists. It is important then to analyze the noxious charges put forth against Lívia and Capitu, not just because they share the same
scarlet letter put upon their breasts, but because the two inducers of this tarnishing branding are the men who had sworn to love and protect them until death did them part. Gilberto Pinheiro Passos makes an interesting claim regarding Capitu’s detrimental characterization by her skeptical husband, arguing that at the core of Bento’s suspicion lies “a força do tema da Mulher fatal, [e assim] sua esposa não pode e nem deve ter o benefício da duvida, já que tudo nela poderia confluir para uma nota básica, a da dissimulação” (21). So, when considered inscrutable by their male lovers, Capitu and Lívia are automatically dubbed as the fin-de-siècle’s stereotypically dangerous Other who being aligned predominantly with shiftiness can only be treated with studied wariness.

Jealousy comes into play at this juncture, for it seems to be cast as the prymordial reason behind Félix’s and Bento’s destructive suspicions about their women. Being a precursor of Bento’s characterization, Félix, the wealthy and educated protagonist of Ressurreição, sets the tone to Machado’s preferential portrayal of the upper-class male: an obsessive, pessimistic and indecisive temper topped by a strange proclivity for doubting the loyalty of his beloved, while simultaneously deeming brief romantic attachments as a pleasure, but if serious, a trap one must escape quickly. A malicious anonymous letter written on the eve of his wedding suggesting Lívia’s infidelity opens up a miraculous exit door for Félix to escape the dirges of commitment; he cowardly declares his marriage to Lívia “fatalmente impossível” and rushes back to his life of monotonous inertia, bitter doubts and occasional flings (146). He is a character hotwired for unreachable ideals and self-sabotage, a malfunctioning anomaly whose centerpiece is a barren heart “essencialmente infeliz. A natureza o pós nessa classe de homens pusilâminos e visionários que [...] não se contentando com a felicidade exterior que o rodeia quer haver essa outra das afeições íntimas, duráveis e consoladoras. Não a há de alcançar nunca, porque o seu coração [...] esqueceu na sepultura o sentimento da confiança e a memória das ilusões” (165). In his incapacity to trust his beloved, as in his pessimistic tendency to expect the worst while nurturing poisonous suspicions about Lívia, Félix completely mimics Bento’s attitudes towards Capitu.

More ironic yet is the fact Félix’s readers are granted the certainty of Lívia’s innocence, a verdict Capitu never receives in the highly ambiguous narration propitiated by her husband’s overbearing first-person voice. Although Lívia is indeed cleared of all adulterous charges, “o amor do médico [Félix] teve dúvidas póstumas. A veracidade da carta que impedira o casamento, com o passar dos anos, não só lhe pareceu possível, mas até provável” (165). Thus, although the third-person narrator quickly dismisses Lívia’s guilt by remarking that “entendam-nos leitor, eu, que te estou contando esta história, posso afirmar-te que a carta era efectivamente de Luís Batista.
[Félix’s] alma deixa [. . .]-se ir ao sabor de uma desconfiança nova, que as circunstâncias favoreciam e justificavam” (157). It becomes clearly established then that Félix has the kind of defective “nature” which preçêrs to stay put in his venomous doubts concerning Lívia’s love than let go of them and live a happy life next to the woman who adores him. Félix’s desire to use suspicion and jealousy as a screening door between him and matrimonial intimacy with a woman is so manifest that even though he is the first to acquit Lívia of any fault, by finally writing to her, “não tens nenhuma culpa direta nem indireta na minha resolução,” he still cannot pursue a situation where he must relinquish some kind of emotional control (147). Félix is ultimately described as a foil for Bento: they forcefully hinder any romantic completion through marital bliss by doubting their lovers’ chastity and seriousness, so that the poison-pen letter sent by Batista, or Capitu’s poignant glare at the dead Escobar, are both taken as opportune excuses to continuously fence off love through immaterial suspicions, while concurrently feed off a maladjusted idea of love which validates their negative tempers.

Caldwell diagnoses Bento with an emotional arrestment akin to Félix’s, although propitiated by having “two men within him, but his is a more sinister combination: Othello and Iago [. . .]. With a criminal’s urge to talk, he discloses, in carefully guarded metaphor, that his jealousy was rooted in aboriginal evil, that it antedated its object [. . .] then dungs to [Capitu] with obdurate blindness” (143). In Dom Casmurro, the first-person narrator enumerating Capitu’s peccadilloes is her husband, who again couples dual roles: that of unreliable storyteller and personal plaintiff. I believe the obsession Bento shares with Félix over jealousy is, however, not akin to Othello’s -an emotion related to a particular love-object and the will to keep one’s beloved contained in the bonds of faithful matrimony -but exactly the opposite. 4 In Machado’s literary realm, jealousy becomes a feeling divorced of romantic passion, an artificial mask which may have the initial semblance of love-sickness, but truly hides these men’s real antagonism towards admirable women who represent a spectrum of qualities which is lacking in these supposedly perfected firstborns of a highbrow patriarchal society. Othello is then a rather inaccurate reference in this context, firstly because his jealousy is born of passionate suspicions planted by another and not a product of his own deviant nature, but moreover because the soil in his heart was already rich, fiery and loving before Iago’s match of doubt fire-started the catastrophe; in Machado’s male protagonists’ chests there was nothing to begin with but deadness and cynicism. 5

Jealousy for Machado’s protagonists is thus utilized as a tool servicing the men’s destructive urges to mar the valuable image of their wives-to-be, a twisted attitude which can be interpreted as an apt rehearsal of Hamlet’s misogynist behavior, when he cruelly attacks Ophelia accusing her of deprav-
ity and falsehood in the famous "get thee to the nunnery" scene. Literally Lívia and Capitu are sent to that metaphorical nunnery by their male lovers, a place of complete social and sexual isolation which Hamlet in his general attack on women saw as the ultimate solution for the miasma females spill onto men through their mischievous allure and false candor. Lívia, as Ophelia, firstly suffers from a ravaging "delírio" when she is informed of her fiancé's senseless abandonment, but lastly she "soube isolar-se na sociedade [. . . e leva uma] vida solitária e austera. [. . .] Ninguém mais a viu no teatro, na rua, ou em reuniões. Suas visitas são poucas e íntimas. Dos que a conheceram outrora, muitos a esqueceram mais tarde" (164). This voluntary nun-like isolation parallels closely Ophelia's estrangement, and subsequent elimination, from the normal flow of human life. Capitu is similarly interred in silence and isolation in her faraway exile due to her husband's supreme jealousy over everything: the dandy, the sea, the dancers in a party, even "os defuntos" like his friend Escobar (206). Like Lívia buried alive in her voluntary domestic reclusion, Capitu is locked up in her own metaphorical nunnery, Switzerland, the desolateness of being shunned from her country, ignored by her husband, and forced into exile. Both women are thus silenced and tarnished permanently in the same male-imposed way Ophelia was after Hamlet's vicious accusations had perennially soiled her maiden reputation and, therefore, robbed her of a respectable place in a highly judgmental patriarchal society.

Curiously, the accusations made by Félix or Bento always sport sexual overtones, stemming from the Victorian idea that a woman's chaste reputation was her greatest social treasure and after being married by its principal keeper, the husband, she would be lost and scorned from her respectable place in the social hierarchy. Tolstoy's monumental novel, Anna Karenina (1878), or Flaubert's Madame Bovary (1857), for example, amply broach this sexist equating of a woman's adulterous appetite with her fatal fall from grace. The price women pay for their male lovers' spurious jealousy is thus death-like separation from the public, male-centric world and a forced reclusion into the domestic sphere their lively temperaments threatened to trespass in the first place.

If Félix or Bento were truly Othello-inspired characters, as Caldwell argues, instead of Hamlet-look-alikes, their jealousy would have been so fiery, death-ridden plots would spring up in the end, as their cerebral tempers would be beaten by the gory rush of revenge. As Machado cleverly suggests by placing Bento as a spectator in Othello's rendition in chapter 135, and also by describing his contradictorily inoperative reactions to the play throughout the upcoming four chapters, Bento's heart does not sustain the same kind of noble passion or raging brio necessary to achieve the tragic stature of a fallen hero like The Moor. He deems Capitu guilty, which ultimately
separates her from Desdemona's innocent death, but he is incapable of flying at her neck like Othello did, or to carry out his devious plans to murder his supposedly fake son and himself. His apathy impedes him to take a decisive attitude, a character trait that will haunt him up to the end of his life and of his failed apologia. Bento's cowardliness, as his deadened heart, are thus the winning contenders in his existential conflict for virile affirmation, which attentively mirrors Hamlet's interior turmoil focused on avenging his father's death and ascertaining himself as lawful, dignified male heir while at the same time trying to establish his own sense of identity and value.

This is a personal drama introverted Bentinho, the similar heir to a throne - his family's wealth and estate - can never truly resolve, for he has also been recurrently emasculated by a mother's overzealous influence as Hamlet was by his. Like Bento after realizing his life has been ruined by Capitu's mischief, Hamlet cannot take his own life or move on with it after unveiling the deviant plot that killed his father and the possible part his beloved Gertrude played in it. After he has been nourished by the loving women around him, Hamlet, as Félix or Bentinho, discovers his heart is too flimsy to sustain a passionate emotion - whether jealousy, passion or commitment - for more than "um idílio de um semestre, um curto episídio sem chamas nem lágrimas" (42), as Félix curtly puts it when parting with his lover Cecília. Bento and Félix are so deeply paralyzed by apathy and self-reflective dislike that, as Hamlet, they can only lash out at those whose love and a male-centric society has put at their mercy. Ophelia or Gertrude, Capitu or Lívia, love-objects and mother-figures who finally perish, not by their manly hands as Desdemona by Othello's, but due to a cowardly unjust accusation which forces them out of the flow of public life. As Maria Manuel Lisboa argues, Lívia "is silenced and 'dies' in the face of the growing suspicions of her antagonistic lover [Félix]" (45), while Capitu is "effectively killed [by Bento] through her enforced silence and the denial of an opportunity to defend herself [...]" (106).

Jealousy is ultimately not the device that approaches Machado's male protagonists to Shakespeare's Moor, but almost the opposite. By sarcastically presenting a voluble, timid character like Bento as a prototype of the fierce, masculine Othello, Machado is sabotaging the paradigm of Brazilian masculinity when inserted in a moneyed class. What was deemed as a very virile medium to exert the cleansing of a hero's marred honor, the revenge of the cuckolded, becomes a pathetic excuse for inoperative men like Bento or Félix to remain apathetic bachelors, surviving as "uma exposição retrospectiva que as pessoas que assistem ou se fartam de vê-la, ou a luz da sala esmorece" (215).

Jealousy is just a defense, henceforth, against a view that casts women as symbols of the emotional, and thus irrational, sphere of society. By re-
currently casting women, whereas as a conniving temptress with “olhos de cigana [...] obliqua e dissimulada” like Capitu’s in Dom Casmurro (215), or as the selfless angel decked with exuberant “flores evangélicas do sacrifício, do perdão e do amor” like Raquel in Ressurreição (125), the male-centric society is depicting female bodies as leaky and plagued by overemotional psyches that need to be boxed in stereotypes in order to be safely contained and dealt with. This is not an uncommon portrait of females during the late 19th century, especially in Victorian times, and both French and British literature are filled with examples of such models, such as the moribund courtesan in Alexandre Dumas’s La Dame aux camélias (1848) or the infectious vampires in Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897). Deborah Lupton summarizes this antagonistic imagery pertaining to the male and female archetypes by stating that, “maleness was explicitly linked with orderly, the bounded, the precise, while femaleness was joined to their opposite – disorder, lack of boundaries, the indeterminate. […] Women’s bodies evoked both horror and desire on the part of men not only because they are conceptualized as ‘gaping maws’ […], but because they are a receptacle of the most highly polluting body fluids […]” (234–45).

The blurring of gender barriers created by the growing number of educated and employed women propitiated a sense of anxiety in the patriarchal society which Bento and Félix so well epitomize by being described as effortlessly rich, cultured and idle members of a privileged class. The uncertainties created by the strong-willed women they love reveal the restless fears of an enfeebling masculinity, but concurrently denounce the rise of a New Woman who is embodied by Capitu, a female protagonist marked by a highly ambidextrous characterization – half masculine temper, half feminine femme fatale – and an array of qualities which place her in a liminal position, uncertain enough to paradoxically terrify and arouse the skittish, effeminate Bentinho.

Hansen goes even farther arguing that Bento’s narrative is nimbly fashioned to a specific male audience, abundant in Brazil during the late 19th century, which is ready to embrace Dom Casmurro’s biased gender politics:

his readers, in general, are pictured as believers in “the essentially treacherous” nature of women. […] These stereotypes construct ‘woman’ as the product of an ideological formation: sly, oblique, gypsy-like, capricious, calculating, fickle, treacherous […]. The images of Capitu are negative: she is criticised, in effect, for taking her own initiatives, and not taking on the role required of the submissive woman. (252)

Before thinking about Capitu with a mixture of awe and desire, “[como] essa criatura que brincara comigo, que pulara, dançara, creio até que dormira comigo, deixava-me agora com os braços atados e medrosos” (48), Bentinho
had already rehearsed a dysfunctional relationship with his mother, D. Glória, which functions as the paradigmatic unresolved Oedipus Complex: he adores her and depends on her as if she was indeed an angel in his house, but he has harbored a sharp grudge towards her promise of sending him away to the seminary. Moreover, D. Glória's overzealous, saintly ways have transformed him into a dependent, feeble boy trapped in the shadow of his deceased great father, which in its turn transforms Bento, not just into a neurotic, whiny child, but it imprints the germ of his future paranoid self: he is thus more of a Brazilian Hamlet, terrified of his father's heavy legacy and plagued by the incestuous attachment to his mother, than a Brazilian Othello on the prowl for a guilty Desdemona.

Bentinho, and later in his adulthood Bento Santiago, is the paradigm for the pressuring burden of heritage the patriarchal society puts on the firstborn's shoulders; the permanent supremacy of the upper-class depends on his ability to procreate and multiply, whether titles or genes. Therefore Bento's initial failure to produce an heir, and his later refusal to accept Ezequiel as his own, becomes a huge mark in Machado's composition of Dom Casmurro's role. The physical and emotional barrenness of his life as a bitter bachelor ultimately functions as a symbol for the end of an era in Brazil's history, much like Hamlet's death in the end of Shakespeare's play signifies the end to a decaying lineage that was rotting Elsinore away.

Bento's failure to produce not just a surviving heir but also a lasting, meaningful relationship with another being is intrinsically connected with the failure of his narrative goal: "atar as duas pontas da vida, e restaurar na velhice a adolescência" (25). He fails to bring life even to a narrative that should provide sense to his lonely existence; in turn, this fact produces a comment on the barrenness of the patriarchal upper-classes in Brazil. Quoting Dominique Maingueneau in his assertion that "para que a mulher fatal surja em toda a sua força é preciso poder dizer de seus malefícios que ocorreram perto da nossa casa," Pinheiro Passos links Bento's "histórico-cultural" context with his authorial position as first person narrator. He thus employs his writing as a tool to protect his wavering manliness and justify his "fracasso amoroso aos olhos dos leitores da época, os quais, conhecedores das delicadezas do diálogo estabelecido com as fontes, são capazes de apreciar com mais profundidade o seu alcance," and lastly side with Bento in his marital grievances (32–33).

However, this technique does not bring any closure to the stubborn Dom Casmurro. Bento fails not just in coming to terms with his past inner demons and personal shortcomings, but also simultaneously, he fails to aptly reinforce his masculinity and play out the principal role of paterfamilias since he remains a barren bachelor probably until the end of his days. The pivotal traits of a virile patriarch have already been corrupted by a lax
existence based on a system of inheritances, a compulsive fear of women, the self-consuming circle of privileges, and a paradoxical sense of poor self-image, that is ironically met out by a snobbishness about Bento’s superior value over lower-class people like Capitu and her family.

Thus it is perfectly understandable that Machado would broach the theme of the educated gentleman enfeebled by a life of comfortable inertia and pressing anxiety; this is a predominant topic in the literary production of his time and a marked trait of the privileged class Machado knew so well from an outsider’s perspective due to his humble origins. Félix’s heart, especially, seems to function as a synecdoche to the sentimentally sterile landscape found in Machado’s male protagonist; it is “árido e seco [. . .] invadido de uma cruel misantropia, a princípio irritada e violenta, depois melancólica e resignada” (98), a fertile field for the sharp antagonism felt for the psychologically passionate and fiercely emasculating female prototypes whose Lívia, with her vibrant notion that “o amor é a lei da vida, a razão única da existência,” came to represent (124). Machado’s anti-heroes constantly rectify their shaky ideas on masculinity and virile self-worth by chastising women with the accusation of Eve-like betrayal and adultery; “the remnants of Félix’s imagination [for example] will be shown, as the novel progresses, to yield nothing but barreness or slander, since his suspicions concerning Lívia will result in the destruction of her plans for a life together” (Lisboa 41). Collecting evidences and presenting a case against an adulterous woman as Bento, the cunning lawyer, gingerly does, and Félix, the retired doctor, more lazily ends up doing too, is after all an exercise of the mind, a cerebral project which keeps these men grounded to an ideal of stern rationality both Lívia with her “olhos aveludados e brilhantes, feitos para os desmaios de amor” (53) and Capitu with her treacherous “olhos de ressaca” kept challenging (70).

By not letting go of their role as evidence collectors in the minute investigation against their lovers, however, both Bento and Félix are condemning their hearts to a precocious death in the dudgeons of cold science, although they see it as avoiding being overrun by the uncontrollable tides of womanly affection. In this vein, Lupton comments that, “the intensity of emotion associated with womanhood is directly aligned with the flow of bodily fluids; only if such superabundance is drained from the body can emotional tranquility be preserved” (78). Bento and Félix are thus kept safely impervious by their steely façade of apparent jealousy, which ironically may keep their hearts protected from a female-like vulnerability connected with the ideal of love, but it also induces a self-destructive process of over-analysis, which ultimately renders Bento and Félix heirless, bloodless bachelors. As Félix very nimbly puts it, the process of doggedly prosecuting one’s beloved results in a sad denouement, even for the monomaniac accusers:
“calejou-se-me a alma a pouco e pouco, e o meu coração literalmente morreu” (98).

If in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* one witnesses the prince’s descent into bitterness and confusion until he has become inured to cruelty and kindness, in Machado’s two novels the reader is confronted with a similar plotline which I have dubbed as “death of the heart” narrative. From the onset of their tales, both male characters confess openly to be incapable of loving as amply and freely as the women who approach them; Félix even tells his former mistress Cecília that, “sou um coração defeituoso, um espírito vesgo, uma ama insípida [. . .] incapaz de constância. O amor para mim é um idílio de um semestre [. . .]” (42, italics mine). Lívia comes into his life ready to perform “uma espécie de missão espiritual” she should have known impossible, for she had tried it before unsuccessfully in her deceased husband (109). She wearily admits that, “empreendi a tarefa de o trazer à atmosfera dos meus sentimentos, errada tentativa, que só me produziu atribulação e cansaço,” a description that ominously foreshadows the course of her affair with Félix. (96). Nonetheless, Lívia courageously embarks on a repeated emotional voyage, this time with skeptical Félix at the wheel, aiming to resurrect his stony heart. Briefly, with her profound belief in love’s healing power, Lívia stokes a frail flame in Félix’s “árido e seco” spirit; yet ultimately this will be put out by his “cepticismo desdenhoso ou hipócrita,” for he suffers from a malady no amount of feminine love could truly mend, but oddly enough, can only increase; he suffers from “uma imaginação doente [. . .] uma desconfiança dos sentimentos e das pessoas [que] não provinha só das decepções que encontrara; tinha também raízes na mobilidade do espírito e na debilidade do coração. A energia dele era ato de vontade, não qualidade nativa; ele era mais que tudo fraco e volúvel” (78/98, italics mine).

The same fickle emotional characteristics can be easily applied to Dom Casmurro. Bento describes himself as a shy and fearful boy who hides behind doors eavesdropping to the adults’ conversations in chapter 3; moreover, he does not come across as a witty analyzer either, since he is so blatantly oblivious to his own emotions he needs José Dias to perform the “revelação da consciência a si própria,” i.e. that Capitu is in love with him and vice-versa (40). Thus the love seeded in his young mind by José Dias’ innuendoes and Capitu’s deliberate writing on the wall rises wedded with resentment and suspicion, for it only confirms his lack of sagacity, manly dominance and self-control. These feelings will later on overcome the adult Bento, destroying any kind of benign affection and ultimately performing the final stage of his hardening heart’s metamorphosis from spineless Bentinho to suspicious Bento, and lastly to barren Dom Casmurro.

As Capitu’s and Lívia’s nurturing love, directly linked to their roles as motherly figures and thus their “procreative fruitfulness,” cannot take root
in the males’ moribund hearts, only the most sterile emotions, as resentment, malice and doubt, will lastly flourish there (Lisboa 41). Félix blames the death of his heart on a traumatic past affair, which shipwrecked his ability to commit to passion: "ninguém desperdiçou mais generosamente os afetos do que eu, continuou o médico, ninguém mais do que eu soube ser amigo e amante. Era crédulo como tu [...] até que me bateu a hora das decepções funestas" (98). Nonetheless, the omniscient narrator rapidly clarifies that, although there is some truth in this affirmation, Félix’s nature was intrinsically defective, for “ele era mais do que tudo fraco e volúvel” (ibid). Bento sports a similar weak and volatile personality, conversely quick-started by a loving woman Capitu, who like Lívia, “confiava em si mesma o renovar daquela alma que envelhecerá antes do tempo” (ibid). Echoing his literary precursor, Bento also blames the death of his heart on his beloved’s unfaithful misdeeds. Yet, there was a time, Bento promises, when, like Félix’s in the first days of his affair with Lívia, his heart reacted ardently; “naquele tempo, [quando] por mais mulheres bonitas que achasse, nenhuma receberia a mínima parte do amor que tinha por Capitu. [...] Capitu era tudo e mais que tudo; não vivia nem trabalhava que não fosse pensando nela” (178). Nonetheless, as Caldwell points out, “even if Capitu were guilty of adultery with Escobar, the tragedy of Dom Casmurro would remain: it is his. Santiago’s ‘heart had been killed long before the supposed betrayal’ (Brazilian Othello 148, italics mine). The same tabulation is effective for Lívia and Félix’s interrupted affair; even if Lívia had indeed entertained various lovers before and after meeting Félix, like the nefarious poison-pen letter suggested, she could not be held accountable for something which had always been ingrained in Félix: his “imaginação doentia” and his crippling incapacity to generously love without resentment (79).

So, since the terrain inside both these male hearts is really barren, only a temporary semblance of love could grow there, one which is vague and thus ends up being easily snuffed by Félix’s or Bento’s innately pernicious minds. Capitu and Lívia are ultimately cast as paradigms of liveliness and fertility for they have in their hearts the kind of warmth that at least momentarily seems able to resurrect the men’s congealed emotions. Nevertheless, it is exactly their nurturing nature, symbolized by their ability to bear and rear male sons, loving them unconditionally even in their isolated exiles, as well as by their proactive influence over their grooms, that provokes the resentment and the destructive urge in their neurotic partners. As Lisboa argues, “the mingling in Lívia of the maternal and the desirable in Félix’s eyes, symbolized by the ardent kiss imprinted by him upon her mouth, heralding as it does the more clearly oedipal resonances of Dom Casmurro [...] empowers Lívia in a manner perturbing enough to render necessary her elimination” (42, italics mine).
This description is well epitomized in the dual pull Lívia exerts in Félix’s heart when they first meet; “A impressão de Félix foi boa e má: achou-lhe uma beleza deslumbrante, mas pareceu-lhe ver através daquele rosto senhoril uma alma altiva e desenhosa” (49). Right away it is clear Félix resists the pang of love with a critical, if not cynical, approach. As the narrator states earlier on, for Félix love and death walk hand in hand in his barren heart, as “a dama dos seus pensamentos, como diria um poeta, recebia assim um golpe mortal e literário” (35). Demonstrating a sudden admiration for a cadaverous Rachel who was “extremamente pálida e magra; os olhos [. . .] amortecidos e fundos [but] a própria morbidez do aspecto como lhe dava realce maior” finalizes this connection between the inoperative, corpse-like woman and the type of love appreciated by Félix’s dead heart: one with “um gosto amargo, travado de dúvidas e suspeitas” (81).

While Capitu and Lívia arduously try to give birth to a healthy, happy relationship, completed with male offspring (Ezequiel, and Luís by proxy), Bento and Félix stubbornly attempt, and finally succeed, to miscarry the embryo of light and love the women had seeded inside their frail hearts. Félix calls of the wedding and fails to produce an heir, whether through marriage or the adoption of Lívia’s son, while Bento disowns Ezequiel as his legitimate firstborn and Capitu as his lawful wife. Resentment for the female fertility is a reaction which is in line with these two males’ introverted and suspicious natures. In Bento’s case, “at the centre lies his inexperience, the result of his socially privileged situation and his mother’s refusal to let him grow normally,” another resolute female figure who kindles paradoxical feelings of hate and love in Bento’s heart (Gledson 90). These will be carried on into his next relationship with a female, Capitu, the forceful fourteen-year-old girl described as a much more intelligent and virile character than Bento himself, the firstborn of a wealthy family, should be. She is “alta, forte e cheia, apertada em um vestido de chita [. . .] os cabelos grossos [. . .] morena, olhos claros e grandes, nariz reto e comprido [. . .], boca fina e queixo largo,” while conversely bright and inventive (34).

Bento’s mother, D. Glória, epitomizes the saintly “boa criatura,” the perfect Madonna conserved in virginal widowhood, the woman Bento could never truly conquer or defy, but who is still suffocating enough to inspire hatred (32). Glória’s duplicitous maternal role is thus a foil to Hamlet’s Gertrude, a figure cast simultaneously as a loving mother, an impossible lover, and a revolting warder. As Hansen argues, in Dom Casmurro one finds,

Bento, heavily influenced by his mother, [who taught him that] in a woman, independence of character is a vice. [. . .] Since childhood, Bento, as the car-
rier of his mother's desires, has lived a destiny he has not chosen. Widowed herself, D. Glória wants him, in the name of a promise made before he was born, to be castrated and angelic – a priest, not a man. (255)

Such bitter sense of emasculated virility, mingled with a disguised, ingrained misogyny, results in a direct product of a prior overbearing female influence in Bento's case, and one may only guess, in Félix's as well.

On the other spectrum of Bento's female crux is Capitu, with her masculine will, sagacious mind and lovelorn disposition, which acts as the perfect canvas where Bento, like Hamlet to Ophelia, may project his male frustration, romantic ideals and frenetic volatility. Ultimately she encapsulates all the roles pertaining to the realm of dangerous femininity: she is mother, temptress, wife and Madonna to the isolated Bento. She goes beyond the liminal anger Bento fed for his piteous mother because as a lover and ally, Capitu allows for an expansion on Bento's sexual frustrations and insecurities which Glória's limited motherly role annullled immediately.

Capitu, as Lívia up to some extent, stands for the holy angel in the onset, the deceitful femme fatale in the middle, and the dignified martyr in the requiem of her husband's narrative. Therefore, through her multiplicity of roles, Capitu embodies the real "mutante que sendo mulher tem uma mente masculina, e sendo ambiciosa, infiltrou a ordem social no poder," all admirable qualities the privileged firstborn of an upper class household is direfully lacking (Macedo 104). Even Lívia, with her "ar de rainha, uma natural majestade" and well-bred manners, has a sting of defiance in her temper for she throws unexpected tantrums and is "um pouco sarcástica, mas daquele sarcasmo benévolo e anódino, que sabe misturar espinhos com rosas" (54). As Lisboa remarks, Machado is already experimenting with the blurring of generic female prototypes, adding a particular flair to the traditional European corseted model of the poised lady. Nina Auerbach furthers this claim by adding that there is "a possible reinstatement of the energizing potential of both the whore and the angel [...] empowering the versions of femaleness [...] as necessarily antithetical but rather as facets of the same subversive potential [...]" (155).

Bento's resentment towards his beloved can thus be inscribed in his sense of gapped self and unstable sense of manhood detected when he referred to his "lacuna," since "a liberdade que ela representava era, por isso, potentialmente subversiva, e desde logo, foi entendida como ameaçadora pelos detentores e os instrumentos do poder – a mãe viúva de Bentinho, o 'agregado' José Dias – e não menos o próprio Bentinho" (Macedo 95). Bento fears and resents Capitu as early as his enamored description of his beloved in chapter 13, much like Félix's resentment for Lívia is jumpstarted as soon
as he sees her and must admit to himself that she exudes a superiority intrinsically connected with her regal beauty and the prideful "harmonias do seu caráter [...] expansiva e discreta, enérgica e delicada, entusiasta e reflectida" (75).

The insecure male reacts with immediate suspicion when confronted with a willful, admirable woman, thus the tag of subversive and the will to crush the offender of patriarchal order is triggered in the form of fencing off love in a rather derogatory fashion for the female reputation. However, because at the core of Félix's and Bento's malicious instability rests a vestigial self-hatred akin to Hamlet's, the drive to search for love and acceptance in the female lap still pushes them towards Capitu's and Lívia's maternal/marital arms; as moths to a flame Bento and Félix seek, through their brides' liveliness, a kind of redemptive and restorative affection their dead hearts and envious minds could never reciprocate.

Lívia and Capitu, with their defyng features and candid intentions, were hence doomed from the start in their "missão piedosa" to rekindle their lovers' hearts, much like Ophelia, with her dreamy innocence, was doomed to fail when she imagined her childlike love could jeer Hamlet out of his self-involved lunacy (95). This is an impossible plan because, as Caldwell argues, these men's "ability to love is subject to death. Dom Casmurro is essentially the same story as Ressurreição. When Félix [...] told Lívia he had 'embraced a serpent,' he spoke the truth but not as he meant it: he embraced death. Death, you will recall, also embraced Bento. And death, in the form of jealousy, sank its teeth into him. No matter how often his love was resurrected, death struck again [...]" (117).

Eventually resentment, which comes sometimes masked as romantic jealousy, is nothing but a by-product of a dead heart, and it is all that ultimately remains for these male protagonists; it is the residue of a life of embitterment chosen over a life of love next to the women Bento and Félix have briefly admired and then lastly alienated. Curiously enough it may be argued then that in the "desenlace desta situação desigual entre um homem frio e uma mulher apaixonada" the triumph went indeed to the warmer part, for both Lívia and Capitu exited the stage with silent dignity, even when their reputation and routine were tampered with, and for once, they did not readily succumb to the male-induced despair like drowned Ophelia or poisoned Madame Bovary did, but survived accompanied by their loyal sons.

As for Bento and Félix, Machado's sarcastic insight did not allow them to die a poetic, redemptive death like Hamlet, but instead the witty author condemned them to the worst fate an imaginatively, self-involved gentleman could ever meet: the humdrum of meaninglessly inert life, typical of the economically rich and emotionally bare, or as Bento keenly nails it, "o
mais do tempo é gasto em hortar, jardinar e ler; com[er] bem e não dorm[ir] mal” (25).

Notes

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1. In his book Machado de Assis, the Brazilian Pyrrhonian, Maia Neto ascribes Bento's and Félix's destructively sceptical behaviour not just to intrinsic weakness, but moreover to “the precarious condition of the naïve character, vulnerable to sudden change, trapped in the conflicting web of appearances spun by women [which ultimately] causes the disturbances that point to the necessity of attaining ataraxia. [...] To avoid the despair of doubt” Bento and Félix prefer then the certainty of infidelity crystalized in the complete separation from their beloveds, as well as from the “exterior life” they symbolise, than to carry on a domesticity tormented by “the fragility of ‘fixed ideas’ [that] represents [lastly] the fragility of life” (127, 131).

2. Maia Neto goes as far as arguing that Bento, like Félix, was always condemned to a barren, isolated life since his “pessimistic diagnosis [...] rather than trying to convince the reader that Capitu was unfaithful, [...] is trying to show the groundlessness of any belief whatsoever,” a proof of absolute nihilism ingrained in these men's tempers (144).

3. Regarding the social context surrounding Dom Casmurro's creation, John Gledson suggests that “vale a pena fazer uma pequena digressão aqui, sobre a relação entre Dom Casmurro e a década em que foi escrito. Em muitos sentidos, o romance tem um aspecto quase ‘histórico’: transcorre em grande medida na década de 1890, e seria possível argumentar que, mais do que refletir a década de 1890, Machado fugia dela, cedendo a um acesso de nostalgia [...] e por isso mesmo] Bento é um escapaista [...] que] não acredita em Deus de nenhuma forma significativa – seu relativismo de fin-de-siécle deu cabo da crença” (342–43).

4. Massaud Moisés alludes to the elusive connection between jealousy and female loyalty by declaring that “o adultério de Capitu vale não para explicar a sua patogenia, pois ela é tão frágil como o resto da humanidade, mas para dar aço a Machado de Assis de analisar detidamente um problema insondável para o homem [...] adultério e ciúme” (16).

5. Excessive jealousy once again points out to the long history of association between Machado's male protagonists and "Otelô de Shakespeare, representante maior do ciúme explosivo que leva à destruição do ser amado"; however, as Pinheiro Passos sagely points out (20), in Machado the problematic of jealousy and adultery is complicated by settling upon "a hipótese da traição," not the consummated fact, as in for example Hawthorne's 1850 novel of female adultery par excellence, The Scarlet Letter. In Ressurreição, as in Dom Casmurro, both heroes clutch, not to hard
evidence, but to the taunting “hypothesis” of betrayal, even when in Lívia’s case, such hypothesis is completely dispelled by the narrator’s omniscient acquittal.

6. The fascination with “o campo da magia destruidora feminina” was actually a recurrent trope of late 19th-century literature, as Pinheiro Passos explains by broaching other examples of dangerous femininity analogous to Capitu; Salomé, Carmen, Manon Lescaut, they all encapsulate the “motivo desenvolvido também pelos românticos, tão ligados à ideia da marginalidade e êxtase, [que] nos apresenta cortesãs famosas, ciganas deslumbrantes, representantes oitocentistas do tema da Mulher fatal, cujo erotismo estofava a trama e também fazia ressaltar o contraste com a regada vida burguesa” (26). Capitu was therefore not alone in her ambiguous characterization of loving woman and volatile gypsy-eyed vixen who as easily seduces the swooning Bentinho as perturbs the staunch Dom Casmurro.

Bibliography


