

# Camilo's M(O)ther Women: Two Matricidal Narratives

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**Abstract.** In this essay Rebecca Atencio argues that a recurring theme in Camilo Castelo Branco's work is the trope of the dead mother and the act of matricide itself. Theoretically informed by the pertinent and complementary theories of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, she analyzes two "matricidal narratives," the popular narrative *Maria! Não me mates* and the novella "Maria Moisés," as exemplary of these driving motifs in Camilo's work. Moving away from the widespread tendency of biographical readings of Camilo's gallery of fictive women, this essay proposes an innovative critical reading of these female protagonists, and relates matricide, a founding act and key plot element in these and many of the author's texts, to gender-related issues, the repression of female desire, the submission of women, the female identification with the mother or father, and the alternatives available to women in a patriarchal society.

Where does Camilo Castelo Branco fit into a discussion of the "other" nineteenth century? He is, to be sure, one of Portuguese Romanticism's most emblematic figures. Still, at least one important aspect of his fictional production has usually been pushed to the side in scholarly readings: his gallery of female protagonists. Camilo wrote prolifically about the lives of women, yet his heroines have often been relegated to the lowly status of the "other woman" by critics. This is largely because his novellas have traditionally been overshadowed by his colorful biography. He is a sort of archetypal romantic

"hero" in his own right, an inveterate philanderer whose checkered love life has frequently been viewed as the raw material for his fiction. In Camilo's case, the legends surrounding the man are equally if not more extravagant than the sentimental stories he composed. To give just a taste of his amorous (mis)adventures we might recall, for example, how he abandoned his teenage wife and infant daughter to pursue a series of illicit affairs with nuns, poor seamstresses, and other hapless ingénues. Moreover, romantic exploits such as these landed him in jail on at least two occasions: once for abducting and seducing a prepubescent orphan and later for his infamous extra-marital liaison with Ana Plácido. It has even been alleged that as a young man his passion for a certain Maria do Adro was so great that after she died he exhumed her remains and kept them in a basket under his bed in a gesture reminiscent of the greatest Portuguese love story of all time, that of Dom Pedro and Inês de Castro.

Plucked from the pages of his biography, real-life women such as these are all too often the leading ladies in scholarly critiques of Camilo's work. Studies of his heroines are relatively rare, and even these are frequently anchored in biographical musings.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I propose a re-reading of Camilo's "other women," the female protagonists—particularly mothers and daughters—that populate his works of fiction.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, it will be my contention that Camilo systematically eliminates maternal figures from what I have chosen to call his matricidal narratives. I take as the basis for my analysis two of his texts, the *folheto de cordel* (popular narrative) entitled *Maria! Não me mates* (1848) and the novella "Maria Moisés" (part of the collection *Novelas do Minho*, originally published between 1875 and 1877) in order to illustrate how the death of the mother is portrayed as being tragic but ultimately in the best interest of the community because it safeguards the traditional values that are the bedrock of patriarchy. At the same time, however, the elimination of the mother also exposes the weakness of male power, which reacts to the perceived threat of female desire by suppressing the maternal. Above all, the effacement of mothers from Camilo's narratives literalizes how the institution of motherhood contains women within the narrow roles of parturition and childrearing, depriving them of language, identity, and *jouissance*.

Matricide and its symbolic implications are at the center of the feminist theories of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and others, although their approaches to the subject vary. In "The Bodily Encounter With the Mother," Irigaray draws attention to the taboo surrounding the relationship with the mother, which she views as "the dark continent *par excellence*" (35). She then reinter-

prets the murder of Clytemnestra in the Greek myth of the *Oresteia* in order to demonstrate how Western society is founded on matricide. According to her analysis, there are at least two important consequences to the murder of the mother. The first is the matricidal son's escape from punishment in order to establish patriarchy. The second consequence, on the other hand, has to do with the effect of matricide on women. In the wake of the sacrifice of the mother, the daughter finds herself forced to choose between two rather extreme and unappealing options: to identify with the mother through insanity or to become a "virgin goddess, born of the father and obedient to his law in forsaking the mother" (38). Regardless of the path chosen, the result is always the consolidation of male power and the effacement of female genealogy.

Counterposed to Irigaray and her cultural analysis, Kristeva explores the question of matricide in psychoanalytical terms, though she reaches similar conclusions. This approach is grounded in the understanding of female development during the preoedipal and oedipal phases, which Nancy Chodorow meticulously explains in her study *The Reproduction of Mothering*. In the preoedipal stage, girls perceive themselves as having more permeable ego boundaries and less autonomy from their mothers compared to their male counterparts (93). According to Freud's version of the female Oedipus complex, the girl's penis-envy causes her to reject her mother in favor of her father (114). According to Chodorow, however, this account is far too simplistic because the intensity of the daughter's attachment to the mother precludes an absolute identification with the father, thus the oedipal girl "oscillates between attachment to her mother and to her father" (129).

Kristeva takes the classical model of the female Oedipus complex as her point of departure in *Black Sun*, in which she famously uses matricide as a metaphor for the abjection of the maternal body. In short, the "murder" or radical rejection of the mother is "our vital necessity, the *sina-qua-non* of our individuation" (27-8). This is all the more true in the case of the preoedipal girl, who feels particularly threatened due to the porousness of her ego boundaries in relation to her mother. On the other hand, Kristeva, like Chodorow, recognizes that the female self is unable to completely annul its identification with the maternal body due to the intensity of the preoedipal bond. The result is a situation of profound ambivalence that she describes in another essay as "an endless struggle between the orgasmic maternal body and paternal prohibition" ("About Chinese Women" 147). Furthermore, Kristeva identifies two opposing feminine paradigms similar to those proposed by

Irigaray: the ecstatic virgin and the melancholic fallen woman (147). For both of these feminist theorists, identification with the mother is an act of subversion that can only lead to madness.

The trope of the dead mother that Irigaray identifies as the foundation of Western culture and that Kristeva views as a metaphor for the individuation process recurs throughout Camilo's work, often emerging as a crucial plot element. It is a theme that can be traced all the way back to his relatively unknown first printed work of prose, *Maria! Não me mates*,<sup>3</sup> a *folheto de cordel* about an actual murder case. If the patriarchal order is founded on the act of matricide, then the same can be said of Camilo's work, judging by this and subsequent publications. Though *Maria! Não me mates* may be one of the only instances of literal matricide in Camilo's fiction, the figure of the dead or dying mother is resuscitated throughout his work, most notably in "Maria Moisés," *A brasileira de Prazins* (1882), and *A doida do Candal* (1867), among others. In works such as these, Camilo eliminates—or kills off—his maternal characters in what amounts to acts of narrative matricide, in effect preempting the formation of a female genealogy in favor of the paternal order.

In the *folheto* entitled *Maria! Não me mates*, Camilo recasts the matricidal myth of the *Oresteia* in the context of nineteenth-century Portugal.<sup>4</sup> Despite its origin as a potboiler, *Maria! Não me mates* is an essential text for understanding the matricidal impulse in certain of Camilo's other novellas and his treatment of female characters in general. In spite of the fact that he based his story on an actual murder case, the account itself is clearly a work of fiction. Comparing the detailed version presented in *Maria! Não me mates* to the scant information available in contemporary newspaper reports, Abel Barros Baptista concludes that it is not the product of investigative journalism, but rather pure invention (*Camilo* 111). The conventions of the *folheto* form serve to obscure this fictionalization and contribute to the narrative's mythification (111). The greatest discrepancy is that the protagonist in Camilo's narrative admits to killing her mother, whereas the real-life daughter was subsequently cleared of all suspicion. The addition and manipulation of a number of specific details in the *folheto* give rise, furthermore, to other striking similarities with the *Oresteia*. In order to demonstrate this, it will be useful to summarize the plot of Camilo's version.

*Maria! Não me mates* is the story of the murder of Matilde, an elderly widow and mother of Maria José. When a young man named José Maria asks for her hand in marriage, Maria José seeks her mother's blessing. Matilde dis-

approves and urges her daughter to break off the courtship, but Maria José flatly refuses. José Maria reacts to Matilde's objections by pressuring his lover to murder her mother.

Maria José is initially reluctant to heed this villainous advice. She changes her mind only after an argument with Matilde over the theft of the latter's life savings, which Maria José has secretly given to her suitor. José Maria helpfully supplies his fiancée with a pair of cobbler's knives before disappearing from the narrative for good. Maria José returns home and stabs her mother, then decapitates and mutilates the body. She is eventually arrested when a local official discovers the decapitated head under a brick in the hearth in the brilliantly gothic final scene:

The administrator, digging in the hearth, found the head and other pieces of the face. He asked Maria José if she knew whose head it was and she responded, while eating watermelon with bread:

"Yes, I do. It's my mother's!" (Branco, *Maria!* 32)<sup>5</sup>

The narrator ends his tale with a dispassionate summary of Maria José's murder conviction and death by hanging. Curiously, he neglects to mention the fate of José Maria, who arguably can be held equally accountable for Matilde's death.

The narrator's silence with respect to José Maria is an ideal starting point for reading *Maria! Não me mates* as a rewriting of the Greek myth within the context of Camilo's Portugal. As the would-be son-in-law and co-conspirator in Matilde's murder, José Maria plays the role of Orestes. That his name is the inverse of his lover's also suggests a filial relationship to his victim. His fulfillment of the Orestes role is made complete by his escape from punishment for his crime. José Maria is absolved of all guilt, not only by the legal system, but also by the narrator, who neglects to mention what happened to him after the matricide.

Unlike Orestes, however, José Maria does not found a new social order. Instead it is the narrator who presumes to try and fill that role by hysterically decrying the moral collapse of society with apocalyptic imagery and repeated calls for fathers to exert greater control over their unruly daughters as the only remedy for that collapse—in effect championing patriarchy. According to him, Matilde's murder is a direct result of Maria José's unchecked desire. Though the narrator claims that his account is meant to be read as a condemnation of matricide, on quite another level it becomes clear that Camilo sets an important precedent by manipulating the death of the mother so that



it becomes a justification for the repression of female desire.

The primacy of the father's law is apparent not only in the parallelism with the *Oresteia*, but also in the narrator's repeated addresses to his readers as *pais de família*. Although the plural *pais* usually means parents (i.e. father and mother) in Portuguese, the expression *pais de família*, from the Latin *paterfamilias*, specifically refers to fathers as a group. By making this important distinction, the narrator in effect excludes mothers from his target audience in a gesture that is wholly consistent with the underlying message of his text. Another telling detail in this regard is José Maria's acquisition of Matilde's life savings. This seemingly minor episode of the plot is actually quite significant because it reenacts the social practice of primogeniture, which is vital to the continuation of patriarchal power. In the primogeniture system, all inheritance passes on to the first-born son in order to guarantee patrilineality and thus the removal of all women from the pool of potential heirs. The trope of the dead mother in Romantic, and especially Gothic, literature often serves to literalize the legal "death" of women under primogeniture (Anolick 33). José Maria's confiscation of Matilde's money—Maria José's inheritance—is therefore a significant event in the story's development because it cements this literalization. Furthermore, the similarities between Camilo's *folheto* and the myth of the *Oresteia*, along with the literalization of the civil 'death' of the mother under primogeniture, demonstrate that Camilo's fictional account of a real crime has a hidden rhetorical agenda. What, though, can we make of the fact that in Camilo's version, it is the daughter's hand that wields the murder weapon?

In practical terms, it is Maria José who must commit the matricide in order to release José Maria from accountability. As we have seen, however, according to Irigaray Clytemnestra's murder has another consequence beyond the non-punishment of the son: the daughter must choose whether to identify with the mother, resulting in madness, or with the father, implying total submission to his law (37-8). The stakes are the same in *Maria! Não me mates*. At the end of the story, the central dilemma of maternal versus paternal identification continues to be problematic, as symbolized by the daughter's androgynous name. Even though Maria José commits matricide, the most extreme act of rejection of the mother, she still finds herself in limbo between the two poles because, as Kristeva observes in the case of the female self, total separation from the mother is impossible. We see this most clearly in Camilo's story through the matricidal daughter's literal return to the mother she has killed: "Upon returning home [. . .] she lay down in the same

sheets where she had slept with her mother two days before and with the head of that same mother buried next to the bed" (*Maria!* 31). Maria José's actions symbolize this perseverance of the mother-daughter bond. The vestiges of the matrisesexual tie clearly disgust the narrator, who recounts every detail as evidence of the daughter's total depravity. According to his biased portrayal of events, Maria José's return to her mother is equally as deplorable as the murder itself and must be paid for in kind. The punishment invented by Camilo in his fictional account fits both of the daughter's crimes (the matricide and the return to the mother): "[T]he defendant was condemned [. . .] to a natural and eternal death in the gallows, to be erected in Santa Clara field, *passing through those places where she placed the pieces of her mother's body*" (32, my emphasis). The circumstances of Maria José's execution in *Maria! Não me mates* thus literalize how the daughter's return to the mother necessarily implies her exclusion from the symbolic order.

As the female paradigms outlined by both Irigaray and Kristeva reflect, Christian culture constructs two contrasting images of women, corresponding to the palindromic dichotomy *Eva-Ave*. Robert W. Hanning explains that, according to Biblical tradition, "*Eva* (Eve and the fall) is reversed and redeemed by *Ave* (the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary announcing her conception of Jesus)" (581). Eve, mother of all humankind, represents the demonization of female desire, whereas Mary, the Virgin Mother, embodies the ultimate feminine ideal under patriarchy. *Maria! Não me mates* likewise stigmatizes female desire through Maria José's literal return to her mother, which places her on the side of *Eva*, maternal identification, and insanity. Camilo's manipulation of the matricide theme therefore sets an important precedent in his work. The trope of the dead mother in later works such as "Maria Moisés" serves to justify the repression of the female protagonists' *jouissance* and to promote the impossible ideal of the feminine as simultaneously virginal and maternal.

The *Eva-Ave* binomial is not only present in "Maria Moisés," it is the organizing motif of the novella, determining the narrative's content, style, and structure.<sup>6</sup> In the first part of the novella, the narrator recounts the circumstances surrounding Zefa's death in a river as she tries to flee her parents' home after secretly giving birth to a baby out of wedlock. The accident is presented from various perspectives as different members of the community, unaware of the baby's existence, try to piece together what they believe to be an act of suicide. The second part reveals the infant girl's fate following the death of her mother. The basket in which Zefa was carrying Maria Moisés is swept away by

the current and finally rescued by a poor fisherman, who brings the baby to two spinsters to be raised. Thereafter, Maria Moisés becomes the epitome of chastity and virtue, dedicating her life to the care of abandoned children.

As this short summary illustrates, both the premise of the story and its bipartite structure contribute to the separation of the lives and the narratives of these two female protagonists. This mutual exclusivity is vital to understanding the matricidal intention that steers the novella. It is imperative for Zefa to die soon after Maria Moisés is born so that there is no possibility for a preoedipal bond to form between the two. Deprived of any contact with the maternal body, the daughter naturally gravitates toward the only object left with which for her to identify, the father. Zefa, like Eve, incarnates female desire, and her death creates the conditions necessary for Maria Moisés to embody the otherwise unattainable male ideal of femininity, symbolized by the Virgin Mary. In this way, their juxtaposition in two separate texts imitates the reversal and redemption of *Eva* by *Ave* in Biblical tradition (Hanning 581).

Maria Moisés's role as caregiver to abandoned children is central to understanding how the female paradigm of the virgin mother is represented in the novella. Some critics have misinterpreted the significance of the heroine's occupation, viewing her dedication to unwanted children as "a threat to the nuclear family and, metaphorically, to the macro-structure that it represents" (Diogo and Mateus 100), when actually Maria Moisés represents the patriarchal ideal of femininity. The Virgin Mary is the ultimate symbol of this paradoxical ideal because she is literally both a virgin and a mother, having conceived without sin. The same can be said of Maria Moisés, who is a virgin at almost forty years old, yet still fulfills the maternal role delegated to women in the social-symbolic community by rearing children abandoned by others.

Maria Moisés is therefore the perfect embodiment of what Kristeva identifies as the "ecstatic" female archetype of Christianity ("About Chinese Women" 147). In contrast with the account of Zefa's death, which reads like a crime novel, the second part of the novella, dedicated to the title heroine, is reminiscent of a medieval hagiography with its exaltations of the chastity and virtue of "Saint Moisés" (Diogo and Mateus 99). Maria Moisés's fulfillment of that feminine ideal culminates in her emotional reunion with her long-lost father, António, in a fairytale happy ending. The return of—and to—the father conveniently guarantees the resolution of all the heroine's troubles, rescuing her from financial ruin. As I've previously mentioned, it is the mother's death that makes this total identification with the father possible. In Zefa's absence,



António assumes the role of both mother and father. Kristeva observes that when “the maternal traits are attributed to the symbolic father, the mother is denied by this displacement of her attributes and the woman [daughter] then submits herself to a sexually undifferentiated androgynous being” (“About Chinese Women” 147). This is clearly the case for Maria Moisés, whose androgynous identity is reflected in both her name and her lack of sexual desire.

From the observations outlined above, we can conclude that it is Zefa, not Maria Moisés, who constitutes a threat to patriarchy. Her death is portrayed as a tragic blessing because it preserves family and social values by punishing her for her transgression of Christian morals. As Kristeva avers, women like Zefa who lose their virginity have only one recourse for accessing the symbolic order, which is the “atonement for their carnal *jouissance* with their martyrdom” (“About Chinese Women” 145-6). It is within this context that the mother’s death in “Maria Moisés” acquires a positive significance.

It is only fitting, then, that in the pages leading up to her death Zefa is consistently characterized solely by her transgression, that of having conceived out of wedlock. She is forced to flee her father’s home in shame, thus representing the epitome of the fallen woman. Her story is shrouded in secrecy to the very end, except to the omniscient narrator and the reader, serving to emphasize that humiliation (Baptista, “Introduction” 47). It is telling in this regard that the novella begins from the perspective of a young herdsman who has lost a sheep and must search for it in the dark, risking an encounter with a purgatorial soul that is rumored to haunt the area. The lost sheep—belonging the protagonist’s father—and the soul in purgatory are clear symbols, encoded in Christian culture, of Zefa’s sin (Morgado 67). Equally symbolic is the emotionally-charged final scene of the novella’s first part, in which Zefa dies in her mother’s arms: “[Maria da Laje] went directly to her daughter, lay on top of her, kissed her, shook her, called out her name with the screams of a madwoman, and there lost her senses in the brutal arms of her husband who tried to tear her away from the body” (Branco, “Maria Moisés” 150). Indeed, Maria da Laje’s descent into madness signals her own return to the preoedipal mother. Perhaps even more significantly, the second part of “Maria Moisés” ends with a similar scene of parent-child embrace, this time between Maria Moisés and her father.

In spite of its underlying defense of patriarchal power, “Maria Moisés” contains at least one element that is congruent with female subjectivity, namely the circularity of its narrative structure. This circular structure, imitative of the

cyclical nature of life and death, is also reflected in the novella's nature imagery, such as the stream that carries the basket with the newborn Maria Moisés from her dead mother's side to a new life (Morgado 70). For Kristeva, this circular conception of time, characterized by both repetition and eternity, is intimately linked with female subjectivity ("Women's Time" 191). In Paula Morgado's interpretation of Camilo's novella, this circularity is confirmed by the conclusion in which Maria Moisés, born under the sign of fertility, continues in her role as mother to an endless parade of abandoned children (70). What Morgado fails to take into account, however, is that the conclusion can also be profitably read as a moment of profound rupture because the virginal Maria Moisés will presumably never bear children of her own. The possibility of her self-realization through biological motherhood is eliminated, thus another mother is "killed." This shift from circular, feminine time to linear, masculine time corresponds perfectly to Maria Moisés's final identification with her father. As Irigaray maintains in the case of paternal power, "Female genealogy must be suppressed in favor of the [. . .] idealization of the father and husband as patriarchs" (qtd. in Hirsh 43). In Camilo's novella, the reproductive cycle and female genealogy both come to an abrupt end in the person of Maria Moisés.

Thus in "Maria Moisés" Camilo continues the precedent he set in *Maria! Não me mates* by exploiting the trope of the dead mother in order to stigmatize female desire and to promote an idealized image of the feminine. This matricidal tendency is a critical aspect of the author's treatment of female characters in general. Over the course of his career, Camilo invented countless female characters, a select few of which—like Teresa in *Amor de perdição*—have achieved iconic status in Portuguese Romanticism, and critical re-readings of these heroines are long overdue, to say the least. The author's matricidal narratives are a logical place to start because they raise a number of tangential issues of relevance to a gender-based analysis, such as romantic love, concubinage, female madness, and the role of women within both the family and the nation. What becomes clear upon re-visiting his matricidal narratives is that a great deal of critical terrain remains to be traversed in the fictional universe of Camilo's "other women."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> To give just one example, those critics who have addressed Camilo's treatment of maternal figures tend to try to explain this aspect of his work in light of the fact that the author's own mother died when he was only an infant. One such critic, João Bigotte Chorrão, maintains that

Camilo's real-life relationships reflect a predilection for "maternal, strong-willed women" and a search for a substitute for his dead mother (75). Another, Cristina Fabião, takes the short story "A última vitória de um conquistador" as the point of departure for a Freudian analysis of the author, arguing that Camilo projects both his idealization of and his feelings of betrayal by his own mother onto the two protagonists, Augusto and Josefa (91).

<sup>2</sup> The figure of the mother is also a recurring trope in Camilo's poetry, often serving as a 'mask' for the poet. In the poem "Um anjo," for example, the voice is that of a mother grieving for her dead infant (Neves 147).

<sup>3</sup> The complete title is *Maria! Não me mates, que sou tua mãe! Meditação sobre o espantoso crime acontecido em Lisboa: Uma filha que mata e despedaça sua mãe: Mandada imprimir por um mendigo, que foi lançado fora do seu convento, e anda pedindo esmola pelas portas. Oferecida aos pais de famílias, e àqueles que acreditam em Deus*. In English translation, the title is as follows: "Maria! Don't kill me, for I am your mother: Meditation on a horrific crime that occurred in Lisbon: A daughter kills and dismembers her mother: Printed by a beggar, who was thrown out of his convent, and goes door to door begging alms. Offered to fathers and to those who believe in God."

<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that Camilo's fascination with the myth of the *Oresteia* and its cultural significance is readily apparent in "A última vitória de um conquistador," a short story that he published shortly after *Maria! Não me mates*. In it the author explicitly likens the protagonist Augusto to Orestes (Fabião 94).

<sup>5</sup> All translations from the Portuguese are my own.

<sup>6</sup> The names that Camilo bestows on his characters are almost never gratuitous and those in this novella support the assertion that "Maria Moisés" is organized around the *Eva-Ave* dichotomy. The name of the title heroine is a clear reference to both the Virgin Mary and Moses, whereas *Zefa* (from Josefa) is phonetically similar to the Portuguese *Eva*.

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