

The Historical-Gothic, Female Sacrifice and Honor in Alexandre Herculano's *O Fronteiro d'África* *ou Três noites aziagas*

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Abstract. In this article Rebecca Jones-Kellogg focuses on one of Alexandre Herculano's three plays *O Fronteiro d'África ou Três noites aziagas*. She analyzes *O Fronteiro d'África* through the lens of the Historical-Gothic mode that she defines in relation to the European literary tradition. In particular, Jones-Kellogg shows how Herculano juxtaposes patriotism and political ambition with the plight of the Gothic heroine in a play steeped in questions of honor and sacrifice.

Alexandre Herculano secured his literary canonical status as the father of the Portuguese historical novel with the publication of *Eurico o Presbítero* in 1844. Nevertheless, he can be considered "other" in that he was also a strong component of the Portuguese Gothic literary movement, for which he is little studied but certainly recognized. Various critics agree. Vitorino Nemésio cites the existence of certain "tetric" elements behind the historical narrative in *Eurico* (xx); Hernâni Cidade compares the tortuous journeys of Herculano's protagonists in *Eurico* to those of Victor Hugo (in Sousa 268); and Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa, the foremost critic to-date of the Portuguese Gothic movement, points to Herculano's most prominent contribution to the genre:

But the feature that gives Herculano special prominence in the general survey of our *black* [Gothic] fiction is the interest he places on the internal struggles of his heroes,

the *dark* psychology, the storms of exacerbated passions, that drag Vasco to crime and Eurico to despair. In this, Herculano is not only important to nineteenth-century [Gothic] literature, but also a precursor of the modern tendencies that study "the deepest reaches of the soul." (268)¹

Herculano is likewise little studied as a playwright. He wrote three plays—*Tinteiro não é caçarola* (1838), *O Fronteiro d'Africa ou Três noites aziagas* (1838), and *Os Infantes em Ceuta* (1844)—none of which knew any great success. The second play, in fact, has long been considered one of the weaker examples of the Portuguese historical drama ("dramalhão histórico"). According to A. J. Saraiva and O. Lopes, most Portuguese historical dramas were of inferior quality due to the fact that they were highly influenced by the abundance of translated or adapted French melodramas and *vaudevilles*, mostly those written by Eugène Scribe, popular at that time in Portugal (765). That *O Fronteiro d'Africa* was influenced by Scribe's "well-made play"² recipe is a valid assumption given that Herculano's first dramaturgical work was an adaptation of Scribe's *Le secrétaire et le cuisinier* (1821). However, *O Fronteiro d'Africa* is original in that it combines, perhaps for the first time in Portuguese literary history, the historical narrative and the Gothic mode to create a fear-inducing, patriotic lesson on morality. The Historical-Gothic mode allows for a fusion of the patriotic moral with the plight of the Gothic heroine, as viewed through her struggle to maintain her personal and familial honor. Finally, while D. Isabel da Cunha's character is representative of the typical Gothic heroine in that she is subjected to personal persecution by an overwhelmingly evil male protagonist, she can be considered atypical in that she takes an active part in her salvation, even if her choice is self-sacrifice.

The Historical-Gothic Mode

According to Harry E. Shaw, fictional texts that adhere to the historical narrative mode are simply those "in which historical probability reaches a certain level of structural prominence" (22). *O Fronteiro d'Africa* is set very clearly in the late 1580s, shortly after the death of King Sebastião at Alcácer-Quibir, when the Portuguese throne was legitimately inherited by King Phillip II of Spain (I of Portugal) at the start of the *União Ibérica* of 1580-1640. This is a very important element of the patriotic moral lesson, as it puts forth the debate about being loyal to one's *king* or to one's *national identity*. The historical contextualization is reinforced by allusions to true historical charac-

ters—the Duke of Alba, D. António, the Prior of Crato, and King Phillip—although none of them appear as protagonists in the play. These characters not only add historical veracity to the plot but also stimulate the plot in that their actions cause reactions in the main protagonists. To give one example, the Duke of Alba orders that the da Cunha children be taken from their mother, D. Isabel, in order to force her to accept Spanish sovereignty. Even though his orders are carried out by vassals, they still force D. Isabel into the role of the persecuted heroine, illuminating the moral lesson in the process. For D. Isabel, accepting a Spanish king on the Portuguese throne was a betrayal of not only her personal honor but also of her Portuguese identity. She represents all sixteenth-century Portuguese citizens who were forced with the decision of accepting Spanish sovereignty. In this sense, the role of her character substantiates Barbara Foley's theory that reads as follows:

Characters [in the historical novel] constitute a microcosmic portrayal of representative social types; they experience complications and conflicts that embody important tendencies in historical development; one or more world-historical figures enters the fictive world, leading an aura of extra-textual validation to the text's generalizations and judgments; the conclusion reaffirms the legitimacy of a norm that transforms social and political conflict into moral debate. (160)

This moral debate was likewise a very current idea for the nineteenth-century Portuguese spectator, as Portugal had only very recently emerged from a bloody civil war at the point when Herculano wrote this play. This literary double *entente* is one of the more important aspects of the historical narrative, as explained by Avrom Fleishman: "Historical thought is seen [...] as moving from the present to the past in order to be reflected back to the present with enhanced powers of meeting the problems of life" (14). The Gothic mode serves a similar purpose. Fred Botting states that "[t]he Gothic mirror offers a heterogeneous and conflicting reflection of the present" (8) and Jarrett feels that because of this, the Gothic mode "provides one of the most powerful ways in which an author can deal with certain kinds of moral, social and historical crisis" (31). The crises addressed in this play become obvious first in the analysis of the actions of the lead female protagonist D. Isabel da Cunha and, more ambiguously, in the overall moral of the play. The Historical-Gothic novel, or mode when applied to other genres, is at its core a patriotically moral fable, oftentimes with strong loyalist tendencies and overt social criticisms. As such,

history is usually an inherent element of Gothic fiction, as the historical actions provide an allegorical context on which to stage the moral lesson.

History also has a structural function in the Historical-Gothic mode. The historical narrative establishes history as the driving force of the text and the historical context provides many key elements of the plot, the personal accoutrements, the physical location, and social comportment and mores of the characters. It also lends the Gothic narrative a literary plausibility under the guise of historiography. Using overt tones and historical references, *O Fronteiro d'Africa* is a strong example of the Historical-Gothic mode, which Devendra Varma in *The Gothic Flame* (1957) explains as a text "[...] where, in an atmosphere of supernatural terror, is portrayed a distinct panorama of history. Such works depict events and personages of a particular historical period presenting its manners and customs through fictitious characters, or they introduce local colour of the Middle Ages, diffusing over all an air of mystery and superstitious dread" (74).

Varma calls attention to the use of history as a backdrop or "panorama" for the plot and the use of the Gothic mode as ambiance. It is in this atmosphere of mystery, dread and fear that the characters act and react to their historical situations. Many other Gothic theorists agree that "Gothic fiction has, above all, to do with terror (Punter 14) and that "Gothic fiction is a literature of nightmare" (MacAndrew 3). Likewise for Robert Hume, Gothic "atmosphere is one of evil and brooding terror" (44) and "[s]een in these terms the Gothic novel becomes one kind of treatment of the psychological problem of evil" (45). When fear is used as a literary stratagem, Elizabeth MacAndrew theorizes that its main purpose is "to explore the mind of man and the causes of evil in it, so that evil might be avoided and virtue fostered" (3-4). For James Watt, this atmosphere of terror creates "a certain atmosphere in which characters are forced to act a certain way" (5). James M. Keech concurs: "Basically, the Gothic novel should be seen as attempting to evoke a particularized response, and its stock devices as merely one means to that end [...]. The response of the Gothic is fear, universally inherent in every man's nature, primitive and basic, and existing regardless of time, place, or culture" (131).

As the fear in *O Fronteiro d'Africa* is overwhelming connected with the orders of the Duke of Alba and D. Isabel's refusal to disgrace her family name, her actions are indeed controlled by her Gothic surroundings. The use of fear allows the Gothic mode to cohesively construct a flawless foundation for social criticism, using fundamentals such as horror, monstrosities, psychological degeneracy, transgression of social mores and barbarism to contrast an implied

reality with the fictive one. Gothic literature as a result concurrently functions as literary escapism and as a direct confrontation with social decadence and moral decay. The Historical-Gothic takes this duality one step further, by providing a national face to the Gothic tale. David Jarrett, in *The Gothic Form in Fiction and its Relation to History* (1980), claims that history is an inherent part of Gothic mode, as tales are usually depicted in a previous and often national historical context which renders the tale all the more horrific for showing that the past isn't always more uncivilized and barbaric than the contemporary present—the “Gothic inversion” which is intrinsic in all Gothic literature but is especially evident in the Historical-Gothic mode.

Reading the Gothic in *O Fronteiro d'Africa ou Três noites aziagas*

Maria Leonor Machado de Sousa classifies *O Fronteiro d'Africa ou Três noites aziagas* as “a Gothic tragedy” (202)³ and these elements are clearly visible: the three “dark” (*aziagas*) nights, the fear that turns the da Cunha house into a prison, the final scene in the family crypt, complete with stone sarcophagi—all create the *locus horrendus* typical of the Gothic melodrama. The third act in its entirety is confined to the da Cunha family crypt, the utmost interior retreat within the house structure, where D. Isabel effectively forces the other characters to interact with her. The choice of scenery is decidedly Gothic and the implications of the scenery are equally so: in her darkest hour, D. Isabel is forced to make a heinous decision in an attempt to force her way out of the imprisoning situation that she found herself in. She fails and, literally, never escapes the confines of the crypt. An atmosphere of fear overwhelmingly pervades the first and third acts, which focus on D. Isabel's dilemma, and forces her to make the ultimate choice of sacrificing herself in order to save her family's honor.

The play develops along the course of three “dark” or “unfortunate” nights, which are divided into three acts, each of which corresponding to one night. There are, in fact, two very different plays within this play. The title itself shows this dichotomy, starting with “O Fronteiro d'Africa” and then offering the alternative “ou Três noites aziagas.” The former refers to D. Pedro da Cunha, who is called *o Fronteiro*⁴ (“the Captain”) after his glorious military successes in Africa. The “three unfortunate nights” refer to what occurs at his palace in Lisbon with his wife, D. Isabel. However, it is clear from the opening act that Paulo Affonso—a “friend” of the da Cunhas who has sided with the Duke of Alba—has devious plans for D. Isabel and that his political aspirations are clearly linked with his nefarious personal inclinations. Hence, all of

his actions are suspect and focus on driving D. Isabel into accepting him as her lover, even while attempting to sway her to accept Spanish rule.

D. Isabel is obligated to face the challenges of saving herself and her family's honorable name from the lecherous clutches of Paulo Affonso in the absence of her husband. Although she considered herself to be "merely a weak woman" (11; Act 1, Scene 11),⁵ she nevertheless shows her strength of character when she attempts to take control of the situation. By refusing to cede to Paulo Affonso's wishes and to accept the power of the Duke of Alba, she faces the possible death of her children. At first, D. Isabel is unaware of the fact that Paulo Affonso wishes to force her to accept him as her lover and believes that her children were taken from her in order to force her to recognize the true power of the Duke of Alba. Paulo Affonso, who is still disguised as the hero-friend at this point in the play, presents D. Isabel's case to her:

Paulo Affonso: Why do you so obstinately refuse to ask him for the restitution of your exiled husband's goods? Do you think that you are humiliating us? Lady, let us speak seriously! When an entire people curve at the knee, what difference does it make that a mere woman does so likewise? Subject yourself to the common sort, and obey. I can almost assure you that the violence that the Duke has shown you is only so that you recognize his authority. Your family is invested in this. What a shame it would be for them to see you reduced to begging. Lady, accept your fate. (8; Act 1, Scene 7, trans. mine)⁶

That Paulo Affonso presents his argument to D. Isabel in gendered terms, and not as the representative of the da Cunha family that she was, is indicative of his perception of her at that point: as a lone woman, who had, unbeknownst to her, driven him crazy with passion and who was in the position to be coerced by political pressures. Paulo Affonso considers it her destiny to agree to the Duke of Alba's demands, her unavoidable fate not merely as a Portuguese person who must accept their new king, but also as a woman who should know her place within her own society. D. Isabel, however, shows her true honorable spirit as she replies:

D. Isabel: Oh! Paulo Affonso, and do you know why I have not ceded to the wishes of the Duke? It's because it would throw infamy on the name of my husband, and on the names of his and my grandparents. The da Cunha and Silva names belong to the world and to history [...]; to history, that, when it speaks of this shameful and infa-

mous time, will already have enough names to curse, without it being necessary to add ours to this list of betrayers of our nation ("Judas da Pátria"). (8; Act 1, Scene 7)⁷

Honor, for D. Isabel, supercedes her gender and her assumed place in society; in the name of History, she will not cede. Paulo Affonso, again speaking in gendered tones but of a more specific nature, urges her to give in to his wishes, but this time in order to save her children:

Paulo Affonso: Now however, my lady, deal with saving your children [...]. It is necessary to give in! (8; Act 1, Scene 7)⁸

It is this appeal to her maternal duties that finally convinces D. Isabel to yield to the political and family pressures placed upon her. She still maintains her position that the Duke of Alba is exerting an unjust amount of power over Portugal but is willing to cede to his wishes if it means saving her children:

D. Isabel: Yes...My lord, I will cede...in order to save my children. Where violence begins, there ends the blame. If the world is unjust, God will be my judge! (*with energy*) Remember, Paulo Affonso, when he is my judge... he will also be the judge of the inflexible Duke of Alba... I give you this fatal paper, but save my poor children for me! (8; Act 1, Scene 7)⁹

When D. Isabel finally signs the document attesting to her new loyalties, Paulo Affonso realizes that he will no longer be able to carry out his personal goals without revealing that the kidnapping of the da Cunha children had been a ploy from the very beginning. While the Duke of Alba was aware that the children were to be removed from the da Cunha household, he was not aware that Paulo Affonso would order them imprisoned in his own house and for his own personal motivation. Therefore, when D. Isabel becomes aware of Paulo Affonso's true intentions toward her and the threat to her personal honor, she becomes the tragic Gothic heroine at the mercy of the evil villain. Abandoned and without many viable options due to her prescribed place within her house and society, D. Isabel suffers great inner torment and ultimately makes the choice to sacrifice herself in order to thwart Paulo Affonso's plans. D. Isabel is her own instrument of destruction; nonetheless, her predicament is very typical of the Gothic heroine.

The other Gothic elements in the text—the dark nights, the mysterious

sounds in the corridor, the subterranean crypt with the stone sarcophagi—are no doubt included to elevate D. Isabel's ultimate decision to the state of tragic martyrdom, irreverently converting her sacrifice into a needless exercise of maintaining honor. D. Isabel arranges to meet with Paulo Affonso in the da Cunha family crypt, to supposedly give in to his desires. Unfortunately, her preparations for that tragic event—poison—are rendered completely useless as, while D. Isabel is ultimately never allowed to leave the crypt, in an ironic turn of events, Paulo Affonso is never allowed in. While D. Isabel was arguing with Paulo Affonso, her husband D. Pedro had received a false letter attesting to her adultery, which sets him flying back to Lisbon in a rage. Then, seeing a cloaked figure lurking outside of the door to his house on the night of the arranged tryst, D. Pedro mortally wounds Paulo Affonso before the latter even enters the crypt, thereby alleviating the pressures placed on D. Isabel. Had she only known of her husband's arrival and of his intentions, she would never have been forced to make the ultimate decision to sacrifice herself. D. Pedro's unexpected return made her sacrifice completely unnecessary.

As it stands, D. Isabel's death at the zenith of the *dénouement* is as poignant as it is absurd. D. Isabel was innocent and yet punished; that her death defies logic and appears marked by fate is distinctly one of the aspects of the Gothic universe that clearly influences the play. She dies, in Romantic aesthetic, because she is no longer pure, having been touched by the finger of suspicion, and is no longer necessary as she had outlived her social usefulness: she had already borne children whom she was unable to protect, she could never again be the trusted wife, and she had dared to take a personal stance by making the choice to take her own life. Also with her death, the da Cunha household as a family unit lost their mother-figure who had sacrificed herself for them. In a country that had just lost its father-figure—the last legitimate Portuguese king, D. Henrique, had died without leaving a heir in 1580—the metaphor of family-as-nation can be seen as utterly incomplete, lacking the parenting or educating generation. This missing father-figure is reinforced by the fact that D. Pedro is forced to flee the *pátria* with his children, leaving Portugal in the hands of the usurper, the Duke of Alba. This, then, leads to the play's importance as providing a lesson in political morality or honor to the spectator.

Duarte Ivo Cruz elucidates the political significance of the play as follows:

This situation places us at the heart of the major merit of Herculano's play, which is to have foreseen, four years before, the central issue of *Frei Luís de Sousa*: patriotism,

the combat against the Spaniards, the refusal to occupy the Palace “defiled by the foreigner,” the resistance, in essence. Only in Herculano’s play, the resistance is active—it fights against the Spaniards—and the Spaniards are chivalric and noble. (83)¹⁰

While serving to emphasize that Herculano’s moral lesson in *O Fronteiro d’Africa* was actually one about patriotism, this quote also outlines one of the great moral dilemmas of this play: Why should anyone continue to fight the legitimate Spanish appropriation of the Portuguese throne in 1580, especially when the only visible Spanish figure in the play is portrayed as “noble” and responsible and the Portuguese figures as brash or duplicitous? The answer, I believe, lies not in the sixteenth century but in the nineteenth. The historical nature of the play serves as a didactic comparison of the past and present; the Gothic mode serves to show how the past is often less barbaric than the present. Herculano’s present was faced with a government that grew more decadent as the decades progressed and the Liberal ideals that had fueled the civil war from 1826-1834 rapidly decayed into political immorality. Change, as the moral of this lesson, would have to come from within.

Notes

¹ “Mas o traço que dá a Herculano especial relevo no quadro geral da nossa ficção *negra* é o interesse com que ele foca as lutas interiores dos seus heróis, o *negro* psicológico, as tempestades de paixões exacerbadas, que arrastam Vasco ao crime e Eurico ao desespero. Nisto, Herculano é não só importante na literatura *negra* do século XIX, mas também precursor das modernas tendências que estudam ‘os subterrâneos da alma’.” (268)

² See Driver, *Romantic Quest and Modern Query*, 45-57, for an excellent explanation of the form and purpose of Scribe’s “well-made play” recipe.

³ “A única tragédia de Herculano, *O Fronteiro d’Africa ou Três noites asiáticas* (1838), é gótica” (202).

⁴ “Fronteiro” loosely translates to a knight or a captain of the guards of a frontier fortress. In this case, it is D. Pedro’s honorary title and carries with it a strong medieval connotation.

⁵ “...apenas uma fraca mulher.” (11; Act 1, Scene 11)

⁶ “PAULO AFFONSO: Porque recusaes tão obstinadamente o pedir a restituição dos bens do vosso proscripto marido? Crêdes que vos humilhaes? Senhora, fallemos seriamente! Quando um povo inteiro curva o joelho, não é muito que uma mulher o curve. Sujeitae-vos á sorte comum, e obedeei. Quasi que posso assegurar-vos que a violência que vos faz o Duque é só para que reconheças a sua autoridade. Os vossos parentes se interessam nisso. Vergonha fôra para eles ver-vos reduzida à mendicidade. Senhora, cedei ao destino.” (8; Act 1, Scene 7) All translations are mine.

⁷ “D. ISABEL: Oh! Paulo Affonso, e sabeis porque não tenho cedido aos desejos do Duque? É porque iria lançar a infamia sobre o nome do meu marido, e sobre o nome de seus e meus avós. O apellido dos Cunhas e dos Silvas pertence ao mundo e á história...; á história, que,

quando fallar desta época vergonhosa e infame, já tem bastantes nomes que amaldiçoar, sem que seja necessario ajuntar estes á lista dos Judas da Patria.” (8; Act 1, Scene 7)

⁸ “PAULO AFFONSO: Agora porém, senhora, trata-se da salvação de vossos filhos...É preciso ceder!” (8; Act 1, Scene 7)

⁹ “D. ISABEL: Sim...Senhor, eu cederei...por salvar meus filhos! Onde a violencia começa, ahi acaba a culpa. Se o mundo fôr injusto, Deos será o meu Juiz! (*Com energia.*) Lembrae-vos, Paulo Affonso, quando elle será o meu Juiz...e também o Juiz do inflexivel Duque d’Alva...Dar-vos-hei esse papel fatal, mas salvae-me os meus pobres filhinhos! (*Vae-se pela porta da direita.*)” (8; Act 1, Scene 7)

¹⁰ “Esta situação coloca-nos no cerne do maior mérito da peça de Herculano, que é ter adivinhado, a quatro anos de distância, a problemática central do *Frei Luís de Sousa*: o patriotismo, o combate aos espanhóis, a recusa em ocupar o Palácio “esmolado pelos estrangeiro,” a resistência, em suma. Só que na peça de Herculano, a resistência é activa—combate-se contra os espanhóis—e os espanhóis são cavalheirescos e nobres.” (83)

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