

Roxana Lewis Dabney and *Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca*

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Abstract. This essay investigates the projection of Júlio Dinis' novel *Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca* through the critical reviews of Dabney's translation that appeared in US newspapers in 1891 and 1892. Despite the positive evaluation the translated novel received, and the reputation it established for future publications of Portuguese novels in translation in the United States, the novel was soon to be almost completely forgotten, along with the noteworthy work of the translator.

During her lifetime the American Julia Parker Dabney was the acknowledged artist and best-known writer in the Dabney family that for over a century maintained a presence in the Azores, principally on the island of Fayal.¹ Yet it was not Julia Dabney but Roxana Lewis Dabney (1827-1913) who undertook the daunting task of compiling the three-volume *Annals of the Dabney Family in Fayal*, beginning her work in 1880 and not reaching its conclusion until the turn of the twentieth century.² What the Dabneys meant to the Azores throughout the nineteenth century is stated succinctly by Francisco Cota Fagundes:

The Dabney family of Boston, American consuls and ships' agents from beginning to end of the last century—in addition to being philanthropists and true friends of the Azores—invested a significant portion of their wealth in the con-

struction of attractive little palaces and generally raised the cultural level of the island. They were responsible for introducing the coastal-whaling industry in the Azores. (xxii)

Given Roxana Dabney's keen interest in setting down the details and course of her own family's largely Portuguese history, it seems fitting that she complemented her work on the *Annals* with two published translations. Her first try, in 1867, was a Portuguese version of Mary Botham Howitt's *Strive and Thrive: A Tale as Quem Trabalha Tem Alfaias* (1867), a children's book that tells the story of "a family, suddenly reduced from competence to poverty, and of the manner in which the reverse is borne by the different members."³ *Strive and Thrive* was "trazudido em vulgar por uma senhora," it is stated on the title-page, but the "senhora" goes nameless. A notation on the catalogue entry for the copy in the Widener Library (Harvard University) indicates that the "translation is attributed to Roxana Lewis Dabney."⁴

Roxana Dabney's second translation was a version, into English this time, of *Os Fidalgos da Casa Mourisca*, Julio Diniz's fictional family saga, published as *The Fidalgos of the Casa Mourisca* in 1891. Dabney prefaces her translation of Diniz's novel with an account of the author's life and literary reputation:

Joaquim Guilherme Gomes Coelho was born in Oporto in 1839. In 1856 he matriculated in the Medico-Surgical School, from which he graduated with honors in 1861. His over-sensitive nature, aggravated, undoubtedly, by the fatal malady which even in his student days caused him much suffering, prevented him from ever practicing his profession.

Two of his brothers had died of the same—pulmonary consumption—which may have accounted for the sadness of his first verses, published in 1860, under the pseudonym of "Julio Diniz." In 1861-62 he published his first novel, "An English Family," and from that period until his death, in 1871, he published various tales and romances—mostly of village life—which were highly appreciated, not only for their intrinsic worth, but because they offered a certain novelty to the Portuguese public, nationalizing, as it were, the modern British romance, unknown in Portugal up to that period.

He has been criticised by some of his countrymen for his too great admiration for that school, but foremost among his admirers stands the great Alexandre Herculano; and two of his romances have been dramatized, and are among the Standard Plays of Portugal; the *Rector's Pupils*, and the *Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca*.

This last he wrote in Madeira, in two successive winters, in which he vainly sought for relief from the disease with which he so manfully wrestled. It was while correcting the proof sheets of the *Fidalgos* that he finally gave up the battle—September 12, 1871. One of his contemporaries writes: “The soul of Gomes Coelho was as pure and ingenuous as the scenes he so delicately depicts. His spirit is embodied in his works and will live as long as we know how to appreciate the beautiful in art.” (iii-iv)

On 6 March 1891 the *New York Times* listed *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* under “Books Received,” and on 14 March, both *The Dial* (Chicago) and the *New-York Daily Tribune* listed it under, respectively, “Publications Received” (Vol. 15: 148) and “Books of the Week” (8). A week later, in his “Boston Letter” to *The Critic* (New York), Nathan Haskell Dole devoted several paragraphs to the book and its translator, along with a prediction about the future for the publication of Portuguese literature in America:

About three years ago, in a note to Mr. [William Dean] Howells, I predicted that the next great literature to be exploited would be the Portuguese. Unknown to outsiders, that little out-of-the-way corner of the world, Portugal, has of late years developed a remarkable number of powerful novelists. Then there is the great empire of Brazil,—now a republic,—with its own tremendous problems of emancipation and revolution, both worked out peacefully and without bloodshed. Such epoch-making changes have an influence on literature, and the crop of writers which has been springing up during the past decade will be reinforced in the ten years to come.

It looks now as though the awakening to the splendors of Portuguese fiction had already begun. *Dragon's Teeth*, translated by Mrs. Serrano, was the first, if I mistake not; since then there have been several, and the latest edition is such a delightfully fresh and wholesome book—not on especially original lines, but with a wonderfully realistic atmosphere. If I may so speak—that it ought to be a precursor to a long list. I refer to Miss Roxana L. Dabney's translation of Coelho's *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca*, a work which has been dramatised and is a stand play in Portugal. The Dabneys have long been identified with Portuguese Fayal. Miss Dabney's grandfather, her father, and now her brother have successively acted as United States Consul at Fayal. Through Mr. Hastings Hughes, brother of “Tom” Hughes, I learn that Mr. Dabney's father was one of the most unselfish American patriots during the Civil War. In order to prevent blockade-running of

the Southern ports he bought up the entire coal supply of Fayal, and refused to sell to Confederate cruisers, thereby incurring the enmity of Capt. Sumner of the *Alabama*, and obliging himself to sail his ship Azores under the British flag and a different name. This same ship carried free the full freight of coin sent to Fayal by Boston philanthropists during the famine there twenty years ago. By such acts Mr. Dabney made his name dear to every peasant on the island.

Miss Dabney, to whom Portuguese is almost a native tongue, and who is familiar with Portuguese habits and customs, makes an admirable interpreter for "Julio Diniz," as Senhor Coelho calls himself. Her English is simple and fluent, though not without a certain touch of quaintness which only adds to its charm.

But there are many more Portuguese novels that deserve attention: I may mention *A Reliquia*, by Eça de Queiros, *O Primo Brazilio*, *O Crima do Padre Amaro*, and a dozen other stories by Teofilo Braga, Oliviera Martins, Antero de Quental, Tomás Ribiero, and others. I prognosticate that many of these will be transferred to English before long. D. Lothrop Co. are much pleased with Miss Dabney's work. (Vol.15: 155-56)

Several observations about Dole's remarks are in order. Obviously he does not know that *Dragon's Teeth* was the title given to Mary J. Serrano's translation of Eça de Queiros's novel *O Primo Bazilio*, published by Ticknor in Boston in 1889.⁵ As for the statement that there were translations of several other Portuguese novels published in America between 1889—when *Dragon's Teeth* appeared—and 1891—when *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* was published, there were, to the best of my knowledge, no English-language versions of any other Portuguese novels published in the United States. Too obvious to be singled out and named, moreover, are the mistakes Dole makes in setting down the names of Portuguese writers and the titles of their books.

On 23 March 1891 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* published a review of the Dabney translation titled "A Charming Portuguese Romance":

D. Lothrop Company, the Boston publishers, are to be congratulated in finding the very charming Portuguese romance, "The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca," by Julio Diniz, the English translation being made by Roxana L. Dabney. "Julio Diniz" was the pen name of Joaquim Guilherme Gomes Coelho, who was born at Oporto in 1830. He studied medicine, graduating in 1861, and died in 1871 of consumption. He died, in fact, while correcting the proof sheets of this novel now introduced to American readers. Several of his romances have been drama-

tized, and have a permanent place upon the Portuguese stage. The present novel, it is evident, readily lends itself to dramatization, it being one of the author's agreeable methods not to linger long enough upon a situation or episode to exhaust its interest. He passes swiftly, almost simply from one episode to another. "The Fidalgos" is a pastoral romance, an idyl of Portuguese country life. The old Portuguese aristocrat is portrayed in Don Luiz; the change from the old order to the new, after the revolution and the constitution granted by Don Pedro, is illustrated in his son Jorge, who, with the assistance of the farmer Thome, restores the family estates by the earnest study and industrious practice of agriculture. The love between Jorge and the beautiful Bertha, daughter of Thome, culminates, in spite of family pride and prejudice, in the union of the old order and the new. "The Fidalgos" is a first and easy lesson in democracy for the Spanish aristocrat. To the American reader, aside from the charm of a simple and unaffected love narrative, it is interesting because it portrays the strength of the caste feeling in Portugal and Portuguese rural life. It is a genuine romance, without, we had almost said, being romantic, if such thing can be. (8)

On 26 March 1891, under "Books Received," the *Christian Union* (New York) listed *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* (Vol. 43: 416). The next review of Diniz's novel that I have discovered so far appeared in *The Literary World* (Boston) on 28 March:

Roxana L. Dabney has done good service to novel readers in translating this story by Joaquin G. G. Coelho, whose nom de guerre was Julio Dinos [sic]. Delicate and simple in his literary tastes, he depicted the village life of his country as it might be if English industry conquered Portuguese pride of ancestry and indolence. His emphasis on character in opposition to rank was delightful to the middle-class people of his land, who regarded his novels as harbingers of equality. The directness and vivacity of this tale remind the reader of Jane Austen, and there is sufficient plot to offset the prosy conversations; these, however, are always short. The book treats a life so different from our own that it well repays perusal. (Vol. 22: 111)

On 30 March, *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* was favorably reviewed under "New Novels" in the *New-York Daily Tribune*:

The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca is a Portuguese novel, written twenty years ago by Gomes Colebo [sic], a popular author in his own country, under the nom-de-

plume of Julia [*sic*] Diniz. It introduces us to quite a new field of fiction. On the one hand we find a class of ancient nobles, whose obstinate adherence to feudal ideas has thrown them back upon themselves, ruined their estates, and left them only pride and poverty; on the other hand is shown the new Portugal, based on thrift, energy and sense, which is rapidly transferring the wealth and influence of the Nation to a young generation having no claims of blood, but a very hearty faith in self-help and liberal doctrines. The principal characters here are an old, proud and impecunious fidalgo and his sons, and a prosperous former retainer of the decayed nobleman, who has risen while his old master was sinking. Love plays an important part in the story, and in the end acts as a universal solvent. The author writes well and strongly, and invests the unfamiliar scenery and action with an interest sufficient to overcome this strangeness. It is evidently drawn from and to the life, and it proves that Portuguese fiction in its higher rank has no apologies to make or allowances to claim in competing with the literature of other countries. (30)

An advertisement in *The Nation* (New York) on 9 April quotes the *Brooklyn Times* to the effect that *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* "can be read with interest alike for the story's sake, the refined manner of its telling, and the fact that it is one of the first and one of the best of modern Portuguese romances introduced to American readers" (Vol. 52: iv). *The Nation* had listed the novel as one of its "Books of the Week" on 26 March (272). On 11 April, under "News and Notes," *The Literary World* reported that the father of Miss Dabney, the book's translator, was the Consul of Fayal, "who gave free freight in his vessel to the cargo of corn sent by Boston friends during the famine" and who, during the Civil War helped to "prevent blockade-running" (Vol. 22: 133).

On 25 April *The Literary World* ran Lothrop's advertisement for *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca*, quoting from *The Literary World's* own review of 28 March: "The directness and vivacity of this tale remind me of Jane Austen" (Vol. 22: 150), as well as the publisher's own puff: "In Portuguese literature we have a new and unexplored field, and the very freshness and novelty lend zest to the reader. *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* presents in most attractive form the best phases of Portuguese life, and shows the struggle between the old aristocratic ideas that formerly held sway and the progress of modern thought" (Vol. 22: 150).

In May, under "Brief Comment: Literary Doings," *Current Literature* alluded to Nathan Haskell Dole's prediction of "a speedy exploitation of Portuguese literature by translators" (Vol. 7: 156-57). On 3 May the *Morning Olympian* (Olympia, Washington) published the following notice:

"The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca," a pleasing love romance and an agreeable story, is translated by Roxana L. Dabney from the Portuguese of Gomes Coelho (D. Lathrop Company, Boston, price \$1.50). This was the last novel of the author, who died 20 years ago at the age of 32. He admired the modern English fashion of story telling, and imitated and introduced it in his own country.

He is better known, perhaps, under the pen name of "Julio Diniz." The story is well calculated to interest American readers in the best phrase of Portuguese literature and can be read with interest alike for the story's sake, the refined manner of its telling, and the fact that it is one of the first and one of the best of the modern Portuguese romances to be introduced to American readers. (2)

On 30 May, under "Recent Fiction," *The Critic* published a short review of *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca*:

Translated from the Portuguese of Joaquim Guilherme Gomes Coelho ("Julio Diniz") by Roxana L. Dabney, is spoil for the English novel-reader taken from comparatively fresh territory. The story itself is one of provincial life amid the changing political and economic conditions of a half-century ago in Portugal. The love parts of it strike one as peculiarly unsophisticated, passion at first sight, and declaration almost, being as common as in a fairy story. The characters of Thomè, the farmer, and Don Luiz, the decayed nobleman, are drawn with the most distinctness. The translation, aside from some slight inconsistencies in the rendering of proper names and titles, appears to be thoroughly good. The reader will find in Mr. Dole's Boston letter in *The Critic* of March 21 some interesting facts about Miss Dabney, the translator (Vol. 15: 286).

In "Recent Books of Fiction," an omnibus review in the June issue of *The Dial*, William Morton Payne wrote approvingly:

One more novel from the Iberian peninsula claims our attention, and directs it to a literature almost unknown to English readers,—that of Portugal. The name of Coelho is as unfamiliar as a name well can be, and yet, to judge from *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca*, it is one to conjure with. This work is a beautiful example of a type common enough in Continental fiction,—the type which aims to depict the conflict between conservatism and liberalism, between aristocracy and democracy, between old ideas and new. For the current of that Revolution which has swept away the old order of things in France and Italy, and which is fast sweeping it away

in the Teutonic North, has not passed by the lands beyond the Pyrenees; and even Portugal, perhaps the last of European countries to feel the influence, has awakened to the consciousness that "God fulfils himself in many ways." But the course of the current there, as elsewhere, has not been unimpeded, and many a feudal custom, many a proud family, has long resisted the invading flood of the modern spirit. To describe such a family, with its characteristic modes of life and thought, was the task of Senhor Coelho in this story, as the title indicates, for "fidalgo" is obviously the Portuguese form of "hidalgo," and the term "Casa Mourisca" is used in the sense in which Jules Sandreau made "La Maison de Penarvan," the title of one of his most charming stories. Indeed, we have often been reminded of that work in reading Senhor Coelho's novel. For the Portuguese romance has the same grace and simplicity of style, presents the same sort of ideals, and offers the same contrast between the aristocrat, on the one hand, and the industrious, self-made, self-respecting farmer, on the other. And in both stories alike, the younger generation puts an end to the estrangement of feeling characteristic of the elder, and the old spirit becomes wedded, both literally and symbolically, with the new. (Vol. 12: 52-53)

Lothrop's advertisement in *The Critic* for 13 June quoted from both *The Literary World* ("The directness and vivacity of this tale remind the reader of Jane Austen") and the *Chicago Times* ("An example of the best modern Portuguese fiction very fluently and very cleverly Englished") (Vol. 15: 1).⁶ *The Fidalgos of Casa Mourisca* was listed as one of "The Best Books of 1891" by *The Literary World* in its issue for 2 January 1892 (Vol. 23: 8).

But its favorable reviews and its appearance on *The Literary World's* year-end list did not bring Diniz's novel an American success. It did not help, moreover, that its publisher, the D. Lothrop Company, failed in the early days of January 1894.⁷ The fate of Roxana Dabney's *Fidalgos of the Casa Mourisca* was to be entirely forgotten. But there were two exceptions. In 1898 it was one of two Portuguese novels (Eça's *Dragon's Teeth* was the other) recommended by the *New York Times* as useful reading to anyone interested in "Spain, History and Description" (23 April, BR274); and in 1902 remaindered copies of the novel were being sold at New York City's Wanamaker Store for twenty cents apiece (*New York Times*, 16 September, 4).

Notes

- ¹ See the entry for Julia Parker Dabney in Oscar Fay Adams 462.
- ² See *Annals of the Dabney Family in Fayal*, 3 vols. compiled by Roxana Lewis Dabney (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, n. d.); translated into Portuguese as *Anais da Família Dabney no Faial* (Horta: Instituto Açoriano de Cultura e do Núcleo Cultural da Horta, 2005).
- ³ *Quem Trabalha tem Alfaia*. (Lisbon: T. Quintino Antunes, 1867); *North American Review* (Oct. 1840) vol. 51, 501.
- ⁴ See also Francis M. Rogers 169.
- ⁵ For details of the publication and critical reception of *Dragon's Teeth*, see George Monteiro, "'Une Bonne Press': *O Primo Basílio* in America," forthcoming in "The Later Eça Revisited," a volume of essays edited by Frank. F. Sousa.
- ⁶ The advertisement is repeated in *The Literary World* (21 Nov. 1891) vol. 22, 457.
- ⁷ "The D. Lothrop Company Assigns," *New York Times* (6 Jan. 1894) 1.

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