

Dress and Female Intelligence: Intertextuality in *Esau and Jacob*

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Abstract. Within the Brazilian tradition, *Esau and Jacob* invites comparison with Joaquim Manuel de Macedo's *Memórias do sobrinho de meu tio*, a satire describing the life and career of a politician. With regard to the larger Western tradition, the novel parallels Balzac's *Le père Goriot*. In Machado, as much as in Macedo and Balzac, we can see the recurrence of similar metaphors around the use of dress, which is used to signal a willingness to compromise ideals whenever political and economic benefits can be derived from it.

When analyzing the issue of politics in Machado de Assis' *Esau and Jacob* (1904), critics suggest a conformity between two apparently opposed political parties through a metaphor related to the main characters, the twins Pedro and Paulo, as well as through the secondary character D. Cláudia, whose cynical discourse reflects a typically individualistic and unconscientious bourgeois behavior. It must be emphasized that the metaphor and D. Cláudia's posture place *Esau and Jacob* in a broader literary tradition. This paper aims to examine the intertextuality of these two components and their effect on Machado de Assis' novel.

Esau and Jacob is about the birth, childhood, and youth of twins Pedro and Paulo, who were fortunate to be born into a wealthy, bourgeois family. The polarization of the two is predicted at the beginning of the story and, as they become adults, is established as they join opposed political parties:

[Their] beards did not want to come, much as they tugged at their chins with their fingers, but political and other opinions formed and flourished. They were not

exactly opinions, as they did not have large or small roots. They were (a bad comparison) like neckties of a particular color, that they wore until they got tired of the color and another one came along. Naturally each one had his own. One could also believe that the color each one wore suited his personality. (*Esau and Jacob* 53)¹

In this quote, the tie is a metaphor that makes use of the narrative voice to show the superficiality of the opposition between the two young men. As Pedro aligns himself with the ideas of the Monarchists, Paulo adopts the ideas of the Liberal Republicans, leaving them permanently in disagreement for almost the whole of the rest of the narrative. The identical appearance of the two and their socio-political context, however, reveals the inconsistency of their political contrast. This opposition therefore goes no further than a piece of cloth tied round the neck, a garment that actually hides their resemblances. The tie indicates more the need for self-imposing individuality and the frailty of the distinctions between political points of view than it does the belief based on ideas and philosophical ideals.

The metaphor of the tie extends itself to the twins. Their relation is more one of stage acting than of real difference. It reveals the dissimulation in the novel, in the political attitude of some characters. As such, the twins' father, Agostinho Santos, ennobles his bourgeois name, but is not especially shaken by the end of the Emperor's power.² The recent acquisition of the title of baron does not prevent him from accepting serenely the advent of the Republic. A well-to-do bourgeois like him should not have any difficulty in letting go of a title in order to profit from new power games. For a wealthy bourgeois, the title would not be much more than a tie hanging around his neck.

Santos' attitude is the same as his great friend's, Batista. Like Santos, Batista corroborates that which reveals itself through the metaphor of the tie, namely, his constant search for a political career at all costs. In order to do this, Batista ends up following the advice of his wife, Cláudia. He belonged to the Conservative Party during the Monarchy and, before the "Ilha Fiscal Ball," Batista finds himself unemployed but anxious to take part in politics. When the Liberals attain power, he can find no solution to his problem. Surprisingly, D. Cláudia finds a way out by alleging that he had never been a Conservative in the first place:

"Batista, you were never a conservative!"

[...]

“You were with them, like someone who attends a ball, where it is not necessary to share the same ideas in order to dance the same quadrille.”

Batista smiled lightly and quickly. He liked witty images and this one seemed to him to be very witty indeed, so that he agreed right away. But his star inspired him to a quick rebuttal.

“Yes, but people don’t dance with ideas, they dance with their legs.”

“However they dance, the truth is that all your ideas were in the liberal camp. Remember the dissidents in the province accused you of supporting the liberals [...]” (100)³

The strategy aims at getting round the difficulty of attaining power; if it is a success, it is due to the inconsistency of the political parties that resemble each other so much in their difficulty in sticking to a particular ideological line. Cunningly, D. Cláudia discovers the mask by which she can declare her cynicism. Her sarcasm lies in the “tie” of her discourse. Batista was never a Conservative because it is not necessary to have the same ideas in order to dance the same dance. D. Cláudia comes up with a solution to her husband’s dilemma: she suggests a change of wording, a change of “tie,” and declares the importance of flexibility through the imagery of the dance.

D. Cláudia can be included in a gallery of female characters who discover the veiled meanderings of power in works that come under the name of “realist.” In *Esau and Jacob*, D. Cláudia expresses, through her cynical convictions, the real implications of the mechanisms of power: the importance of adapting to change, as is evidenced by the metaphor of the dance.

In a world in which the ends justify the means and money is all-powerful, social mobility is used by those who, knowing how to adapt as quickly as possible, take advantage of any opportunities that may come their way. The character Nóbrega is an example of this kind of upward mobility, which should not come as a surprise. Poor and nameless at the start of the novel, he is a beggar who uses the donation he receives from the twins’ mother, Natividade, to change his luck and get rich by putting the money to use in more favorable economic circumstances. Thanks to this situation, he becomes a capitalist. Enchanted by the beautiful Flora, the daughter of Batista and D. Cláudia, he proposes marriage and is surprised by the refusal. Nóbrega does not understand how anyone could refuse a wealthy life. Because his values are tied to money, he does not understand Flora’s decision, coming to the conclusion that she must be ill.

The attitudes of the characters in *Esau and Jacob*, Pedro and Paulo, Batista and D. Cláudia, and Nóbrega, mirror the position adopted by the narrator in *A Carteira do Meu Tio* (*A Letter from My Uncle*, 1855) and *Memórias do Sobrinho de Meu Tio* (*Memories of My Uncle's Nephew*, 1868), by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, an author who is still nowadays underestimated by critics. In these works, which predate the novel being analyzed here, the tone is openly ironic in what concerns the country political issues. These two decisive satires represent two periods in the life of a Brazilian politician.

The narrator in *A Letter from My Uncle* and *Memories of My Uncle's Nephew* does not agree with his compatriot Paciência, who criticizes the lack of ethics and cynicism of the politicians of the time. “The nephew of my uncle” declares his individualism by claiming to be a member of the “Me Party.” He states the political attitudes of the time, such as disregard for the law, injustice, and the small commitment to fragile party ideologies simply to support his personal interest. In both works he comments ironically on condemnable practices that are harmful to society, in order to follow a political career, at which he is indeed very successful.

As in the society described in *Esau and Jacob*, money is the motivation assumed to drive Macedo's protagonist. One cannot hope for idealistic behavior on the part of the hero. The “nephew” celebrates the current values of the bourgeois world. Moreover, his wife, Chiquinha, bears quite a resemblance to D. Cláudia in her cunning and wit. She also adopts points of view that suit her, trying to adapt to circumstances. Like Batista's wife,⁴ Chiquinha is not politically naïve:

— I know, for example, your philosophical ideas concerning the material and moral need to eat, and we ladies, although unjustly but happily excluded from political life, teach, by practical example, the wisest moral lessons to philosophical and political men: we, among the guests at the banquet table, and even at the family table, barely touch with our lips one chicken wing; but before the lunch or dinner that is regularly served, we eat as much as is necessary, however secretly, to satisfy the demands of nature. The lesson is eloquent and wisely applied to philosophy and to politics. The intelligent thing to do is to eat as much as possible behind the larder door with the cooks, and then show sobriety before laymen's eyes, or in front of the public.

[...]

Cousin Chiquinha was a meddling Machiavellian, dressed in a hoop skirt with little, black patent leather shoes. (131-132)⁵

Just as Cláudia knows how to be flexible under changes of power, always advising her husband, Chiquinha can be compared to Talleyrand (Macedo 510), the French diplomat who survived unharmed through large upheavals in his time, demonstrating great adaptability to “the latest whim.” The absence of any distinctive identity among the Brazilian political parties, suggested in Machado, is explicit in Macedo, who prefers to use the metaphor of ministerial uniforms to that of ties in order to express the concealed ideological allure:

[...] luckily, for the men of sound mind, for the political speculators to whose flock I belong, [...] there are no true political parties in Brazil, that is, parties of ideas, whose leaders only become so through ideas and through their capacity and loyal disposition to realize those ideas in power, *sine qua non*, there are only groups and gangs who take names without giving importance to the ideas that those names signify.

[...] I find it much better to dress in the fashions of the time: the tailors don't make uniforms for ministers to dress ideas; they make them to hang on the shoulders of human coat hangers. (317-318)⁶

This non-compromise of ideas and opinions, individual as well as collective, is indeed a tendency of the bourgeois world moved by money. In the novel *Le père Goriot* (1834), Honoré de Balzac, through his cynical character Vautrin, also mentions garments while discussing the modern political mentality. However, he does not refer to ties, like Machado in his treatment of the political attitudes of Pedro and Paulo, or uniforms, like Macedo; rather, he prefers shirts in order to establish a comparison. Vautrin is a type of Mephistopheles who goes out of his way to tempt the hero Rastignac:

Si j'ai encore un conseil à vous donner, mon ange, c'est de ne pas plus tenir à vos opinions qu'à vos paroles. Quand on vous les demandera, vendez-les. Un homme qui se vante de ne jamais changer d'opinion est un homme qui se charge d'aller toujours en ligne droite, un niais qui croit à l'infailibilité. Il n'y a pas de principes, il n'y a que des événements; il n'y a pas de lois, il n'y a que des circonstances: l'homme supérieur épouse les événements et les circonstances pour les conduire. S'il y avait des principes et des lois fixes, les peuples n'en changeraient pas comme nous changeons de chemises. (172-173)

Like Joaquim Manuel de Macedo's narrator, Vautrin praises the Prince of Talleyrand, who learned how to adapt to circumstances:

[...] tandis que le prince auquel chacun lance sa pierre, et qui méprise assez l'humanité pour lui cracher au visage autant de serments qu'elle en demande, a empêché le partage de la France au congrès de Vienne: on lui doit des couronnes, on lui jette de la boue. Oh! je connais les affaires, moi! J'ai les secrets de bien des hommes! Suffit. J'aurai une opinion inébranlable le jour où j'aurai rencontré trois têtes d'accord sur l'emploi d'un principe, et j'attendrai longtemps! (173)

Besides the criminal Vautrin, the hero Rastignac counts on the help of the aristocrat Madame de Beauséant, his cousin, who belongs to the upper echelons of the exclusive Saint-Germain neighborhood. Both of them, each in his own way, look for help in their struggle to find a place in the Parisian elite. The Viscountess of Beauséant seems to be as astute as D. Cláudia and Chiquinha when she reveals her strategies for reaching the top of society:

Plus froidement vous calculerez, plus avant vous irez. Frappez sans pitié, vous serez craint. N'acceptez les hommes et les femmes que comme les chevaux de poste que vous laisserez crever à chaque relais, vous arriverez ainsi au faite de vos désirs. Voyez-vous, vous ne serez rien ici si vous n'avez pas une femme qui s'intéresse à vous. Il vous faut jeune, riche, élégante. Mais si vous avez un sentiment vrai, cachez-le comme un trésor; ne le laissez jamais soupçonner, vous seriez perdu. (135)

As can be seen in Machado, Macedo, and Balzac, women are allies in the struggle for social advance, revealing that which seemingly distinctive clothing conceals and preaching the dissimulation that serves the ambitious behavior of the bourgeoisie. In *Esau and Jacob*, if the woman is one's greatest ally in social climbing, the affirmation of political versatility to the detriment of grand ideals, she also suggests a much more complex romanticism that does not let itself be seduced by superficiality, ties, or other disguises.

Notes

¹ The original reads: "As barbas não queria vir, por mais que eles chamassem o buço com os dedos, mas as opiniões políticas e outras vinham e cresciam. Não eram propriamente opiniões, não tinham raízes grandes nem pequenas. Eram (mal comparando) gravatas de cor

particular, que eles atavam ao pescoço, à espera que a cor cansasse e viesse outra. Naturalmente cada um tinha a sua. Também se pode crer que a de cada um era, mais ou menos, adequada à pessoa” (*Esau e Jacó* 62-63).

² Santos’ worry lasts only a little while, as chapter LXVI seems to demonstrate.

³ Assis, *Esau and Jacob* 100. The original reads:

“—Batista, você nunca foi conservador!

[...]

—Você estava com eles, como a gente está num baile, onde não é preciso ter as mesmas idéias para dançar a mesma quadrilha.

Batista sorriu leve e rápido; amava as imagens graciosas e aquela pareceu-lhe graciosíssima, tanto que concordou logo; mas a sua estrela inspirou-lhe uma refutação pronta.

—Sim, mas a gente não dança com idéias, dança com pernas.

—Dance com que for, a verdade é que todas as suas idéias iam para os liberais; lembre-se que os dissidentes na província acusavam a você de apoiar os liberais [...]” (*Esau e Jacó* 103-104).

⁴ See *Esau e Jacó*, chapters XLVII and LXXVIII.

⁵ My translation. The original reads: “—Eu conheço, por exemplo, as suas idéias filosóficas relativas à necessidade material e moral do comer, e nós as senhoras, embora injusta mas felizmente excluídas da vida política, damos na prática material da nossa vida a mais sábia lição moral aos homens filósofos e políticos: nós à mesa dos convidados ao banquete, e até à mesa da família apenas tocamos com os lábios em uma asinha de frango; mas antes do almoço ou do jantar regularmente servidos, comemos tanto quanto é preciso, embora às escondidas, para satisfazer as exigências da natureza. A lição é eloqüente e sábia aplicada à filosofia e à política: cumpre comer o mais possível atrás da porta da despensa, e de inteligência com os cozinheiros, e ostentar sobriedade ante os olhos profanos, ou diante do público.

[...]

A prima Chiquinha era um Maquiavel metido em saia de balão, e com sapatinhos de duraque preto” (Macedo 131-132).

⁶ The original reads: “[...] felizmente para os homens de juízo, para os especuladores políticos a cuja grei pertenço, ou não há, como sustento, verdadeiros partidos políticos no Brasil, isto é, partidos de idéias, cujos chefes só o sejam pelas idéias e pela capacidade e leal disposição de as realizar no poder, *sine qua non*, e há somente bandos e seqüelas que se unem por simpatias e certos homens, e por oposição a outros bandos e seqüelas, e que tomam nomes sem dar importância às idéias que esses nomes significam. [...] Eu acho muito melhor vestir-me à moda do tempo: os alfaiates não fazem fardas de ministros para vestir idéias; fazem-nas para pendurá-las nos ombros de cabides humanos” (Macedo 317-318).

Works Cited

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